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"A HEIGHTENED DEGREE OF MESSINESS": J.R. NASHVILLE, THE DEAD FATHER, AND THE REFUSAL OF NARRATIVE

by

MICHAEL LOUIS LEVINE

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

"A Heightened Degree of Messiness": J.R, Nashville, The Dead Father, and the Refusal of Narrative

by

Michael Louis Levine

If the late 1960s and early 1970s in America could be characterized as a period which disrupted the narratives that structured both public and private life, then William Gaddis’s J.R, Robert Altman’s Nashville, and Donald Barthelme’s The Dead Father, all of which appeared in 1975, are emblematic of this period, products of both the aesthetic principles of these three artists and the social milieu in which they created their most exemplary works. All three works subvert or abandon narrative conventions in three general ways. First, they render time as a continuous present, endless and without gaps, as opposed to a narrativized kind of time which suggests a recovery of the past, and which starts and stops with the beginning and end of each event included in the narrative. Second, these works contain no internal organizing center which could stabilize the relationships between their characters. Third, all three works eschew a narrating consciousness, offering no indication of the significance of anything in their fictional worlds. In their non-narrative aspects, the forms of each of these works show the influence of other media; Gaddis's novel
possesses cinematic qualities, while Altman's film and Barthelme's novel invite comparisons to painting. By looking to other media, Gaddis, Altman, and Barthelme extend the representational capacities of their own.

The result of this refusal of narrative is not the creation of a space within the work, left by elements said to be missing from it, that is filled by the reader or spectator, who then becomes to some degree the "subject" of the work, and is therefore capable of articulating its meaning. On the contrary, by refusing narrative, these works undermine the illusion, perpetuated by narrative, that the world speaks to us in intelligible terms, as well as the illusion of a shared reality made possible by acts of identification between one consciousness and another. L. R., Nashville, and The Dead Father attest to the constructed nature of shared reality and illuminate both the limits of individual subjectivity and the irreducible difference between art and its audience.
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Introduction

The shape filled foreground: what distractions for the imagination, incitements to the copyist, yet nobody has the leisure to examine it closely. But the thinness behind, the vague air: this captivates every spectator.

-- John Ashbery, Three Poems

In 1955, their paths did not seem likely to cross. William Gaddis and Robert Altman had, respectively, twenty and fifteen more years of obscurity ahead of them, while Donald Barthelme, although he had not yet written anything for a national publication, would become a literary celebrity with the appearance of his first collection of stories, Come Back, Dr. Caligari, in 1964, and remain one until he died in 1989. On March 10, 1955, William Gaddis's first novel appeared, the enormous and enormously complex The Recognitions. The novel's obvious ambition was matched by its absolute failure in terms of any immediate impact on the literary world, either critically or commercially, and Gaddis was forced to accept his novel's initial fate and begin writing publicity for a pharmaceutical company. The book was widely reviewed, but the reviews seemed so much more representative of the shortcomings of its critics than of the content of the novel that an amateur journalist using the pseudonym "Jack Green" devoted three issues of his newspaper, a magazine written, mimeographed, and distributed in Greenwich Village in the 1950s and 60s, to the reaction of book reviewers to Gaddis's novel. In 1957, Gaddis started to work on
another novel and a play. However, he quickly abandoned both projects, publishing nothing for fifteen years. His literary career appeared to have ended as soon as it began.

By 1955, Robert Altman had been working for eight years as an industrial filmmaker for the Calvin Company of Kansas City. He had also been trying to break into the entertainment industry, but his efforts had yielded only the sale of two screenplays he'd written with a collaborator, one a compilation called Christmas Eve, the other a detective movie called Bodyguard. He was not involved in the production of either one. While making a documentary about the Kansas City Athletics baseball team, Altman secured independent financing for his first feature, a story about teen-age rebels called The Delinquents. Before it was finally released, in 1957, he had made another documentary, The James Dean Story. Instead of making more feature films, however, Altman began directing episodes of "Alfred Hitchcock Presents," and he worked regularly as a free-lance television director until 1968, when he was hired by Warner Brothers to direct Countdown, about the first moon shot (and subsequently fired by the studio before the picture was completed because he allowed the actors to speak at the same time).

Donald Barthelme was drafted to fight in the Korean War in 1953, but the war ended on the day he arrived there. He edited an Army newspaper until he was discharged in 1955, at which point he returned to the job he had left, writing for the Houston Post. He left the Post before the end of the year to take a job in publicity at the University of Houston, where his duties included writing speeches for the university president. In

Gaddis's *The Recognitions* is a remarkable first novel in that it exhibits such a fully developed, uncompromising artistic vision. However, its immediate descent into obscurity suggests that at the time it was published, American readers had no appetite for it. *JR* was not much more of a commercial success when it appeared in 1975, but it did receive its share of praise from a number of critics, as well as the National Book Award. *JR*, however, is a far more radical novel than *The Recognitions*, which suggests that critics had almost, if not quite, caught up with Gaddis's sensibilities. No doubt writers who had come on the scene during these twenty years, such as John Barth and Thomas Pynchon, had created a different climate in which *JR* could be read. However, it seems to me that American history between 1955 and 1975, at least as much as literary developments during that time, made *JR* appear far less strange and surprising to its audience than Gaddis's first novel. In fact, the appearance of *JR* as well as Altman's *Nashville* and Barthelme's *The Dead Father* in 1975 -- their most exemplary works, the ones in which the possibilities each saw in his particular medium find their most compelling expression -- can be considered not only the result of individual career trajectories, but
also the result of a conjunction between the aesthetic principles each of
them possessed and the social milieu within which all three were working
at the height of their powers.

A record of the effects of the tumultuous events that occurred in the
late 1960s and early 1970s, "The White Album," Joan Didion's brilliant
essay, portrays a country in which the narratives which structured both
public and private life are no longer viable. "I am talking here," she
writes, "about a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I
had ever told myself, a common condition but one I found troubling. I
suppose this period began around 1966 and continued through 1971"(11).
As she alternates anecdotes about the precarious state of her personal life,
especially her mental health, and meditations on subjects such as Charles
Manson, the Doors, the Black Panther Party, and the student revolt at San
Francisco State College, the difficulty she has in explaining her own life in
terms of familiar personal narratives becomes inseparable from the
irreconcilability of public events to familiar social narratives. What is
finally most troubling to Didion is not just that there are no pre-existing
narratives in place that could make sense of her own life or the events she
writes about, but that the absence of narratives prevents her from
interpreting her experiences within an ethical framework:

I was supposed to have a script, and had mislaid it. I was
supposed to hear cues, and no longer did. I was meant to
know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in
variable sequence, images with no "meaning" beyond their
temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting room
experience. In what would probably be the middle of my life I wanted still to believe in the narrative and in the narrative's intelligibility, but to know that one could change the sense with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as more electrical than ethical. (12-13)

To the events Didion describes in "The White Album" which resist the imposition of what suddenly seemed like outdated narratives, the Vietnam War could easily be added. Michael Herr writes about the lack of agreement on the precise year in which the war started, suggesting the war's resistance to efforts to narrativize it: "Mission intellectuals [members of the non-combat command stationed in Saigon] like 1954 as the reference date; if you saw as far back as War II and the Japanese occupation you were practically a historical visionary. 'Realists' said that it began for us in 1961, and the common run of Mission flack insisted on 1965, post-Tonkin resolution, as though all the killing that had gone before wasn't really war"(49). The American military presence in Vietnam ended in 1975, but marking this date as the end of the war entails almost as much ambiguity as deciding upon a date at which the war began. The war simply did not fit any existing model of what a war is, at least with regard to the wars in which America had fought.

Didion asserts that "[w]e live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line on disparate images"(11), but the events of the late 1960s and early 1970s imprinted themselves as images and stayed that way, instead of succumbing to the narrative impulse to render them as parts of a whole, the meaning of which become clear when
they can all be seen together, in their relationships to one another. The most shattering developments of the period filtered into memory as moments, often captured for television or the print media by a camera, apparently transcending temporality and yet deeply significant in terms of their consequences. Given the inadequacy of available narratives to process experience, the question arises of what narrative actually performs, and what the results are when it is no longer able to function. In "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," Hayden White makes the following assertion: "Far from being a problem, then, narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate knowing into telling, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture-specific"(1). White describes narrative further as "a metacode, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted," and he claims that "the absence of narrative capacity or a refusal of narrative indicates an absence or refusal of meaning itself"(2). The implication of White's analysis is that narrative makes possible the very idea of a shared reality, a social reality, insofar as it endows the silent reality of individual experience with a meaning that appears after the fact to be inherent in that reality, which can then be articulated and so become the basis of a shared reality. The retrospective quality of narrative is important to note, for it means that the notion of a shared reality is a fundamentally historical concept, necessarily grounded in representations of the past. White goes on to argue that narrative's tendency to moralize
reality is the most significant way in which it generates meaning (14), but for now I want to emphasize the capacity of narrative to assimilate individual experience to a social reality which transcends the limits of individual experience.

White asserts that "the capacity to envision a set of events as belonging to the same order of meaning requires a metaphysical principle by which to translate difference into similarity" (16). As an instrument of the production of a shared reality, narrative must to some degree erase not only the differences inherent in the events it narrates -- between the events themselves, between characters (if the narrative is fictional) or the people to whom it refers (if the narrative is historical) -- in order to assign to them a single meaning; narrative must also erase the differences between itself and its audience and between the individual members of its audience if the single meaning it offers is to be affirmed by everyone who encounters the narrative. In other words, in translating knowing into telling, narrative reproduces experience in such a way that the teller and the listener not only have access to the same experience, but assign to it the same meaning, thereby creating a shared reality which seems to exist in opposition to the differences which constitute individual subjectivity. What becomes of social reality, then, without the translation of individual experience into a form which makes it available to others by making it meaningful? In Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, Barthes compares meaning in its monolithic form, which becomes History and the underpinnings of social reality, with meaning in some impossibly dispersed
form, never resolving itself into anything unified enough to be called History:

Yet to this initial state of semantic reading, according to which things are proceeding toward the "true" meaning (that of History), corresponds elsewhere and almost contradictorily another value: meaning, before collapsing into in-significance, shudders still: there is meaning, but this meaning does not permit itself to be "caught"; it remains fluid, shuddering with a faint ebullition. The ideal state of sociality is thereby declared: an enormous and perpetual state of rustling animates with countless meanings which explode, crepitate, burst out without ever assuming the definitive form of a sign grimly weighted by its signified: a happy and impossible theme, for this ideally thrilling meaning is pitilessly recuperated by a solid meaning (that of the Doxa) or by a null meaning (that of the mystiques of liberation). (97-8)

Barthes seems to be lamenting a stabilization of meaning which he considers both inevitable and a necessary condition for the existence of a social reality. The "ideal state of sociality" Barthes contemplates is one in which our penchant for assigning meaning to things somehow survives without meaning ever solidifying into something that can no longer be recognized as originating in individual experience. Although Barthes describes this world without stable meaning as merely a fantasy, he nevertheless points to an important effect of the absence of narratives that would sustain social reality: individual experience becomes primary, since
the ground upon which identification with others could occur has been withdrawn.

Just as the Modernists documented the increased isolation of the individual resulting from the breaking down of public narratives occurring at the turn of the century, so the social fragmentation documented in Didion's essay, and throughout both The White Album and Slouching Towards Bethlehem, seems to proceed directly from the failure of narratives that had previously served to bind individuals together. The isolating effect of the breakdown of narrative seems an integral part of J.R., Nashville, and The Dead Father, making them emblematic of the decade in which they appeared. I do not, however, intend to concentrate primarily on how this process manifests itself within the parameters of the fictional world each of these works depicts. All three works do show socially fragmented worlds, and I will have occasion to elaborate on this feature in the course of my study. But an extensive description of this feature would amount to an analysis of these works from a historical perspective, and, although each does contain moments for which the historical period of its creation provides an illuminating context, this is not my main objective. Instead, my study will proceed along more formal lines, exploring the ways in which Gaddis, Altman, and Barthelme subvert or abandon completely conventions of narrative, and it is this particular result of their divergence from narrative convention that seems most interesting to me -- the degree to which each of these works leaves the reader or the spectator trapped within the limits of his or her own consciousness, fully aware of
the imaginary nature of the constructions upon which identification with a work of art or, more generally, identification with others, rests.

The result of their refusal of narrative is not, I think, the creation of a space, left by elements said to be missing from the work, in which the reader or spectator becomes part of the work, and is thereby able, by becoming the "subject" of the work, to articulate its meaning, but rather the creation of a work which finally emphasizes the wholly imaginary quality of this notion. Narrative art, insofar as it perpetuates the illusion of a world that speaks to us in intelligible terms, facilitates the belief that the artist and the reader or spectator, when the two interact, achieve an identical understanding of the work's elements; furthermore, narrative relies on the possibility of identification between one consciousness and another -- the possibility, in other words, of a shared reality. To say that these works contain empty spaces meant to be filled by the reader or spectator is itself a means of narrativizing them, because it supposes totality where there is none by figuring a (missing) part of them as a mirror that gives back an image of the reader or spectator. Not only do these works resist their own potentially totalizing gestures, but also those of their critics. By refusing narrative, they attest to the constructed nature of shared reality and illuminate the irreducible difference between art and its audience.

I.R., Nashville, and The Dead Father are all described as works which appear to have left out various elements that have traditionally defined their particular genres. They appear to follow a widely observed principle of a great deal of postmodern art, which John Ashbery voices at
the beginning of Three Poems: "I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way"(3). The poem continues with "clean-washed sea" and "The flowers were." appearing at seemingly random places on the page, followed by an addendum to the opening sentences: "These are examples of leaving out. But, forget as we will, something soon comes to stand in their place. Not the truth, perhaps, but -- yourself. It is you who made this, therefore you are true. But the truth has passed on," and, further down the page, "to divide all"(3). If I am reading Ashbery's tone in these last three sentences correctly, he seems to be expressing skeptical amusement at the idea that filling with oneself the empty spaces in a work of art constitutes an escape from the limitations of the individual, perceiving consciousness, not to mention a merging with the work or access to its deepest mysteries. The "truth" is that the interpreter of the work ultimately remains separate from it, from the consciousness which created it, and from the time of its creation, despite the sense the work might have of being incomplete in the absence of the interpreter. Ashbery's thinking is not exactly an argument against Umberto Eco's concept of the "open work," but rather an act of disillusionment. Eco asserts that "'open' works, insofar as they are in movement, are characterized by the invitation to make the work together with the author"(21); within the category of "open works" are "works in movement," which "characteristically consist of unplanned or physically incomplete structural units"(12). An implication of Eco's theory is that, in completing a work left open, the reader or spectator attains, by becoming
part of the work itself, a kind of self-affirmation. For Ashbery, this notion is a fantasy, no matter how "open" the work may appear to be, although it is a fantasy in which we cannot help but indulge. In "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," Ashbery contemplates the notion of self-identification as an aspect of our experience of art in terms of his response to Parmigianino's painting, alternately embracing the idea and admitting its illusoriness. In the following lines, Ashbery reflects on the painting's ineluctable otherness:

What is novel is the extreme care in rendering
The velleities of the rounded reflecting surface
(It is the first mirror portrait),
So that you could be fooled for a moment
Before you realize the reflection
Isn't yours. You feel then like one of those
Hoffman characters who have been deprived
Of a reflection, except that the whole of me
Is seen to be supplanted by the strict
Otherness of the painter in his
Other room. (74)

Even as he finally comes to terms with this realization, Ashbery expresses nostalgia for the possibility of the painting as an image not only of Parmigianino but, in some sense, of the viewer as well. He realizes, however, the idea is nothing more than an imagined but no less solacing respite from the difficulty of structuring our experience of the present:

Once it seemed so perfect [...]
This could have been our paradise: exotic
Refuge within an exhausted world, but that wasn't
In the cards, because it couldn't have been
The point. Aping naturalness may be the first step
Toward achieving an inner calm
But it is the first step only, and often
Remains a frozen gesture of welcome etched
On the air materializing behind it,
A convention. (82)

The notion of the "open work" is implicit in much of the commentary on J.R., Nashville, and The Dead Father, and one of the reasons is undoubtedly that Gaddis, Altman, Joan Tewkesbury (who wrote the script for Nashville), and Barthelme have done their share to promote this understanding of their work. When asked in an interview to comment on his decision to write J.R almost entirely in dialogue, Gaddis offers what he condescendingly calls "a theory": "It is the notion that the reader is brought in almost as a collaborator in creating the picture that emerges of the characters, of the situation, of what they look like, everything. So this authorial absence which everyone from Flaubert to Barthes talks about, is the sense that the book is a collaboration between the reader and what is on the pages" (Abádi-Nagy 79-80). Referring to his films, Altman expresses this same idea: "This work doesn't exist unless an audience is half of it. If they come there and sit in front of their sets or in the theatre, and they don't go halfway with you, and take the material in front of them and process it through their own history, it's meaningless" (Breskin 297). Joan
Tewkesbury has said that Nashville "was designed so that you were the 25th character" (Tewkesbury 109). Barthelme has expressed his sense of the reader as collaborator more explicitly in his work than Gaddis or Altman has. The questionnaire in the middle of Snow White, his first novel, is perhaps the most notorious example. It consists of fifteen questions, beginning with "Do you like the story so far?," followed by a choice of "Yes" or "No" for the reader to check. After being asked if the work has, "for you, a metaphysical dimension," the reader is asked to explain it in twenty-five words or less, the response to be written on five empty lines provided for the purpose. Given this kind of encouragement, it is no wonder that critics have tended to think of the work of Gaddis, Altman, and Barthelme as puzzles in which the missing piece is the reader or spectator. Steven Moore, for instance, describes JR in this way: "Just as radio audiences must use their imagination more than movie audiences do, Gaddis's readers must join him in creating this fictional world" (64). Helene Keyssar considers the spectator of Nashville a "participant observer" (134), while Alan Karp argues that the fragmentation in Altman's films offers "the potential for the viewer to experience expanded fields of consciousness," and that, "[b]y bombarding us with open-ended experiences on numerous levels, Altman's films seek to undermine our own ego structures and induce at least a temporary sense of another degree of awareness" (14). Carl Malmgren classifies Barthelme's fiction as a type in which "[t]he reader is invited to discover a principle of coherence for the text, to assemble the text's disparate narrative segments. The reader becomes the text's chief gap-filler and connection-maker [...]" (190). This
approach to J.R., Nashville, and The Dead Father -- in which the work is said to contain empty spaces to be filled by the reader or spectator -- is essentially a means of narrativizing them. Instead of seeing them as complete and full despite the fact that they refuse conventions of narrative, these critics create a space within the work that apparently invites the reader or spectator into it, thereby negating the work's fundamental otherness and countering its refusal to encourage the reader or spectator's identification with it.

So, rather than saying that certain elements of narrative are missing from J.R., Nashville, and The Dead Father, it seems more accurate to say that these works refuse them, and most of this study will be devoted to describing how the shape of each work is determined by the refusal of these narrative elements. The quotation in my title, "a heightened degree of messiness," comes from a preface Barthelme wrote for a Robert Rauschenberg catalogue in 1985. Barthelme uses the phrase to describe the effect Rauschenberg achieves with photomechanical silkscreen, specifically "the superimposition of one image upon another in such a way that the first bleeds through the second, as physical collage does not"("Being Bad" 8). The effect of the silkscreen, as Barthelme describes it, seems analogous to the effect of certain features of J.R., Nashville, and The Dead Father in that the silkscreen is opposed to principles of narrative in two important ways - - it permits the presentation of two elements simultaneously, and it dissolves the boundaries which would otherwise mark these two elements as separate from one another.1 As Gerald Prince writes, narrative "is more

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1 Jerome Klinkowitz asserts that silkscreen is "the informing principle" of The Dead Father, which distinguishes it from the earlier work which is dominated by collage,
clearly perceptible when discrete states or actions are temporally related" (64). But Rauschenberg's materials are much more suited to these non-narrative effects than are those of a writer or a filmmaker. In J.R., Nashville, and The Dead Father, Gaddis, Altman, and Barthelme each invent ways of achieving non-narrative effects with a medium whose history is dominated by its narrative possibilities. In an interview with J. D. O'Hara, Barthelme suggests that trying to overcome the limitations imposed by his medium is what generates much of his work, and he elaborates on the concept of "messiness":

All this has to do with a possible extension of means. Abstraction is a little heaven I can't quite get to. How do you achieve, for example, "messy"? De Kooning can do "messy" by making a charcoal stroke over paint and then smudging same with his talented thumb -- in prose the same gesture tends to look like simple ineptitude. De Kooning has a whole vocabulary of bad behavior which enables him to set up the most fruitful kinds of contradictions. It frees him. I have trouble rendering breaking glass. (O'Hara 198-99)

J.R., Nashville, and The Dead Father could all be called a radical and relentless "extension of means," insofar as each of them attempts to expand the possibilities of what can be rendered in their respective media. A major component of this attempt is the borrowing of techniques of representation from other art forms, which in each case contributes to the undermining of the narrative aspects of the original medium. J.R possesses

but Klinkowitz does not develop this idea in his analysis of the novel (Donald Barthelme 8).
cinematic qualities, and *Nashville* and *The Dead Father* are both heavily
influenced by painting. All three works undermine narrative in three
general ways. First, time in these works is made to seem endless and
without gaps. Instead of striving for the illusion of continuity between the
events they depict, their continuity lies in the passage of time itself. The
events they include do not quite have the status of "events," in the sense of
having clearly marked temporal boundaries, nor do the works themselves
have precise temporal beginnings or endings. They acknowledge the
extension of time beyond the duration they inhabit, thereby emphasizing
the arbitrariness of a narrative’s temporal limits. Furthermore, rather than
suggesting that what the reader or spectator is experiencing has already
happened, they portray a continuous present which not only seems to
coincide with the present of the reader or spectator, but which is also
disconnected from the relativizing concepts of past and future. In addition
to the non-narrative representation of time, all three works have no
internal organizing center. Although certain characters are more
prominent than others, no character determines the significance of any
other. They speak only for themselves, and, to a large extent, only to
themselves, insofar as various obstacles complicate communication in all
three works. Finally, all three works create the illusion of the total absence
of any sort of narrating consciousness that could assign significance to their
fictional worlds. This feature of each work is most apparent in the fact
that Gaddis, Altman, and Barthelme never stand in judgment of their
characters. Instead of presenting their characters, their characters present
themselves, without cues as to what our moral responses should be.
Gaddis, Altman, and Barthelme simply let the reader or spectator observe the behavior of their characters; they do not presume to have access to their characters' inner lives. In their refusal of narrative, Gaddis, Altman, and Barthelme achieve the "messiness" Barthelme prizes in the visual arts, with perhaps the central paradox of each of these works being that their messiness is the product of rigorous precision.

Gaddis's The Recognitions is a fiercely inventive novel, but its predecessors are easily discerned in it. Gaddis composed JR, the subject of Chapter One, almost entirely in dialogue, and while this fact in itself does not constitute a departure from all novelistic tradition (which includes novels consisting of mostly dialogue by Ronald Firbank and Ivy Compton-Burnett), Gaddis's method of rendering the characters' dialogue as well as the fictional world they inhabit constitutes an assault on the narrative conventions Hayden White outlines. Although Gaddis's next two novels, Carpenter's Gothic and A Frolic of His Own, resemble JR more than The Recognitions, they are footnotes, minor variations on an already established method. JR can be described by using one of the characters' pet phrases, "the ongoing situation." Instead of representing time according to narrative principles, which dictate that a narrative's continuity appear to inhere in the events it contains, time in JR never seems to stop, regardless of whether any of its characters are present to fill it. It flows independently of them. Nothing in the novel properly begins or ends, partly an effect of Gaddis's constant use of gerundives. Actions cannot be temporally located with any exactness. Despite the novel's title, no character seems more central than any other. Although they talk
incessantly, the characters rarely achieve meaningful connections, a situation exacerbated by their immersion in an endless array of incompatible discourses, as well as their reliance on disembodying modes of communication, especially the telephone. Both the dialogue and the third-person passages in the novel suggest the presence of a mechanical means of reproduction rather than a narrating consciousness. The dialogue possesses an "unedited" quality, as if it were emanating from an audio tape being played back; it starts and stops at seemingly random places, and changes directions not only between sentences, but between words. In contrast to the noise generated by the characters, the third-person passages portray nothing but the mute landscape and the externally observable actions of the characters. In their spatial and temporal continuity and the lack of access to the inner lives of the characters, they are the written equivalent of a film in progress; they do not penetrate the surface of anything in the novel's fictional world. The mechanical aspects of the novel's form effectively remove both Gaddis himself and, more importantly in terms of the requirements of narrative, the possibility of a voice that could articulate the significance, moral or otherwise, of the characters' actions.

By the time he made Nashville, which I discuss in my second chapter, Altman had used in one film or another many of the narratively subversive devices that would appear in it. Beginning with M*A*S*H in 1970 and continuing through Nashville in 1975, Altman consistently revised the traditional genres of American films -- most notably the war film in M*A*S*H, the western in McCabe and Mrs. Miller, the film noir
detective story in *The Long Goodbye*, and the musical in *Nashville* -- while at the same time gradually releasing cinema from the grip of narrative conventions that had dominated it since its formative period. *Nashville*, however, gave him an unprecedented opportunity (and so far unduplicated) insofar as it provided Altman with material into which he could seamlessly integrate the technical advances which made possible much of the narrative subversiveness of his earlier films. Altman's use of sound is perhaps the most immediately noticeable aspect of his style, and, if his experiments with sound in his earlier films sometimes made him an intrusive presence in them, *Nashville*, because music and musical performances are so central to it, afforded Altman a chance to experiment further with sound in such a way that the material itself would seem to motivate his decisions. None of his films since then has broken as much new ground.

In "Narrative Space," Stephen Heath argues that the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema constitute a continuous process of narrativization:

> The classical economy of film is its organization thus as organic unity, and the form of that economy is narrative, the narrativization of film. Narrative, as it were, determines the film which is contained in its process in that determination, this "bind" being itself a process -- precisely the narrativization. The narration is to be held on the narrated, the enunciation on the enounced; filmic procedures are to be held as narrative instances (very much as "cues"), exhaustively, without gap or contradiction. (397)
Nashville continuously defies this process of narrativization. To describe his style, Altman uses painting as a metaphor, which points to two key elements of Nashville: its tendency toward atemporality and its refusal to explain (or pretend to explain) itself. Instead of showing us what happens next, Altman shows us what is happening somewhere else, and this impulse accounts for many aspects of the film's form. Instead of a series of scenes which fill consecutive blocks of time, the film often backtracks to show a scene taking place at the same time as the preceding one. In many of the film's scenic transitions, rather than the edges of two scenes touching, they overlap, so that the scenes bleed into one another. The aural boundaries of a given scene seem porous, permitting access to off-screen action and allowing temporally overlapping but spatially unrelated scenes to merge with one another. As in JR, there are hardly any clear beginnings and endings. Also like JR, there are no hierarchical relationships among the film's characters. They are always observed in relation to one another, but they rarely form connections with one another. None of them could be said to occupy the "center" of the movie. And neither could Altman, insofar as he strives to create the appearance of not being in control of his material. Individual scenes seem indiscriminately inclusive, as evidenced by the aural chaos of the sound track, usually the result of many characters speaking at once, and by the frequent use of zooms, panning shots, and long shots which incorporate segments of space and time excluded by the necessities of narrative. Like Gaddis's fictional world, Altman's is restricted to surfaces. In his effort to show rather than tell, Altman, like Gaddis, tries to efface himself from his work. He does not pretend to have
access to the inner lives of his characters, so the concept of motivation becomes irrelevant, which ends up making moral judgment impossible. The fictional world of Nashville is as silent as the world it represents.

Chapter Three focuses on Barthelme's The Dead Father, a work largely neglected in numerous studies of Barthelme. Unlike Gaddis and Altman, who create complex but internally consistent non-narrative modes of representation, Barthelme's career is marked by the huge variety of forms he employed in order to undermine narrative conventions. Barthelme makes no choices without an awareness of their shortcomings. So, in The Dead Father, the absence of narrative is manifested not so much in its replacement with a different system as in a demonstration of the inadequacy of other systems to more accurately reflect lived experience. Much of the novel shares two features with the epic genre, as befits the Dead Father's conception of himself as an epic figure: it offers no signs of a clearly defined, subjective point of view of the events it portrays, a feature of epic observed by M. M. Bakhtin; and, as Erich Auerbach asserts with regard to Homeric epic, it takes place in a continuous, absolute present, changeless and exempt from the relativity of past and future. If these features of the novel suggest an adherence to the questionable ideals of total objectivity and immunity to temporal processes, they would seem to be opposed by the extended conversations between Julie and Emma. These sections of the novel, however, which consist of short, unattributed lines of dialogue, render Julie and Emma indistinguishable from one another, insofar as neither can be associated with any given line of dialogue. Instead of complete objectivity, they seem to be immersed so
deeply in their own subjectivity that they no longer have discernible identities. Rather than a present that is unchanging and continuous, Julie and Emma seem caught in a present that must continuously reconstitute itself, so that it is no more open to the past or the future than is the epic present. If narrative cannot escape its limitations, neither can an epic representation of the world or the more fluid conversations between Julie and Emma. Many critics take the need to accept the anxiety inherent in negotiating between conflicting absolutes to be a moral position advocated by Barthes, but reading the novel this way, I argue, amounts to setting aside its attack against the kind of generalities which make moral codes possible, as well as Barthes's capacity for dispersing himself among the novel's irreconcilable voices. Like Gaddis and Altman, Barthes does not delve beneath the surface of the world he creates; the physical world in the novel is rendered as if it were a painted backdrop, silent and still. Unlike Gaddis and Altman, however, Barthes seems resigned to the inevitability of the narrative impulse, a point I take up in the conclusion.

Although, as I indicated earlier, Gaddis, Altman, and Barthes all encourage a view of their work which I contest -- its capacity for incorporating the reader or spectator -- they also allude to a feature of their work which seems to me intimately related to its refusal of narrative. Barthes's words are the most succinct: "I think the paraphrasable content in art is rather slight -- 'tiny,' as De Kooning puts it" (O'Hara 199). I would amend Barthes's statement so that it only referred to non-narrative art, because the whole point of narrative art is that it does in fact have a paraphrasable content; this is what makes it narrative. As I noted
earlier, White asserts that narrative solves the problem of translating "knowing into telling." Narrative art is therefore an expression of the experience of an individual consciousness which has as its goal to make intelligible that experience to its audience. The audience should then be able to articulate the experience of the artist, or at least, to use Barthelme's word, paraphrase it. Non-narrative art, on the other hand, cannot be paraphrased because it has no interest in "telling" its audience anything, yet this does not preclude the audience from "knowing" it, in the sense of knowing what a work of art is without knowing what it means. In an interview conducted in 1968, while he was working on J.R., Gaddis was asked to describe his novel in progress: "Well ... ah, just tell them it's about money" (Friedman 10). When asked for the "germinating idea" for The Dead Father, Barthelme's response was not much more enlightening: "A matter of having a father and being a father" (LeClair and McCaffery 41). Altman expresses the lack of "paraphrasable content" in his films this way: "Ideally, I want someone to walk out after one of my pictures and say, 'I don't have any idea what that was about, but it was right.'" (Breskin 297). My focus on the ways in which J.R., Nashville, and The Dead Father refuse narrative conventions betrays my interest in what they are, as opposed to what they are about.
Chapter One

J.R.: Screenwriting

What can account for the wildly uneven response to William Gaddis's second novel, J.R., since its publication in 1975? Although its initial reviews were generally more favorable than those for Gaddis's first novel, The Recognitions (1955), probably the most notorious review of J.R., written by George Steiner for The New Yorker, pronounced the book "unreadable." The viciousness with which Steiner elaborates on the novel's unreadability is mystifying, but his reaction was taken seriously enough to warrant a specific response by John Gardner in a subsequent review for The New York Review of Books. Gardner asserted that, contrary to Steiner's belief, J.R. was in fact "wonderfully and easily readable," but was nevertheless a failure because it could only point out what the author abhorred in the world it depicted without also offering some vision of how that world could be made better. The New Republic was likewise equivocal, but it had the excuse of two separate reviewers. In offering his opinions of what he considered noteworthy fiction published in 1975, Alfred Kazin wrote that J.R. "is like nothing else around, and is not a masterpiece," yet he found it comparable to Judith Rossner's Looking for Mr. Goodbar at least "in their lack of human beings." Two months later, the magazine published a review by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, who wrote that J.R. was "[n]ot a conventional novel, but perhaps more surely and originally a novel than much that has recently passed for such."
Reaching the conclusion that *I R* is not a conventional novel requires only that one open it to almost any page and read it for a moment. Its abundance of dialogue, unattributed and marked with a dash instead of quotation marks, is immediately apparent, but passages such as the one following are especially indicative of the fact that this novel is operating under its own unique rules:

He came out of the booth pulling his tie closed at the throat, his voice constricted in the call --Amy ...? as though that had constricted it, knotted his voice and his face in consternation as hers filled with her smile, her arms extended open passing him where he sank back against the booth and then into it watching her come half to her knees to embrace the boy who stood away quickly in embarrassment to pick up a suitcase, straighten the school blazer, as he caught the dangling phone --like, like one of those old Shirley Temple movies, Jack Haley goes in one side of the revolving door and she comes out the other but Christ, Tom? Imagine having her, having anybody that glad to see you? Eigen? hello ...?

And the glass of the shuddering door caught her eyes and her profile framing the boy's stooping close as they passed with her arm to his shoulders to catch --I can recite The Charge of the Light Brigade.

--Let's hurry, Francis. (190-1)

The "He" at the beginning of this passage is Jack Gibbs, who has been talking in a telephone booth in a train station to his friend Thomas Eigen.
He leaves the booth to try to get the attention of Amy Joubert, who teaches at the same elementary school as Gibbs and is at this point the unresponsive object of his affection. She has come to meet her son, Francis, from whose father she is divorced. We are not aware of her presence at the station, nor even her intention of going there, until this moment. When Gibbs returns to the telephone, he speaks to a dead line before realizing Eigen has hung up, at which point we leave Gibbs to follow Amy and Francis as they take a taxi to her apartment. (Characters speaking into telephones with no one listening on the other end of the line is something of a recurring motif in \textit{I R}, as well as in \textit{Nashville}.) This passage is representative of the whole novel in that it confounds certain expectations which narrative normally satisfies. Although it refers to a number of specific actions, assigning any one of them a specific temporal duration is difficult, mainly because of the frequent use of gerundives and the word "as." The third-person description of the scene is strictly visual, as if we were literally standing nearby watching the action; there is no indication of what is inside the minds of the characters. The words outside the speech of the characters do not suggest a narrating consciousness so much as a mechanically produced impression of what lies on the surface of the scene, such as would be made by a movie camera. Finally, there seems to be no clear reason why our access to Gibbs has been terminated in favor of Amy and her son. The shift occurs as if by chance. Had she not been close enough to Gibbs for him to see her but fail to divert her, her trip to pick up Francis might have gone unnoticed, and we would have continued listening to Gibbs's telephone conversations.
The relationship of \textit{J.R} to narrative is what distinguishes it not only from other novels in whose company it is often studied,\textsuperscript{1} but also from Gaddis’s three other novels. The \textit{Recognitions}, as I remarked earlier, is certainly different from its modernist models, but a look at any passage from it shows how firmly rooted it is in most narrative conventions compared to \textit{J.R}:

In spite of the fact that the couch was out of sight, he set off toward it, suddenly remembering the perennial hunt; and by now he had had enough to drink to encourage him toward the woman sought after in vain, die Frau nach der man sich sehnt (as Gordon called her in Act III). So he knew the eyes that looked beyond and did not acknowledge him, the hands which offered but protected, and these were the places one was forced to seek her in New York, no matter the shadows, the choking air, this Ewig-Weibliche, the Eternal Helen. Then he suddenly heard Jesse Franks's voice saying, --She looks like some friggin madonna, and, no more realizing the wonder in that remark than the man who had spoken it, shut it out. (188-9)

\textsuperscript{1} Although critics such as Kuehl note the novel’s uniqueness, they nevertheless describe \textit{J.R} in terms which align it with other novels more often mentioned in discussions of postmodern American fiction. For instance, in Tom LeClair’s \textit{The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction}, \textit{J.R} is an example of novels concerned with various kinds of systems, in its case the economic system. In \textit{Fiction in the Quantum Universe}, Susan Strehle reads \textit{J.R} through the lens of quantum physics, which she regards as a metaphor for the values endorsed by the novel. In addition to a chapter devoted to \textit{J.R}, both LeClair and Strehle include chapters on Pynchon’s \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}, Coover’s \textit{The Public Burning}, and Barth’s \textit{LETTERS}. 
The fact that Otto, the (obvious) subject of this passage, is seen performing several discrete actions, that these actions are represented as if they have all already happened, that the narrator has access to Otto's thoughts, especially his memories, that the speaker at the end is identified, all give some indication of the drastic leap Gaddis makes between *The Recognitions* and *J R*. A character in the first novel remarks at one point, "--Yes, I don't know, if one corrupts the artist and the other corrupts ... that damned *Mona Lisa*, no one sees it, you can't see it with a thousand off-center reproductions between you and it"(92). The novel is obsessed with every kind of structure posed between reality (or, in this case, a representation of reality) and our experience of it. In deciding to write *J R* almost entirely in dialogue, it seems as if Gaddis wanted to remove from his second novel as many layers of "reproduction" as he could. In the two novels which have followed *J R* -- *Carpenter's Gothic* and *A Frolic of His Own* -- Gaddis works variations on the form of *J R*. *Carpenter's Gothic*, a relatively short novel by Gaddis's standards, conforms to Aristotelian unities, with the action occurring in a single setting over a period of two months. *A Frolic of His Own* incorporates legal opinions, presented in their entirety and written in finely wrought legalese, as well as portions of a play the main character has written about the Civil War. Both novels indicate that, having successfully negotiated the constraints he set for himself in *J R*, Gaddis challenged himself in different ways.

The divergence of *J R* from novelistic convention goes some of the way toward explaining why the responses of critics who wrote about it when it was published were so various -- openly hostile, bewildered,
offended, admiring. Yet the novel clearly had strong advocates. Among them was William Gass, who referred to JR as "the supreme masterpiece of acoustical collage." But Gaddis's novel has not been paid nearly so much attention as, for instance, Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, to which it is often compared. It has been in and out of print, and, although it has been the subject of numerous essays and occasionally gets a chapter devoted to it in books dealing with several authors, many books surveying postmodern fiction do not mention JR or its author at all.2 One could say that the novel's relative obscurity is simply evidence of its insignificance, but the passion with which it has been attacked by its detractors, along with the fact that now-canonical works by American authors such as Melville were routinely rejected when they first appeared, more likely support the contention that JR is, as John Kuehl writes, "[m]ore profoundly innovative than any other post-World War II American novel"(256). Profound innovation is rarely received with mere indifference; if it is not applauded, it is usually attacked with considerable energy, for the simple reason that it constitutes its own attack on the conventions it seeks to subvert.

To get a sense of the narrative conventions relevant to JR, I want to return to Hayden White's "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." Although White's essay emphasizes the concept of narrative as it is manifested in historical writing about real events, the elements of narrative he describes apply to any form of representation in which one could make a distinction between a set of events and its narrativization of them. White asserts that the events which are the basis of a narrative "must

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2 For example, Brian McHale, Postmodernist Fiction; Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism.
be not only registered within the chronological framework of their original occurrence but narrated as well, that is to say, revealed as possessing a structure, an order of meaning, which they do not possess as mere sequence"(5). He proposes what he considers to be several defining characteristics of a narrative, the combined effect of which is to reveal "an order of meaning" in the events it relates.

White argues that narrative "strains to produce the effect of having filled in all the gaps, to put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time"(11). Narrative must possess some principle for ranking the importance of events, and that principle determines which events are included in the narrative and which are not. The narrativization of time requires that the events included in the narrative appear to form a temporal continuum; a narrative does not acknowledge the extension of time beyond the duration of the events it recounts. It is the procession of one event after another, rather than the passage of time itself, which gives narrative its continuity. In the absence of narrativity, as White writes, "time has no high points or low points; it is, we might say, paratactical and endless. It has no gaps"(8). In addition to denying the endless nature of time, a narrative, according to White, must display "a notion of a social center by which both to locate [the events it contains] with respect to one another and to charge them with ethical or moral significance"(11). Without such a center, events merely happen, and the fact of their happening is the only significance that inheres in them. They have no ethical or moral significance because they are not
thought of as having happened to anyone, or as having been carried out by anyone. Therefore, there is no interest in the outcome of any particular event, and so no way of claiming that one event is any more important than any other. White argues that if events are to be rendered as a narrative, "we must suppose that a subject of the sort that would provide the impulse to record its activities must exist" (12). Without the presence of a recording subject, with a clearly defined perspective on the events being recorded, a narrative could not achieve what White considers its ultimate goal. Narrative, White asserts, "is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine" (14). Any social system, according to White, is most immediately defined by its legal system, and narrative arises out of "the conflict between desire, on the one side, and the law, on the other," the latter of which makes possible both "a subject [and] the kind of event which lends itself to narrative representation" (12-13). Narrativity offers the subject a way of presenting events in such a way as to confer upon them a moral force consistent with the subject's desires, a moral force which the events themselves do not otherwise possess.

Reading 1R in the context of White's analysis of the elements essential to narrative, Gaddis's subversion or abandonment of these elements becomes clear. The novel's representation of time counters that of narrative; the gaps in 1R occur because there is nothing to fill the time, not because time itself seems to have stopped and started again. Time is continuous, and the novel unfolds within an absolute present, with the
events in the novel represented in language which does not place them at a precise location on a temporal continuum. There are no hierarchical relationships among the characters. Each voice is as authoritative as every other, so that none of them could be said to occupy a position in any way privileged. The characters are consumed by their endless efforts to overcome their isolation from one another; connections between them are rare and fragile. When no one is speaking, the novel is completely silent, since there is no narratorial consciousness within it. The third-person passages render the physical world as if we were seeing it in a film; the novel provides access only to its fictional world's exterior, sensual aspects. Both the dialogue and the third-person passages seem reproduced as if by mechanical means, instead of a perceiving subject. In the absence of such a subject, the novel offers no sense of the moral significance of its contents.

In addition to showing how JR resists narrative conventions, I give extensive attention toward the end of the chapter to Joseph Tabbi and Gregory Comnes, whose interpretations of the novel I consider methods of narrativizing it. Both propose the idea of a participatory relationship between the reader and the novel, as if the reader could be said to complete the novel by bringing to it that which Tabbi and Comnes argue is missing from it. For Comnes, this function acquires a specific moral value and becomes both the source of and an affirmation of a moral position he believes Gaddis is advancing. Both Tabbi and Comnes attempt to bring Gaddis back to the novel from which he so thoroughly effaces himself, thereby resolving its contradictions within a single origin, and to create within the novel a space meant to be filled by the reader, thereby
establishing its narrative function as a source of intelligible meaning. Neither Tabbi nor Connors seems willing to accept \textit{J.R.} on its non-narrative terms, or to investigate the effects of its resistance to narrative conventions.

Some of \textit{J.R.'s} critics address the novel's relationship to narrative, but they do so as a means of furthering an argument about the novel that is separate from the questions the novel specifically raises about narrative. Steven Moore asserts that the "most radical feature of \textit{J.R.} is its narrative mode" (\textit{William Gaddis} 63) (which ignores the possibility that its mode should be called something other than "narrative"), but, after a description of the text's surface, Moore simply points out how the novel's mode changes the reading experience in several basic ways. Steven Weisenburger contends that Gaddis makes "a shambles of conventional narration" (\textit{Fables} 223), but he is principally concerned with fields of reference which he sees as ordering the novel: Wagner's \textit{Ring}, the cosmology of Empedocles, and entropy theory. Joel Dana Black writes that Gaddis "comes very close to liberating his fiction (and one might even claim \textit{all} fiction) from the nemesis of narrative, the Western mania for order and control" (171). This is a very provocative idea, yet it serves only as a coda to an essay about how Gaddis's work shows the effects of corporate and political empire-building. Susan Strehle, one of Gaddis's most astute readers, considers \textit{J.R.} "a narrative that refuses to be a well-made thing, resists closure, ignores visual surfaces, rejects unity, economy, and artificially imposed order, and celebrates multiplicity, prodigality, and randomness" (\textit{Fiction} 97). She develops each of these aspects of the novel insofar as they contribute to a reading outlining its relationship to quantum
physics; she sees Gaddis opposing energy and processes to matter and ends. The statement above, however, raises the question of whether it makes sense to call LR a "narrative," no matter how much one is willing to qualify the term.

Several features of LR contribute to the impression that the passage of time itself, rather than the events it relates, is what gives the novel any kind of continuity. There are no chapters, sections, or even blank spaces within the novel, and there is no period of time in the novel that is wholly unaccounted for. Gaddis uses none of the typical phrases one would find in a novel which indicate the passage of time, such as "the next day" or "a week later." These phrases would suggest that absolutely nothing could be said to have happened during the period of time they denote, but for Gaddis there is no time in which "nothing happens." Instead, there are times during which the focus of the novel briefly shifts away from the characters and rests momentarily on the physical world they inhabit. Therefore, when the first day of the novel turns into night, the novel takes us through this night before rejoining what now no longer seems to deserve to be called the "action." At the end of the day, Jack Gibbs and Stella Angel have concluded their conversation on the train platform:

[...] and they entered the car out of sight behind its filthy windows as its lights too receded and became mere punctuations in this aimless spread of evening past the firehouse and the crumbling Marine Memorial, the blooded barberry and woodbine's silent siege and the desirable property For Sale, up weeded ruts and Queen Anne's laces to
finally mount the sky itself where another blue day brought
even more the shock of fall in its brilliance, spread loss like
shipwreck on high winds tossing those oaks back in waves
blown over with whitecaps where their leaves showed light
undersides and dead branches cast brown sprays to the surface,
straining at the height of the pepperidge tree and blowing
down the open highway to find voice in the screams of the
electric saws prospering through Burgoyne Street[...] (74-5)

By setting the events of the novel, to which our only access is through the
speech of the characters, within what one critic calls a sense of time as
"unbroken process," Gaddis exposes the extent to which narrative tries to
conceal its investment of continuity in the events it narrates at the expense
of representing the continuity of time as it is actually experienced. By
representing the events of the novel entirely in dialogue, Gaddis is able to
virtually eliminate any difference between story-time and the time of one's
reading. The novel would be unimaginably long if he had completely
eliminated this difference, but passages such as the one above, like the strict
adherence to dialogue, serve to de-narrativize time; we remain aware of its
passing even if no particular event is there to fill it. The characters seem
to be subsumed into the landscape, as if to emphasize their submission to
"the destructive power of time," to return to White's phrase. Instead of
encouraging the illusion of time stopping and starting as dictated by our

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3 Susan Strehle, "Disclosure Time: William Gaddis' J R." In Kuehl and Moore,
 In Recognition of William Gaddis, 119.
4 Steven Moore makes this observation in William Gaddis.
access to the characters, the novel acknowledges time's endlessness, its extension beyond the duration of the human events rendered in the novel.

The sense of events happening in real time, as opposed to narrativized time, is also suggested by odd repetitions within the third-person passages. During a scene in the DiCephalis house, the following series of events occurs: "Somewhere a clock made a try at striking the hour. A door banged; a toilet flushed; a door banged"(313). As Jack and Stella are driving through traffic, we are told that "[a] horn sounded and she looked up to the mirror and slowed to the right, and a horn sounded"(350). Later, as Jack and Amy ride the train into Manhattan from Long Island, Amy looks out the window, "turning to where laundry strung behind row houses passed the dirty pane, gave way to a store, stores"(477). This last example is especially rich, for it can be seen as evidence of the novel's remarkable economy. In only three words, "a store, stores," Gaddis is able to convey the gradually increasing density of commercial buildings as the train nears the city. Yet the repetition contained in all three examples contradicts the narrative impulse to relate events only because of their importance to the story, and the assumption that, once related, they need only be repeated in the narrative if their repetition is somehow relevant to the progression of the narrative. It is as if the novel cannot remember what it has already told us. It holds the reader in a perpetual present, upon which neither the past nor the future within the novel's temporal duration ever impinge.

JR is full of other kinds of repetitions. Characters constantly repeat certain phrases, such as JR's "holy shit" and Whiteback's "ongoing
situation." They return repeatedly to their favorite topics of conversation; Major Hyde is obsessed with building his bomb shelter, and Rhoda is obsessed with the condition of her body. Certain events recur as if programmed, such as the appearance of a piece of gum attached to a string held in front of the window of the Ninety-sixth Street apartment by someone upstairs. Repetition of such insignificance has the effect of disconnecting events from the flow of time insofar as no particular point in time can be used as an indication of where we are in the chain of events that fill the novel. In the time between the first occurrence of an event and its exact repetition, the only difference, and therefore the only hint of progression, is in time itself. As Wendy Steiner writes, "one needs a repeated subject in order to have narrativity, but if the repetitions are identical, one has not story but design"(51).

If time de-narrativized makes it impossible to imagine its beginning or end, the events of the novel are equally problematic in this regard. As Susan Strehle writes, "Gaddis begins and ends in the middle: midsentence, midconversation, midday, midaction"(Fiction 116). The way the characters speak, as Strehle points out, can be seen as one example of this feature of the novel. Major Hyde eyes his secretary as she reaches for a telephone "till her skirt stopped just short of revelation"(217); this seems an accurate description of much of the dialogue in IR as well. Characters begin speaking in the middle of a sentence or an idea, and they rarely reach the end of either, trailing off for no apparent reason or interrupted by

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5 Strehle makes this point in arguing that the novel sets up an opposition between energy and matter; she shows how various aspects of the novel's form emphasize the former rather than the latter.
another character, a ringing telephone, or some more destructive surprise. The speech of a character is equally likely to change course for no reason at all. In this regard, it resembles the announcements at the train station of arrivals and departures heard by Gibbs, "[s]yllables resonant and unrelated" (190). Without the constraints of grammar or syntax, there is no reason to expect that any word or syllable will have a meaningful relationship to the one preceding or following it.

Whiteback, the school principal and bank president, has trouble expressing anything even without the problem of interruption; he is especially prone to speaking without any notion of what his next word is going to be: "Now the need to justify the test results, of course, in order to justify the test results in terms of the ongoing situation, in other words, this equipment item is justified when we testor tailing, tailor testing to the norm, and since the only way we can establish this norm, in terms of this ongoing situation that is to say, is by the testing itself, somebody's going to get left out in the cold, right?" (22). The "mistake" included in the passage, "testor tailing," along with its correction, "tailor testing," forms a little chiasmus that is representative of the way all of the characters speak. Their words seem to take back whatever they might have given, so that very little progress is made toward anything resembling communication. The effect is more like a piling up of words; this description will be appropriate to Barthelme's style as well. "The ongoing situation," one of Whiteback's favorite phrases, means nothing when he uses it, but it aptly describes much of the novel's dialogue, no piece of which seems to begin at the beginning or end at the end. It is as if all of the characters are speaking
all of the time, and what we hear is only the part that rises above the constant noise of the novel.

If the speech of the characters does not, as in more typical novelistic dialogue, move from word to word in such a way that more and more possibilities are gradually foreclosed, this same sense of possibilities remaining open is suggested by the following third-person passage. As Major Hyde drives from Manhattan to the school on Long Island, he listens to a baseball game on the radio. His trip is disastrous: his watch is stolen off of his wrist as he sits at a light with his window rolled down, his car breaks down, and someone crashes into it while he is trying to fix it on the side of the road. As these events transpire, we are reminded periodically of the fact that a baseball game is in progress: "caverned ranks of cars and his, free-standing, as the third inning began, feet dislodged from the dashboard, loud words dulled to muttering as he drove up the ramp, two men on, one out, and a called third strike nearing the bridge"; "over the bridge on a double play and well along the expressway ribbon of filth"; "he pulled off to the side in the seventh inning stretch"; "when he pulled up at the school in the top of the ninth"(219). The baseball game has no relevance to the story at all, but it enters briefly, even haphazardly into the text and then disappears again, another event on which the text could be focusing instead. Its progress continues whether we are witnessing it or not, a fact which narrative usually tries to conceal so as to justify a limited, definable perspective. Altman, we will see, uses sound to the same effect in Nashville; it permits simultaneous access to events happening beyond the inviolable visual boundaries of the screen. Most of what would normally
be considered the major events in *J.R.* happen "offstage": a suicide, car accidents, important business meetings. The difficulty of processing such information retrospectively creates a desire for the multiple perspective glimpsed in the passage above, but Gaddis almost never relents from the focus on a single, carefully circumscribed scene. Instead, we are reminded that things are always happening elsewhere -- trivial as well as gravely important -- whether we are made aware of them or not.

The novel's tendency toward dispersal rather than development is manifested in several other aspects of the novel. *J.R.* is forever dropping the portfolio containing his schoolwork and the materials associated with his business. Amy Joubert drops the bag of coins used as a prop in the Rhinegold production. Almost everything in the Ninety-sixth Street apartment that could be scattered about is, and the malfunctioning letter opener adds to the mess by slicing letters to shreds. Strehle considers these aspects of the novel evidence of a pervading "entropic decline"("For a Very Small Audience" 68), but they seem more specifically to underscore the novel's refusal to proceed in a developmental fashion. The fact that no section of the novel seems able to reach its expected end, whether it be a scene, a conversation, or the shortest possible element of a character's speech, creates the possibility of the novel assuming a new direction at any given time, as if the prospect of linearity were constantly coming apart literally at the seams.

If the novel's dialogue can be seen as resistance to linear development and clearly marked beginnings and endings, so too can many
of the novel's third-person passages. They are filled with gerundives, making it very difficult to say when any given event they describe has begun or ended. As Gerald Prince notes, "narrative prefers tensed statements"(64), actions specified as having occurred at a definite time. In the following passage, J R's class is rehearsing Wagner's The Rhinegold under Edward Bast's direction:

--That one's my type, the saxophonist confided over Bast's shoulder as he sat to the piano. --Maybe you can ... but he was cut off as Bast came down with an E-flat chord that sent the boy scaling the peak of the stacked chairs and the Rhinemaidens wriggling and howling by turns below, arching limbs and brazening impertinent bodies in what quite rightly they believed to be lewd invitation, whispering, perspiring, cowering to the blast of the Call to the Colors obliterating a brief saxophone chorus of Buffalo Gal[...]. (36)

The passage continues, but this much of it gives the impression of the accumulation of events, some simultaneous, with very few of them having discernible temporal boundaries. Whiteback's pet phrase applies here as well; every action is an "ongoing situation." Passages such as the one above read as if Gaddis had taken a set of events that occur over a given period of time and rendered them so as to make it seem as if all of the events are stretched out over the entire duration. It becomes impossible to determine not only the temporal boundaries of a single action, but also the sequence

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6 Strehle notes the frequency of gerundives, again as evidence of the novel's emphasis on energy rather than matter(Fiction 121).
of any set of actions; they all seem to be happening at the same time, but not at any particular time.

"The ongoing situation" also describes the novel as a whole. Although the novel is mostly talk, none of the characters listens very well. The result is conversations between characters which seem to continue not because there is more to say, but because nothing that is said is being heard. When Edward Bast comes to Crawley's office on behalf of his aunts and J R, his efforts to discuss business become futile when Crawley decides to hire Edward to write "some zebra music" -- a score for a film showing African wildlife and intended to promote the idea of stocking national parks with these animals so they can be hunted. As Crawley elaborates endlessly on this project, Edward tries vainly to return to the business he came to discuss, but Crawley answers every question before it gets asked, assuming it must pertain to his request:

--Yes I, yes I did just want to ask if ...

--Just told you Bast, can't throw your balance of nature off and leave it off now can you, get these zebras and the rest of these fellows in there without something to hunt them and they'd all go berserk. (204)

This pattern persists for several pages. Critics have noted that the characters for the most part fail to communicate with each other,7 but they do not point out how this failure to communicate is what in fact generates much of the text. As the novel begins in the middle of a conversation between Anne and Julia Bast about the advent of paper currency, Julia

questions the veracity of a story Anne tells about their father, to which Anne responds, "—That's just what I mean, about stories getting started"(3). Stories, in other words, are born of misunderstandings. In arguing that the novel's "ongoing, discontinuous language" encourages the feeling that "Gaddis could have made the novel twice as long or half as short"(170), Patrick O'Donnell does not consider the possibility that the novel is as long as it is precisely because of its failures of communication. As Frederick Karl writes, the language of the characters moves "beyond information into gray areas where speech is merely sound"("Gaddis: A Tribune of the Fifties" 192). The point of so many words is that so few of them are expressive, not to mention heard. If a novel half as long could not make this point, neither could a novel twice as long, for it would be less likely to leave the impression that it could easily continue. As J R ends, the difficulty of being heard remains, as indicated by J R's voice pouring through a telephone left unattended by Eigen in the Ninety-sixth Street apartment: "So I mean listen I got this neat idea hey, you listening? Hey? You listening...?"(726).

Gaddis's effort to de-narrativize time can be seen in part as a way of illustrating the fact that the corporate system the novel portrays more closely resembles time in its endlessness than narrative, which always assumes an eventual conclusion. J R's refrain through much of the novel is that anyone involved in a business must "play to win," and by the standards which prevail in the novel's vision of corporate America, his empire makes him a winner. But if business is a game, as the metaphor suggests, it is a game that does not end. Edward tries to convince J R to stop, but J R has
learned the system too well: "--No but that's what you do! I mean where they said if you're playing anyway so you might as well play to win but I mean even when you win you have to keep playing"(647). J R realizes that no matter how successful he is (or unsuccessful), there is always another deal to be made -- another company to acquire, another asset to be sold, another tax incentive to take advantage of. The system allows a goal to be met, but it also allows a new goal to be set regardless of the outcome in attempting to reach the first one. Events in the business world, at least in the long term, exist only as sequence, without narrative's necessary point of termination.

Aside from this thematic justification for de-narrativizing time, however, the novel provides evidence which suggests that the distortions imposed upon time by narrativity violate Gaddis's ideas of realism. On a piece of paper which Gibbs carries in his pocket, he has written a list of possible epigraphs to be used in the book he is writing. When Amy finds the list, he tells her it is just "trash," but many of the epigraphs are applicable to J R, including this one: "That a work of art has a beginning, middle and end, life is all middle"(486). By having a beginning and an ending, a work of art implies that time itself has these attributes. Gaddis seems to have tried to make not only the novel as a whole "all middle," but also all of the elements within it which in other novels could be said to have discrete beginnings and endings. Gaddis has been called an antirealist, but the epigraph above suggests the opposite -- that, as Michel Butor characterizes formal invention in any novel, "far from being opposed to

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8 John Kuehl, Alternate Worlds, 1.
realism as shortsighted critics often assume, [it] is the sine qua non of a greater realism" (28). The degree to which the novel's mode is accumulation, rather than progression or development, suggests that a comment Gibbs makes about his own book could be said of \textit{JR} as well: "...end up reduce the title to a God damned period give an intelligent reader the essence of the whole God damned thing" (582). Perhaps a period contains the essence of \textit{JR} insofar as it would give the impression that the novel has ended as soon as it begins (an impression created by \textit{The Dead Father} as well); none of its meaning arises from its movement from one point in time to another.

In addition to its rendering of time, \textit{JR} opposes narrative in its lack of a basis for a social structure that could sustain specific kinds of relationships among its characters. Gaddis has said that \textit{JR} is "very largely about a shattered world, about a fragmented world" (Abádi-Nagy 84). Anything that has the capacity to hold people together -- the most basic social units, such as the family; a common language; simple human contact -- is either virtually absent from the novel or, at least, is strained enormously. Nearly all of the families featured in the novel are either in some kind of disarray when the novel begins, or else suffer some kind of division before it ends. For his part, \textit{JR} himself has at best his mother present, although she is never seen or heard. Amy's son is taken by her ex-husband to live with him in Switzerland. Tom Eigen's wife throws him out, keeping their son to live with her. Ann and Dan DiCephalis have taken in a drifter whom both believe to be the other's father. Gibbs is divorced from his wife, and his visits to see his daughter are erratic. The death of
Thomas Bast has all of his relatives competing with one another for control of the family business, the General Roll Company.

As I mentioned earlier, the characters rarely succeed in communicating with each other. One of the reasons for this is that their speech consists of a huge number of specialized discourses\(^9\) which, rather than aiding clear communication, usually obstruct it. Amy describes this problem in the simplest of terms when talking to Jack about J R: "--Oh I know yes, I have felt he doesn't bathe often but, no there's something, something else, when you talk to him he doesn't look at you but it's not as though, not like he's hiding something. He looks like he's trying to fit what you're saying into some utterly different, some world you don't know anything about he's such an eager little boy but, there's something quite desolate, like a hunger ..."(246-7). J R's "world" is the world of business, and anything for which he cannot formulate a relationship to business can barely penetrate his world. For everything he sees, his first thought is that "someplace there's this millionaire for it"(473). Edward tries to dismantle this mode of perception by having J R listen to a Bach cantata, with horrifying results. J R finally gives in to Edward's demand to tell him what he heard while listening to the music: "--Okay okay! I mean what I heard first there's all this high music right? So then this here lady starts singing up yours up yours so then this man starts singing up mine, then there's some words so she starts singing up mine up mine so he starts singing up yours so then they go back and forth like that up mine up yours up mine up yours that's what I heard!"(658). Besides his clever use of the

postal system, talk is what enables J R to build his financial empire, since he must operate without ever being seen because of his age. Yet, removed from the world of business, his attempt to articulate what he hears in a piece of music is not far from "holy shit," his constant refrain.

The novel is full of other instances of incompatible discourses. Their convergence is often comic, but nevertheless illustrates the degree to which they isolate their users. During Jack's brief romance with Amy, she suddenly remembers a newsletter of J R's about commodities futures, which causes her to respond to one of Jack's advances with "--not friendly to bellies ... !" She then has to explain to him: "--if we can get in these here bellies he said and I asked him what on earth he was talking about, that bleak little Vansant boy and it's not funny, really"(497). Later in the novel, Cates is in the hospital but still overseeing the operations of his corporation through Beaton, whom he tells about someone involved in the theater "with no tie going on at me last night at Vida's thought he was making some sense about what the pound's been through rallies declines public turning its back turns out he's talking about some damn dead poet finally had to put him out the door"(692). Even the novel's first scene, in which a lawyer named Coen visits Anne and Julia Bast to begin settling the estate of their recently deceased brother, Thomas, is dominated by the degree to which its participants fail to understand one another because of their different modes of discourse. (The obfuscations of legal discourse are a major source of comedy and heartache in A Frolic of His Own.) It is as if the characters quite literally speak different languages, and this presents a tremendous obstacle to any kind of social cohesion in the novel.
If the different modes of discourse used by the characters are primarily what inhibits communication and connection, the situation is only exacerbated by the fact that their voices are so often disembodied -- usually because the conversation is taking place on the telephone. Throughout the novel, Gaddis is constantly drawing attention to the ways in which technology which is supposed to foster communication instead ends up making communication more difficult because of its reduction of an individual to nothing but a voice. As Stephen Matanle writes, the telephone "effectively eliminates any possibility of checking language, since it reduces the available channels of communication to one"(115). The physical separation of the characters not only eliminates other methods of communication, but also creates the impression that the character's words are coming from nowhere and going nowhere. When Crawley's secretary's voice comes to him through some kind of speaker, communication has become a random exchange between objects: "-- I'll bring it right in sir, her boxed voice blurted at the fist doubled on the blotter"(85). This is a small but typical instance of the way in which language in J.R has become detached from its users; it is free-floating, and it seems to live more inside the devices used to carry it from one character to another than inside the characters themselves. Perhaps the most explicit manifestation of this principle is the radio in the Ninety-sixth Street apartment which is on continuously because no one can find it to turn it off.

Another reason for the characters' isolation from each other may be their isolation from themselves. Because our only access to the characters
is through dialogue, we get no sense of a character's inner life. If we suspect that what is happening inside a character's mind is different from the impression created by the dialogue, we have no way of verifying this possibility. The characters exist only in what they say out loud, but the fact that their speech is largely composed of specialized discourses to which they momentarily manage to attach themselves suggests that they have no more access to their inner lives than we do. Such access would require a more private language. J R is delighted to read in a newspaper article about his business that he is "a man of vision," and perhaps his age excuses him from being perfectly willing to believe in this absurd definition of himself. As Gaddis has remarked, J R is "a prisoner of his own myth; he thinks that he is a brilliant financial operator" (Abádi-Nagy 70). The adults in the novel, however, seem no more capable than J R of resisting the exterior forces that determine their sense of themselves.

If there is no social center of any kind to be found within J R, we might still expect to find a narrator, or at least what could be called a narrative consciousness, which could serve as the principle around which the novel's disparate elements cohere. Such a "subject" is very difficult to locate in J R, and Gaddis has suggested in interviews that this is the result of a deliberate decision he made when writing the novel:

I was at pains to remove the author's presence from the start, as must be obvious. This was partly by way of what I mentioned earlier, obliging the thing to stand on its own, take its own chances. But it was also by way of setting up a problem, a risk, in order to sustain my own interest, especially
since the largely uninterrupted dialogue raised the further risk of presenting a convincing sense of real time without the conventional chapter breaks, white spaces, such narrative intrusions as A week later ... How some of the writers I come across get through their books without dying of boredom is beyond me. (Kuehl and Moore, "An Interview" 5)

The novel's consisting almost entirely of dialogue is of course its most immediately apparent means of eliminating any sense of authorial, or even narratorial, presence. The effect is further enhanced by the absence of chapter breaks, the marking of dialogue with dashes rather than quotation marks (in the manner of Joyce), and the refusal to identify speakers. However, as Gaddis has remarked in another interview, authorial absence is something that "everyone from Flaubert to Barthes talks about" (Abádi-Nagy 79-80), so it could not have been merely this impulse itself which kept Gaddis interested in the composition of his novel. What distinguishes _LR_ in this regard is how far Gaddis is able to extend the idea of authorial absence.

Gaddis's attempt to efface himself from the novel comes across not only in his infrequent use of the third person and the absence of helpful cues for the reader, but also in the overheard quality of the dialogue, which reads as though it were the transcript of an audio recording. As Tom LeClair writes, "[a]dopting the roles of collector and transmitter rather than narrator, Gaddis 'sends the messenger,' allows his characters to present themselves as voices. This I call 'recording' because Gaddis does not use certain conventions that suggest authorial mediation or the
transformation of speech into writing"(103). Joel Dana Black also focuses on the "recorded dialogue" to argue for "the nearly total eclipse of the narrating persona as a responsible organizing consciousness"(171). Since IR does not, however, consist entirely of dialogue, there is room for speculation about what to make of the novel's third-person passages. At one extreme, Black argues that the third-person passages have no force whatsoever. He writes that "any vestige of an organizing, shaping narrative voice is ultimately drowned out by the inane jargon of the characters," and he asks, "how is it possible to discern a meta-discourse, a language in which a narrating persona can make itself heard?"(172). It would be inaccurate, certainly, to label the language of the third-person passages a "meta-discourse," because this would imply that it is somehow "above" the dialogue, that it should be read as if it were more authoritative. Yet the implication of Black's claim is that the third-person passages are simply indistinguishable from the dialogue, and therefore should be viewed as nothing more than another voice, albeit one without an identifiable character with whom it is associated. Steven Weisenberger occupies the other extreme, reading the dialogue and the third-person passages in opposition to one another. "Charged as they are with emotive power," the voices of the characters are set against third-person passages "written wholly in the indicative mood, their power consisting precisely in their absence of emotion"(Fables 223). The third-person passages do lack any sign of emotion, but using this fact to set up this neat opposition greatly simplifies them, as well as the dialogue. This description assumes that the novel's third-person passages are otherwise conventional, and that emotion
is what most signifies the presence of a narrative consciousness. Susan Strehle takes yet another view of the third-person passages, asserting that an "authorial/narrative voice renounces the omniscience traditionally associated with the third person, pursuing a single view of events in one place, without departing to summarize other actions in other places."

Strehle considers this feature of the third-person passages, as well as their word play and occasionally satirical descriptions, as evidence that Gaddis "celebrates the subjective vision" (Fiction 122). Strehle's evidence of a narrator's "clear attitudes toward characters and events" (122) is tenuous at best, but this description faces two other problems. It does not account for passages such as the one I discussed earlier which offer windows onto other events occurring elsewhere, and, more importantly, it equates an authorial voice with a narrative one, revealing an unquestioned belief that Gaddis himself must be somewhere in the novel. All of these evaluations seem reductive when set against all of the radically distinct features of the third-person passages.

Just as there are no temporal gaps in the novel, so there are no spatial ones. At the conclusion of any given scene, the shift to another scene is never accomplished by jumping from one location to another; the third-person passages often serve to describe a transition from one location to another as it is happening. A scene early in the novel ends with Amy Joubert telling Edward how much money was in the sack of coins he caused her to drop while she spoke to Whiteback in front of the bank:

--And sixty-three cents, Mrs Joubert finished, a gentle bulge rippling from her knee as she shifted her weight in
departure to disappear in the swirl of her skirt as the quarter bounding from the billowing trouser cuff drew Bast in a headlong lunge after the exhaust of Whiteback's car shearing from the curb, rounding the corner into Burgoyne Street to course through the shrieks of saws and limbs dangling in unanesthetized aerial surgery, turning at last into the faculty parking lot and into Gibbs' limited vista from a second floor classroom window watching Mrs Joubert alight and come toward the portal beneath him, knuckles gone white where he grasped the cold radiator staring down into the loose fullness of her approach till it was gone beneath the sill, and he turned back to the darkened classroom to face the talking face in flattened animation on the screen itself until the tension watching without listening broke the surface in a slight twitch of his own lip and turned him back to the window looking down, now into the wide eye of a camera aimed up at himself and the frieze of teachers similarly abandoned in windows surmounting the dedication of the school hewn over the entrance. (19-20)

Obviously, this represents a dramatic departure from any method traditionally employed in a novel to get from one scene to another. A novel which adhered to the narrative convention of splicing together different points in time and space could simply say, "Later, Gibbs watched Amy as she got out of the car and approached the school." One could, as Strehle does, classify Gaddis's technique as a refusal of omniscience, but
using the concept of omniscience in a discussion about what happens in a passage such as this one implies a narrating persona telling a story in a way that exhibits, if not omniscience, then at least the conscious exercise of control over that story -- particularly concerning what gets included in the story, and perhaps including an interpretive stance toward the story (although what is included, as White's essay demonstrates, is itself an interpretive act). To understand what happens in the passage above, it seems necessary to reject terms which imply the presence of a narrating consciousness, of however limited a point of view. Instead, although Gaddis himself is of course somewhere behind every word of the novel, he creates the illusion that only the characters are behind the words they speak, and that no one is behind the words they do not speak.

If a narrating consciousness does not generate the third-person passages in JR, the mechanical metaphor of an audio tape as the source of the dialogue seems to naturally suggest the idea of a movie camera as, essentially, the novel's "narrator." This notion is not, however, one that many of Gaddis's critics have proposed, much less investigated. Weisenburger writes that the novel's transitions occur "as if the role of omniscient narrator had been redefined as a more mechanical principle of random dial twirling" (Fables 223), but he does not develop this statement at all. Carl Malmgren takes another step, writing that the "narrator" "must rely on some sort of neutral vehicle to 'carry' the recording transcriber from one spot to the other. The transition itself, the actual act of movement, is then selectively but neutrally described, the mediating technological instrument being a camera lens fitted with a kind of
impressionistic lens" (119-20). Malmgren emphasizes the alternation between the strictly aural stretches of dialogue and the visual mode of the transitions, but his development of the camera metaphor is otherwise limited to one part of an argument outlining the ways in which the reader is forced by the novel into an unusually demanding, participatory role. Besides Weisenburger and Malmgren, there is no discussion of the mechanical nature of the third-person passages, but a close look at them suggests that they attempt to represent in written form the experience of watching a movie.\textsuperscript{10}

The passage quoted above in which Amy goes from the bank to the school with Whiteback can be read as a series of camera shots. Most of the time, the camera tracks a subject as it moves. When there is a "cut," it is never a jump cut, and it always has a clearly defined spatial relationship to the shot before, such as a reverse shot. When the dialogue ends, the camera follows Amy into Whiteback's car and follows the car departing, catching Edward in the frame. The tracking shot of the car as it moves down Burgoyne Street includes the trees being cut down so the street can

\textsuperscript{10} Pynchon's \textit{Gravity's Rainbow} is cited for its cinematic qualities, but they are of a different order than those I am outlining in \textit{J.R.}. \textit{Gravity's Rainbow} seems cinematic partly because of its fantastic elements, but also because of numerous other reasons: its many allusions to cinema history, its use of generic movie conventions, its use of devices such as movie music, and its references to and imitations of the capacity of film to be run backwards (McHale, \textit{Constructing}, 110-11). The relationship of cinema to \textit{Gravity's Rainbow}, however, is entirely self-conscious. When the novel imitates a film, the reader always remains aware of the novel's primacy as the genre being manipulated, and of a narrator who is facilitating this illusion. \textit{J.R.}, on the other hand, tries to represent the unmediated experience of watching (or, more often in its case, listening to) a movie. It forgoes the distancing technique of reminding the reader that what is on the page is merely imitating or alluding to the experience of watching a movie. \textit{J.R} presents itself as a movie, forcing the reader to alter the act of reading itself in order to meet the novel on its own new terms. For a detailed analysis of the potential for the experience of a novel to resemble the experience of a film, see Bruce Morrissette, "Aesthetic Response to Novel and Film," in \textit{Novel and Film: Essays in Two Genres}, 12-27.
be widened; the progress of this project is monitored throughout the novel, each time a car drives down this particular street. When Whiteback’s car reaches the school, we are told in the verbal equivalent of a quick reverse shot of Gibbs and a return to the car as seen from his point of view that it is now the object of his gaze. As Amy gets out of the car, there is another reverse shot of Gibbs, specifically of his whitening knuckles, and then another return to Amy, specifically her breasts, which draw a great deal of attention throughout the novel. Although it becomes evident only in retrospect, pairing Gibbs and Amy in consecutive shots is a cinematic foreshadowing of their brief affair much later in the novel when, figuratively speaking, they will temporarily be featured together in the same shot. Once she disappears from his view, the camera returns to Gibbs, then to the television he is watching, and back to him as he moves toward the window again. The camera then assumes his point of view again as he looks out the window, this time at a camera aimed at him; his presence within this camera’s frame is communicated in another reverse shot of him, this time from the point of view of this camera. This shot is the last of the sequence, as it would include in it the dedication on the front of the school building, the point at which the dialogue resumes.

Many of the novel’s transitions have this same cinematic quality. Some transitions occur by virtue of the camera suddenly following the subject of the gaze of a character in the initial scene. In the following example, Gibbs’s class ends as he is trying to teach his students how to spell "entropy":
Correct, t, r, o, p, y, he finished the word and broke the chalk in emphatic underline, turning past the toss of blond hair repeated in the thighs as she stood up and joined the surge of disorder at his back, his lower lip now caught between his teeth in a way that seemed to dam his spirit as he regained the window and the open parking lot below where now, all continent and unaware of fragmentation in another mind's eye, Mister diCephalis came carrying a child's umbrella in the congruous fashion it feigned here in the small, rolled, black, its handle a curve of simulated birch hooked on his wrist as he passed under the inscribed lintel and pushed at the glass door that never yet had opened in and did not now, stopped to unlimber the umbrella, pulled the door open [...]. (21)

As Gibbs's class concludes, the camera observes him at the blackboard, then assumes his point of view as he watches one of his female students leave the room. Then the camera frames Gibbs again, tracking him as he walks to the window, where the camera again assumes his point of view as he looks out and sees diCephalis. The camera then stays with diCephalis as he enters the school, focusing on the arm carrying the umbrella as it fails to open the door, then succeeds. The camera stays with him until he reaches the principal's office, where the dialogue resumes. In other transitions, the camera seems to be stationary, the shifts in scene occurring as if a function of the gravitational force of the potential subjects swirling around it. In one example, Vogel stands outside the school restrooms
talking to diCephalis when he sees Amy Joubert, who becomes the subject of his conversation. Then the dialogue stops:

And the door marked Boys clapped closed on her standing out there tilting her purse to the light, rummaging its depths, alerted in a sudden turn to the rhythmic clank of coins.

--Oh J R, I ...

--Oh hi Mrs Joubert ... as quickly gone behind the glass panels clattering closed on the first ring. --Hello ... ? (464)

This passage is preceded by a page of dialogue between Vogel and diCephalis, and followed by over four pages filled with J R's telephone conversation with Edward. The transitions here proceed in quick succession, as if the camera is obligated to attend to whoever gains the attention of its present subject; this constraint overrides whatever interest there may be in hearing the rest of the conversation between Vogel and diCephalis, or finding out what Amy is searching her purse for. The school restrooms and telephone booth serve as the location for many such transitions. (Moving from one scene to another in this fashion gives the novel a structure much like Richard Linklater's film Slacker, the main difference being that the characters in Slacker appear only once.)

In still other transitions, there is a less immediate spatial relationship between the two scenes. They have some physical point of connection, but it connects them in a more conceptual way. An object that is part of one scene, such as a television set or a ringing school bell, is the point of connection to another scene. The camera seems to leave the characters for a shot of the object, and then moves to other characters who are perhaps in
a different location but one in which the object is still somehow present -- another television set is tuned to the same broadcast or the bell can still be heard. In an example of the latter, a conversation taking place in the principal's office is suddenly interrupted: "A bell sounded silencing motion where anything moved, hurling motionless into activity, books gathered at a sweep, papers to the floor, a glove through the air. --Just a minute, you in the third row there"(183). The voice belongs to Gibbs, to whose classroom the scene has now shifted. The sound of the bell is heard over a series of shots of the random activity it has set off. The transitional device between many scenes is simply a telephone wire. We are allowed to hear only one side of every telephone conversation in the novel, but the scene will sometimes shift when the conversation ends to the side we have not heard.

The scene in which Davidoff is trying to get a film projector turned off as he explains the structure of a corporation to J R's sixth-grade class suggests that perhaps the whole novel can be read as a film, or, more specifically, a document which records the experience of watching and listening to a film. Davidoff is ready to begin his speech, but the projector is still running: "You've got the picture off but the sound's still on, that little white button ..."(105). The stretches of dialogue in the novel, which happen in real time and without temporal gaps but also almost completely free of physical description, could be described as a sound track in progress without a picture on the screen, and, as Malmgren claims, the third-person passages read like a film in progress with the sound momentarily turned off. They do refer to sounds, but, in the context of the
dialogue, they do not seem to emit any noise, as if providing instead an image of sound. When asked in an interview about the idea that his novels are "staged," as if they were drama, Gaddis's response is illuminating: "The attempt in the last two books [J R and Carpenter's Gothic] was to make the characters create themselves, which is true of movies or the stage, and essentially of life itself. Of course, on the stage you can see the people. You see that he's tall or short or fat or what have you. Here the only devices are: 'Where did you get that terrible suit?" (Abádi-Nagy 82).

Gaddis's response suggests that J R can be read not only as a departure from novelistic convention, but also as a transformation of the novel into something more like a film or a play. As such, J R illustrates Barthelme's contention that "painters had to go out and reinvent painting because of the invention of photography and I think films have done something of the same for us" ("A Symposium on Fiction" 26).

Thinking of the novel as a film further illuminates its de-narrativization of time insofar as one of the major differences between film and writing is that film is able to render the undivided present to a degree that writing cannot. As Nadine Gordimer has written, film "may re-create the past or create a future, but in its flickering beginnings it was the unique art form to capture, alive, the continuing present moment" (100). In his effort to represent in words the experience of cinema, Gaddis denies his writing the capacity to stop the flow of time at any point, and then let it resume again. In its representation of a world, film functions under different temporal rules than writing, as Leo Braudy observes: "Films demand continuous attention. They give us a sense of the uninterruptible,
an unflowing of time that we cannot stop, although we can turn away. But if we turn away, we know that we will miss something[...]" (34). One of the interesting paradoxes of JR is that, although almost nothing in it proceeds without interruption, the temporal flow of its fictional world never seems to stop. A lapse of attention on the part of the reader means not only missing something, but missing some duration of time. Nothing need be happening in a film (think, for instance, of Andy Warhol's Empire, eight hours of the same shot of the Empire State Building), yet there is still a sense of time passing. While a film will usually take the liberty of cutting from one present to another, Gaddis does not allow himself even this kind of temporal manipulation. He keeps to a continuous present, albeit one that occasionally passes by as if the projector is running on fast-forward.

If the third-person passages are images recorded by a camera, this would offer another way of understanding the bizarre repetitions I discussed earlier, in which random, insignificant events are noted each time they happen. A camera can only record what lies in front of it, so if a meaningless event occurs several times, it will record it every time. It cannot, as a narrating consciousness would do, edit out unnecessary repetition, or condense the repetition into a single, static image which would express the fact of repetition. These instances therefore especially demonstrate the mechanical aspect of a camera in its operation compared to a narrating consciousness. A camera can have no memory of what it has recorded, nor any idea of what it will record, so neither the past nor the future can have any effect on what it records. A camera's mechanical
nature places it in opposition to the requirement that narrative be constructed, as White puts it, "on the basis of a set of events which might have been included but were left out"(10), because it leaves out nothing.

During the confusion which delays Davidoff's lecture to the class, his secretary, Carol, makes a comment which ties the idea of the novel as a film to one of Gaddis's extensively elaborated themes: "--Nobody's in there the projector's running by itself, Mis ..."(105). Indeed, once a film projector has been turned on, it will run by itself until the film ends. It therefore embodies what Gaddis sees as a steadily proceeding trend in which art is produced and exhibited with less and less human involvement. In writing about the origins of cinema in photography, Stanley Cavell claims that the medium of cinema itself can be considered an escape from the subjective nature of art: "Photography overcame subjectivity in a way undreamed of by painting, a way that could not satisfy painting, one which does not so much defeat the act of painting as escape it altogether: by *automatism*, by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction"(23). In *LR*, this theme is most explicit in the book which Gibbs has been writing for sixteen years and is unable to finish. He describes it as "a book about order and disorder more of a, sort of a social history of mechanization and the arts, the destructive element"(244). His affair with Amy inspires him to begin working on it again, and, while he makes no progress on it, Gaddis offers bits and pieces of it by way of Gibbs discussing it with other characters or reading what he has already written to other characters and to himself as he tries to work. Gibbs tells Edward about a nineteenth-century German anatomist named Johannes
Müller who tried to replicate an opera singer with only "a human larynx fitted up with strings and weights": "--Thought opera companies could buy dead singers' larynxes fix them up to sing arias save fees that way get the God damned artist out of the arts all at once"(288). Grotesque as this idea is, it is nevertheless analogous to the player piano, the subject of a brief article Gaddis published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1951.\(^1\) In both cases, art can be reproduced endlessly. The participation of the artist becomes unnecessary, thereby eliminating the effects of, in the words of Gibbs's manuscript, "chance and the very immanence of human failure"(289).

Gaddis himself began a book on mechanization and the arts after he had begun and then stopped work on what would become \textit{J.R.}, and those portions of Gibbs's book which appear in the novel apparently come directly from Gaddis's unfinished manuscript(Kuehl and Moore, In Recognition 12). In "The Compositional Self in William Gaddis' \textit{J.R.}," Joseph Tabbi argues that Gaddis's decision to include pieces of this manuscript in \textit{J.R.}, along with other material either written by Gaddis for other purposes or associated with his literary career, counter his "apparent absence" by reminding the reader of the presence of a "creative personality" behind the novel(660-1). Tabbi aligns Gaddis with Gibbs because Gibbs is forever working on a book concerning the conditions affecting artistic endeavors while at the same time exemplifying the effects of those conditions in his inability to complete his book. Tabbi considers Gibbs the "organizing center"(664) of \textit{J.R} because Gibbs attempts, with at

\(^1\) The General Roll Company, control of which is contested throughout the novel because of the death of its founder, Thomas Eigen, started out producing rolls for player pianos.
least some success, to make sense of the various kinds of chaos which
dominate the world of the novel. Gaddis's absence, Tabbi writes, is
therefore not "a capitulation to this mechanistic ideal [embodied by the
artificial opera singer]," but rather "an attempt to reconfigure the relation
between the author and his audience in such a way that both are made to
feel how necessary is the 'frail human element [...] even in the arts"(665).
Gaddis's role becomes that of a "compositional medium through which
ideas, voices, and cultural debris are transformed [...] into significant
messages"(666), and his purpose, according to Tabbi, in removing himself
in this way from the novel is "to bring the reader into a more active,
participatory relationship with the work"(668).

Tabbi's essay is useful for its insights into how *J R* incorporates so
much material pertaining to its own composition. However, he makes
some assumptions which, while not implausible, have no justification. One
is that the novel must be read within the context of Gaddis's biography.
Tabbi's theory suggests that if Gaddis appears to have erased himself from
the novel, those who are familiar enough with his life to recognize those
elements of the novel which are taken directly from it will realize this is an
illusion. Tabbi does not seem to believe that Gaddis's absence is illusory
anyway, or that the implications of the illusion remain relevant if anything
in the novel can be traced directly to Gaddis's life. Equally questionable is
Tabbi's conflation of Gaddis and Gibbs. Their similarities are undeniable,
but so are those between Gaddis and other characters, especially Thomas
Eigen, a writer trying to deal with the commercial failure of a thoroughly
misunderstood first novel savaged by most critics but deemed "important"
by a select few. In addition, Eigen has a job with Nobili pharmaceuticals which matches the public relations job Gaddis held for a time with Pfizer International (Tabbi 669). Gaddis seems to have gone out of his way to spread his past among numerous characters so as to discourage exactly the kind of exclusive correspondence between himself and a particular character proposed by Tabbi.

Tabbi's effort to reveal Gaddis's "presence" in the novel, specifically in the character of Gibbs, his description of Gibbs as the novel's "organizing center," and his claim that Gaddis effaces himself from the novel so that the reader will therefore take part in its creation betray his inclination to see JR in specifically narrative terms. By allowing Gibbs this status, and by making any interpretation of the novel inseparable from the life of its author, Tabbi insists on some individual consciousness around which the novel's meaning may cohere. His reading implies that the novel must be seen through someone's eyes other than the reader's, yet he argues that Gaddis's "apparent absence" from JR is supposed to forge a "participatory relationship" between reader and text. This seems contradictory insofar as Tabbi both offers grounds on which the reader may be excluded from determining the significance of the novel's events, as well as a theory which tries to explain how Gaddis invites the reader to do exactly this. The contradiction illustrates, however, White's logic regarding the necessity of an individual consciousness for the production of narrative. Like other critics who cite the creation of a participatory relationship between the reader and the text as the primary purpose of
Gaddis's technique,\textsuperscript{12} Tabbi fills the space vacated by Gaddis with the reader, erasing the boundary between the reader and the novel. Before elaborating on this aspect of Tabbi's essay, I want to turn to another critic who makes this interpretive move, specifically as a means of investing the novel with a moral dimension.

Does \textit{J.R.} attempt to moralize reality? The absence of a narrating consciousness makes it very difficult to find evidence which would support a particular moral view of the events depicted in the novel, which is perhaps why Gregory Comnes argues that the novel's morality reveals itself in what the novel excludes. While Tabbi does not develop the moral aspects of a participatory relationship between author and reader, Comnes reads Gaddis's entire oeuvre (prior to \textit{A Frolic of His Own}) through what he considers its faith in the possibility of ethical choice despite the various sorts of indeterminacy which dominate contemporary thought. Comnes claims that, in \textit{J.R.}, the degree to which the reader must confer meaning on the novel's events is itself an answer to what he convincingly argues is one of the novel's central moral questions -- what is worth doing. The question is most notably contemplated at different times by Gibbs and Bast. Gibbs figures this question led Schramm to kill himself, because Schramm was constantly wondering "whether what he was trying to do was worth doing even if he couldn't do it"(621). Bast offers what might be an answer to the question when he recalls discussing his music career with Duncan, with whom he shares his hospital room before Duncan dies: "nothing's worth doing he told me nothing's worth doing till you've done it and then it was

\textsuperscript{12} Gregory Comnes, \textit{The Ethics of Indeterminacy}; Steven Moore, \textit{William Gaddis}; Carl Malmgren, \textit{Fictional Space in the Modernist and Postmodernist American Novel}. 
worth doing even if it wasn't because that's all you ..."(715). This suggests that worth lies in any action at all, as opposed to the exclusion of immediate experience in favor of preconceived theories or unexamined, passively accepted conclusions. Bast would seem to have taken this idea to heart, since he decides near the end of the novel to continue to try to write music and retrieves from the trash the beginnings of a piece for unaccompanied cello. The novel ends, however, before any evidence appears indicating whether or not he fulfills this intention, and Gibbs remains paralyzed in his effort to resume his book. Despite the novel's inconclusiveness on this point, it seems reasonable to argue that a particular character has responded in some way to the question of what is worth doing, but Comnes asserts that Gaddis himself answers the question by both removing himself from the novel and requiring the reader to provide all of the pieces missing from the characters' dialogue -- the words they leave out, as well as the unheard side of every telephone conversation. According to Comnes, by forcing the reader to participate in the creation of the novel, Gaddis is able to make the reader realize the moral worth of this very activity.

In making the illusion of Gaddis's absence from JR the basis for the novel's morality, Comnes seems as unwilling as John Gardner was to accept a novel which refuses to moralize. Without a central point of moral reference within the novel, Comnes looks beyond it, and in so doing demonstrates Barthes's contention that the "explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us"(143). JR poses many
complex moral questions, including the question of what is worth doing, but it does not resolve them in any unequivocal way. The novel is undoubtedly, in the words Barthes uses to describe all literature, "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture"(146). Reading I R as a "tissue of quotations" is consistent with Tabbi's idea of Gaddis as a "compositional medium," yet Tabbi and Comnes must ultimately view Gaddis as both the beginning and end of the novel in order to make their arguments. "To give a text an Author," Barthes writes, "is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing"(147). In its continuous motion, its irreconcilable elements, its essential unresolvedness, I R defies this kind of limit. Comnes must point to Gaddis in order that there be a single point of origin for all that is incompatible within I R, and therefore a single moral voice that can contain the whole novel.

In assigning to I R a specific moral effect, Comnes unwittingly affirms what the novel itself suggests about the source of morality. As White writes, social systems are the source of any morality(14), although narrative seeks to conceal this fact by presenting events as if their moral significance were somehow inherent in them. Comnes implies that the moral significance of I R lies in what is absent from the novel -- namely, Gaddis himself. Therefore, Comnes himself becomes the source of what he sees as the moral significance inherent in the novel. In the character of J R, however, Gaddis shows the distinction that must be made between events and their moral significance. Many of J R's business transactions could certainly be thought immoral, but, in explaining the process of creating the
character, Gaddis emphasizes that J R himself should not be considered immoral: "The reason he is eleven is because he is in this prepubescent age where he is amoral, with a clear conscience, dealing with people who are immoral, unscrupulous; they realize what scruples are, but push them aside, whereas his good cheer and greed he considers perfectly normal" (Abádi-Nagy 68). J R is always presented as being in a position to learn the moral code of the society in which he lives. "-- But what am I suppose to do!" (300) is his response to Edward's outrage at hearing one of J R's detailed accounts of his entrepreneurial progress. What he learns, of course, is the moral code observed by American business, which in the novel amounts to the nearly complete absence of any moral code, or at least any that stands in the way of a profitable opportunity. J R has other role models, especially Edward, but none of them has a presence as powerful as that of the business world and the characters who inhabit it. If his actions seem immoral, it is because of the moral code through which we view them. The novel's characters may serve as models of morality, and the events of the novel may violate certain moral codes. However, the novel does not specifically endorse any of them. If we find some of the events in the novel morally unacceptable, it will only be because of what our own moral sense dictates, and not because we are simply responding to the novel's interpretation of the events it portrays. Reading the novel using mechanical metaphors becomes especially appropriate in this regard. Tape recorders and movie cameras can perhaps be used for moral purposes, but they cannot in and of themselves cast moral judgments on the sounds and images they capture.
Readings of JR which attempt to reveal in it some kind of moral force seem symptomatic of a larger need to overcome its resistance to narrativity. As a novel, the events in it do not have the status of "real events," but they are no less subject to, in White's words, "our desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary"(24). Even as it departs radically from the defining elements of narrative, the novel causes us to examine this desire. Would it be possible to read JR without narrativizing it -- that is to say, without seeing meaning in its fractured dialogue, imagining the content of its off-stage halves of telephone conversations, sensing in its temporal and spatial seamlessness some purpose other than an author's will to work within an outrageous self-imposed constraint? A scene involving Jack Gibbs and Edward Bast highlights the desire for narrative and the consequences of its refusal. As they discuss Edward's musical career, Gibbs seems equally overcome by dread as well as a sense of liberation as he tries to impress upon Edward the significance of Edward's decision to write a cantata instead of the opera he had been planning:

God damned wise man pulls out nobody to tell him what to do next right Bast? Write a cantata you don't need a plot, problem everybody running around wants to be told what happens next don't need a plot, looking for the wise man tell them what am I supposed to do now God damned wise man find out he's doing the same God damned thing walks up the
shade and he's gone, rest of us sitting here looking at his footprints think he took it with him and he's gone ... (399)

The "wise man" to whom Gibbs refers could be any potential figure of authority, including Gaddis himself. Besides the question of the reader's response to his self-effacement from JR, one can imagine the anxiety Gaddis's method must have stirred in him as he composed the novel, allowing him tremendous freedom while at the same time forcing him to proceed with very little idea of where he would end up. The passage above suggests that, in writing the novel, Gaddis was no more able to predict what would happen next at any given point than his readers would be. When asked in an interview conducted while he was writing JR when he would complete it, he said, "I won't know when the work is done until it's finished" (Friedman).

The attempt to narrativize the novel by figuring its refusal of narrative conventions as empty spaces within it, into which we can then project images of ourselves, requires that we conceive of the novel as possessing an inside and an outside, but with the difference between the two blurred enough to accommodate the idea that the reader "completes" the novel. However, the whole notion of a work of art that is missing something rests on the illusion that the thing presumed to be missing is really part of the work itself; its absence signifies its presence. JR gives the lie to this idea. The clamoring voices speak without mediation, occasionally giving way to a speechless physical reality that asserts nothing but itself. When Edward responds to J R's news that he is the target of a stockholder suit charging him with profiting from insider information, he
could be talking about the reader's relationship to the novel as well as his relationship to J R's company: "--Inside? that's, how could I be inside there isn't any inside! How could anybody believe the, the only inside's the one inside your head[...]"(644). It is the need to extract meaning from the novel, and thereby escape the "inside" of our heads, that necessitates the idea of the novel's "inside," which in turn makes possible the belief that the novel and its readers exist "inside" the shared reality we construct with narrative.
Chapter Two

Nashville: Silent Movie

The reception of Robert Altman's Nashville since its premiere in 1975 in many ways mirrors that of Gaddis's JR, especially when taking into account the fact that it is a movie rather than a novel. Many more people, professional critics as well as a general audience, were bound to see Nashville, a two-hour-and-thirty-nine-minute movie, than to read JR, a seven-hundred-and-twenty-six-page book. And publishing had nothing like the publicity machinery in Hollywood, which at the time was just beginning to make the noise that has since become an incessant roar, so ubiquitous now that it does not even seem like a discernible sound anymore. Jaws appeared in theaters in the same month as Nashville, prompting Altman to remark that, in terms of box office performance, the biggest problem for his film was that "it doesn't have a shark" (Byrne and Lopez 14). That a film which Pauline Kael described as "a radical, evolutionary leap" (446) would be released at the same time as the film which essentially created the concept of the summer blockbuster, which in turn is partly responsible for the extreme homogeneity ever more prevalent in mainstream American filmmaking, is a measure of the unpredictability of films of the 1970s, if not the flux within American culture. Nashville was not the mass-appeal hit that Altman and Paramount, the studio which released it, thought it would be, although it did make money. But, as Kael's comment suggests, there were numerous critics who could not praise it enough, Kael herself being the most notorious because, realizing that she would be on leave
from *The New Yorker* when the film was released in June, she published her review in March after being invited to attend a screening of a rough cut, slightly longer than the version shown in theaters. Kael began her review by asking if there is "such a thing as an orgy for movie-lovers -- but an orgy without excess?"(446); after enumerating the film's joys, she concluded that *Nashville* was "the funniest epic vision of America ever to reach the screen"(452). In a *Newsweek* cover story which appeared after the film opened (*Time* ran a cover story on *Jaws*), Charles Michener described *Nashville* as "an epic poem of a movie"(46).

Kael seems to have violated not only what now sounds like a quaint film critic ethic of not writing about a movie before its release, and before seeing a final cut, but also some rule of decorum forbidding a critic from loving a movie too much, at least in print. In addition to the critics moved to ecstasy by Altman's film, there were some who found it merely pleasurable. Stanley Kauffmann was typical of these critics, who, perhaps partly as a response to Kael's review, tried to present a fiercely even-handed analysis of the film. Kauffmann began his review by stating that the "erratic Robert Altman has made a good picture, his best so far"(22), and he claimed near the end of it that *Nashville* was "a generally entertaining, conventionally critical look at Americana"(33). More interesting than the tasteful appreciation expressed by some critics, however, is the hostility with which many attacked *Nashville*. As was the case in George Steiner's review of *J.R.*, it was rarely sufficient for a critic to simply not like the movie; instead, it had to be deemed significantly bad. These critics considered the film's ambitious scope license to assert that
what it represented was in fact everything wrong with the world it sought to depict. Probably the most acidic of these critics was John Malone. He called the film "self-indulgent, overblown and vastly overpraised," and complained that it had "a story with more loose ends than you can count, a sound track deliberately designed to prevent you from hearing what the characters are saying to one another, a visual style that seems to have been learned at the knees of television news and quiz show cameramen, and, not least, a treatment of women that often borders on celluloid rape"(1). Greil Marcus despised Nashville, as well as E. L. Doctorow's Ragtime, for what he considered their promotion of the idea of the failure of America, and he wrote that both works, "in their refusal of their own possibilities [...] in their subsitution of form for substantial, intriguing ideas, artistic courage, emotion, and risk -- are not about the passivity and failure of imagination that now oppresses us in daily life, but merely examples of such things"(62).

By itself, the energy behind statements such as these suggests that Kael may have been right in describing Nashville as "a radical, evolutionary leap." Irrelevant work does not tend to provoke in its criticism this kind of ferocity. Just as JR forces its readers to revise their ideas about what a novel can do, so Nashville forces its audience to examine the conventions which, consciously or not, shape its response to a film. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a film which has so consistently raised the question of what we think a film, perhaps even any work of art, should be or do, although this is not to say that critics have bothered to consider this question explicitly in the course of writing about Nashville. In the
Newsweek cover story, Charles Michener wrote that Nashville "is everything a work of social art ought to be but seldom is -- immensely moving yet terribly funny, chastening yet ultimately exhilarating" (46). The definition of "social art" is not clear, but this kind of forthrightness with regard to a critic's expectations is matched by critics whose assumptions remain buried beneath their condemnations. Altman's departures from cinematic and narrative conventions are almost always at the heart of negative evaluations of the film, as if its flaws lay in its very attempts to defy convention and expectation rather than in the success or failure of the results.

Nashville may be "radical" and "evolutionary," but, as Kael also notes in her review, Altman had been moving toward it for most of his career (446). In 1968, after making his first feature for a large studio, Countdown, a film about astronauts, Altman was fired for allowing actors to speak at the same time on the sound track (Michener 50). He continued to experiment, however, and in an interview he gave during the filming of Nashville, he offered what amounts to a simple justification of his effort to create a new kind of movie: "I don't think we've found a format for movies yet. I think we're still imitating literature and theater" (Hodenfield 31). Altman would appear to be speaking primarily of the classical Hollywood film, which usually "presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals," and in which "causality is the prime unifying principle" (Bordwell 18, 19). In saying that movies do not yet have "a format," I think Altman means to suggest that the technology which makes cinema possible had yet
to be used for the achievement of ends significantly different from those toward which literature and theater typically aspire -- the representation of a narrative. As Stephen Heath writes, narrativization, at least in classical Hollywood cinema, is at the heart of the cinema's conventions; it consists of a process of exclusion the purpose of which is to produce a "coherent address":

Narrativization is scene and movement, movement and scene, the reconstruction of the subject in the pleasure of that balance (with genres as specific instances of equilibrium) -- for homogeneity, containment. What is foreclosed in the process is not its production -- often signified as such, from genre instances down to this or that "impossible" shot -- but the terms of the unity of that production (narration on narrated, enunciation on enounced), the other scene of its vision of the subject, the outside -- heterogeneity, contradiction, history -- of its coherent address. (404)

Altman's films, especially those beginning with M*A*S*H in 1970 and continuing through Nashville in 1975, constitute an attempt to gain access to this "outside," to show what lies beyond the "coherent address" which results from the governing of film by conventions shaped by the necessities of narrative. By divorcing cinema from narrative, Altman hopes to bring into cinema all that its narrative intentions would exclude. Thinking of the narrative aspect of cinema as the result of an act of exclusion, however, produces an interesting paradox in the context of Altman's style, insofar as his films can induce in the spectator a sense of something missing from
them. What is absent, however, has nothing to do with a lack of images or sounds; instead, what his films lack are signs of a narrating consciousness shaping the material according to narrative conventions. Like _Ir_ , with its torrents of "unedited" dialogue and its temporal and spatial continuity, _Nashville_ seems to include too much -- too many voices, too many images of extraneous space, too many things happening at once. Yet, also like _Ir_ , there is no trace of a mediating presence between the film's elements and the spectator that could hold together its irreconcilable features, making the film intelligible by articulating their significance as a whole. But the lack of such a presence does not mean that the film contains within it an empty space awaiting the spectator. On the contrary, it suggests a final exclusion of the spectator, insofar as the film's subversion of narrative constitutes a rejection of the notion that the world it depicts is capable of communicating its meaning to its audience. What ultimately distinguishes Altman's film from Gaddis's novel in terms of their subversion of narrative conventions, however, is Altman's exploitation of the potential of film to render simultaneity, rather than merely imply it the way writing can.

In order to understand Altman's approach to filmmaking, one could begin with the metaphor he has used most often to describe it -- painting. "I look at a film as closer to a painting or a piece of music, it's an impression"(Kass 21); "It's almost like painting. You start out with a set idea of what you want; there's an empty space there on your canvas. Then you fill it in and it all changes"(Hodenfield 31); "I'm going to do a mural. So I take a pigment -- an actor -- and put her up there by the horses, and suddenly the horses are moving, though, and the actor decides to go this
way, and she gets over there in the purple, and so I say shit, this composition isn't any good. Well, I can't stop these pigments from doing what they are doing, but I can throw more things up there that will change it"(Breskin 304).

These statements imply a certain freedom Altman finds in thinking of filmmaking as painting, but what is it that he wishes to liberate himself from? He wants to make the experience of a film different from that of other media, but developing a notion of cinema that is closer to painting would seem to mean distancing it from the characteristics which initially differentiated it. A painting is static, while cinema, as Heath writes, is in part defined by movement: "cinema uses the images produced by photography to reproduce movement, the motion of the flow of the images playing on various optical phenomena (phi-effect, retinal persistance) to create the illusion of a single movement in the images, an image of movement"(385). Furthermore, film is especially suited to reproducing, apart from the specific content of its images, temporal movement, and it is in large part this capacity which allows a film to signify in ways painting cannot. As Leo Braudy observes, "[o]bjects in film [animate and inanimate] gather significance the way snowballs grow when they roll down hills, by the repetition, accumulation, and mere persistance in our eyes"(37). The elements of a painting, on the other hand, have no duration. Insofar as post-Renaissance works are concerned, painting is predominantly atemporal, concerned with the representation of a single moment.¹

¹ Wendy Steiner makes this point in Pictures of Romance: Form Against Context in Painting and Literature: "Virtually all post-Renaissance works -- however specific or particular their action, characters, place, or time -- represent an event through an isolated moment"(13).
What Altman's films suggest, however, is that for him the capacity of film to depict duration had become a limitation; the medium was imprisoned by this one fantastic possibility. It made the use of cinema as a narrative device natural and inevitable, but it also overwhelmed other possibilities. If painting is an inadequate metaphor for Altman's style, this is because, in terms of temporality, it still implies, in Heath's words, homogeneity and containment, as opposed to heterogeneity, contradiction, and history. Altman places more emphasis on the isolated moment than on duration, but he wants to represent every given moment's heterogeneity. His technique suggests that there is always something else happening simultaneously to which the audience could be attending, and he tries to incorporate that something else to the greatest extent possible -- a tendency which forces Altman to risk incoherence. Besides atemporality, however, painting possesses another attribute which makes it analogous to Altman's style -- silence. This feature of Altman's films has nothing to do with actual sound, but rather with his effort to direct without performing what Lyotard considers one of the director's primary functions: a director "divides -- along the axis of representation -- and due to the theatrical limit -- a reality and its double"(175). Perhaps some degree of division of this kind is unavoidable, but in resisting it, Altman exposes the illusion, instilled by the conventions of narrative, of reality's capacity to "speak itself." Just as Gaddis strips away the layers of reproduction implicit in grammatically correct dialogue and an author's attempt to depict the mental life of a character, leaving only the immediacy of sensory experience in the form of voices and their observable surroundings, so Altman creates the illusion of
a fictional world not yet reproduced in such a way as to make itself intelligible. As Stanley Cavell writes, "the world is silent to us; the silence is merely forever broken" (150-1). It is this silence which Altman wishes to honor.

The temptation in writing about Nashville, as it is in writing about I R, is to nevertheless describe the film in narrative terms, albeit as a means of saying that the film does not present a conventional narrative. For instance, in one of the more sophisticated and sharply observed pieces written about the film in the year following its release, Connie Byrne and William O. Lopez write that Altman "constructs his scenes and his overall narrative in a manner widely divergent from established film norms," and that "the plot [...] is entirely subordinated to the moment" (Byrne and Lopez 13). They assert that "[t]his method of narrativity is closer to real life than a neatly tied-up package or moralized comeuppances or ritualized conclusions" -- all valid claims -- but they never question the usefulness of "narrativity" as a word to describe Altman's method. Likewise, Helene Keyssar argues that, "while Altman's films subvert the conventional modes of filmic narrative, they do determinedly tell us stories" (28). To say that Altman subverts conventions suggests that they remain in place, but in some new form; some of them certainly do. However, telling a story is an action defined by its conventions. To what degree, then, do its conventions need to be present, not to mention recognizable, for a film to be engaged in the activity of "telling a story"? Keyssar's comment reveals the critically mandated value of interpreting a film, or any work of art, within some context, and Altman's films specifically invite the audience to experience
them within the context of other movies, especially his own. At the same
time, however, Altman seems just as intent upon disconnecting his audience
from any film it has ever seen, thereby opening it up to an experience that
could potentially expand its definition of film.

As I indicated in the previous chapter, Hayden White argues that
narrativity requires, among other things, a very specific notion of the
relationship between events and the time in which they happen. A
narrative tries to present a sense of "fullness and continuity in an order of
events" (White 9) rather than in the passage of time itself. A sequence of
events in a narrative appears to exhibit time's linearity, yet these events
remain discrete from one another. Because editing can cause a film to
jump instantly from one time and place to another, film is uniquely capable
of giving to the events it records this sense of "fullness and continuity." In
Nashville, however, Altman does not present the events of the film as if
they possessed the linearity of the flow of time, nor does he depict them as
having stable temporal boundaries that could be used to distinguish them
from one another, and thereby maintain their separateness from one
another. In the context of the film's adherence to temporal continuity, it is
the events themselves which begin to seem discontinuous, so that sequence
appears as merely sequence, without structure, without an "order of
meaning" (White 5).

If JR could be said to honor the flow of time independent of the
events it records by never "cutting" from one time or place to another,
Nashville, while obviously not to the same extent, also tends toward long
takes in situations where other films would simply use a cut to move from
one point in space to another. One of the film's more intricate continuous shots is the one which opens the second day of the action. At a busy intersection, the shot begins with the campaign van at a gas station, then tracks the Tricycle Man as he rides up to the middle of the intersection. After moving past what appears to be an abandoned car in a parking lot, the pan picks up Star in his truck, looking for Albuquerque. As he passes the car, the camera stops on it, revealing someone asleep in the back seat under a Walker campaign poster -- Albuquerque. She gets out of the car and crosses the street, causing two cars to collide, the drivers of which emerge and start fighting, while Albuquerque continues on her way to the gas station restroom, oblivious. Even when the need for a different shot is only for the purpose of moving from a long shot or a medium shot to a close-up, other films employ cuts where Altman uses the zoom, the frequency of which is one of the trademarks of his style. A zoom maintains continuity in time and space as opposed to the events being recorded. Nothing that could be considered an "event" is happening during one of Altman's slow zooms to a close-up. Where a cut eliminates the time required to achieve the intimacy represented by a close-up, a zoom suggests a sense of process, of having to move through both time and space in order to achieve the physical closeness implied by a close-up.

Although *Nashville* unfolds over the course of five days, its changes of scene rarely correspond to forward movement in time. Helene Keyssar describes the film as "a series of parenthetical expressions"(134), a phrase which does some justice to the fact that many different scenes occur simultaneously in terms of the film's sense of time even though they are
shown consecutively. In fact, before *Nashville* was released, Altman considered editing most of the film he had shot into two separate movies which would cover the same period of time and be composed of different takes (Hodenfield 64). This idea is especially indicative of Altman's lack of interest in getting from one point in a chronology of events to another, as opposed to exploring as thoroughly as possible the action occurring in different locations within the parameters of a set period of time.

The results of this disposition are evident throughout *Nashville*, and its very first images and sounds immediately suggest the film's obsessively simultaneous quality. The film begins with a late-night television commercial for a hopelessly kitschy product, feverishly pitched by a loud, overbearing voice. The product in the commercial is the movie itself. In the center of the screen is a record jacket, spinning, and a still photograph of each of the twenty-four characters appears as the titles of all of the songs in the film roll down the right side of the screen and the names of the actors roll up the left side. Along with the announcer's voice, we hear snippets of each of the songs. The commercial feels like an assault, leaving the viewer dazed by the explosion of information that could not possibly be processed all at once. The voice competing with the music introduces one of the film's definitive and, in 1975, surprising features -- a sound track which has, in Keyssar's words, "as much depth, texture, and color as visual images" (37). As the anecdote about Altman's dismissal because of his use of overlapping dialogue attests, convention dictated that only one character's words be heard at any given moment. Altman had

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*M*A*S*H* also features a commercial for itself, although it appears at the end of the film rather than the beginning.
experimented with overlapping dialogue before, but not with the technical means available for Nashville: an eight-track sound system (and sixteen tracks for the musical performances), which meant that, in most scenes, each of the primary characters could be miked individually. As a result, Nashville is in part, as Wim Wenders writes, "a film about noise, that particularly American noise of music and talking and traffic and commercials on radio and television" (84). In this regard, the film bears a striking resemblance to LR. In representing noise, however, Gaddis is limited by his medium, writing. He can express the idea of two people talking at once, but he cannot force the reader to listen to both of them at once. Altman, on the other hand, is able to do exactly this, by virtue of the eight tracks, and perhaps the technique is part of what he meant by a new "format" for movies. The effects of the simple fact of more than one character at a time talking, or a character talking over some apparently indiscriminate aural background, are numerous, and I will return to them. For now, however, it is enough just to mark the fact itself; listening to Nashville is a matter of hearing many things at once, without the possibility of attending to all of them.

If the simultaneity of sound in Nashville could be said to be always implying other, concurrent possibilities in relation to the scene before us, the film itself seems to be structured so as to pursue these possibilities. Rather than moving forward in time, it tends to move sideways, to something else happening somewhere else, and often at the same time as what we've just seen. At the beginning of the film, after a short time following and listening to Hal Phillip Walker's campaign van, we enter
Haven's recording studio, only to leave it a few moments later with Opal and Haven's son after Haven throws her out, but instead of remaining in the gospel recording studio with her for an extended period of time, we return to Haven's studio, apparently back at the moment when Haven shouted "Hold it" upon seeing Opal and stopped the session. He's shouting "Hold it" again, but this time to complain about Frog, a musician (played by Richard Baskin, the film's musical director). We then cut back to the gospel studio, where the singing is continuing as it was when we left it, and then back to Haven's studio, where he once again stops the session. It is as if we have seen the same few minutes of the movie three times, while cutting away only to a scene occurring simultaneously, so that there is no sense of any progression along a narrative line.

Most of the film exhibits this disinterestedness in consecutive events in favor of simultaneous events. The series of Sunday morning church scenes is the most striking example of this tendency; we begin with a Catholic church, followed by a Protestant church, a black Baptist church, and the hospital chapel. In these churches, we see about half of the film's major characters, and all four scenes are presumably taking place at the same time. In other parts of the film, what would appear to be a central event begins, but the scene is then interspersed with cuts to characters elsewhere. Altman had experimented with this technique in M*A*S*H -- a conversation between Hawkeye, Duke, and Blake continues over a cut in the image track to a scene of the doctors performing their duties -- and in McCabe and Mrs. Miller -- a group of men playing cards discuss the newly arrived prostitutes as we see them bathing. In these films, however, the
technique does not seem strongly motivated by the demands of the action; the access to both scenes at once seems imposed by Altman. In *Nashville*, the technique is especially effective during the show at the Grand Ole Opry, from which we cut away, while still hearing the music being performed on the stage, to Albuquerque's attempts to get backstage, to Suelleen listening to the show on the radio and practicing her stage act, and to Barbara Jean's hospital room, where she and Barnett are watching the show on television. When they turn the television off in the heat of an argument, that is the last we see or hear of the show, as if our access to it had all along been under the control of Barbara Jean's mood swings. The switching back and forth between the performances at the Exit Inn and Suelleen's performance at the smoker likewise emphasizes the simultaneity of various events rather than progression along a chronological line. The film's divergence in this regard from cinematic convention prompted John Malone to complain that *Nashville* "never seems to move in the same direction for more than a few minutes at a time"(13), as if this were in itself a reason for disliking the movie. Yet his comment underscores the extent to which linearity is so deeply embedded in cinema, and it also exemplifies responses to the film which inadvertently betray remarkably narrow and specific ideas of what kinds of conventions films should adhere to.

The way in which the car accident and resulting traffic jam occur after the characters leave the airport near the beginning of the film neatly demonstrates Altman's view of a film consisting only of chronologically arranged scenes. We see several cars back out of their parking places at
the same time, which is followed by the procession of one vehicle after another leaving the parking lot. A bus crashes through the gate as it leaves, and, after a reporter covering Barbara Jean's arrival wraps up his story, Altman cuts to a couch falling off of a truck moving down the highway, causing a crash and a traffic jam which brings all of the characters together, including those we have just seen leaving the airport. At this point, Altman bounces among the characters, each of them revealing some definitive aspect of themselves. It is as if what is happening on the screen draws our attention only when the chronology inherent in the orderly procession of cars is halted by the crash (the truck carrying the couch having disappeared, and become entirely irrelevant), giving Altman a chance to explore the situation without the burden of moving any of his characters from one place or time to another.

If Altman's emphasis on simultaneity slowly conditions the viewer not to jump ahead of what is on the screen at the moment, Altman seems just as interested in directing the viewer back to what has already happened. The tension in *Nashville* between forward and backward momentum, both within what occurs in the film and with regard to the audience's response, is figured in the film's opening credits, in which, as I noted above, the titles of the songs we will hear roll down the right side of the screen while the names of the actors who play the twenty-four main characters roll up the left side of the screen.\(^3\) Instinct may cause the

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\(^3\) Altman had created a similar effect in the opening credits for *Brewster McCloud*. They begin to appear over an interior shot of the Houston Astrodome's roof, and continue as the camera pans down to a marching band, conducted by Margaret Hamilton, playing the national anthem. Hamilton stops the performance when a member of the band plays in the wrong key. The credits stop also, and the camera pans back to the roof, at which point the credits, the national anthem, and the pan down from the roof begin again.
spectator to focus on the names rolling up since this is how credits usually appear, at least at the end of films made since the 1960s. The titles rolling down at the same time, however, force the spectator to make a choice; it is next to impossible to take in both lists at once. As Nashville progresses, we will confront this sort of choice repeatedly. Keyssar writes that when Altman cuts from one scene to another, he often uses "a mode of montage in which the key connecting elements present themselves initially in metaphoric rather than syntactical relationship to each other" (136). Within these metaphorical connections, Altman sometimes reverses what would seem to be the natural order of the two elements. As soon as Haven has thrown Frog out of the recording studio, telling him, "You get your hair cut; you don't belong in Nashville," the film cuts to the airport, the camera focusing on a sign saying "Welcome to Nashville." When Opal's tour through the graveyard of wrecked cars ends, Altman cuts to a stock-car raceway, where a race is in progress. He follows a scene showing cars past the end of their driving lives, Opal's voice (and then Kenny's) the only sound, with one showing cars speeding around a track, roaring so loudly as to drown out the singers performing there. Likewise, as preparations for the rally at the Parthenon go on, Altman cuts to the funeral of Mrs. Green, which, it turns out, will precede the shooting (and, apparently, the death) of Barbara Jean. Within the film's parameters, the funeral precedes the only death we witness. Even within the boundaries of a single scene, the audience is compelled to retrace the film's steps. In one of several visits to Tom's hotel room, each finding him with a different woman, the panning camera reveals Mary laying in bed with him, whispering "I love you." As the pan
continues, however, the camera reveals the fact that Tom is asleep, so that we must reconsider Mary's words if we made the likely assumption that Tom would have heard them when she said them. Joan Tewkesbury, author of the screenplay for Nashville, seems to allude to this aspect of the film when she describes her experiences during a visit to Nashville which served as the source of much of the script she would write. While she was listening to a singer at the Exit Inn, she started thinking about her children and her life at home. "You come to town," Tewkesbury says, "and these are the things you experience in the present while your past is running this other movie in your head simultaneously]"(Tewkesbury 106). Nashville often provokes the audience to re-run what it has already seen even as the film is in progress.

As I noted above, we hear snippets of every song in the film during the opening credits, so that they function as an extremely condensed version of the whole film. Once they conclude, the film in a sense starts over, now with intervals between the songs and the songs themselves performed either in their entirety or nearly so; in other words, we hear all of the songs again. This time, however, some songs will be repeated, so that we hear them in different circumstances and, in some cases, performed by different singers. "It Don't Worry Me" is heard at least four times before it moves from the clutter of all of the incidental noise heard on the film's sound track to, as it were, center stage, when Albuquerque belts it out at the rally after the shooting. Altman had tried repeating variations on the theme song throughout The Long Goodbye, perhaps as a parody of the

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4 This structure resembles the structure of the "Sirens" episode in Ulysses, which also begins with a sort of overture.
pervasive reliance in other films on a theme. But the excessive use of the theme does not seem to work to any particular effect in this film because, although it is usually heard within the fictional world of the film and not just by the audience, the song has no discernible relationship to any of the characters. It begins to seem like an interpretive gesture on Altman's part -- a comment on cinema history, rather than an integral element of the situations in which it occurs. "It Don't Worry Me," on the other hand, is one of Tom, Bill, and Mary's hits, so even if we do not realize this the first few times we hear it, the song comes across as part of the aural environment in which the characters live. Although each instance of the song is different, together they nevertheless suggest the predominance of circularity over linearity. In fact, the song operates as another of the film's elements which cause the spectator to look backward to what has already happened rather than forward. Until Albuquerque's version, we hear only bits and pieces of the song, and probably do not even register it as a song with any potential significance. The fact that the song suddenly seems loaded with meaning, at least of some sort, creates the desire to confirm the suspicion that we've heard the song already and to see if any of the previous renditions betray any hint of what is to come. This response to the film would seem to be an example of Peter Brooks's "anticipation of retrospection."  

5 "If the past is to be read as present, it is a curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we know to be already in place, already in wait for us to reach it. Perhaps we would do best to speak of the anticipation of retrospection as our chief tool in making sense of narrative, the master trope of its strange logic. We have no doubt forgone eternal narrative ends, and even traditional nineteenth-century ends are subject to self-conscious endgames, yet still we read in a spirit of confidence, and also a state of dependence, that what remains to be read will restructure the provisional meanings of the
novel) is an act of complicity in the illusion that we see and read as present what we know to be past. This real, underlying sense of a film's pastness, however, is specifically what Altman is trying to subvert. Ideally, the present of one of his films becomes more real than the present in which the audience watches it, so that anticipation of any kind becomes just as uncertain as it is in real time.

Nashville's resistance to linearity is further enhanced by the fact that very few events proceed without interruption. The situation is not as extreme as in JR, where a character can almost never reach the end of a sentence, but the film is built on the premise that hardly any part of it should be allowed to reach its expected end. As I pointed out earlier, in the movie's second scene, in Haven's recording studio, we hear only a few verses of "Two Hundred Years" before Haven stops the session to throw out Opal. We might expect Haven to get to the end of the song when we return to his studio, but once again he stops, this time to throw out Frog. In the traffic jam, Opal begins an interesting conversation with Linnea, only to abandon it when she notices Tommy Brown's bus. Likewise, as Buddy serenades her at his father's party with the one song he has written, Opal leaves him in the middle of it when she spots Elliot Gould (who plays himself). Later in the film, Wade interrupts Del's advances toward Sueleen after he has driven her home from the smoker. Keyssar claims that Altman "establishes continuity" by "allowing each of his characters to fully sing his or her song"(152), but while the characters do sometimes get to sing a song from beginning to end, they rarely do so without a momentary

already read"(Reading for the Plot 23).
cut to another scene, even if the sound of the song can somehow still be heard. Often, however, songs are interrupted too. Haven's first song, "Two Hundred Years," is interrupted twice, once by Opal and once by Frog; Opal interrupts Buddy's song; Barbara Jean interrupts her own second song at the Opry Belle when she wanders into anecdotes about her childhood; Sueleen's second song at the smoker is interrupted by the spectators demanding that she strip; and Barbara Jean's second song at the Parthenon is interrupted by the shots fired by Kenny. Songs are not, it seems, any less subject to random suspension than any other activity in the film.

If numerous scenes in *Nashville* do not reach their logical end, neither do many of them have a clear beginning. Altman uses a variety of both visual and aural devices to blur conventionally observed cinematic boundaries. The different parts of the film tend to bleed into one another, starting with the transition from the introductory commercial to the film's first scene. As the record jacket zooms backward out of sight, it leaves behind a white, block-printed "NASHVILLE" on a black screen, which, when another image emerges, becomes a word on a banner above a garage at the Hal Phillip Walker campaign headquarters. As with the deluge of simultaneous sounds and the images moving in various directions, this aspect of the film's opening will reappear throughout the film, except that Altman usually achieves the same effect aurally instead of visually. With the shot of the Walker campaign headquarters comes a voice spouting tirades against various evils of the present political system. The garage door opens, and out drives a van, the source of the voice, with a huge
megaphone on top of it. As we see the van moving down the Nashville streets, and continue to hear the voice emanating from it, we start to hear music at the same time -- the beginning of a song. The van stops at an intersection, at which point Altman cuts to Haven's recording studio. A panning shot moves across the studio, until it reaches Haven himself, singing "Two Hundred Years," the song we have been hearing. Throughout the film, Altman will cut to the next scene on the sound track before cutting to its first image. When the sound from the following scene is a character's voice, the effect is much like a voice-off.\textsuperscript{6} Unlike a typical voice-off, however, in which the sound track contains the voice of a character who happens to be excluded at the moment from the frame, the character and the scene that are the source of the voice have not yet arrived on the image track. For instance, near the end of Opal's soliloquy on the color yellow as she walks among the school buses, we hear Del's voice before Altman cuts to the image of him at the hospital, speaking to Triplette on the telephone.\textsuperscript{7} In the sequence alternating between Tom, Bill, and Mary performing at the Exit Inn and Sueleen's performance at the smoker, we hear sounds, usually applause, coming from the venue to which the film is about to cut before it does so visually, and in this example the effect is somewhat more disorienting, since we might expect to hear applause at either of these locations. When the applause seems to have come at an inappropriate time, it turns out to be coming from the other

\textsuperscript{6} The term "voice-off," as Mary Ann Doane observes, does not quite make sense, since it is the image, not the sound (or the voice) which is "off"; so the term in itself suggests the placement of the visible above the aural ("The Voice in the Cinema" 339).

\textsuperscript{7} The telephone into which Del speaks is yellow, like the school buses. Keyssar notes how the color yellow functions throughout the film as a sign of danger or death, which contrasts with its usually upbeat connotations (148).
location, to which the image track soon cuts. By this point in the film, the audience may have grown accustomed to the sound track taking an incongruous turn at the approach of the end of a scene. In this example, however, the incongruity is much more subtle.

When the sounds of a scene seem to have spilled into the scene preceding it, Altman is disrupting two primary cinematic conventions: the hierarchical superiority of image to sound and the importance of synchronization between voice and image.\(^8\) An ordinary voice-off supports a rather straightforward reading, as Mary Ann Doane shows: "The voice-off deepens the diegesis, gives it an extent which exceeds that of the image, and thus supports the claim that there is a space in the fictional world which the camera does not register. In its own way, it accounts for lost space" (340). The disjunctions in Nashville between cuts in the sound track and cuts in the image track do not seem to account for lost space so much as lost scenes. They seem to be a gesture toward the impossible ideal of a film completely free of the limitations imposed by sequence. It is easy to imagine a film which, in order to suggest a multitude of possibilities within the same period of time, represents multiple points of view of a particular temporal duration, stringing them together; the great example is Rashomon. But even in such a film, each segment would have a certain autonomy and authority that amount to an exclusion of the others. The spectator is not, as it were, in the position of being in two places at once.

In Nashville, however, this is exactly what occurs. Instead of using

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\(^8\) Stephen Heath makes these two observations: "[T]he sound track is hierarchically subservient to the image track and its pivot is the voice as the presence of character in frame.[...]. The stress is everywhere on the unity of sound and image[...]."("Narrative Space" 405).
sequence to suggest simultaneity, Altman is able to divide the audience's attention between two different scenes, thereby rendering simultaneity itself. By accounting for an entirely different scene, occurring at the same time as the one we are watching, Altman tries to dissolve boundaries in such a way that what would be excluded by the limitations of sequence is incorporated. The moments during which an image is matched with the sound of a scene occurring simultaneously but elsewhere suggest a utopia in which spatial and temporal laws are suspended, making division and exclusion, activities central to the production of narrative, unnecessary.

Altman's manipulation of the sound track even when he is cutting away intermittently from what appears to be the central focus of a particular scene produces a similar effect. The comedy of one of M*A*S*H's funniest scenes -- the placement of a microphone connected to the PA system under the bed of Burns and Hot Lips during their overheated tryst -- derives directly from Altman's habit of letting the sound emanating from one location continue even as the camera has moved to another location. At the beginning of the scene in Nashville dominated by Barbara Jean's arrival at the airport, a television news reporter informs us as to what we are about to see. We hear his voice, then see his image on a monitor, and finally see the reporter himself, corresponding to the voice we have been hearing. Then, after cutting to the interior of the airport and Private Kelly, another exterior shot shows the Walker campaign van again, the voice still booming. As the scene progresses, the sounds of the reporter's voice and the voice of the campaign van come and go, regardless of whether or not the reporter or the van can be seen. Even within this
scene, Altman uses the device in miniature, when Sueleen sings to the Tricycle Man, a customer in the airport restaurant, and her song can still be heard as the camera moves to other customers and conversations in the restaurant. During the show at the Grand Ole Opry, Altman periodically cuts away from what is happening on the stage to observe Albuquerque's efforts to get backstage and meet the stars, to Sueleen listening to the show on the radio at home and practicing her routine, and finally to Barbara Jean's hospital room, where she and Barnett are watching the show on television. Whenever Altman cuts away from the Opry stage, however, the music can still be heard. As I noted above, the show does not really end. The music has continued uninterrupted through the cut to Barbara Jean's room, although we now see her and Barnett and not the television. She finally turns off the television, in a sense ending the scene focusing on the Opry show, yet we are now in the middle of Barbara Jean and Barnett's argument. When does the scene featuring the show at the Grand Ole Opry end and the scene featuring Barbara Jean and Barnett begin? There is no clearly marked division. Throughout the film, instead of having our access to a scene cut off, another scene is added to it, while its aural component continues. This kind of dissolution of the boundaries of a scene through the separation of its visual and aural components is another instance of Altman taking advantage of a film's capacity to depict simultaneity to a degree that writing cannot.

Michael Wood responds to the problematic boundaries of Nashville and other Altman films by arguing that "an Altman film is committed to a kind of democracy of action and gesture and emotion, to a vision in which
all occurrences are equal, in which there are no events"(115). Indeed, if an event is defined in part according to its separateness from other events, then Wood is right. No event in Nashville happens in the sort of isolation dictated by cinematic and narrative convention. Wood makes this comment, however, within the context of explaining his objection to the fact that many Altman films, including Nashville, end in death. He writes that "[t]here is simply no reason for an Altman movie to end. It could go on forever, chronicling the tics and wisecracks of its chosen community. Any termination of its easy, vivid movement will seem more than abrupt; it will seem violent, and death simply writes this violence into the story"(114). If Altman is, as I have been arguing, and as Wood seems on some level to realize, committed to a kind of film which consistently resists the conventions of narrative, then his films must by definition be capable of going on forever. In White's words, "we cannot say, surely, that any sequence of real events actually comes to an end, that reality itself disappears, that events of the order of the real have ceased to happen"(23). Altman himself addressed in an interview his so-called "problem" with endings: "I don't do satisfactory endings because I don't think anything stops. The only ending I know about is death.[....] Death is, to me, the only ending. People say I don't know how to do an ending. I probably don't know how to do that well. I probably wouldn't like a good ending if it were presented to me -- I'd probably reject it"(Breskin 301). Ending a film with the death of a character might seem like an act of resistance to the otherwise arbitrary end required by narrative convention, since, as Paul Ricoeur writes, "is not narrative time a time that continues beyond the
death of each of its protagonists? Is it not part of the plot to include the death of each hero in a story that surpasses every individual fate?" (184). However, it seems to me equally reasonable to argue that the continuation of a film just beyond a character's death is a way of acknowledging the time which exceeds the duration contained within the film. Wood makes the point that "[d]eath is an event, a moment which separates itself from other moments" (115). Death is not, however, quite the end of Nashville; the film ends, in fact, in such a way that it resists the closure which narrative convention calls for more than if the assassination were its final act, but I will return to this issue later.

By blurring the divisions between the various temporal and spatial elements which comprise Nashville, and by emphasizing simultaneity in opposition to linearity, Altman creates the illusion of the absence of any principles of selection which would determine what is and is not included in the film. To conclude that any one event is more important than any other, and therefore worthier of inclusion in a narrative, requires, as White argues, some "consciousness of a social center" (11). If the form of Altman's film suggests the absence of a social center, so too does its content. Yet Nashville is very much about the relationships between its characters. Like J.R., the film almost never lets a character be alone for more than a moment. Keyssar observes that "[w]hat distinguishes Altman's characters is that they are and remain part of the crowd" (32). Altman insists on showing characters in relationship to one another, yet the characters remain largely isolated from one another. As Charles Michener writes, although the movie "is bursting with the sound and fury of its
desperate and not-so desperate characters [...] its most powerful implication is that nobody is listening"(48). Indeed, the film presents one instance after another of missed connections, connections broken as soon as they are made, and the imposition of barriers between characters. The scene in Haven's studio strikes this chord immediately, as Haven throws out first Opal and then Frog. Although it is Haven who forces her to leave, Opal herself repeatedly abandons situations in which she has a chance to forge a connection with other characters. She stops listening to Linnea's story about her family as they sit in the traffic jam; she leaves Buddy in the middle of the song he sings to her to fawn over Elliot Gould; she responds to Norman's offer to tell her juicy stories about the city by telling him that she makes it "a point never to gossip with servants." Del has never bothered to learn sign language so that he could communicate with his deaf children. L. A. Joan (who announces at the beginning of the film that she has changed her name from "Martha") never actually visits her sick aunt before she dies, and when L. A. Joan's uncle, Mr. Green, is told of his wife's death, Private Kelly, oblivious to Mr. Green's condition, proceeds to tell him about his mother's history with Barbara Jean. No one tells Sueleen she has no talent for singing, but when Wade finally does so, she refuses to believe him. Ruth McCormick sums up this aspect of Nashville, and her comments are remarkable for their applicability to JR as well: "It's a world in which people have forgotten how to listen, inundated as they are by noise and meaningless small talk; where people talk at rather than with one another"(24). She claims that "the only real communication between the characters is that between Linnea and her two deaf children"(24); this
statement seems accurate, and especially interesting insofar as Linnea’s children must be seen as well as heard in order to be understood. Most of the characters cannot even manage half of this.

Even when Altman does show characters by themselves, he gives to other characters a sort of ghostly presence which serves to emphasize the isolation of the character on the screen. We see Sueleen alone several times as she practices her routine in front of a mirror. Even though she is alone, the woman in the mirror is in a sense her ideal audience -- someone who is as willing as she is to believe she is a gifted singer. Enclosed within her image of herself, Wade’s truthful words cannot possibly reach her. Twice during the film, we see characters continue conversations on the telephone after the person on the other end of the line has hung up. When Tom first calls Linnea, he interrupts her dinner with her family and Triplette. Knowing they can hear her, Linnea adds a line of farewell after Tom has hung up in order to render their conversation ordinary and insignificant, after which she evades Del’s question about who had called with an anonymous answer. Later, when Kenny calls his mother from Mr. Green’s rooming house within range of L. A. Joan’s hearing, he hangs up on her when he can no longer tolerate her overbearing questions and warnings, after which he too adds a proper conclusion to the conversation, telling his mother he loves her. (It is interesting that neither of the two declarations of love in the film are heard by the people for whom they are intended.) Jonathon Rosenbaum writes that "deceptions involving telephones become a minor leitmotif"(254) in the film, just as they are a major leitmotif in J.R., but in all three of these examples of characters momentarily alone, the
characters deceive themselves as much as others in order to create or preserve tenuous attachments to other people.

Despite the constantly unstable relationships between Nashville's characters, critics have nevertheless mounted arguments for the presence of different organizing "centers" within the film. It is fairly easy, in fact, to see why Hal Phillip Walker, the presidential candidate, could be considered the center of the movie. If Nashville is "about" anything other than the lives of its particular characters, it is about country music and politics, and while no figure among the singers holds a clearly privileged position, the man in whose name the campaign is conducted is, at least on the surface, in the middle of the movie's political events. Alan Karp claims that the film's "social dimension revolves around an invisible center (Hal Phillip Walker, whom we never see) which is one reason why the film maintains a fundamental sense of openness characteristic of Altman's modernism"(54). If the film could be said to have a plot (a debatable position at best), then the plot consists of the planning and staging of the rally for Walker at the Parthenon. However, while numerous scenes in the movie, besides the rally itself, have some direct or indirect connection to this process, many of them have no connection at all. If the film's openness is related to Walker, it is related to him not because he is invisible, but because he is not really a center although he could be made to seem like one. His invisibility, however, is certainly no accident, as revealed by the fact that

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9 Gerard Plecki argues for Triplette as the center of the film, as if he might serve as the front man for the invisible Walker in this regard also: "Characters and events in Nashville, then, are logically organized and defined by their relationship to John Triplette, and by transitory allegiances. The story of Nashville is therefore told by examining the nature and implications of those character interactions"(84).
he does appear at the end of an earlier version of the script. By not allowing Walker to appear, Altman may be exposing the desire to locate a center, an organizing principle, and Walker's absence makes it that much easier to cast him in this role. Perhaps an absent center is still a center. Yet if Walker is visually absent, he does not seem to be aurally absent, since he apparently tells Triplette he wishes to stay in his limousine when the rally begins in order to keep working on his speech. Keyssar writes of this moment that "[t]he figure of power remains invisible"(165), but his power is only suggested, its exercise never concretely demonstrated. Knowing almost nothing about Walker does not stop the audience from thinking it knows many things about him. He is simply one of the most extreme elements through which the film shows that the likelihood of an audience to impose its expectations is increased by the reduction of what it actually sees and hears. Proposing Walker as the organizing center of the film reveals less about the film than about the reluctance to accept a film without an identifiable "center."

Just as Gaddis serves some of his critics as a "subject" within which the disparate voices of JR resolve themselves, so the possibility exists that even if the content of Nashville offers no character who embodies a center in relation to which the various elements of the film could be located, Altman himself, as the film's director, could serve as the "subject" around which the film coheres. He could be, in White's terms, the "metaphysical principle" which would allow us "to envision a set of events as belonging to the same order of meaning" and "to translate difference into similarity"(16). However, it seems to me that Altman's emphasis on
simultaneity over linearity and his conception of a film essentially without "events" specifically undermine any attempt to bestow upon him this function. The fact notwithstanding that film is a much more collaborative art form than writing, a film consists of (as Altman remarks) a visual and aural space, the contents of which are at the discretion of the director. As Lyotard writes, film direction is a "profoundly unconscious process of separation, exclusion and effacement"(175). For Altman, however, the challenge is to consciously resist these impulses. In re-drawing the boundaries of the visual and aural space, or in some instances dissolving them completely, Altman forces us to question the kind of significance assigned to directing. As Robert Kolker observes, directors of American films have historically sought to contain the spectator's attention within fairly rigid boundaries; our attention is usually focused on the center of the screen, and discouraged from wandering elsewhere. The focus, Kolker writes, "in traditional American cinema on limited, concentrated areas, dominated by a few central characters, reflects our long-standing myths of individual potency as well as the pre-cinematic tradition in middle-class art that the only serious and engaging dramatic interests are those of the individual in conflict with himself or herself or another person"(275).

Altman was not the first to set himself against this tradition; Eisenstein and Renoir preceded him. As Kolker writes, "Renoir recognizes that the screen is capable of indicating an extension of space beyond what it frames rather than denying the existence of that space. Through deep-field composition and the use of the pan he extends the spatial limits of the shot, indicating that there is more to the space than is immediately depicted by
continually showing additions to it"(276). Altman uses these same techniques, as well as others, to open up the visual space, but he also opens up the aural space, both of which become, to use Kolker's word, "decentralized"(278).

Kolker discusses the effects of this "decentralization" on the viewer, but he does not inquire into its implications in terms of the relationship between Altman and his films. He points out that Altman creates only "the appearance of spontaneity and improvisation" and "the sense of arbitrary observation"(273), and in fact, as a director, Altman has only slightly less control of what is and is not included in his films than a writer has of what is and is not in a novel. Despite Altman's remark that for him "the process" of filmmaking "is being in the activity itself, while it's happening, and really being out of control"(Breskin 272), what falls within the visual and aural boundaries of a film must reflect some method of selection, some way of determining the significance of events. If it seems trite to say that Altman's method of selection suggests that everything is equally significant, it nevertheless seems important to realize that his method is a means of reducing Altman's own ability to dictate the direction of the viewer's attention. In Altman's words, "what I try to do is simply create an event -- and that event can be somebody pouring a cup of coffee, and spilling it, or not spilling it -- creating that event, and then documenting it. And whether it's a riot, or a church fire, or a cup of coffee, I try to create the event, and then not manipulate everything to work for what you would like to have. And many times getting less than what you would like to have"(Breskin 274).
With regard to M*A*S*H, Altman has said that he wanted the audience to believe that what they were seeing was "just the window they were stuck at. That if they'd looked out another window, they'd have seen a different movie, though with the same atmosphere" (Jacobs 93). This comment strikes me as odd since it suggests a rigidly defined point of view. His use of overlapping dialogue in the film, for example, places the spectator in an aural space that has no solid boundaries. Some words but not others can be heard and understood clearly; there is no mechanism filtering out extraneous sounds. Overlapping dialogue would then be equivalent to listening (rather than looking) through several windows at once. With Nashville, Altman seems to further incorporate into the film those other windows, through which sound as well as images flow. When we hear a sound whose source we have previously seen but which is no longer in the frame, such as a song or the voice of the campaign van, it operates as a kind of shorthand indicating the presence of something other than what we now see on the screen. Especially when Altman cuts away from a performance we have been watching, but allows the sound of it to continue, he in a sense leaves open a window onto that performance, so that we may continue to follow it in addition to, or instead of, attending to whatever has pushed its visual component from the screen.

John Malone's distaste for Nashville's aural chaos shows perfectly how the film's sound track suggests that Altman has vacated a role which cinematic and narrative convention would assign him. Malone notes how Altman's defenders find his sound tracks more realistic than those of other films, but Malone thinks "Altman's use of the sound track does not reflect
reality at all. Anyone who has ever eavesdropped on people talking at another table in a crowded restaurant knows that it is possible to screen out the Musak violins, the anvil chorus of plates and silverware, even the words of your own dining companions, and to pick up instead the conversation behind you"(1). He goes on to state the obvious fact that Altman is still determining what we are allowed to hear, after which follows a revealing assertion: "The value of any work of narrative art must to some extent be measured by the artist's ability to clear away the distractions that in real life prevent us from grasping the significance of events. Altman not only fails to clarify matters for us, he goes to the opposite extreme, making it even more difficult for us to understand what is going on than it would be in actuality"(13). At least Malone is willing to present explicitly his expectations of a work of art. However, besides assuming that Nashville must be a "work of narrative art," Malone seems oblivious to the idea that, despite Altman's ultimate control over the range of possibilities in terms of what the audience hears, there could be any value in forcing the audience to do exactly what Malone says they must do in real life, screening out everything but what they wish to hear. Malone also believes that it should necessarily be easier to determine the significance of events in a work of art than other events, and that the job of the artist is to assist the audience in this task, as if there is no chance as long as the artist does this that the audience could confer upon the events it confronts in the work a significance different from that envisioned by the artist.
If the sound tracks of Altman's films, including Nashville, are the most immediately noticeable aspect of the illusion of his lack of control over them, other elements in his films are no less essential to this illusion. Gaddis's description of LR as his attempt to "make the characters create themselves, which is true of movies or the stage"(Abádi-Nagy 82), assumes the literal absence from the screen of the director as a mediating influence, but it conceals the fact that a director may choose to set extremely strict limits within which characters can present themselves. In Altman's films, however, the camera becomes as much of a neutral observer as possible, with the emphasis always pushed toward what is happening on the screen, and away from how what is happening is being presented. Stanley Cavell articulates cinema's potential in this regard: "Early in its history the cinema discovered the possibility of calling attention to persons and parts of persons and objects; but it is equally a possibility of the medium not to call attention to them but, rather, to let the world happen, to let its parts draw attention to themselves according to their natural weight. This possibility is less explored than its opposite. Dreyer, Flaherty, Vigo, Renoir, and Antonioni are masters of it"(25). To this list I would add Altman. This is not to say that there is no relationship between the action in front of the camera and the parameters set by the camera which shape our perception of it. When there does seem to be a discernible relationship, Altman tries to place its motivation within the characters or the situation, rather than in a more overtly imposed conception of some specifically determined exterior point of view. As Altman himself said of Nashville, "We're not telling a story. We're showing"(Wicker 17). Just as
he objects to the film’s unfiltered sound track because of the burden it puts on the audience, John Malone condemns the photography in Nashville for similar reasons: "Rather than using the camera to comment upon or characterize the action, Altman, like a television news cameraman, just sets it up and lets things happen in front of it. It is left to the viewer to pick out the significant details from the purposeless clutter of any given shot" (13). The clutter, of course, is exactly what Altman wants in any given shot; again, Malone has not considered the idea that Altman could have commented upon or characterized the action in more explicit terms, and that his choosing not to may itself constitute a method of commentary and characterization.

Three visual devices in Nashville seem especially emblematic of Altman’s desire to show rather than tell. They each create a sense of context within which whatever appears on the screen is happening, and they suggest that other possibilities in terms of what the camera may reveal remain open. In Altman’s films, Kolker writes, the zoom “functions as an offering to us, giving us perspective and detail, coaxing, leading, but never totally situating us or closing off the space that is being examined” (284). A zoom preserves the spectator’s sense of the space occupied by a character even when the shrinking frame has gradually excluded much of it; a cut from a long shot or a medium shot to a close-up, on the other hand, severs a character from his or her surroundings, as if the spectator should no longer take them into account. Near the beginning of Nashville, after we’ve followed Opal into the studio where Linnea is singing, the camera zooms from a shot of the whole gospel choir with whom Linnea, the only
white singer, is recording, in to a close-up of her. The continuation of the singing, as well as the use of the zoom, maintains our awareness of the context in which we have been introduced to her, even though everyone else is now outside the frame. In addition to the zoom, Altman tends to begin a scene with the camera panning down from some location above the action, instead of starting with a shot containing the center of the action. The first scene following the opening credit sequence begins this way: a shot of the banner above the garage door of the Walker campaign headquarters, and a pan down to the door itself, which opens to let out the van. The Sunday morning church sequence begins with a shot of a stained-glass window at the front of a Catholic church, high above the congregation, before the camera pans down to them.\(^\text{10}\) As the rally begins, the camera pans down from the top of the Parthenon, passing the American flag and the Walker banner before reaching Barbara Jean and Haven on the stage. When Sueleen's performance at the smoker begins, she literally descends from above her audience, on a stage which drops from the ceiling, and the camera tracks her descent. Altman's use of this device creates a sense of discovery of whatever the camera finally settles upon, as if the characters it eventually frames had a life beyond the spectator's access to them. Many films begin with some kind of movement from a shot which includes a large space or many people to a shot framing the particular characters on which the film will concentrate. The opening of \textit{Psycho}, consisting of an aerial view of Pheonix which gradually narrows down to a view into a hotel room window, is a classic example. In such

\(^\text{10}\) The first scene in \textit{A Wedding} also begins with a panning shot inside a church, moving from the ceiling down to the ceremony about to begin.
films, the device suggests other possibilities for the film's attention before eliminating all but one and following it to the end of the film. In Nashville, the repetition of this device suggests that other possibilities remain present at all times, and it gives to the appearance of a character a second time an accidental quality. Finally, besides the zoom and the pan, Altman often shows characters in long shots as they walk toward the camera. The camera itself is either stationary or pulls back as the character approaches it. In these scenes, the characters quite literally present themselves for observation by the camera. The crowd walking out of the airport to meet Barbara Jean appears in a long shot; as Albuquerque and Kenny walk down the street on their way to town, they appear in a long shot; when Albuquerque leaves the car she has been sleeping in, she crosses the street in a long shot, not noticing the collision that occurs behind her; Opal appears in long shots during her tours through the junkyard filled with wrecked cars and the field filled with school buses. By shooting characters this way, Altman seems to be suggesting that it is the action of the character, as much as a decision made by the director, which determines if and how closely the audience will observe the character.\footnote{The opening of Thieves Like Us is a good example of Altman's habit of letting the characters present themselves. A tracking shot follows a man-powered railroad car until it recedes into the distance. Meanwhile, the frame now includes a lake on which a rowboat floats, and the voices of the two men in it, Bowie and Chicamaw, become audible. As the boat nears the edge of the lake, it moves closer to the camera; once out of the boat, the two men now walk toward the camera, until finally they are in a medium shot, and their speech can be clearly understood.}

In some scenes, the camera seems to respond specifically to a character's situation, as if to accomodate the character's emotional state.
For instance, when Sueleen's performance at the smoker begins, we see her in full view, sometimes in close-up, reflecting her need for an audience as she sings. When her striptease begins, however, the rest of the scene is shot so as to largely conceal her nakedness from us, as if the camera were registering her discomfort. When the scene ends, the camera does not follow her from the stage. As Keyssar writes, Sueleen's "nakedness is so blatantly demeaning and pitiful that the camera seems unable to follow her as she finally runs from the center of the room and the frame" (164). When Del drives her home and tries pathetically to seduce her, the camera stays at a distance, as if, in opposition to Del's act of desperation, it were honoring Sueleen's desire to be left alone. When Wade shows up and chases Del away, however, the camera closes in on him and Sueleen as she tells him what happened at the smoker. Her ease and openness with Wade permit his physical closeness, as well as the spectator's. The scenes in which Tom is in bed with one of his conquests in his hotel room are also shot in a way that seems dictated by the particular terms under which the character relates to others. In each of these scenes, the camera initially frames a tape recorder playing one of Tom's songs before showing the bed itself. The repetition of this sequence suggests not only a cautious approach to something private and intimate, but also the notion of Tom's music as a sort of facade behind which he tries to hide, and through which it is necessary to pass before emotional or physical closeness to his character is possible.

The camera in *Nashville* may provide insight into what a character is feeling by appearing to respond appropriately; by itself, however, the
camera cannot convey motivation. If Altman seems to have no interest in motivation, this is because motivation is itself a product of narrative; it always implies a specific, meaningful relationship between two events, and assumes that explanations for the present can be found in the past. This devaluation of motivation is one of the things which enables Altman to keep as many possibilities as he can open for as long as he can, and one result is that it is difficult to say why his characters behave as they do. JR poses this same problem, and for the same reasons. Because our access to the characters is only through sounds and images, there is never any speculation, outside of what they say to each other, concerning the reasons for their actions. About Nashville, Pauline Kael writes that "[t]here's no single reason why anybody does anything in this movie"(451), and if there are many reasons for some of the characters' actions, there are likewise no reasons for others. In fact, the characters seem not to understand themselves very well, which is not surprising considering the fact that, in the film, they are never alone or silent long enough to have a self-reflective thought. Yet, as Keyssar writes, "[i]t is a cliché of the post-Freudian sensibility that we will find ourselves in uncovering our pasts; with zealous facility, we have carried this notion to our knowledge of the fictive characters of stage, screen, and novel"(29). Some critics, like Kael, willingly accept with regard to motivation the terms set by Nashville. Benjamin DeMott, for instance, lightheartedly observes that "nowhere are you burdened with accounts of motivations, or any other trapping of the homely universe of cause and effect"(101). Other critics, however, were quite disturbed by this aspect of the movie, finding it to be one of
Nashville's most serious flaws, and perhaps the expectation of understanding a character's motivation is in part responsible. In an article in which he laments the cutting of Nashville from an original eight-hour version to its present length, John Simon catalogues the various questions he has about each of the characters before concluding that "[w]e can make up answers to these and similar questions, and a work of art may certainly raise more queries than it answers; still, we are entitled to ask of the film, here and there, a little answering of its own"(34). We are indeed entitled to ask, but Simon's assumption seems to be that the work of art is required to answer if it hopes to satisfy its audience. Simon suggests that a longer version of the film would reveal more about the characters, and therefore make them and their relationships more affecting. But if a longer version were no more interested in narrative conventions than the released version, would it offer clues as to why, as Simon wonders, Tom and Linnea are the least bit attracted to one another? There would certainly be more material from which motivation could be construed, but a longer version would be merely that, a film which provided a longer look into the lives of its characters while still not developing coherent explanations for any character's behavior.

Critics troubled by the film's lack of motivation tend to focus especially on Kenny's assassination of Barbara Jean. Malone, again, exemplifies this complaint about the film: "[T]he fact that we have been given no clues as to the motivation of the seemingly nice young drifter who shoots [Barbara Jean] adds to our confusion and further dilutes the impact of the film's climax"(13). Besides Malone's strange perception of Kenny as
"nice" (is this how he would characterize Kenny's conversation with his mother?), this comment seems interesting because Malone implies that if only he had understood why Kenny shoots Barbara Jean, or, in other words, if he had been able to anticipate it, the scene would have carried more force. Does this mean that any event in a movie, or in any work of art, is "diluted" if reasons for its occurrence have not been planted ahead of it? Referring to the deaths which end several of Altman's films (McCabe and Mrs. Miller, The Long Goodbye, Thieves Like Us), Greil Marcus describes each of them as "an unmotivated and fundamentally incomprehensible act of murder"(61). Again, the implication is that an act of murder the reasons for which can be understood by the audience would make for a more aesthetically and morally pleasing conclusion. Perhaps the most insidious idea embedded within both Marcus's and Malone's statements is that murder is usually accompanied by histories in which may be found sufficient, logical motivations, thereby releasing a neutral observer from confronting directly such an essentially irrational act. If death ends many of Altman's films because it is for him the only real end imaginable, perhaps murder ends several of them because it is so resistant to acceptance in the absence of possible motives. In a cinematic tradition in which the motives of murderers are usually clearly defined and offered as a full explanation for their actions, murder loses its aura of inscrutability, the absolute mystery left in its wake no matter how easily it appears to submit to some mode of interpreting human behavior. In his refusal of simple psychology, Altman allows murder the power that is otherwise
diminished by the presence of what is essentially always insufficient motivation.

If the assassination of Barbara Jean seems to come from nowhere, our expectations regarding motivation cause us to see an empty space behind it we try to fill. Other than the fact that he is alone in Nashville, Kenny's telephone conversation with his mother is the only sign of possible discontent. Yet, with repeated viewings, brief moments in the film may be infused with ominous portent. During the traffic jam, Del approaches Kenny, whose car has overheated, and asks him where he got it, to which Kenny responds in a barely audible voice, "I stole it." Later, his violin case arouses suspicion when he seems unnecessarily concerned by L. A. Joan's interest in it. When Opal spots him with it at the wrecked car junkyard, she assumes he is a musician, an assumption which, in light of the others Opal has expressed up to this point, we should believe to be wrong. Still, none of this adds up to a portrait of a man about to kill a country singer, and any quality of foreshadowing invested in these moments only highlights the spectator's need to have the actions of the characters, especially an act as extreme as murder, framed within some semblance of narrative. As Keyssar writes,

no viewing of Nashville will provide this information [telling us why Kenny kills Barbara Jean], and the more intently we try to discover such knowledge in the film, the more clearly "clues" appear to be red herrings or obvious and clichéd explanations of experience. We may associate Barbara Jean's song about her mommy and daddy and their Idaho home with
Kenny's strained conversation with his mother earlier in the film, but that is a story we tell ourselves, not one the movie tells us. (22)

To whatever degree the audience can convince itself that, upon a second viewing of the movie, it can see Kenny's assassination of Barbara Jean coming, the fact is, as Molly Haskell asserts, that "[the assassination] still does not seem inevitable"(82), and this is surely part of its point. As is the case in the world outside the film, things occur in Nashville that cannot be predicted ahead of time, nor explained after the fact. We cannot know, based on what the film shows us, why Kenny kills Barbara Jean, although we can think we know.12

Of those critics who consider Nashville somehow deficient because of its lack of interest in presenting motivation behind what its characters do, one might ask what value there could be in this kind of knowledge. It seems to me that the question of motivation has more to do with the concept of narrative than just its assumption of a relationship between two

12 Morris Dickstein asserts that the 1970s were "an age of conspiracy theories, assassination fantasies, and a widespread feeling of being helplessly engulfed in a vast fabric of deceit and corruption"(73), and some of the responses to Barbara Jean's assassination bear him out. Byrne and Lopez cite Paul Krassner's argument that Nashville perpetuates what he calls the Big Lie: "I'm not saying that Robert Altman is a conscious propagandist; only that, by reinforcing the image of the single assassin spewed out all these years by carefully orchestrated CIA profiles, he might as well be. We are left with the portrait of a just another crazy killer, triggered by an unhappy home life rather than being an espionage patsy[...]. Spreading fear is the name of the game." Byrne and Lopez offer an only slightly chastening rejoinder: "While it is clear that the government has attempted to secretly engineer recent history, and that the lone-nut assassination theory is an ominous fraud, it is also true that Nashville will be seen and discussed by a large portion of the American population; each individual will receive 159 minutes of varied impressions in addition to the above-mentioned impressions of a solitary killer"(22). In her review in The New Yorker, Penelope Gilliatt criticizes the film for its simple intellectual content, as illustrated by "its theory about the reasons for political assassination in America"(108), but she never bothers to articulate what this theory is, as if it should be readily apparent.
different events which renders them parts of the same order of meaning. Joan Didion begins "The White Album" with a meditation on the use of stories, which includes the following passage: "We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience"(11). If the presence of apparent motivation facilitates the imposition of a narrative line upon a sequence of events, or permits a narrative to be constructed around a single event, it also, more specifically, allows the derivation of a moral meaning from those events. As White asserts, narrativity "is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality"(14), and Didion seems to point to this notion in the first sentence of the passage above. Without any idea of why Kenny shoots Barbara Jean, the event yields no moral lesson.

Nashville is itself in some sense a "shifting phantasmagoria," the end of which emphatically resists "freezing," 13 either through the halting of its own mechanisms or the sudden intrusion of authorial judgment upon what has transpired. Because the movie seems to end with an act that, above all others up to this point, should require some kind of moral response, the fact that Altman does not provide it, regardless of how far he has distanced

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13 The end of the film seems directly opposed to the use of a freeze-frame as an ending -- a fairly common device since Truffaut's The 400 Blows. While Altman's pan up to the sky may imply the continuation of time beyond the events which fill the movie, and therefore the fact of mortality, the freeze-frame suggests a stopping of time when the film stops, both for the characters within the film and the audience watching it. Everyone is "frozen" in that moment, and so immortal.
himself from the rest of the film, is especially troubling to many critics. Objecting to the end of the film, however, is equivalent to dismissing the film entirely, because what Altman does with the conclusion to *Nashville* is perfectly compatible with its constant subversion of narrative conventions. The assassination of Barbara Jean is not of course the very end of the movie. After the shooting, Haven tries to reassure the crowd, and gives the microphone to Albuquerque, exhorting her to sing. She hesitantly begins to sing "It Don't Worry Me," and the crowd gradually joins in, with Albuquerque eventually belting out the verses with unrestrained feeling. The final images are comprised of a zoom which initially frames only the stage; the camera zooms back to include in the frame the crowd as well as the stage, as if to emphasize Albuquerque's successful connection with her audience. Finally, once the zoom stops, the camera pans up from the scene on the ground until only the sky is visible, but it is an overcast sky, which has the effect of making us uncertain as to whether we are still seeing the sky or a blank screen. Then the screen goes black, the final credits begin, and a different version of "It Don't Worry Me" begins too, running until the credits end. The zoom away from the stage, followed by the pan up to the sky, seem to complement Altman's frequent use of opposite kinds of shots throughout the film. The pan up to the sky is especially appropriate because, just as the shots which pan down to the action, including the one of the Walker campaign headquarters which begins the film, convey the temporal extension of the action beyond what the spectator is allowed to see of it, so too does this last pan convey this same idea. The life of the
surviving characters continues (as does time itself); only our access to them has ended.

The end of Nashville, to say the least, lacks closure. If this feature of the film is consistent with its refusal to narrativize time, it is more pointedly consistent with Altman's refusal to stand in judgment, especially moral judgment, of what his characters do. White argues that "[t]he demand for closure in the historical story is a demand [...] for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama" (21). In the case of Nashville, the demand for some indication of the moral significance of the movie's contents takes two different forms. Critics either believe that Altman fails by not fulfilling his obligation to offer at least a hint of a moral judgment, or that he fails because he has produced a film that is susceptible to a multitude of interpretations, especially with regard to the final scene, instead of a film that obviously encourages a single interpretation, that of the director. In other words, Altman is both not "saying" enough and "saying" too much. Robert Kolker and Michael Wood each find Altman guilty of both offenses. Here is Kolker's take on the end of Nashville: "A catastrophic event brings us all together, but in a devitalized state, ready to be herded and manipulated once again. No answers are offered; indeed, few questions are raised by the film, which ends in a most uncharacteristic camera movement for Altman, a movement away from the field of action up to the sky. It is a final evasion, and it needs a response" (322-23). Kolker wants "answers" but finds none forthcoming. Neither does Wood: "[...] I don't see what is being said in Nashville, except that America is a
violent place and assassinations have occurred there. [... ] The tilt to the sky, suggesting optimism if you feel that way and a snickering joke against movie conventions if you're not so innocent, is also an ugly confidence trick. Altman is now no longer even sitting on the fence; he has left town" (105-107). Wood's comment seems especially rich because it is such an accurate description of the movie; he pays the film the service of seeing it for what it is, but he wishes it were something else. Nashville is not "saying" anything about America. Instead, it is an observation of what exists in America. As Altman himself admits in talking about the wrecked cars in the junkyard, the inclusion of something in one of his films can itself be taken as a statement: "I had no comment to make about them at all. I mean other than the fact that they're there. That's a comment" (Wicker 17). But beyond the notion that everything in Nashville "is there," and as such is a kind of comment, Altman is as silent as possible. The film indeed "says" essentially nothing other than that what is in it exists. As Wood writes, the end of the film can be read as Altman, along with his audience, leaving town. But the idea of a confidence trick suggests that Altman had been preparing his audience for something else. Rather than betraying a misreading of the rest of the film, however, this description more likely betrays expectations Wood has developed based on other films. Although Altman has not satisfied such expectations when the final scene begins, Wood seems to think he still might. Until the credits roll, there is still a chance for Altman to "say" something about what we have seen. He does not.  

14 This fact was not lost on George McGovern, who after seeing Nashville said
When Kolker and Wood argue that *Nashville* does not work because it is capable of supporting conflicting readings, they are responding as much to their own irreconcilable responses to the film as to any of the film's incongruities. Kolker notes derisively that the film "refuses to come to terms with itself"(319); he asserts that "[t]he pluralism of the film undoes itself -- by condemning passivity while seeming to condone it, exposing the banal hypocrisy of country and western music while applauding its vitality, observing the vicious vacuity of 'stars' while indicating that they're just folks, and giving everyone his or her due [...]"(322). The film may indeed show all of these things, but it does not pass judgment on any of them. It is certainly possible, for instance, to say that the fact that the crowd at the Parthenon can do nothing after the shooting but sing a song celebrating equanimity, if not complacency, amounts to a condemnation of passivity. Likewise, the fact that the crowd does not panic or riot or otherwise perpetuate the violence it has just witnessed can be considered a mark of steadfastness and perseverance in the face of calamity. To Kolker, the film should not be as open to interpretation as experience; the director should not only present a sequence of events, but also give some suggestion of how they should be interpreted. In other words, a film should be narrated. Wood claims that there are "two Altmans" in his movies: "a gloomy, pretentious fellow..."

15 The desire for the unification of opposites by the end of a movie is one that, as Mark Crispin Miller shows convincingly in "Hollywood: The Ad," has been fulfilled with numbing consistency in the 1980's. One film after another from this decade ends with "the melding of two 'opposites' into a unity"(65), the quotation marks signifying the absence of any force in the resolution due to the triviality and unreality of the initial conflict.
determined to comment on the contemporary scene; and a marvelously relaxed filmmaker whose great talent is for showing us how people bluff and joke their way through their ordinary lives"(115). What seems to bother Wood about the Altman who would make comments is that no single, unambiguous comment appears within any given film, but Wood praises the other Altman by listing the many interpretive possibilities arising from the scene in which Tom sings "I'm Easy" for Linnea. "[I]n the end," he writes, "all interpretation is left to us; there is really no tilting of the picture by Altman. We have to read this moment as we read any other tangled bit of life, in or out of the movies"(116). While the intercutting of shots of the American flag throughout the scene at the Parthenon certainly suggests that there are larger issues in play than in this scene at the Exit Inn, is Altman not, finally, still leaving all interpretation to us? I think he is, yet Wood in this instance would rather he did not.16

Both Kolker and Wood seem to insist upon the idea of Altman occupying the position of a unified, clearly identifiable point of origin for his films, especially because of the difficulty of otherwise saying what the "subject" of any of his films is.17 Yet Altman specifically refuses to let

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16 Numerous other critics consider the film's tendency to invite contradictory interpretations one of its major flaws. Jay Cocks, for instance, condemns "the eagerness both to use the rather parched symbolism and mock it too"(67-68). Andrew Sarris thinks "Altman and his script-writer Joan Tewkesbury try to have it both ways with the condescending characters played by Michael Murphy and Geraldine Chaplin. On the one hand, these two characters give us a lot of information, a lot of exposition. On the other hand, they're presented as cruel, brutal, supercilious outsiders, and so they become easy targets for the audience"(Haskell and Sarris 81).

17 Geoffrey O'Brien writes about the nature of auteur theories: "The idea of cinematic authorship was not simply a tribute to merit and craftsmanship but an expression of faith: that the clouds or the tree acquired meaning because someone had put a frame around them. An author was an organizing principle. A movie looked different if you thought somebody directed it, just as the world looked different if you thought God planned it. The arbitrary became intentional"(The Phantom Empire, 125-6).
and the difficulty of attribution in collaborative situations, Altman asks, "So who's the writer? And why does there have to be the writer?" (Breskin 281). He elaborates further: "Where's the artist? You go out and say, I was an actor on that picture. Or, I was a writer on that picture. Who made that picture? Sometimes, it's the star that makes the picture. There's an imbalance. But it's never one person. I get the credit for most of my pictures, but that credit is for selecting the people that I collaborated with. So I'm just really a manager. And you can strip me down to having no artistic input whatsoever, other than of selection" (Breskin 281). While this is certainly something of an overstatement, it conveys the self-consciousness with which Altman tries to resist an authoritative relationship to his movies. If they contain irreconcilable elements, his comment suggests, they are all the more indicative of the nature of filmmaking, and, in any event, casting him as a unifying force betrays a wish that his movies be something other than what they are. In another comment, Altman admits he is not merely a mirror, reflecting back whatever lies before him, but he nevertheless insists upon the freedom of his audience to make of his vision what they will: "I don't have anything to say! [...] I'm saying what other people say, and I'm showing it to you in the context of the way it appears to me. It's like a painting. I'm not going to make up a sunset. I'm going to paint a sunset" (Breskin 309).

Opal's character illuminates some of the effects of narrative conventions in two ways; she is herself the victim of her own desire to impose them on whatever situation she encounters, and she exposes the degree to which our desire to impose them on the film distorts our
understanding of it. As Keyssar argues, Opal's repeated failures to see things in context and to register incongruity and complexity, along with her reliance upon the assumptions she brings to every situation, cause her to miss everything relevant and focus on everything trivial.(149-151).

When she spots Tommy Brown's bus and boards it hoping to interview him, she does not realize the black man she is talking to is him, which makes her even more baffled when he introduces her to his wife, also black. Besides her obvious gravitation toward people she considers interesting because of their celebrity and her corresponding disdain for potentially interesting nobodies, it is her desperate attempts to formulate a meaning for whatever she encounters that keep her from actually experiencing anything. She wants to believe the traffic jam is America, the wrecked car junkyard "an elephant's secret burial ground," the school buses "so many yellow dragons." She almost never calls anything what it is. Wim Wenders finds Opal superfluous, writing that the "film itself is a convincing statement against this kind of attitude"(90). But she is necessary for the very reason John Simon considers her a source of confusion: "this steady nuisance and intermittent fool is allowed some valid insights among overwhelming imbecilities, some pregnant metaphors among others that are totally barren"(38). Simon would rather not have to pay any attention at all to her, but he can see that not everything she says is a cliché or mere nonsense, such as when she offers her theory of political assassination: "I believe that people like Madame Pearl and all these people here in this country who carry guns are the real assassins. Because they stimulate the other innocent people who eventually are the ones who pull the trigger."
The audience cannot dismiss her out of hand. If she is a source of confusion, it is because her function in the film cannot be reduced to any one of her scenes. They must be considered both individually and collectively, which means that none can be allowed to create expectations and therefore diminish the attention given to her. Greil Marcus writes that *Nashville* does not so much represent "an actual sense of life as some theory of life"(61), but a "theory of life" is exactly what Altman's film opposes. Altman believes the element of surprise is essential to his films because, "[i]f you anticipate it, you've already experienced it"(Breskin 271). Anticipating what Opal will do based on what she has already done amounts to forming a theory about her, which has the effect of reducing our receptivity to the variations in her subsequent appearances. Like the rest of *Nashville*, Opal must be observed from one moment to the next, with a restraint that blocks the inclination to be done with her in one final, coherent, premature declaration.

In her grasping for meaning, Opal displays the activity of the narrativizing mind. While the structures through which it processes experience are not always unfavorable to insight, they are not very well suited to registering the world's silence. Acknowledging this silence, I think, is what Altman's style makes possible. In this regard, his work resembles that of the Italian Neo-realists of the late 1940s, whose films Geoffrey O'Brien describes: "It was the simplest of magic, the trick being that there was no trick. Rossellini carried it as far as it could go. The lens simply allowed itself to be filled by a statement the world made. This is a tree. This is an elephant. This is a hill. This is Saint Francis in ecstasy."
This is barbed wire. This is a woman stepping out of a car. This is a woman stepping out of her life. This is congealed lava. This is random light"(88). The world asserts nothing, in other words, but its own existence. Although Altman's films could hardly be said to have no tricks, they too seem devoid of statements. However, the passivity that narrative convention fosters in the spectator, in which she need not bear the full burden of her own responses because the film itself assumes some of the responsibility for them by explicitly articulating them, is what Altman's films are designed to upset. In Cavell's view, the medium promotes the spectator's passivity, to the point that her response to a film does not seem very relevant at all: "In viewing a movie my helplessness is mechanically assured: I am present not at something happening, which I must confirm, but at something that has happened, which I absorb (like a memory). In this, movies resemble novels, a fact mirrored in the sound of narration itself, whose tense is the past"(26). For Altman, movies need not be like novels for the very reason that they are uniquely capable of inspiring in their audience a sense of being at something happening now, yet few filmmakers have taken advantage of this capacity. If Altman succeeds in convincing his audience that their present coincides with that of the film, his audience is no longer safe behind the knowledge that they are simply experiencing a memory, which leaves them vulnerable to the full force of their most authentic intellectual and emotional reactions.

To say that the present of the spectator coincides with that of Nashville, however, is not to say that the film dissolves the boundaries between itself and the audience. On the contrary, by refusing a narrative
between itself and the audience. On the contrary, by refusing a narrative form, *Nashville*, like *J.R.*, suggests the illusoriness of the idea that it contains a space within it meant to be occupied by the spectator, so that the difference between the two is erased. Keyssar asserts that the spectator experiences *Nashville* as a "participant observer"\(^{18}\): "we are placed by Altman in a position of at once partaking in spectacle and reflecting upon it"(134). Part of what makes Keyssar's argument, as well as Joan Tewkesbury's contention that the spectator is the twenty-fifth character in the film, so easy to accept is the commonplace assumption that the experience of watching a movie in a theater is a fundamentally collective one, a kind of dream in which distinctions that normally obtain between not only the world depicted in the film and the spectator, but also between one spectator and another, are temporarily suspended. In describing the methods used by promoters of films in the 1920s to sell their relatively new product, O'Brien shows how deeply embedded in the history of cinema and our perceptions of the medium is the possibility movies offer of an escape from the ordinariness of everyday life to a more exciting world: "The pleasure of that escape became the most commonly shared pleasure of the century. Everybody could go into the same dark room -- no matter where it happened to be located -- and zero in on precisely the same dream"(116). The cinema provides not only an escape from everyday life, but also an imaginary escape from the limits of individual consciousness. Movies do lend themselves to the description of a collective dream, much more than novels, which we read alone (unless they are read

perhaps thinking about the experience of a film as a dream is an admission of the fantastic nature of the notion that a film could effect the dissolution of otherwise impenetrable barriers. Rather than an escape from the isolation of the individual consciousness, Nashville's refusal of narrative, insofar as it implies a refusal of intelligible meaning, is a confirmation of that isolation. The film reminds us of how little we share, and of the tenuousness of the structures we use to identify with others, instead of indulging the fantasy that an audience, gathered together in a darkened room, really does see and hear exactly the same things.
Chapter Three

The Dead Father: Quiet on the Set

If you set out to write an essay or a book to characterize Robert Altman's films -- their thematic concerns, their formal qualities, their various effects -- it would be difficult to overlook Nashville. This is not to say, of course, that Nashville stands above the rest of Altman's films, and in fact one of the interesting aspects of the body of criticism on Altman is the occasional voice proclaiming some other film, often McCabe and Mrs. Miller,¹ as the one that should be considered Altman's most successful. Even if a critic does not hold Nashville in very high regard, however, attention must be paid to it simply because it is a fully realized example of so many features of Altman's films.

I do not intend to argue for the indispensibility of Donald Barthelme's novel The Dead Father to a summary of his work, but I do think such an argument could be made, so its relatively low profile in criticism of Barthelme's fiction, and in some cases its complete neglect, is an odd development. If his reputation rests largely on his short stories, perhaps this is because of their sheer volume compared to the four relatively short novels he wrote, although any number of his stories has as good a chance as any of the novels at assuming a place in future canons of this century's American fiction. The elevated status of his stories might also be a result of his association with minimalism;² classifying him as an

¹ See, for instance, Robert Phillip Kolker, A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Kubrick, Coppola, Scorsese, Altman.
² On Barthelme and minimalism, see Frederick Karl, American Fictions 1940-1980, 384-396.
exemplary minimalist obviously requires that one focus on his shorter works. Larry McCaffery, however, cannot use either of these excuses. In The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass, McCaffery offers what he calls "An Overview of Barthelme's Fictions," followed by more detailed discussions of Come Back, Dr. Caligari and Snow White. Nowhere in the book does he even mention The Dead Father. His selections allow him, as he writes, to "emphasize the metafictional continuity of Barthelme's work," and free him of the task of "analyz[ing] the relatively unimportant ways his work has evolved during his career"(100). Although the judgment slipped into this last statement about the evolution of Barthelme's work may be accurate, it is hard to see how The Dead Father could in no way be counted among, to use McCaffery's words, Barthelme's "fictions which examine fictional systems, how they are created, and the way in which reality is transformed by and filtered through narrative assumptions and conventions"(5). Charles Molesworth's Donald Barthelme's Fiction: The Ironist Saved From Drowning, a book devoted to Barthelme's work, deals with the short stories exclusively, a decision which Molesworth justifies by asserting that, in Snow White and The Dead Father, Barthelme "has little more than indicated that he wants to write a novel, for these books are merely extensions of a style that works better in the short-story form"(82). (Barthelme had not yet published either of his other novels.) Molesworth adds that "one of the corollaries of my argument is that Barthelme's vision is fundamentally not novelistic"(82). Like McCaffery, Molesworth explains his dismissal of The Dead Father by suggesting not only that it
does not fit comfortably into the parameters of his project, but also that the novel is not particularly relevant to an understanding of Barthelme's work. Alan Wilde, for the most part one of Barthelme's most astute critics, is a bit less genuine. He describes *The Dead Father*, without a trace of doubt, as a "myth of modernism"(46), and the Dead Father himself as modernism's representative. He then dismisses the novel on the grounds that the portrait of the Dead Father does not "stand up to the facts of modernism"(47), or at least his interpretation of it, and so Barthelme's response to modernism, as Wilde understands the term, is of no value. It does not seem to occur to Wilde that his perfunctory treatment of the book hinges on an extremely narrow view of what is perhaps its most complex problem: the almost limitless symbolic range of the Dead Father (a problem to which I will return momentarily).

If these critics seem assured of the relative unimportance of *The Dead Father*, there are nevertheless those who seem equally assured of its superiority. Jerome Klinkowitz, for instance, asserts that "*The Dead Father* employs the broad range of Barthelme's strongest talents both as a short fiction writer and as a novelist"(6), while Lois Gordon writes that "*The Dead Father* is Barthelme's masterpiece, certain to take its place among a handful of brilliant and imaginatively original modern works"(178). She begins her analysis of the novel, however, by pointing out that it "is difficult to discuss, since Barthelme creates characters, plot, drama, and denouement that only tentatively coalesce into concrete meaning, after which they dissolve and, with geometric progression, shift in and out of other levels of signification -- psychological, anthropological,
mythic, political, philosophical"(161). The novel's difficulty is most immediately apprehended, as I suggested above, by looking at some of the possibilities critics have put forth as to who or what the Dead Father might signify. In his review of the novel, Richard Todd writes that "The Dead Father becomes a symbol of some plasticity. He is God first of all. God as a father. And father as God. After that he's what you will: The Novel, Western Culture, Truth, Duty, Honor, Country"(45). Frederick Karl prefers to think of him as The Novel first of all(386). Wilde opts for modernism(Horizons of Assent 47). In addition, the Dead Father echoes numerous characters from myth and literature, including Orpheus, Zeus, Prometheus, Anchises, Oedipus, King Lear, and the Fisher King. And, as if it were not a rich enough field of signification, the Dead Father is an ordinary father. A plausible argument can be made for any of these possibilities, and each carries with it all sorts of implications for any comprehensive interpretation of the novel.

The problem of assigning some consistent meaning to the character (if one can call him that) of the Dead Father is symptomatic of a larger issue with which critics must deal when confronting Barthelme's work. Maurice Couturier and Régis Durand articulate it this way: "if one tries -- as indeed one must in the end -- to go for the 'essential,' the particular characteristic of Barthelme's fictions remains that they make any single grid of reading or approach seem inadequate: a formalistic and reductive practice superimposed upon the complexity of the sentence or the text"(72).

This idea helps somewhat to explain the divergent views of The Dead Father among Barthelme's critics; it is at least as resistant, if not more so,
to a single mode of interpretation, a unified, linear argument, as anything he wrote. This aspect of the novel would seem to make it adaptable to a wide variety of critical stances toward Barthelme's fiction, but the number of critics who dispose of it so hastily, as well as those who ignore it entirely, suggest instead the unwillingness of the novel's critics to engage it on its own terms.

Like J.R., The Dead Father prompted its share of negative reviews when it first appeared. Maureen Howard addressed the matter of the challenges the novel poses to the reader quite directly, stating flatly in The Yale Review that "[t]he book is boring and difficult to no purpose" (408). If other reviewers were not as explicit, their tone usually implied similar feelings. Howard also observed that "[i]t seems clear only that Barthelme finds clarity simplistic" (408), no doubt intending this as a derogatory claim, but in fact Barthelme says as much in his essay "Not-Knowing." He offers a defense against the charge that the difficulty, of his own work or that of other "difficult" artists, is not merely a result of the artist's indifference to an audience or an easy reaching for significance: "Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, but because it wishes to be art. However much the writer might long to be, in his work, simple, honest, and straightforward, these virtues are no longer available to him. He discovers that in being simple, honest, and straightforward, nothing much happens: he speaks the speakable, whereas what we are looking for is the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken" (24). Under these terms, the

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3 See, for instance, Hilton Kramer, "Barthelme's Comedy of Patricide," and Roger Shattuck, "The Dead Father."
novel's difficulty, rather than eliciting condemnation, should be considered the result of Barthelme's desire to map unexplored territory.

While Barthelme undermines narrative conventions to the same extent that Gaddis and Altman do, his method differs from theirs in that he is not interested, as they are, in opposing narrative by creating a consistent non-narrative mode within which to work; compared to Barthelme, Gaddis and Altman seem to have exchanged one set of conventions for another, however unique the new set happens to be. For Barthelme, consistency connotes adherence to a system, and no system is without its limitations, no matter how cleverly it is able to disguise them. A key to understanding Barthelme's opposition to narrative conventions, therefore, is the realization that he will not be content to propose only one form which subverts or abandons them. It is no more narrative itself which inspires Barthelme's opposition to it than the fact that narrative is a singular way of structuring experience. So The Dead Father cannot be read as an alternative to narrative, but rather as an exploration of several possible routes of escape from narrative. Barthelme's "The Explanation" perhaps points to one of these possibilities. Q and A have the following conversation about the genre of the novel, and although it is in no way a certain reflection of Barthelme's own thinking, it is a reasonable if not totally serious explanation for why the epic is central to The Dead Father:

Q: Is the novel dead?
A: Oh yes. Very much so.
Q: What replaces it?
A: I should think that it is replaced by what existed before it was invented. (Forty Stories 36)

Barthelme is undoubtedly parodying the critical fashion in the 1950s and 60s of proclaiming the death of the novel, but if the novel is not really dead, it sustains itself in part because of its capacity for incorporating other forms of literature, specifically the epic in The Dead Father. Rather than just serving as one of Barthelme's subjects, the epic governs the form of much of The Dead Father. The novel's third-person passages display two primary aspects of epic: the denial of a subjective point of view toward the events they describe, which M. M. Bakhtin argues is characteristic of epics because they originate in collective memory; and the denial of a temporality that is relative in favor of the kind of absolute, unchanging present which Erich Auerbach observes in Homeric epic. The Dead Father thinks of himself as embodying both of these qualities. He believes he encompasses every potential point of view, and so transcends his own subjectivity as well as the very idea of subjectivity, and he imagines himself to be immune to temporal processes, without either origin or end, and so not subject to the temporal relativity of past, present, and future. Although the Dead Father, with his epic pretensions, exerts his influence over much of the novel's form, he does not do so to the exclusion of all other possibilities. The dialogues between Julie and Emma may at first appear to be a substantially different way in which language can be used to structure experience, because they seem to be both deeply subjective and intensely aware of temporal processes. However, when compared to the epic form, the dialogues turn out to exhibit similar kinds of limitations. Their
immersion in subjectivity goes so far as to make Julie and Emma indistinguishable within them, and so no longer associated with individual points of view, and, rather than suggesting a present that is forever ongoing, they suggest a present that is endlessly reconstituted, and therefore no more inclusive of past and future. The alternation between these two forms suggests not so much the possibility of a perfectly transparent representation of reality as the endless nature of the attempt. Critics construe the need to come to terms with the impossibility of escaping all systems of representation as the moral imperative promoted by the novel and Barthelme himself, but the novel so thoroughly undermines the sort of categorical thinking that moral codes require, and so adamantly resists the alignment of its author with any one of its voices, that any reading of the novel that endows it with the force of moral statement falls apart. Finally, like much of Barthelme's other fiction, The Dead Father permits nothing but the contemplation of its surface, for nothing lies beneath it.

As Couturier and Durand indicate, any sort of circumscribed approach to The Dead Father will inevitably seem reductive, so my decision to focus on the novel's relationship to narrative does not mean that other issues in the novel are less relevant; I realize many rich aspects of it will remain outside the limits of this discussion. Narrative has not been the primary concern of much that has been written about The Dead Father, although it is a regular topic of discussion in criticism of other fiction by Barthelme, indeed, Barthelme's contentious relationship to narrative

4 Thomas M. Leitch's essay, "Donald Barthelme and the End of the End," is a good overview of the role of narrative in Barthelme's work as a whole, although Leitch has
conventions can be discerned almost instantly in much of his work. Although his last two novels, *Paradise* and *The King*, are relatively straightforward, his first novel, *Snow White*, is obsessed with its own form, consisting of mostly one- or two-page sections the narrators of which are usually not clearly identifiable. In the middle of the novel is a questionnaire for the reader. In the short stories, there are pictures ("At the Tolstoy Museum," "Brain Damage"), a story consisting of numbered sentences ("The Glass Mountain"), stories consisting of dialogues between "Q" and "A" ("The Explanation," "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel"), and stories consisting of dialogues between unattributed voices ("The New Music," "The Leap"). Insofar as it wears the label of "narrative" uneasily, "The Balloon" is typical of a lot of Barthelme's fiction. When the story opens, the narrator has somehow engineered the appearance of a huge balloon in the sky over Manhattan, extending from Fourteenth Street to Central Park and covering "an irregular area east-west"(*Sixty Stories* 53). The narrator spends the story describing the various reactions to the balloon, until the last paragraph, in which the narrator explains the balloon to a beloved just returned from a trip as "a spontaneous autobiographical disclosure, having to do with the unease I felt at your absence, and with sexual deprivation"(58). The story's first paragraph concludes with an apparently neutral-sounding summarizing statement: "That was the situation, then"(53). Just as the narrator uses "situation" to refer to the sudden appearance of this giant balloon, so it is tempting to forgo "story" or "narrative" in favor of "situation" to describe many of Barthelme's

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almost nothing to say about *The Dead Father*. 
stories and even the novels. However, to begin the next paragraph, the narrator shows why even this word will not do: "But it is wrong to speak of 'situations,' implying sets of circumstances leading to some resolution, some escape of tension; there were no situations, simply the balloon hanging there -- muted heavy grays and browns for the most part, contrasting with walnut and soft yellows"(53).

Gaddis and Altman, like Barthelme, are not interested in "situations," but their styles do not announce this fact as immediately as Barthelme's does. In the opening scene of JR, for instance, Anne and Julia Bast are meeting with a lawyer to discuss the fate of the estate of their brother Thomas, who has just died. Only when other characters who have very little or nothing to do with this situation have taken over the novel do we realize that its resolution is not the point at all. Likewise, once the traffic jam scene near the beginning of Nashville is over, many of the characters seem to be enmeshed in situations for which resolution is possible, but Altman never delivers it. If some of the tension in JR or Nashville derives from their failure to satisfy expectations they have created, the tension in Barthelme's fiction is created by the opposition between the entire work and the completely unrealized expectations of his audience, expectations which sometimes his audience only realizes it has had at the end. As Thomas M. Leitch writes, "[i]t is not the case, as in the novels of Vonnegut (or, say, in those of Alain Robbe-Grillet), of a fictional form that undercuts the expectations it encourages about an intelligible plot and revelation; the possibility of such developments simply does not arise"(92).
It is no doubt deliberate that the narrator of "The Balloon" elaborates on the fact of "the balloon hanging there" by providing a precisely worded account of the colors observable in it. Like Altman, Barthelme demonstrates, and also expresses in interviews, a fascination with painting. His interest in the visual arts has been a consistent component of critical appraisals, many of which make reference to Barthelme's frequently quoted claim that "[t]he principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century in all media" (quoted in Bellamy 51).5 When asked about the graphic and typographical play in his work, Barthelme responded:

I think I was trying to be a painter, in some small way. Probably a yearning for something not properly the domain of writers. [....] Maybe I was distracted by the things that painters can do. Look here and over there [pointing at an Ingres poster and a Richard Lindner poster on his living room walls] -- an ambition toward something that maybe fiction can't do, an immediate impact -- a beautifully realized whole that can be taken in at a glance and yet still be studied for a long time.

(LeClair and McCaffery 39)

In The Dead Father, it is not only the inclusion of diagrams which is the result of Barthelme's effort to achieve a visual quality, "an immediate impact," but also much of the language. The novel begins with a sort of prologue, presented in italics and without a chapter number, that reads like a description of a picture of the Dead Father, rather than a description of

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5 When Jerome Klinkowitz asked Barthelme in an interview to expand on this idea, he replied that he "was probably wrong, or too general" (Bellamy 51-2).
the Dead Father himself, and is therefore twice removed from the fictional reality. We learn that the Dead Father is "3,200 cubits long," partially buried, spread across what seems to be a large portion of an unspecified city: "The Dead Father's head. The main thing is, his eyes are open. Staring up into the sky. The eyes a two-valued blue, the blues of the Gitanes cigarette pack. The head never moves, decades of staring. The brow is noble, good Christ, what else? Broad and noble. And serene, of course, he's dead, what else if not serene"(3). This description continues for two pages, but these first few sentences are emblematic of the rest of it, and are indicative of what is to follow in the rest of the novel. First, they emphasize sight, which suggests its importance throughout the novel, not only in terms of Barthelme's methods, but also insofar as looking is so often in the novel an activity charged with emotion, especially when it is the Dead Father who is doing the looking. Second, as Richard Walsh points out, the whole prologue has a static structure(175). It describes a scene that is emphatically not in progress. In fact, the prologue ends by noting how strongly the citizens of the city where the Dead Father resides wish their circumstances would change: "We want the Dead Father to be dead. We sit with tears in our eyes wanting the Dead Father to be dead -- meanwhile doing amazing things with our hands"(5). A careful distinction needs to be made, however, between stasis as an epic absolute present, exclusive of past and future and not open to change, and stasis as the complete absence of all temporal movement, as in a painting or a photograph.
The Dead Father is himself an embodiment of this first kind of stasis, an epic timelessness in which change is impossible. Although the novel suggests that he is not actually timeless, but merely wishes he were, the Dead Father's timelessness at least feels real to the residents of the city across which he sprawls, and to the novel's characters. The prologue notes the fact that "[n]o one can remember when he was not here in our city positioned like a sleeper in troubled sleep, the whole great expanse of him running from the Avenue Pommard to the Boulevard Grist"(3-4). The Dead Father perpetuates the idea of his timelessness even as he seems aware of its essential illusoriness. Early in the novel, he says that "[w]ithout children I would not be the Father. No Fatherhood without childhood." But, he adds, "I never wanted it, it was thrust upon me"(17). Most of his reasons for not wanting children consist of the usual trials involved in raising them, but what the Dead Father believes he has been kept from by being a father is especially illuminating: "I wanted to worry about the action of the sun fading what I valued most, strong browns turning to pale browns if not vacant yellows, that sort of thing, but no, I had to devour them, hundreds, thousands, feefifofum, sometimes their shoes too, get a good mouthful of childleg and you find, between your teeth, the poisoned sneaker"(18). His having children immerses him not only in the flow of time, but, more significantly, in the process of growing from a son with his own father to being a father himself. By devouring his children, perhaps he can cancel their very existence, and thereby return to the time before their birth. If not for the birth of his children, the Dead Father could have kept the sun from fading what it touches, a metaphor for the general
capacity to arrest all processes which are enabled by the flow of time.\footnote{Stanley Trachtenberg interprets this passage quite differently: "[W]hat the Dead Father fears, in short, is the erosion of time on his issue, literary no less than biological"(194).}

When, near the end of the novel, he says to Thomas and Julie, "You are killing me," one of them (it is not clear which) responds, "We? Not we. Not in any sense we. Processes are killing you, not we. Inexorable processes"(158).

The opposition within the Dead Father between the timelessness he desires and his submission to temporal relativity is manifested in the novel's structure. The impossibility of a temporality consisting of an absolute and changeless present is analogous to what we learn in the prologue is the Dead Father's most prominent trait, as evidenced by its isolation in a ten-word paragraph: "Dead, but still with us, still with us, but dead"(3). Barthelme's use of chiasmus here suggests both movement and stasis, the movement only a temporary illusion produced by the mechanics of rhetoric. The beginning and the end of the chiasmus and of the novel itself are in a very real sense identical; in this respect, the novel echoes Beckett, especially Waiting for Godot. Jerome Klinkowitz argues that the hauling of the Dead Father to his grave is the novel's central linear element(89), which stands in opposition to its static tendencies. Indeed, the novel seems to be structured on the principle of progress toward a goal, the burial of the Dead Father, but since the Dead Father is already dead, the question of whether his burial will mean a substantial change in the world he leaves behind haunts the novel. The linearity of this goal becomes highly suspect; there is constant doubt as to whether the Dead Father's
burial will have any effect at all. "A Manual for Sons" in fact argues against this outcome: "Fatherless now, you must deal with the memory of a father. Often that memory is more potent than the living presence of a father, is an inner voice commanding, haranguing, yes-ing and no-ing -- a binary code, yes no yes no yes no yes no, governing your every, your slightest movement, mental or physical. At what point do you become yourself? Never, wholly, you are always partly him"(144). The burial of the Dead Father, in other words, will make virtually no difference in his power over Thomas, nor, by extension, will it bring about a state of affairs different from that with which the novel begins. Despite this prediction, the end of the novel leaves this question open. Like the burial of the Dead Father, his quest for the Golden Fleece appears to be one of the novel's linear features. The Golden Fleece turns out, however, to be Julie's pubic hair, and to have never been an attainable goal. The phantasmal nature of these two end-directed elements gives the novel a constant tension between a temporality that is relative and open to change and a temporality consisting of an absolute and unchanging present, excluding past and future.

If the Dead Father's timelessness (or at least his belief in it) makes the beginning or end of his life inconceivable, the events of the novel are represented as if they possess a similar sort of timelessness, resisting the imposition of clear temporal boundaries.7 The prologue begins not so much at a particular time as at a particular location. After the prologue, as

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7 In "‘Bees Barking in the Night’: The End and Beginning of Donald Barthelme’s Narrative," R. E. Johnson, Jr. argues that, in much of Barthelme’s fiction, "the origins of the work appear inaccessible"(73) to the reader, as if the story or novel has some other, prior point of beginning for the author.
if to mock the reader's expectation of a temporal setting, Chapter 1 begins with this paragraph: "Eleven o'clock in the morning. The sun doing its work in the sky"(6). The time is so specific as to be thoroughly irrelevant. And the offering of a specific time is immediately undercut by the device which, like Gaddis's use of it in JR, most often unhinges the novel's actions from a specifiable time -- a gerundive. "The sun doing its work" does not limit the work of the sun to eleven o'clock, but rather spreads the work across an undetermined duration. The gerundives that appear frequently in most of the third-person passages have the same effect. The passage below is typical:

The men build a fire, all pemmican forgot. More trout persuaded from trout stream, they are very eager. The sky grays as sun zips behind large cloud. Waning or demise of sun. The projector is set up for projection of the pornographic film. Thomas decides that the Dead Father is not allowed to view film, because of his age. Outrage of the Dead Father. Death of the guitar, whanged against a tree, in outrage. Guitar carcass added to the fire. Thomas adamant. The Dead Father raging. Emma regnant. Julie staring. Trout browning. Thomas walks to the edge. Regards the edge. Aspect of one about to hurdle over the. Thomas retreats from the edge. Slivered almonds distributed over various trouts browning in various skillets. (21)

One might assume from the ordering of the sentences that the actions they describe occur in the sequence this order suggests. However, even this
assumption cannot be made without qualification. For instance, when "Julie staring" is followed by "Trout browning," there is no reason other than the confining of these events to separate sentences and the positioning of one after the other to think that these events are temporally separate, the one beginning and ending before the other begins. Neither can be assigned specific temporal boundaries. Such passages fill the novel, another example being the first paragraph of Chapter Five: "Thomas helping haul on the cable. Julie carrying the knapsack. The Dead Father eating a bowl of chocolate pudding"(33). What results is something like the "ongoing situation" in I.R. Very little of the action of The Dead Father is expressed in language that places events within discrete temporal boundaries; everything happens in the same temporal dimension -- no particular time.

Unlike I.R, however, in which Gaddis never suspends the temporal flow of the novel's undivided present, The Dead Father is equally suggestive of time stopped altogether. The third-person passages which describe physical settings, as well as the various diagrams included in the novel, convey a sense of absolute stillness, the complete absence of any temporality. The words seem to be referring to an unmoving image, the elements of which appear to the reader through a process of accretion. A sort of background against which the dialogue of the characters is heard gradually materializes. One of these "images" occurs when the first picnic ends: "They packed up. Thomas gave the signal. The cable jerked. The

8 When asked in an interview what happens once he has a phrase or a sentence with which to begin a story, Barthelme responded: "A process of accretion. Barnacles growing on a wreck or a rock. I'd rather have a wreck than a ship that sails. Things attach themselves to wrecks. Strange fish find your wreck or rock to be a good feeding ground; after a while you've got a situation with possibilities"(LeClair and McCaffery 34).
sun still. Trees. Vegetation. Wild gooseberries. Weather"(9). Stanley Trachtenberg writes that "[s]uch pictorial awareness" is "distinct from visualization," arguing that the "discontinuity of the elements is more onomastic, or naming, than visual. Neither the objects named nor the relationships between them are arranged in any necessary order by combining the parts to afford some perspective or by widening the view of landscape"(199). Trachtenberg is right to point out that the words themselves do not function as "images," but it seems important nevertheless to recognize that what they name are elements of a static image; in other words, "Trees" does not refer to trees so much as the image of trees, as if they could be seen on a painted backdrop on the set of a film. The lack of order or perspective, I think, is exactly what does give these passages of the novel their visual quality. A painting, or even a photograph, may or may not be shaped by an internally defined perspective, but there is always the viewer's perspective. Unlike language, in which syntax is always present as a form of order, even if present only as an order from which the words deviate, the order of the elements in a painting is determined as much by what the viewer chooses to look at as by the artist's choices.

Indeed, the constant denial of any stable perspective is one of the trademarks of Barthelme's fiction. In "See the Moon," the narrator explains his decision to allow his wife only "the odd bit of dialogue" by telling us that "I don't want her bursting in on us with the freshness and originality of her observations. What we need here is perspective"(Sixty Stories 101). Barthelme problematizes the notion of individual perspective even when it would not appear to be a problem. Certainly one of the
aspects of *The Dead Father* which makes it so resistant to a coherent reading is its insistence on alternating between the absence of any perspective and the presence of a perspective that is either unstable or cannot be identified with any of the characters. Paul Bruss asserts that "the fundamental issue in *The Dead Father* becomes the turning down of traditional perspective" (149), but he does not fully explore all of the ways in which the novel itself accomplishes this. As I indicated above, the third-person passages in the novel serve as one of its primary devices for refusing perspective. One might call the source of these passages a narrative voice, except that "voice" implies a more definable perspective than these passages offer. Here is another example: "The countryside. Flowers. Creeping snowberry. The road with dust. The sweat popping from the little sweat glands. The line of the cable" (13). Hayden White writes that in order to have "a narrative of real events, we must suppose that a subject of the sort that would provide the impulse to record its activities must exist" (12). Passages such as this one, however, do not allow the apprehension of a "subject," or an individual perspective, in relation to what they name. They express the presence of, for instance, flowers, but they offer no idea of a relationship between the flowers and the source of this information; nor do they situate the reader within any discernible relationship to the things they name.

If the diagrams in the novel constitute another kind of image in the series of images against which the action of the novel takes place, they also resist perspective as forcefully as the third-person passages do. Two of the diagrams (8, 54) show the arrangement of the characters and the food
involved in the two picnics which occur during the journey. The third one (28) shows the positions, represented by dots, of everyone hauling the Dead Father, in relation to the giant cable they are using to pull him along, represented by a straight line. Just as the words in certain passages of the novel seem to be referring to images, so too do the diagrams. The second picnic diagram (54) consists of a circle, representing the edge of a round tablecloth, on the outside of which appear the names "Julie," "D. F.,” "Emma,” and "Thomas." Inside the circle are the names of the food the four of them are eating (however unlikely eating such things may seem), as well as "Etc.,” which suggests that there is some other food located where this word appears, but that the point of the word is simply to convey this information, as opposed to the possibility of representing the particular food itself. What unites all three diagrams, however, is the fact that they represent these various arrangements as seen from above. Therefore, not only do they exclude the perspective of any one character; they also assume what amounts to a wholly imaginary perspective. If, within the parameters of the novel, this perspective could only belong to an omniscient narrator, beyond the novel it could belong to God; perhaps the point here is to expose the falseness of unlimited perspective. Unlimited perspective is the equivalent of no perspective.

The novel's prologue presents a problem of perspective as well. As I indicated earlier, much of the prologue consists of a sort of portrait of the Dead Father. The source of the words, however, is not at all clear. Near the end of the first paragraph, there is some hint of whose eyes we have been observing the Dead Father through: "The full red lips drawn back in
a slight rictus, disclosing a bit of mackerel salad lodged between two of the
stained four. We think it's mackerel salad. It appears to be mackerel
salad. In the sagas, it is mackerel salad"(3). The occurrence of "we"
announces that what we have been reading is not a report from an
individual perspective, but, as the prologue continues, "we" never seems to
refer to anyone more specific than some members of the unidentified city
over which the Dead Father lays. A group of people united by the place in
which they live as the source of the prologue suggests the beginning of an
epic, a point to which I will return later. It is also interesting to note that
when there is some question as to what is really lodged between the Dead
Father's teeth, the source of authority used to confirm the assumption that
it is mackerel salad is "the sagas." If "the sagas" can be taken to refer to
epics, it would make sense that the citizens of the city would need to resort
to them as the source of their knowledge, since one of the defining
elements of an epic is its status as a repository of a culture's experience, as
opposed to that of an individual.

One might expect the section entitled "A Manual for Sons" to be
written from a more easily locatable perspective. The source of the
wisdom and advice it purports to offer would likely be either a particular
son or a particular father, but this book-within-the-book turns out to be
just as problematic in terms of identifying a consistent voice as its source.
A sentence near the end of the manual's first chapter, which is about "Mad
fathers," suggests with its use of the pronoun "I" that there is at least an
individual point of view behind the words: "Nothing may work out in the
way I have described; in this eventuality, you can do not much for a mad
father except listen, for a while, to his babble"(116). Appropriately enough, the emergence of a singular voice as the source of this chapter occurs within the context of undermining the value of everything we might now attribute to this voice. The next chapter, "Fathers as teachers," begins this way: "Fathers are teachers of the true and not-true, and no father ever knowingly teaches what is not true"(116). The rest of the chapter consists of some extremely odd lessons, on such subjects as how to find honey: "tie a feather or straw to the leg of a bee, throw him into the air, and peer alertly after him as he flies slowly back to the hive"(117). The chapter's first sentence, combined with what follows, suggests the perspective of a father, if only because it casts fathers in a favorable light by implying that good intentions are behind any father's effort to educate his son. However, the lessons end abruptly: "Then --." Another voice seems to have interrupted, whereupon a new paragraph, the conclusion of this chapter, appears: "Fathers teach much that is of value. Much that is not"(117). This last statement expresses a far different attitude toward these lessons than the one which opens the chapter; instead of assuming a father's innocence, it simply analyzes what a father teaches, without regard for intentions. The chapter entitled "A tongue-lashing" consists of a long list of accusations, apparently coming from a father and directed at a son, delivered in a Biblical tone. The speech, however, is in quotation marks, introduced simply as "A tongue-lashing"(134). Are the quotation marks there to set off the speech as words spoken by a voice other than one that is in control of the manual? Is the voice which introduces this speech simply imitating a tongue-lashing? The latter seems more likely since quotation
marks are not used anywhere else in the novel to set off dialogue, but the status of this speech is finally no more definite than any other part of the manual.

If "A Manual for Sons" seems to slip in and out of different, irreconcilable perspectives, it can be considered a macrocosm of each of the novel's primary characters insofar as they resist psychological coherence and, in the case of the Dead Father, physical coherence. Couturier and Durand write of Barthelme that "the most striking feature of all his stories [whether they mean to exclude the novels is not clear] [...] is the absence of the subject, of a stable, confident self"(33). The Dead Father himself is of course the least stable of the novel's characters. Frederick Karl articulates the Dead Father's all-inclusive aspect: "Barthelme's Dead Father is a collective voice, like those collages which characterize other aspects of Barthelme's work: a father bigger in death than in life, because he is the accumulated fathers of our life and literature, the fathers of myth and legend"(385). It is easy to read this statement without realizing how literally it pertains to the novel; Karl's analysis is in fact too unified to really do justice to the irreconcilability of the Dead Father's various traits and actions. He is a manifestation of his own refrain: "Having it both ways is a thing I like"(15). As Paul Bruss argues(150), the end of a conversation between the Dead Father and Thomas about Thomas's color-blindness shows the Dead Father's aversion to limits of any kind:
My criticism was that you never understood the larger picture, said the Dead Father. Young men never understand the larger picture.

I don't suggest I understand it now. I do understand the frame. The limits.

Of course the frame is easier to understand.

Older people tend to overlook the frame, even when they are looking right at it, said Thomas. They don't like to think about it. (32)

Indeed, the simplest sort of frame, the kind we take for granted in what is casually classified as a "character," cannot contain the Dead Father. He is the father of "tens of thousands" and at the same time the father of Thomas. He seems to be a giant, requiring nineteen men to haul him to his grave, but he dances with Julie. His body is itself a collage-like construction: his left leg is "entirely mechanical," "the administrative center of his operations"(4). In the course of the tale of the day he fathered the Pool Table of Ballambangjang, he turns himself into a haircut to get Tulla's attention.

The Dead Father is so resistant to limitations that this characterization itself fails to encompass him. After listening to the Dead Father profess his interest in art, Julie poses a logical question:

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9 In her reading of the Dead Father's mechanical leg, Lois Gordon implies the value of narrative as a means of promoting a specific morality: "We can be very traditional in our symbolic reading of his leg as the source of our morality, which then becomes our culture, for in the leg are 'facilities for confessions,' which then are recomposed 'to appear as feature-length films every Friday'"(168-9).
Tell me, said Julie, did you ever want to paint or draw or etch? Yourself?

It was not necessary, said the Dead Father, because I am the Father. All lines my lines. All figure and all ground mine, out of my head. All colors mine. You take my meaning.

We had no choice, said Julie. (19)

The Dead Father's response raises the question of what art is, or at least what he considers it to be. The implication here is that art is essentially the expression of the artist's perspective and authority, if not on reality, then on a particular art form. According to the Dead Father's reasoning, there would be no point in him expressing himself through art because he is himself the origin of every art form; the arts are themselves an expression of him. To put it another way, he contains every possible perspective.

What this reasoning does not take into account, however, is the idea that an art form's conventions constitute it, and that conventions are the product of a definite perspective; without conventions, the form exists only as an idea. If we think of any work of art as a variation on the conventions of its particular form, shaped by the perspective of the individual artist, the history of the form becomes an infinite regression through the different variations, without ever arriving at anything that could be considered the "ground," a place of boundless perspective. Like the Dead Father, conventions disguise the fact of their limitations. And, like conventions, the addition of other perspectives, which in the case of the Dead Father occurs in the form of his children, exposes those limitations.
Although the various lists in the novel can be read in many ways, those associated with the Dead Father serve as another example of his willful resistance to limiting concepts. In fact, as Stanley Trachtenberg asserts with regard to all of the novel's lists, it is "the implicit notion of a unifying principle that Barthelme seems to be mocking most of all"(192). The list of the Dead Father's possessions, for instance, is composed of a finite number of items, but the extreme degree of the items' dissimilarity from one another suggests that the list could go on endlessly, and that the items in it cannot be held together by their status as that which belongs to the Dead Father: "The stereo. A pair of chatterpies. My ravens. A parcel of rental properties. Eleven rogue elephants. One albino. My cellar. Twelve thousand bottles more or less. Lithographs to be swallowed for sickness. Two hundred examples. My print collection, nine thousand items. My sword"(164). The list continues, apparently supporting the Dead Father's conception of himself as a boundless entity. The Dead Father's two "slaying" extravaganzas at first appear to serve the same function; they are outbursts that result from his need to dramatize the power inherent in his all-encompassing Fatherhood. However, like his contention that he is the origin of all art, his boundless image of himself is undercut. In the first episode, the Dead Father slays "in a grove of music and musicians. First he slew a harpist and then a performer upon the serpent and also a banger upon the rattle and also a blower of the Persian trumpet[...]"(11). The list continues for nearly a page, but Julie diminishes considerably the Dead Father's display: "Impressive, said Julie, had they not been pure cardboard"(12). Later, Thomas and Julie find the Dead
Father "in a wood, slaying. First he slew a snowshoe rabbit cleaving it in
two with a single blow and then he slew a spiny ant eater and then he slew
two rusty numbats[...]"

(52). Again, the list continues. It concludes, however, with this sentence: "A toad escaped"

(53). The escape of the toad makes the list incomplete, as if to indicate the failure of the Dead Father to
fully occupy a position of limitless perspective.

As another kind of assault on coherent identity, Thomas undermines the idea of a personal history as that which defines a character.

10 When the end of the Dead Father’s rule over the Wends enters their conversation, the Dead Father asks Thomas to change the subject: "We can talk about something interesting, giraffes for example. Or you can explain yourself. It is always interesting to hear someone explaining himself"

(56). In the course of his remarks about giraffes, Thomas’s reference to the exclusion of old male giraffes from the herds offends the Dead Father. Thomas responds:

I will instead explain myself. I will give you the short form, Thomas said, the basic datatata. I was bbbbbborn twice-
twenty-less-one years ago in a great city the very city in fact from which we have subtracted you. As a new creature on the earth I was of course sent to school where I did reasonably well except where I did reasonably badly. As a child I had the necessary sicknesses seriatim a pox here a measles there broke a bone now and then just to keep in step with the others blacked

10 This is a good example of what Charles Molesworth sees as Barthelme’s tendency to offer schemes that promise an interpretation of the characters, only to deny their validity, and thus the idea that one can really "know" a character (Donald Barthelme’s Fiction: The Ironic Saved From Drowning 54).
an eye and had an eye blacked now and then just to keep in
step with the others. I then proceeded to higher education as it
is called and was educated upon by a team of masked gowned
and scrubbed specialists, top performers every one. It had
been decided that I would be educated up to the height of two
meters and this was done over a ppppppperiod of. (57)

What is remarkable about this passage, of course, is that it does not explain
anything; Thomas might just as well have continued talking about giraffes
as a means of "explaining himself." For critics of Nashville who faulted
the film for providing no explanation for Kenny's assassination of Barbara
Jean, perhaps an "explanation" such as this one might have been more
effective in demonstrating the idea that a character always exceeds the
predictive power of an individual past. Like Altman, Barthelme does not
believe that a character consists of, can be known by, or is determined by a
personal history the contents of which must be narrativized for the purpose
of not so much self-identification as expression of a stable identity. This is
not to say that Thomas's past is not in part constitutive of his identity.
When "A Manual for Sons" asks, "At what point do you become
yourself?," the answer is, "Never, wholly, you are always partly
him"(144); Thomas is therefore always partly the Dead Father, partly his
past. As Barthelme himself says in an interview, "The Dead Father
suggests that the process of becoming has bound up in it the experience of
many other consciousnesses[...]"(O'Hara 201). The shaping of identity as a
function of one's exposure to other consciousnesses may seem to imply that
the past is in fact the source of identity, but only if one assumes an end to
such exposure (other than death), which would serve to fix one's identity at some certain point in time, making it suddenly immutable. Instead of actually "explaining himself," Thomas's words show not only how identity inevitably overflows the forms available for articulating a personal history, but also how that history is in part always an attempt to reconcile oneself to the pressures of fitting into pre-existing identities. Thomas describes his re-entrance into "the mainscream": "Superbly equipped as I was for nothing-in-particular, I fitted myself into the slot 'Navaho lawgiver' but this was a flop because first I am not a Navaho and second there are as you know no Navahos in our country"(58). "Navaho lawgiver" seems to exist as a potential identity only because it can be named; language makes possible this identity while it simultaneously circumscribes it. For Thomas to escape the past completely, and thus the Dead Father's power over him, he would have to escape language, inevitably a relic of the past. The strength of this desire to be free of the constraints language itself places on identity, along with the futility of this desire, are one major source of the novel's tension.

Compared to the Dead Father and Thomas, Julie participates intermittently in a much more extreme destabilization of identity. If the rest of the novel displays the shifting boundaries of the identities of its characters, the extended conversations between Julie and Emma show the total dissolution of identity; the two characters become indistinguishable, insofar as the lines that constitute these conversations cannot be definitively attributed to either one of them. Furthermore, it would seem to make no difference if they could be attributed. In describing Julie and Emma's
dialogues, Barthelme suggests the degree to which it becomes impossible to
discern their relationship to one another: "In The Dead Father there are
four or five passages in which the two principal women talk to each other,
or talk against each other, or over each other's heads, or between each
other's legs[...]" (LeClair and McCaffery 41). The first conversation begins
with an occasional semblance of relationships between one line and another:

Whose little girl are you?
I get by, I get by.
Time to go.
Hoping this will reach you at a favorable moment.
Bad things can happen to people.
Is that a threat?
Dragged him all this distance without any rootyootootoot.
Is that a threat?
Take it any way you like it.
Other fish to fry. (23)

Each of the conversations moves in and out of periods in which there
appears to be a comprehensible relationship between one line and the next.
Certain lines are repeated both within the same conversation and in other
conversations, but to no clear effect. No continuity persists, however, for
more than a few lines before the complete disparity from line to line
resumes, as in the following passage:

It's been so long, been so long.
Free to leave at any moment.
Where can a body get a baiser around here?
Attending, departing, arriving, ignoring.
Hoping this will reach you at a favorable moment.
Fish scales, wastepaper.
Inching by dying by.
Not sad or serious. (86)

Paul Bruss claims that these conversations "are, perhaps, the most crucial sequences of narrative in The Dead Father"(148). "Julie and Emma," Bruss argues, "by restricting themselves to fledgling, undeveloped motifs, apparently hope to escape traditional language structures (later to be associated with fatherhood) and thus to create a new texture, not merely of language, but also of human experience.[....] The question for the reader, therefore, is whether such open-ended language play, in view of its negation of perspective, can ever develop into a viable style and thus into a serious alternative"(148-9). Bruss suggests that it can. But what kind of alternative is it? Insofar as Julie and Emma can no longer be seen as separate characters within their extended conversations, these conversations cannot function as anything that could be called narrative, since the presence of some kind of definable subject, no matter how radically diffuse or contingent, is a requirement for narrative. If we think of narrative as a system that imposes a structure upon experience, and thereby gives to experience at least the appearance of inherent meaning, then these conversations do not possess any features which would make them capable of achieving this same end. They are not narrative, but to say as much is altogether different from saying that they are an alternative to narrative.
Jerome Klinkowitz sets Julie and Emma's conversations against what he calls the novel's "otherwise strictly progressive form"(95). The somewhat questionable description of any part of The Dead Father as "strictly progressive" notwithstanding, Klinkowitz argues that the context of the conversations indicates that "for Barthelme the nature of these dialogue sessions -- loosely presented, with almost no linear organization, yet inviting new spatial associations -- is womanly, at the farthest remove possible from the ethos of the Dead Father"(96). Klinkowitz considers the dialogues expressive of "the generative power of language's own system,"(99) no doubt a valid interpretation. But to claim that they should be classified under a term at once as vague and delimiting as "womanly" or "feminine" seems to violate both the nature of the dialogues themselves and the implications of the rest of the novel insofar as such attempts to divide and categorize are concerned. Klinkowitz's sense of the opposition between the dialogues and the Dead Father seems reasonable, but the idea that this opposition is rooted in differences between the categories of male and female requires generalizations which the novel is always cautioning against.11

Richard Walsh perceives this same opposition between the dialogues and the Dead Father, but his conclusion is much different: "Although

11 Robert Con Davis has an equally suspect interpretation of the dialogues, seeing them as a language understood only by Julie and Emma: "Instead of the Germanic assertion-question-response pattern of English conversation, Julie and Emma speak a language of free association mixed with guardedly private connotations -- a language of the oppressed"(188-9). Besides a very limited notion of what English conversation is, Davis assumes that, although he cannot fathom the connotations of the dialogues, they must still connote something, but something known only to Julie and Emma. Perhaps they understand one another, although this is questionable, but does everyone else's failure to understand them therefore make everyone else oppressors?
recognizable aesthetic criteria are at work in the incantatory repetitions and 
thermic recurrence to certain lexical fields, they do not usurp the sense of 
intent inherent in the referentiality of language. As a refusal of coherence 
rather than an alternative to it, the dialogues fail to establish an independent 
value structure and remain subordinate to the intentionality they 
defy"(180). The reason, I think, why the dialogues cannot "establish an 
independent value structure," and thereby perform a function similar to 
that of narrative, is because valuation requires the presence of a consistent 
subject; value must be conferred by someone. Because Julie and Emma 
lose their individuality, their subjectivity, within the discontinuity and 
abstraction of the dialogues, no system that would place a particular value 
on anything can emerge from them. In themselves, the dialogues implicitly 
reject the very idea of valuation. If some value could be associated with 
the dialogues, it would have to derive from evidence in the rest of the 
novel that would suggest the nature of a character's stake in them. 
Otherwise, there is simply no coherent individual consciousness within the 
novel but external to the characters which could assess the value of the 
dialogues.

The dialogues are never directly referred to, so we can only surmise 
what they might mean to Julie or Emma, or to the other characters. As far 
as Julie is concerned, the dialogues seem to possess two attributes which 
perhaps explain why she, rather than some other character in the novel 
besides Emma, engages in them -- their absoluteness and their newness. 
Julie reveals her desire for absolutes, her disdain for any kind of
compromised position, at various times throughout the novel. Her response to "A Manual for Sons" reveals most directly this aspect of her:

Seems a little harsh, Julie said, when they had finished reading.

Yes it does seem a little harsh, said Thomas.

Or perhaps it's not harsh enough?

It would depend on the experience of the individual making the judgment, as to whether it was judged to be too harsh or judged to be not harsh enough.

I hate relativists, she said, and threw the book into the fire. (145-6)

Indeed, "A Manual for Sons" offers no absolute answers to the problems of father-son relationships, so Julie's response to it and to Thomas concurs with her usual way of thinking. Her absolutism has its most interesting expression, however, in her her belief in the effectiveness of ignoring the material circumstances in which she finds herself, as if by sheer force of will she could somehow transcend them.12 Comparing herself to Thomas, Julie says, "I put out of my mind that which is injurious to mind. You revel in it"(68). Thomas denies this, and Julie continues: "The two of us, she said, damn it, can't you get this simple idea into your head? The two of us against the is"(68). Her railing "against the is" perhaps makes her a figure for the artist; as Barthelme has said, "Cursing what is is a splendid ground for a writer -- witness Celine"(O'Hara 201). Late in the novel, Julie again shows her preference for thinking about what could be instead

12 Stanley Trachtenberg notes this aspect of Julie, writing that she "willingly ignores sense data in making the world over into the image she wishes to have of it"(195).
of what is. Thomas proposes a way of answering the question of what he and Julie will do once the Dead Father is buried: "Could be answered possibly in terms of the kind of life one has imagined for oneself. Or in terms of what one is actually doing" (169). The Dead Father responds: "Both good choices, said the Dead Father. Also their congruence or non-congruence would be of interest" (169). The Dead Father's suggestion that Thomas and Julie compare what they would like to do after he is buried to what they actually do evokes only a sound of disgust from Julie: "Ugh!" (169). True, however, to the novel's refusal of complete continuity in any aspect of a character, Julie's absolutism is not absolute. When the group encounters the two ten-year-old children in love early in the novel, Thomas wonders why they are not, like other kids their age, throwing rocks at each other. Julie corrects his assumption: "Always magnificent exceptions, Julie said" (14).

Newness is one of the absolutes to which Julie demonstrates her commitment. Her conversation with the Dead Father as they dance together is largely generated out of the tension that develops when her unyielding attachment to this absolute meets resistance. Nothing they say to one another will carry them beyond this conflict of values, so the scene's interest lies in seeing how Julie and the Dead Father will always return to the same point of disagreement. As they dance, Julie registers her displeasure over the absence of other partners:

There's nobody here.
I'm here.
Yes you but there's nobody else nobody new.
Do you want somebody new?
I always want somebody new.
What's so good about somebody new?
He's new. The newness. (99)

Throughout the rest of their conversation, Julie shows the capacity of newness to supercede any other value. No matter what subject is under consideration, Julie uses it to express her desire for newness. Her responses are certainly intended as an affront to the Dead Father, but they also suggest that her conversations with Emma can be seen as an expression of her desire for all things new.

While the conversations are not absolute in their discontinuity, or, in Walsh's terms, in their effort to deny intentionality, they are absolute, as I indicated above, in their dissolution of individual subjectivity. Julie and Emma lose their identity within them as distinguishable characters. Because the conversations consist of what appear to be improvised combinations of words which produce almost no discernible effects of communication among the participants, they could also be considered new. Walsh sees the dialogues "in clear contrast to the monolithic epic narrative with which the Dead Father makes his claim to authority"(180). The Dead Father certainly thinks of himself as an epic figure, however much his actual deeds in the novel parody this conception of him. Besides fancying himself with some justification an epic figure, the Dead Father functions in the novel as a figure for epic itself, as Bakhtin and Auerbach define the genre. A look at their definitions of the term, however, suggests that some of the elements of the epic genre are also present, although in somewhat
altered form, in the dialogues. The impression that the dialogues are opposed to the epic genre is therefore a false one, since both prove to have similar kinds of limitations as modes of structuring experience.

Bakhtin asserts that the source of every epic is tradition, collective memory, which means that it does not originate in individual experience. As he writes, "[e]pic discourse is a discourse handed down by tradition. By its very nature the epic world of the absolute past is inaccessible to personal experience and does not permit an individual, personal point of view or evaluation"(16). The epic speaks in a collective voice, denying the possibility of individual subjectivity. Auerbach notes several aspects of Homeric epic (as opposed to Biblical epic) which resonate in The Dead Father. He observes that Homeric epic takes place in "a temporal present which is absolute," instead of "creating a foreground and background, resulting in the present lying open to the depths of the past"(7). This absolute present is completely immune to change. Also, all phenomena in the Homeric epic are externalized, available to sensory perception, so that its world "exists for itself, contains nothing but itself"(13). Everything, in other words, is on the surface; there is no depth.

If the Dead Father, in his desire to see himself as encompassing every possible perspective and in his resistance to the processes that are a function of temporal relativity, is representative of the epic, he seems to exert a strong influence over much of the novel's form. As I suggested earlier, many of the novel's formal qualities tend to deny the possibility of individual subjectivity: the collective voice of the prologue, the diagrams, the third-person passages which seem to allow no particular perspective on
what they describe. Also, as I argued above, the novel's language evokes a sort of eternal present which does not register the effects of temporal flow, of a past or a future. Often, the novel does not depict temporal movement of any kind, but rather total stasis. In this atemporality, the world of the novel appears as only surface, as if its elements existed in an image rather than a three-dimensional world of unfolding events.

As the other characters in the novel haul the Dead Father to his burial site, their desire to escape his influence manifests itself at various points along the way, especially in their attempts to find modes of expression which have origins elsewhere, so it is easy to arrive at the idea that Julie and Emma's dialogues might serve this purpose. It should be clear at this point, however, that these other modes of expression have only the appearance of being substantially different from the epic mode associated with the Dead Father, and that in fact they are just as much at odds with the nature of individual experience. Like the epic genre, the dialogues do not register individual subjectivity. The epic specifically enforces the primacy of a culture's experience over that of any individual, and thereby erases the significance of any single member of the culture. The dialogues do not confer any special value on collective experience, but they nevertheless are not capable of representing individual experience. Julie and Emma become indistinguishable from one another partly because, given the fact that the content of each line does not usually lend itself to association with one or the other, the absence of attributive phrases like "Julie said" makes it impossible to identify the speaker with any certainty.
However, it is the relationship of their conversations to temporality that poses a much larger problem for the maintenance of individual identity.

If the epic, as Auerbach asserts, takes place in an absolute, immutable, and continuous present, the dialogues take place in a different kind of present, but one that is also closed to the concepts of past and future. Because no line seems in any way bound by the one preceding it, the dialogues suggest a discontinuous, endlessly reconstituted present. The continuity of the epic present means that nothing ever changes, but the discontinuity of the present of the dialogues means that nothing stays the same. Under these temporal terms, individual identity is not possible, since it must assume continuity over time. Within one of the dialogues appears the line "Repetition is reality"(87), a statement which seems open to a wide range of interpretations. One way to read it, I think, is that repetition is a means of understanding, or perhaps construing, reality; we make sense of things by assuming their continuity over time, even though this may limit our chances, to use Barthelme's quotation of Poulet in "Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning," of "recognizing in the instant which lives and dies, which surges out of nothingness and which ends in dream, an intensity and depth of significance which ordinarily attaches only to the whole of existence"(Sixty Stories 84). The dialogues are perhaps a gesture toward the recognition of this "intensity and depth of significance" in each instant, but they show that such recognition is possible only at the expense of individual identity, which cannot survive in an endlessly reconstituted present. The dialogues represent total immersion in each passing moment, and the result is chaotic.
In addition to asserting that a national tradition, rather than individual experience, is always the source of an epic, Bakhtin notes that the subject of an epic is always a national past, and that the epic does not take a neutral view of the past it depicts. Rather, according to Bakhtin, it always approaches the past with a predetermined moral stance: "In the epic world view, 'beginning,' 'first,' 'founder,' 'ancestor,' 'that which occurred earlier' and so forth are not merely temporal categories but valorized categories, and valorized to an extreme degree.[....] In the past, everything is good: all the really good things (i.e., the 'first' things) occur only in this past"(15). If, as White argues, one of the ultimate values of a narrative is its moralizing of a given reality, the epic differs from narrative in that the moral tenor of the events it recounts is what in part defines the genre itself; it does not change regardless of the contents of the particular epic. The possibility of a different moral code would imply a multitude of possible interpretations of the events, and therefore a multitude of points of view. In *The Dead Father*, the prologue is more than careful to assure the reader that the positive moral effect the Dead Father has on the citizenry is as much a certainty as his very existence: "At work ceaselessly night and day through all the hours for the good of all"(4). This conviction becomes somewhat suspect, however, when, only four sentences later, we are reminded of this moral aspect of the Dead Father: "The left leg, entirely mechanical, said to be the administrative center of his operations, working ceaselessly night and day through all the hours for the good of all"(4). Then, in the next paragraph, following a detailed physiological catalogue of the components of the Dead Father's right leg, we are again reminded, in
reference to the parts of his leg: "All working night and day for the good of all"(4). At this point, the mechanical repetition of this statement of the Dead Father's benevolence can only be wholly ironic, yet throughout the novel there are many more references to his commitment to "the good of all," most of them spoken by the Dead Father himself. The hollowness of the claim becomes the very reason for it; it is another example of the Dead Father's association with ideas and with forms of expression so inviolable that they have almost no connection to the diversity of lived experience.

The ironic repetition of the Dead Father's "goodness" suggests that moral judgments are usually themselves the kinds of generalizations that cannot take into account particulars of experience; they are part of a system which, like many other systems in the novel, require that their users apprehend the world in a necessarily reductive way. The point is illustrated by the scene in which, arriving at an "outpost of civilization," Thomas asks a man to direct him to the town's flophouse, at which point the man feels compelled to describe the two choices in detail: "There are two, the citizen said. The good one and the bad one. The bad one has the best girls. The good one has the best paté. The bad one has the best beds. The good one has the best cellar. The bad one has the best periodicals. The good one has the best security. The bad one has the best band"(106). The man continues in this fashion for about half a page, until Julie cuts him off in midsentence: "Between the good one and the bad one, Julie said, there appears to be little choice"(106). She is of course right; the man's list empties the two words of their meaning. Still, the other characters continue to employ the categories of "good" and "bad" to distinguish and
designate the two flophouses. After more discussion, and "[a]fter looking at the good one, they chose the bad one"(107). The scene is undoubtedly not meant as an unironic subjection of flophouses to moral analysis, but extending the range of its targets to include moral codes seems justified in view of the novel's concern with judgments. Moral judgments, based on moral codes, become in their application one more kind of unifying principle, examples of White's contention that "the capacity to envision a set of events as belonging to the same order of meaning requires some metaphysical principle by which to translate difference into similarity"(16). Calling one flophouse "the good one" and the other "the bad one" fails to convey any of their real differences. Without the moralizing and totalizing potential of these terms, the different features of each of the flophouses would be merely that -- different.

Although The Dead Father undermines the categories which constitute moral codes, this has not kept critics from commenting on what they consider the novel's morality. It must be said at the outset that any such discussion assumes an identification of Barthelme himself with the novel, a move which most criticism of Barthelme easily realizes is highly discouraged by all of his work. As Betty Flowers writes, "[t]he reader can find neither the center of Barthelme's world nor even Barthelme himself. Not only is there no central vocabulary, no central point of view, but the fictive entity of the author himself is inconsistent, perhaps even 'unreal' [...]"(43). However, setting aside for the moment the fact that the novel contains no voice to which a univocal morality could attach itself, it is interesting but not surprising to find two opposing claims concerning
what is perceived as the moral aspect of The Dead Father and, more generally, Barthelme's fiction as a whole. In his notoriously unpleasant review of the novel, Hilton Kramer makes the following assertion: "Mr. Barthelme is, with all his waggishness, a very didactic writer, and The Dead Father is, despite its facetious tone, a very moralistic book -- but moralistic, to be sure, in the new fashion, which yearns for life to be free of all condition and contingency and which, as a consequence, despises all evidence of growth, attachment, and maturation as an obstacle to its cherished ontological freedom"(57). For Kramer, the novel obeys a moral hierarchy, but one with which he does not agree. John Gardner, on the other hand, finds fault with Barthelme for essentially the same reason he finds fault with all of the writers he derides in On Moral Fiction: "Both in drawings and in fictions, he imitates cleverly the modern world's sadness and confused sense of fear and loss, and in even the most fabulous or refracted of his fictions he keeps a careful eye on how the world really works.[....] He knows what is wrong, but he has no clear image of, or interest in, how things ought to be"(On Moral Fiction 79-80). In a sense, although they both exhibit a cramped, agenda-driven view of Barthelme's work, both Kramer and Gardner are partially right. The novel does at times suggest a desire for freedom from every sort of condition that limits possibility, or the imagination. But it does not, finally, offer a prescription for "how things ought to be."

These two aspects of the novel, and the fact that they are at odds with one another, shape "A Manual for Sons," which a number of critics
consider the heart of the book. Richard Walsh writes that the manual "brings the novel's argument to its crisis," and that it serves as a "resolution of [the novel's] argument" (182-183). To speak of an "argument" or its "resolution" in *The Dead Father* seems entirely too neat, but the manual is one possible commentary (or, more accurately, many commentaries) on the conflicts within the novel between Thomas and the Dead Father. The desire for freedom from all kinds of constrictive structures is present in Thomas as well as Julie and, apparently, everyone else who suffers under the Dead Father's power. The manual, however, addresses the relationship between fathers and sons specifically, although, as I discussed earlier, its inconsistencies make it an equivocal document at best. The manual offers Thomas an answer to the question of how to deal with his fear of replicating the Dead Father in all of his controlling mania: "Your true task, as a son, is to reproduce every one of the enormities touched upon in this manual, but in attenuated form. You must become your father, but a paler, weaker version of him. The enormities go with the job, but close study will allow you to perform the job less well than it has previously been done, thus moving toward a golden age of decency, quiet, and calmed fevers" (145). The manual concludes on this note of hope: "Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least 'turned down' in this generation -- by the combined efforts of all of us together" (145).

Somehow, the language of these passages does not keep critics from reading them without the least suspicion of irony. Could Barthelme ever

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13 Lois Gordon, for instance, writes of the manual that "this seeming digression provides the definitive portrait of the Dead Father and his children and is the heart of the book" (172).
propose the dawning of any sort of "golden age" without winking? The phrase at the very end of the manual -- "by the combined efforts of all of us together" -- suggests the climactic moment of a speech given to a civic group organized for a noble cause. Still, in terms of the problems Thomas experiences throughout the novel in his relationship with the Dead Father, the advice might help him to solve some of them.

The temptation of critics who hear the manual as a unified, unironic voice more authoritative -- in every sense of the word -- than any other in the novel seems to be to see "A Manual for Sons" as a statement about not only the situation of the novel's characters, but also about more general issues which exceed the scope of the novel's particulars. Indeed, the generic nature of the manual's title encourages such claims, as does the fact that the characters, especially the Dead Father himself, are every bit as much archetypes as individuals. But the manual seems in other ways strongly opposed to the idea that it could ever be applied to more than one situation -- in other words, that it could itself become the blueprint for a system too intent upon resolving difference into similarity to take into account the nuances of individual experience. As its translator, Peter Scatterpatter, tells Thomas and Julie, the manual was "printed originally on pieces of pumpernickel"(109), which implies that it was not meant to last terribly long. And Peter has translated it from English into English, one of its most enigmatic features. The implication here, I think, is that any act of reading is to some degree a "translation," insofar as no two readers could take from any work exactly the same meaning. Peter has rewritten the manual as an interpretation of the original, but in so doing he has only
literalized what any reader does with a text. Insofar as he assigns to Peter's text his own meaning, Thomas "translates" Peter's version. Julie's decision to toss the book into the fire is a final, and irreversible, safeguard against its exploitation as a definitive explanation of the complexities of father-son relationships, or of any situation requiring reconciliation with an oppressive form of authority.

Despite the fact that it undermines any potential univocity and universality in so many ways, Walsh considers the manual an expression of a coherent moral stance in the novel. When the men hauling the Dead Father begin to have doubts about the expedition, wondering "are we doing the right thing?"(92), Thomas tells them about Haydn's refusal to do a "piece" for Martin Luther, who has called him on the telephone to make the request. Edmund is baffled: "You have got the centuries all wrong and the telephone should not be in there and anyway I do not get the point"(93). Thomas has an answer ready: "You see, Thomas exclaimed. There it is! Things are not simple. Error is always possible, even with the best intentions in the world. People make mistakes. Things are not done right. Right things are not done. There are cases which are not clear. You must be able to tolerate the anxiety. To do otherwise is to jump ship, ethics-wise"(93). As Walsh reads this passage, Thomas articulates not only the principle upon which he must base his course of action in dealing with the Dead Father, but also a moral position associated with Barthelme in this novel as well as his other writing: "Thomas's answer is inviting as a central statement of the context in which moral engagement is placed in the novel, and in Barthelme's work as a whole. There is no abdication of
responsibility here, but rather a heightening of it through an unswerving consciousness of the uncertain context in which it must operate"(182).

It seems to me, however, that although there are a great many statements in Barthelme's work which invite alignment with him, to do so inevitably simplifies and reduces the work. As William Gass writes of Miss R., a character in Barthelme's "The Indian Uprising," "She also speaks for the author. That's the trouble: everyone speaks for the author"(99). To focus on any one of the many voices in Barthelme's fiction and invest it with the authority of its creator is to deny the authority of all of the other voices. By engaging in what Leo Bersani terms "the destructuring possibilities of language"(195), Barthelme as a distinct consciousness behind the work inevitably eludes the reader. Indeed, the anxiety of which Thomas speaks can result from the fact that Barthelme removes himself so thoroughly from his work that the notion of anything he writes as a "statement," with all of this word's connotations of agency and singularity, is never more than highly speculative. Trying to locate Barthelme in his work only results in the frustration experienced by the "authorities" in "The Balloon," who, "[b]ecause we had hidden the pumps, which fed helium to the interior," and because of the balloon's vast surface, "could not determine the point of entry -- that is, the point at which the gas was injected"(Sixty Stories 55). No voice in Barthelme's fiction can be singled out as the one through which he speaks. In virtually all of his fiction, Barthelme has "hidden the pumps." This is especially true of The Dead Father, the end of which renders not only the burial of the Dead
Father, but also the burial of the novel itself. Here is the conclusion of the final scene:

The Dead Father stretched his great length in the hole.
Skittering of black earth upon the great carcass, from the edges.
I'm in it now, said the Dead Father, resonantly.
What a voice, said Julie, I wonder how he does it.
She knelt and clasped a hand.
Intolerable, Thomas said. Grand. I wonder how he does it.
I'm in the hole now, said the Dead Father.
Julie holding a hand.
One moment more! said the Dead Father.
Bulldozers. (176-7)

It is interesting to note that Julie, rather than Thomas, is the figure with whom the Dead Father's last connection is severed. As I suggested earlier, however, Julie and the Dead Father are equated in terms of the inadequacy of their respective systems for structuring experience; both systems not only fail, but fail for similar reasons. Finally, neither the Dead Father's epic mode nor Julie's similarly timeless and similarly non-subjective mode can express the nature of time or our experience of it and in it. What we are left with, then, is the novel as a genre capable of adapting itself to an infinite number of representational systems. If The Dead Father is alternately dominated by the epic mode associated with the Dead Father and the nonsensical conversations between Julie and Emma, apparently
rejecting anything that might be considered more "novelistic," this fact makes it all the more definitively a novel. In a surprisingly obtuse essay offering his thoughts after reading Barthelme as well as a list of American authors Barthelme had spoken highly of (Barth, Paley, Gass, and Pynchon), Gore Vidal makes at least one cogent observation: "The more like something else the novel is, the more like its true self it is"(131). In its epic qualities, on the one hand, and, on the other, the incoherent babble of the dialogues, The Dead Father is a prime example of this maxim. Implicit in this definition of the novel, of course, is the idea of formlessness as the genre's essential feature. Every novel therefore defines the genre and consequently assumes some of the oppressiveness of the Dead Father, insofar as it is in itself a model for structuring experience which must be both attended to and overcome. The bulldozers bury the novel itself because its very existence makes it a form that is used up, that belongs to the past, that is no longer available as a means of depicting, in Bakhtin's words, one of the "many possible realities"(37) which the genre's recognition of individual subjectivity allows it to encompass.

In "Not-Knowing," Barthelme writes that "art is always a meditation upon external reality rather than a representation of external reality or a jackleg attempt to 'be' external reality.[....] Art is a true account of the activity of mind"(32). As such, one of its effects is to let us understand the world in a new way. Barthelme goes on to propose the notion that "art's project is fundamentally ameliorative. The aim of meditating about the world is finally to change the world. It is this meliorative aspect of literature that provides its ethical dimension"(33). This is a far different
kind of ethics than one which consists of "statements." It values alternative possibilities, but not as anything more than that; it does not assess the value of their contents. As embodied in works of art, the possibilities exist only as objects to be contemplated.

In contemplating Barthelme's objects, the reader can finally only respond to them as to "The Balloon": "It was agreed that since the meaning of the balloon could never be known absolutely, extended discussion was pointless, or at least less purposeful than the activities of those who, for example, hung green and blue paper lanterns from the warm gray underside, in certain streets, or seized the occasion to write messages on the surface, announcing their availability for the performance of unnatural acts, or the availability of acquaintances"(54). Without the prospect of meaning, the only kind of interaction with the balloon that produces tangible results is that which engages it physically rather than mentally. Only the surface of the balloon, however, is accessible, so, in addition to the activities mentioned above, children play upon the "landscape" it presents. With nothing but air inside the balloon, it is of course all surface, just as the fictional world of The Dead Father, like that of J.R., is all surface, but perhaps the impression of a concealed interiority combined with the suspicion that the balloon contains nothing is what instills in its observers "a certain timidity, lack of trust in the balloon," even "some hostility"(55). Indeed, it seems as if distrust of language that might truly be empty is what inspires interpretations of Barthelme's fiction which insist on its interiority. Malcolm Bradbury, for instance, writes that Barthelme "expresses a reductive economy, writing a literature of lessness and the left
out"(163), as if part of the work were that which, although not present in
it, is still somehow there but hidden from us. The idea of a work of art
being incomplete without an element its audience must provide is implicit
in the notion that the balloon "offered the possibility, in its randomness, of
mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to the grid of precise,
rectangular pathways under our feet"(57). R. E. Johnson, Jr. reads this
"mislocation of the self" as a "displacement -- effected by the clash of
grammars -- that affords the liberating recognition that the 'self' is a
grammatical construct"(80). Johnson is right, I think, insofar as the
balloon or any work of art can always function as a reflection of the self of
the individual encountering it because it can never absolutely deny the
imposition of meaning, the assumption of interiority, the presence of
intention. To realize that this reflection is a false one is to realize that the
concept of the self, as opposed to the corporeal self, is always only an
abstraction. I would add, however, that the balloon, as well as Barthelme's
fiction, is equally suggestive of the constructedness of social reality; if his
fiction exposes the irreducible difference between a work of art and the
perceiving consciousness, it also, in resisting intelligible meaning,
emphasizes the division between one consciousness and another, and the
illusoriness of the shared reality we invent to relieve our isolation.
Conclusion

J R and Nashville both conclude in such a way as to suggest an image of emptiness, but the image is illusive, constructed by the reader or spectator in another attempt to somehow get inside the work. The construction of an empty space following the end of each work that we can fill with ourselves creates depth where there is only surface, so that the fictional world might still merge with our own. As J R ends, Thomas Eigen is in the Ninety-sixth Street apartment when J R calls wanting to speak to Edward, who has just left. As soon as Thomas answers the telephone, he asks J R to wait a minute, putting down the receiver because a delivery service driver has arrived at the apartment. We realize, however, that J R is continuing to talk, because the conversation that has begun between Thomas and the driver is briefly suspended twice in order for us to hear what J R is saying. Finally, Thomas and the driver leave the apartment, Thomas wondering "why can't people just shut up and do what they're paid for!", at which point J R's voice resumes its soliloquy. Oblivious to the fact that Edward is not on the other end of the line, J R rambles on about his future in the corporate world: "And like remember where I read you on the train that time where there was this big groundswell about leading this here parade and entering public life and all? So I mean listen I got this neat idea hey, you listening? Hey? You listening ...?"(726). Gregory Comnes reads J R's closing question as an address to the reader(117), as if we should be hearing Gaddis himself in J R's voice, but J R is no more addressing the reader than is any character in the novel;
he is addressing Edward, who is neither listening nor even present. Still, despite the fact that his intended addressee is not there, J R's voice fills the space of the novel, a space which, when one of the characters is speaking, is strictly aural. There is nothing behind or surrounding J R's voice. We hear the words he speaks, and they are all that the end of the novel consists of. If J R himself is not quite present, because we are listening to him through a telephone, neither are any of the novel's characters, insofar as they have all been present to the reader only in words.

As Albuquerque leads the crowd at the Parthenon at the conclusion of Nashville through "It Don't Worry Me" in the wake of Barbara Jean's assassination, the camera zooms back, expanding the frame to include Albuquerque, the huge stage on which she is performing, and her audience. Finally, the camera tilts upward, panning up from the scene on the ground until the sky fills the frame. The lack of color in the overcast sky makes the shot almost indistinguishable from a blank screen. As Helene Keyssar writes of this moment, "we resist the emptiness and search for the shadow of a cloud to define that space"(174). However, as soon as the screen turns black and the credits begin to roll, the illusion of a blank screen falls away; the frame was filled with the sky the whole time, although it may have appeared to be empty. At no point had the projector stopped running. Pauline Kael writes that the confusion of sky and screen causes us to "feel the continuity between what's on the screen and life off-camera"(447). But such a feeling is surely undermined by the realization that the film did not simply evaporate and effect a dissolution of the boundary between its
fictional world and the theater. The spectator is still, as ever, outside Nashville's fictional world.

The end of The Dead Father provides a more formidable demarcation between the fictional world of the novel and our own. As the Dead Father is about to be buried, laying in his hole and holding on to Julie's hand, he pleads for "One moment more!" (177). He does not get it; the novel ends with one more word: "Bulldozers" (177). As I argued earlier, the burial of the Dead Father coincides with the burial of the novel itself; nothing remains. The novel cancels itself out in order to affirm the endless nature of the search for new forms of representation despite the impossibility of finding any which are adequate to experience. It may be tempting to imagine something more beyond the arrival of the bulldozers to push the dirt over the Dead Father, something that will take his place, especially because the novel indicates that the Dead Father's influence might be felt beyond his burial: "[o]ften that memory is more potent than the living presence of a father" (144). There is no indication, however, of anything or anyone taking his place. Nevertheless, Robert Con Davis argues that the burial of the Dead Father merely makes possible a different version of him: "The narrator's relief that the Dead Father 'is not perfect, thank God for that' alludes to the necessity of paternal failure -- death or absence -- so that the symbol may be signified -- somewhat as the death of an ancestor makes a totem possible. 'We want the Dead Father to be dead,' the narrator proclaims, so that the father may belong to his children" (194). When the novel begins, the Dead Father is already, in terms of his effectiveness, absent, which is why he is "still with us, but dead" (3).
Although his giant body still lives, his effect on the world around him is always revealed to be strictly rhetorical. In order to extend the novel beyond its last word, to make the physical world evoked by that word "mean," Davis must assume that the Dead Father's status as a real father was never as real as the concept he embodied, as his status as a signifier of fatherhood. According to Davis's logic, the more definitively absent the Dead Father is, the more definitively present he is. As pure meaning, he is totally transparent to the reader, more intelligible than physical reality can ever be; he escapes not only the bulldozers but the novel itself, which cannot contain him. The end of the novel, I think, lends itself to an opposite reading. By concluding the novel with "Bulldozers," Barthelme illuminates the secondary role of meaning to mute, unintelligible physical reality, which in its absolute otherness inevitably survives us.

Insofar as their fictional worlds never open onto the reader or spectator's reality, and so maintain their ineluctable otherness, these works can be set against Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, another novel of the 1970s which calls into question narrative conventions. Although Pynchon does not satisfy certain expectations associated with narrative, such as causal relationships between events and an adherence to chronology, the end of the novel is a final demonstration of its belief in the power of a work of art to dissolve the boundaries between itself and its audience. "Everybody now —"(760), the narrator's request to sing William Slothrop's hymn, is directed at the spectators sitting in the movie theater in Los Angeles, a bomb an instant away from hitting it. But the words are also undoubtedly directed at the reader, whom the narrator has addressed
in the second person throughout the novel. However much Pynchon undermines certain aspects of narrative, his is still a vision of connection. The novel's narrative voice is itself an instance of connection, alternately addressing the characters as if it were present in the fictional world, and addressing the reader directly, as if it could only report on the fictional world. By eliding distinctions between one character and another, between characters and the reader, between the novel itself and the reader, Gravity's Rainbow not only displays its faith in the potential for the sort of connectedness between one individual consciousness and another that narrative suggests is possible; the novel asserts the reality of such connectedness, as if to believe otherwise is the result of being unable to perceive the fluidity of the divisions we acknowledge in order to make sense of the world. Whatever limits define an individual consciousness are self-imposed, set up for purposes of protection and self-identification. Pynchon's embrace of the notion of liberation from individual consciousness makes Gravity's Rainbow, although it was published in 1973, a novel of the 1960s, suffused with that decade's dreams of commonality. The novel may question the capacity of narrative to adequately represent individual experience, but it shares the goal of narrative, which, in translating knowing into telling, is a means of escaping the limits of individual experience. In their refusal of narrative, on the other hand, J.R., Nashville, and The Dead Father suggest the isolation of their readers and spectators, not only from these works, but from each other.

Unlike Gaddis and Altman, however, Barthelme seems to regard the narrativizing impulse as an inevitability, and the disparity between
experience and narrative representations of it as a problem for which there is no solution, but which should command our attention anyway. As Thomas says in The Dead Father, "[n]o tale ever happened in the way we tell it"(46), but Barthelme's response is simply to tell it in as many different ways as possible. By opposing narrative with forms that are equally singular, Gaddis and Altman betray what seems, in relation to Barthelme, a naive faith in the possibilities of their respective media to succeed where narrative fails, to present, perhaps, where narrative represents. For Barthelme, however insufficient narrative may be, it is a form of representation, which all art must always be, insofar as it is, as Barthelme writes, "a true account of the activity of mind"("Not-Knowing" 32). For this purpose, the choice can never be between presenting and representing; it can only be between different forms of representation.

As a response to our experience of works of art, as opposed to other kinds of experience, we are even more likely to engage in narrativization. As Barthelme writes of contemporary criticism, there is "a rage for final explanations, a refusal to allow a work that mystery which is essential to it"("Not-Knowing" 28). Because we assume that a work of art is the product of an individual consciousness, we cannot help but expect that it should speak to us, that it distinguish itself from ordinary physical reality by giving up its mystery, which physical reality can never do. To allow the notion that a work of art says nothing, that it does not reveal the artist, is to admit the mysteriousness of the individual consciousness, and so surrender not only the possibility of identification with another consciousness, but also the possibility of self-knowledge. The work of art
that does not appear to separate itself from ordinary physical reality
disturbs our expectations of art in that it does not appear any more
intelligible. In an often-quoted analysis of modern art, Barthelme suggests
that art constitutes a new reality, but not necessarily a different kind of
reality: "This new reality, in the best case, may be or imply a comment on
the other reality from which it came, and may be also much else. It's an
*itself*, if it's successful: Harold Rosenberg's 'anxious object,' which does
not know whether it's a work of art or a pile of junk"(Bellamy 52). If a
work of art is nothing but "itself," it holds on to its otherness. *J.R.,
Nashville,* and *The Dead Father* are all to some degree "anxious objects"; it
is our own need for assurance that they are in fact works of art which
motivates our narrativization of them, and thereby endows them with the
capacity to speak to us. Near the end of "Self-Portrait in a Convex
Mirror," Ashbery expresses the futility not only of looking for our own
image in a work of art, but of looking for the image of the artist.
Parmigianino, Ashbery imagines, must have realized that his self-portrait
would not contain either himself or us, regardless of how hard we tried to
find both:

One is forced to read
The perpetually plausible accomplishment of a purpose
Into the smooth, perhaps even bland (but so
Enigmatic) finish. Is there anything
To be serious about beyond this otherness
That gets included in the most ordinary
Forms of daily activity, changing everything
Slightly and profoundly, and tearing the matter
Of creation, any creation, not just artistic creation
Out of our hands, to install it on some monstrous, near
Peak, too close to ignore, too far
For one to intervene? This otherness, this
"Not-being-us" is all there is to look at
In the mirror, though no one can say
How it came to be this way. (80-81)
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