The Imaginary and Its Worlds
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Staging Life in the Systems Epoch

A modern society comes to itself by staging its own conditions. A modern world is a self-conditioning and self-reporting one. If, prior to the nineteenth century, society could not describe itself, now it cannot stop describing itself. Or, as the great science-fiction writer Stanislaw Lem neatly put it, “In the Eolithic age there were no seminars on whether to invent the Paleolithic.” If a modernizing society is what Durkheim described as an “almost sui generis” society, then the self-inducing and self-evaluative character of that world—its drive toward autonomy—makes up what Durkheim also would call a social fact.¹

Put a bit differently, a modern world imagines itself: it consists of itself plus its registration. One way of understanding reflexive modernity, then, is precisely in terms of a shift in the status of imagined, or counterfactual, worlds. Contemporary society—what I call here the official world—everywhere launches models of a self-modeling world. In doing so, it curates a world.

In this way, real reality and fictional reality are copied into each other. In this way, too, the official world takes note of itself, and so (as Niklas Luhmann puts it) makes the world appear in the world. Hence the official world is game-like—in its autonomy, its contingency, and its artificiality. And it is art-like—in its self-reflexive, autogenic, and stand-alone character. The form of the official world—and the game-like and the artificial, or art-like (künstlich), way of that world in imagining, and realizing, itself—are what I want to set out here. The form games of the official world epitomize, it will be seen, the situation of the work of art in the epoch of social systems. These forms games, for starters, are nowhere clearer, or better epitomized, than in the small, sequestered, and closely observed worlds of a forensic realism—the modern crime story and its forms of death and life.
“‘There’s no such thing as a perfect murder,’ Tom [Ripley] said to Reeves,” opening Patricia Highsmith’s remarkable novel Ripley’s Game (1974). “That’s just a parlour game.” Yet it’s not hard to see that the relation between murder and game—between real worlds and parlor games—is a good deal more complicated here. And not least in that the modern scene of the crime always resembles a gamespace. Three questions: What does it mean to talk about murder as a parlor game? What does it tell us about modern forms of both violence and games? And what does it tell us about their place in making up modern social systems, what they look like, and how they work?

In these pages I take up these questions about game and world through a sampling of several very different scenes—initially, Highsmith’s crime novel Ripley’s Game; next, a more recent best seller that is in effect a popularization of systems thinking, Malcolm Gladwell’s Blink: Thinking without Thinking; and, briefly, Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2005 novel Never Let Me Go, about a newly normal form of death and life and the social ecologies of ignorance that go with it. The focus across these scenes is, first, via Highsmith, parlor games; second, via Gladwell, war games; and third, via Ishiguro, form games. These are, I mean to suggest, scenes that remain remarkably stable across their different scenographies. Each appears as the subset of a structure that persists through its variations: encounters of a performance and a syntax—or, more exactly, the emergence of comparable conditions in diverse systems, which is a defining attribute of modernity. These scenes then make it possible to map these games, their rules, and their media—and the social territory they at once model and realize.

**Parlor Games**

Can we get certain pathological phenomena as well-defined games? . . . I don’t believe any game that can’t be played as a parlor game.

—**Martin Shubik, RAND Corporation**

Why perfect murders and parlor games, then?

For one thing, modern game theory, and the game-theoretical worldview that goes with it, takes off from John von Neumann’s 1928 paper “Zur Theorie der Gesellschaftsspiele,” “On the Theory of Parlor Games.” The attempt, in von Neumann’s account, is to put on a mathematical basis the little games in which (unlike, say, playing dice) one is not merely
playing against the odds but playing against others. This is a game, like poker or chess, in which we move against opponents whose intentions, or what look like them (bluffs), enter into the form of the game. This is a complex game in that one must observe and measure and misinform self-observing observers who are doing the same: that is, one must observe what and how the observed observer can’t observe—and whether he can observe that or not.

In short, the effects of playing the game must be included in it. It is (on von Neumann’s account) “the game as played by perfectly intelligent, perfectly ruthless operators,” like oneself. It is a game, then, like the Kriegsspiele, or war games, that von Neumann (a prototype for Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove) will go on to model. It is then something like a play-at-home version of the fog of war, or a dress rehearsal for what has come to be called the military-entertainment complex.

This is to suggest that parlor games, games played for leisure and that contain their own outcome—“social games,” as the literal sense of the idiomatic Gesellschaftsspiele indicates—are already and from the start more than that. “The problem,” as von Neumann puts it, “is well known,” and “there is hardly a situation in daily life into which this problem does not enter. . . . A great many different things come under this heading [the theory of parlor games], anything from roulette to chess, from baccarat to bridge. And after all, any event—given the external conditions and the participants in the situation (provided the latter are acting of their own free will)—may be regarded as a game of strategy if one looks at the effect it has on the participants.” The theory of parlor games (the mathematicization of games of strategy) becomes, in von Neumann’s and Oskar Morgenstern’s Theory of Games and Economic Behavior (1947), the basis for the game-theoretical modeling of economic and other real-world behavior.

We might say that deficiency of the game model (at least as popularly understood) comes into view from the start: the presumption of the rationality of actors or operators, the perfectly rational and perfectly ruthless; the reliance of the model on the assumption of decisive information, on the self-conditioned efficiency of the markets, on the tendency toward self-correcting equilibrium, and so on. Or we can reverse the picture. Then we might say that the deficiency of the world, and hence the attraction of the game world, here immediately comes into view—not least for gamers looking for a better or more perfect world, or at least one that plays by the rules.

We might say too, then, that this game outlook on life amounts to “ex-
panding the game to the whole world” (Wark), or that a world that’s like a game is thus part rules and part fiction—or “half-real” (Juul)—as two influential accounts of gamer theory have it. But both notions—the notion of the expansion of the game to the whole world, and the division of real life by halves—are too crude to do much work with. For one thing, the unity of the difference between game and world is left uninterpreted in both. For another, so are the social conditions that make for the form of the distinction in the first place.

Consider, for example, the film *Avalon* (2001), directed by Mamoru Oshii (director too of the anime film *Ghost in the Shell*). *Avalon* is familiar enough in the canon of recent reality game films. The plot involves a potentially lethal virtual-reality war game played by addicted combatants—with the goal, it turns out, to arrive at the game stage “Class Real.” There is no doubt a canonicity to the subset of such films—and their rehearsal, or retesting, of the distinction between the game world and the real one. But the film inquires into the very problem of this distinction and the conditions that enable it from the start.

It does so in part by doubling it at the level of form—the form of the cinematic medium. That is to say, in *Avalon*, the virtual reality of the film medium—the mechanized doubling of observation and act that cinema posits as its condition and mode of operation and that makes up the reality of motion pictures—here arrives as its own theme. It is not merely that we view the world viewed—the observed observer in the act of observation and so the continual reproduction of the act via its observation (what might be described as the modalization of the world). And it is not merely that this doubling continually reproduces itself via the technical process that implies a second order of vision. The afterimage, for early film theorists, was taken to emit to viewers their own processes of perception. The transformation of stills into motion appears as the special effect of a cultural technique: in effect, a becoming-medial of the psychophysiology of vision. Form and medium feed back into each other.

These feedback loops between the human senses and the media, and between observation and act, thus take on the theme of the game/world distinction. The difference between the film world and the game world looks like the difference between the real world and a fictional one. The difference between real and fictional reality then oscillates—between discourse and story, fabula and sjuzhet. And the point not to be missed is that the unity of the difference becomes visible precisely via an oscillation between media.

Reality—“real life”—can be spoken of only by contrasting it to some-
thing else from which it is distinguished, say, fictional (or statistical, or mathematical) reality. The internal articulation of reality in the film makes it possible, or necessary, to distinguish real and fictional reality: they are copied into each other. Hence the paradoxical determination of “class real” (the real as one classification among others) itself becomes visible. And given what appears here as the preference for violence over paradox, it is not surprising that it becomes visible in the film as war game. That is to say, the choice of the game enters into it: “Which is the better game? Which would you choose given the choice? The sort of game that you think you can win but can’t. Or, alternatively, one that seems to be impossible, but isn’t. Maintaining a delicate balance somewhere in between throughout every level of the game, that’s what keeps it going.” The balancing between the necessary and the possible defines the self-defining space of the game. In short, what defines the game form is its contingency, its self-conditioning, and its deliberate self-complication. It’s contingent in the sense that the rules of the game are neither necessary nor impossible. It’s self-conditioned in that rules, measure, and outcome are defined by the “sort of game” chosen and by what’s possible, or impossible, in it. It’s deliberately complicated to relieve the boredom of that self-conditioning. These are the “sandbox elements” that prolong the play—the gratuitous difficulties that “keep it going,” that seduce players to continue to play. This is (as Roger Caillois expresses it, in his account of play and games) “the pleasure experienced in solving a problem arbitrarily designed for this purpose”—like probing a toothache with one’s tongue, playing with one’s own pain.

“We lead,” as the microsociologist of these little worlds, Erving Goffman, puts it, “an indoor social life.” It is in this sense that the parlor game is a scale model of the modern social field—or, more exactly, of its small and sequestered, discrete but comparable worlds. These small worlds are themselves working models of the “sequestration” of modern life—to the extent that it is modern. And games such as these—parlor games, crime games, war games, and the rest—are, in short, models of a self-modeling world. They are scale models of the modern social field, which is then, in effect, a life-size model of itself.

This is not the place to rehearse the large topic of the social differentiation of modern society, set out in variant detail from Weber to Schmitt, from Foucault to Luhmann. Suffice it to say that if, from the late eighteenth century on, prisons come to resemble hospitals which come to resemble factories which come to resemble schools which come

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to resemble prisons, this is not merely because they share in common a
grand theme such as discipline. These social microworlds—at once differ-
entiated and fractally self-similar—are the genre forms of a self-realizing
society: one that is “almost-completely self-reliant,”¹⁸ one that more and
more generates and dispels uncertainties itself, and “almost” on its own
terms (Durkheim’s sui generis society on the way to recognizing itself).

These training, educating, correcting, grading, and self-realizing insti-
tutions are the small worlds that calibrate and compare and measure
and individualize individuals, and socially distribute the possibilities of
personally attributable reflection, action, and evaluation. They lend in-
cremental form to the lifestyle called a career. (And only academic field-
observers, proliferating new microfields in the name of the opposite, the
inter and the trans—that is, dreaming of a general world in which they
do not exist—still seem awed by this fact.) That is to say—and there
will be more to say about this in a moment—the self-reference system of
modern society, like the self-reference system of modern literature, gives
itself priority over all external reference.¹⁵ But, like the modern art sys-
tem, it does so knowing that. It at every point reflexively monitors its
own self-created reality—and so makes visible all the paradoxes of that
self-implication.

It would not be difficult to enumerate these recursive social systems
and their media, and the shift to the observation of observation—second-
order observation—that each turns on. Here I can do little more than
itemize what social systems analysis has already more or less detailed: the
political system (and its media of self-observation called public opinion);
the legal system (which makes texts from texts); the scientific system (and
the medium of publications, such that observations—experiments—can
be observed); the art system (which leaves the determination of what
counts as art to the art system itself); the erotic system (with its love and
intimacy media: hothouse circuits communicating the uncommunicable);
the education system (which discovers, or posits, the child in order to
demonstrate that persons are things that can be made and measured);
the economic system (the real in the final instance, which, to the extent
that it is a social system—social and a system—never finds out what real
needs or real values might be, or needs to); the crime system (which, via
the mass media, generalizes the scene of the crime as the boundaries of
the modern world). And so on.²⁰

In short, modernity, to the extent that it is modern, trends toward
tautology. It more and more realizes a nullification, or denudation, of ex-
trinsic determinations. (That’s one reason why the weather—from Third
World disasters to global warming—becomes the test case of relative modernization, of a “greenhouse effect” self-determination.) This general trending toward tautology is, as it were, re-reflected in these small worlds, this indoor social life. And it is here that the game, in its contingency, self-conditioning, and purposive complication, shows itself as a working model of the self-modeling modern world—and so makes the world appear in the world.

The Rules of Irrelevance

The game strategist of the perfect murder in Highsmith’s Ripley’s Game is Reeves Minot, who plans the crime, as Tom Ripley puts it, “just to start the ball rolling” (62). In short, “he plays games” (128). Reeves, we are told, is “like a small boy playing a game he had invented himself, a rather obsessive game with severe rules—for other people” (112). The point, however, is not quite that Reeves exempts himself from the rules by determining them and so seeing through them. The real point is that seeing through the game and obsessively playing the game are not at all at odds here. For if one does not see, and see through, the rules, one cannot play by the rules: seeing through the game is part of it. That is to say, in order for self-determinations to count as self-determinations, they have to be seen as such. And in a self-validating world, the crime story, its prolonged suspense and its surprising outcome, must work the same way: it requires suspense in the sense of a self-generated uncertainty and surprise in the sense of a self-dispelled mystery. The paradox, catch, or trick of the expected surprise is its form game.

One thing the novel allows, then, is for this circular causality to take the form of form. “Word did get around, he realized” (23). This is how the circuits of communication and realization continually reproduce (and reenter) each other. “I’m just telling you what Jonathan told me” (223). This is how the novel conveys information, or news of difference. It continually switches back and forth between act and observation, story and discourse—such that, as with the news today, the reporting on the news becomes the news reported on. “It was a matter of protecting—what had gone before” (227). The sentence’s short circuit is the syntax of recursive causal systems, feeding back outcomes into intentions, effects into causes.21

This is simply to observe, once again, that second-order observation is first tested in novels, which become the models for trying out the modalization of the world, with serious consequences. That makes for the ge-
meric preference for characters (as modal terms: self-observing observers). It makes, too, for the novelistic preference for affects that include their self-reflection as part of their operation: sympathy (or envy), for example, which posits the social reflection of pleasure (or pain) in the pain (or pleasure) of others, via a reciprocity of observation and self-observation.\textsuperscript{22}

The formality of the game is in part what looks like its suspension of external reference—or what Erving Goffman calls its \textit{rules of irrelevance}. Games, for Goffman, “illustrate how participants are willing to forswear for the duration of the play any apparent interest in the aesthetic, sentimental, or monetary value of the equipment employed, adhering to what might be called \textit{rules of irrelevance}.” In this way the real-world conditions of the game or the material that the game is made of—for example, “whether checkers are played with bottle tops on a piece of squared linoleum, with gold figures on inlaid marble, or with uniformed men standing on colored flagstones”—can be suspended. Hence the “same sequence of strategic moves and countermoves” can be made nevertheless—and still “generate the same contour of excitement.”\textsuperscript{23}

Yet from another point of view the rules of the game are scarcely a suspension of the way of the world, in that the same sequestration, and so the same rules of irrelevance, mark both. The first sentence of the first chapter of \textit{Ripley’s Game} is about murder and parlor games. The last sentences of that opening chapter are about the game Reeves is playing—if, that is, he’s playing a game at all. It’s not at all clear that Reeves’s actions, or play actions, are more than strictly gratuitous. “Toying” with things is the novel’s repeated term for this. That is, it’s not at all clear that Reeves has anything classed real to get out of it—beyond, of course, just prolonging the play.

Here, then, is the astonishing passage with which the initial chapter of the novel closes:

Reeves might gain—according to Reeves, but let Reeves figure that out, because what Reeves wanted seemed as vague to Tom as Reeves’ microfilm activities, which presumably had to do with international spying. Were governments aware of the insane antics of some of their spies? Or those whimsical, half-demented men flitting from Bucharest to Moscow and Washington with guns and microfilm—men who might with the same enthusiasm have put their energies to international warfare in stamp-collecting, or in acquiring secrets of miniature electric trains? (11–12)

The first chapter of \textit{Ripley’s Game} begins, then, with parlor games and ends with medial systems. But what links this antic series of activities? What draws into relation stamps, model trains, photography, in-
formation, spies, and war by other means? What makes it possible for these miniature systems of information and body-and-message transport (electric trains, stamp collections, microfilm, and so on) to make up a world? What makes it possible for these little medial systems to work as conditions and techniques of existence? To operate via scale models and working models that are models both of the world and in it?

When, that is, did the communication of words and things become the modern medial system before our very eyes? 1839, the annus mirabilis of the network of modern matter and message transport systems (and the criteria of speed, regularity, predictability, and reproducibility). The first commercial electric telegraph, in 1839, constructed by Wheatstone and Cooke for the Great Western Railway; the first Baedeker guide (to the Rhine), 1839; and the first national railway timetable (Bradshaw's), in 1839; the invention of photography—and its use in guidebooks, among other things—in 1839 (by Daguerre in France and, in 1840, by Fox Talbot in England); and the first national postal system, Rowland Hill’s Penny Post (based on the invention of the prepaid stamp), in Britain, in 1840. What spreads throughout the social field, what makes up the infrastructure of the modernizing social field, is the intensified self-organization of a system of self-organizing systems, what the author of an article in the Spectator (February 1839) titled “Self-Operating Processes of Fine Art: The Daguerreotype” calls “self-acting machines of mechanical operation.”

This begins to indicate the medial genealogy of a modernizing world, one tending toward, and more and more conditioned by, speed and repeatability, and by a permanent and asymptotically continuous connectedness—a media union. It’s possible to fill out this genealogy a bit more: first, by way of specifying how what might be called the apriorization of the media in these operations is bound to forms of observation and self-observation, and their systemic and reciprocal conditioning; second, by way of locating how the differences of medium and form, model and scale, fundamentally structure these operations; and third and finally, by way of sorting out what we might then make of the whimsical, half-demented, insane links—“International warfare in stamp-collecting”! “Acquiring secrets of miniature electric trains”—that make up Ripley’s game: that is, both modern parlor games and modern crime games.

Stamp collecting. The “closing of the postal system as a system” occurs with the shift from the individual registration of letters (and their rates) to postal standards (and the mass reproducibility of stamps); with the shift from names of places to street numbers; with the appearance across the social field of systems-integral standards at every level—a working
diagram for the conveyance of communications (from place to place, on time). The postal system is no longer person to person: “The postage stamp made the sender’s presence at the postal counter just as superfluous as the recipient’s presence at delivery”; the mailboxes and mail slots that are the standard inputs and outputs for sending and delivery processes, irrespective of persons. The standardized post—its collection, sending, delivery—neutralizes the idea of distance (within standardized zones), just as the railroad annihilates time (standardizing those zones).

The very existence of prepaid and mass-produced stamps implies a media union: a postal system. Ripley’s Game: “He dropped the letter in a yellow box *en route* to his shop. It would probably be a week before he heard from Alan. . . . He thought of his letter, making its progress to Orly airport, maybe by this evening, maybe by tomorrow morning” (20). The purpose of letter writing, we know, is to mark absences, absent writers for absent readers. With the advent of a postal system, the significance of a theory of communication, and its deferrals, can then be formulated (and so deconstructed). With the advent of telegraphy and then telephony, and systems of communication that do not depend on the sending of things or bodies, the transportation of people and the transportation of information divide—which allows for a period in which they (functionally or nostalgically) track each other, as for a period telegraph lines ran alongside railway lines.

**Spies and secrets.** By then we are in the zone of the detective story, its encrypted secrets and purloined letters. “From the point of view of the cryptanalyst,” as one of the founders of communications systems theory, Claude Shannon, observed, “a secrecy system is almost identical with a noisy communication system.” It is not merely that the modeling, in Shannon’s theory of communication, of transmitter and receiver as *encoder* and *decoder* explicitly identifies “communication with cryptanalysis.” Or that there are the tight couplings between the take-off point of communication theory and computational analysis, on the one side, and espionage and code breaking, on the other, during the Second World War. The inverse relation between the probability of the message and the information it gives means that “the uncertainty about the value of individual bits that is called forth by interference on the channel is more or less indistinguishable from the uncertainty produced by enemy codes.” On that logic the problem of modern literary interpretation—the uncertainty as to whether something is an intended/coded message or simply interference on the line (noise)—is tightly coupled to the form of the secrecy system too.
And in that the model of the new media—without as yet a credible account of either the media or the new—has come to look like the magical solution to the two cultures problem, we might recall what that solution looked like at the beginning of the cold war. Warren Weaver, for example, observes in his review of Shannon’s work in *Scientific American* that the analysis of communicative systems as a series of probabilistic events might be applied to “all of the procedures by which one mind may affect another. . . . This . . . involves not only written and oral speech, but also music, the pictorial arts, the theater, the ballet, and in fact all human behavior. In some connections it may be desirable to use a still broader definition of communication . . . [including] the procedures by means of which (say automatic equipment to track an airplane and to compute its probable future positions) affects another mechanism (say a guided missile chasing this airplane).”32 Here guns and information—Norbert Wiener’s groundbreaking work in recursive systems analysis via the design of anti-aircraft predictors and, via that, cybernetics in general—meet and fuse.33

*Miniatures and models.* No doubt the mechanical toy may excite the thrill and panic of the “self-invoking fiction.” And the miniature—the miniature railway, for example—may be “nostalgic in a fundamental sense,” a movement “from work to play, from utility to aesthetics.” But that fiction now provides, too, a working model of the self-steering and self-modeling social field. The collection—stamps or trains or toys—may “replace history with *classification*” and present a “hermetic world” that is “self-sufficient and self-generating”; and it may provide a “narrative of interiority,” one made up of the “complete number of elements necessary for an autonomous world.”34

But for precisely these reasons its formalism appears not as the alternative to the modern social field but the form of the modern social field, and its small worlds. The form of the scale model is a matter both of modeling and of scale. It makes visible the relation of observation to itself—and so its contingent and self-referential structure.35 And in the search for America’s next top model, it may then be well worth taking into account the way of the modern world as a self-mapping and self-modeling one.

*The Medium in Person*

The doubling of the object or world in the model—the doubling that allows the world to appear in the world—means that the world can be observed in different (rival or correspondent) ways, and so recast by the ex-
istence of alternatives. There are three basic consequences to this. First, it marks the relativity of the observer, who observes himself as an observer among others. Second, one is then asked to distinguish “real” reality from other kinds (fictional or statistical, for example). Third, the matter of scale makes observation itself visible: seeing itself seen, albeit out of the corner of the eye. The photographic—which, it seems, “permits a blow-up any scale”—epitomizes that, from the microfilmic to the big close-up of the human face; the filmic close-up is a solicitation to observe what the observed observer observes. What the photographic brings into view are scales of viewing: modernity ready for its close-up. And that induces a second-nature reflexivity, installing it as a medium and framework of perception, or cultural technique.

The little models that proliferate in, and as, the world of Ripley’s Game, for example, show the self-modeling of that world and how it operates. Here the historia rerum gestarum coincides with the res gestae, the story of events with the events themselves (if we recall that the res gestae is not exactly the event itself but instead in itself the coincidence of the event and its observation). The novel is in effect nothing but this self-modeling and self-sampling, and for that reason, several small and rapid examples can suffice here.

1. “His hobby was naval history, and he made model nineteenth-century and eighteenth-century frigates in which he installed miniature electric lights that he could put completely or partially on by a switch in his living room. Gerard himself laughed at the anachronism of electric lights in his frigates, but the effect was beautiful when all the other lights in the house were turned out” (47). History and model, war and game, hesitate each other here, not least via the anachronism of electric lights. (And the notion of anachronism itself is media-dependent, an effect of the “typographical persistence” of print.)

2. So the scale can be reversed: “Little boats bobbed gaily at anchor, and two or three boats were sailing about, simple and clean as brand-new toys” (67). These little boats are life-size and miniature at once, shifting in scale from one to the other.

3. Or, again, since the act takes shape in its recording or registration, making for the relays between game and world in the modern crime story: “He’d done little jobs for Reeves Minot, like posting on small, stolen items, or recovering from toothpaste tubes . . . tiny objects like microfilm rolls” (6). In passages such as this, scale itself becomes thick and palpable—an element in the concreteness of the medium of representation.
4. Or, yet again, consider what living life and living space look like in Ripley’s Game: “Jonathan carried a second cup of coffee into the small square living room where Georges was now sprawled on the floor with his cut-outs. Jonathan sat down at the writing desk, which always made him feel like a giant” (19). The geometry, the small square, of real space; the boy and his cut-out models; the writing desk that scales between writing and world: all are graphs of a self-graphing world. And the writing desk, like the light switch in the living room that turns the lights of the model on and off, is a switch point between two worlds.

The model for that is the switch itself:

We do not notice that the concept “switch” is of quite a different order than the concepts “stone,” “table,” and the like. Closer examination shows that the switch, considered as a part of an electric circuit, does not exist when it is in the on position. From the point of view of the circuit, it is not different from the conducting wire which leads to it and the wire which leads away from it. It is merely “more conductor.” Conversely, but similarly, when the switch is off, it does not exist from the point of view of the circuit. It is nothing, a gap between two conductors which themselves exist only as conductors when the switch is on. In other words, the switch is not except at the moments of its change of setting.39

We do not notice that the switch is an object of a different order: a quasi-object. That is, we do not notice the switch—the medium is anaesthetic and disappears—if it works; it appears only if it fails: “If the relation succeeds, if it is perfect, optimum, and immediate, it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, that means that it failed. It is only mediation.”40 This is the unity of the difference between the channel and its breakdowns—its interceptions and its accidents, the waves and shocks along the line. There is of course a paradox in our insistence that the media determine our situation but do so to the extent that we do not cease not registering that; and one can then either abide in the deconstruction of this paradox or see how it works.41 It works via the doubling of form and medium—the form games—by which the world intermittently appears in the world, and does so by way of a suspension or cancellation of the distinction between map and territory to which it at the same time appeals.

One finds, across all these examples, an oscillation between form and medium, between model and world, between map and territory. The closing or cancellation of the distinction between map and territory is cen-
trally here the denudation of the distinction between game and world, a self-invented game with its own canons of credibility. (“Or was it even a game that Tom was playing? Jonathan couldn’t believe it was entirely a game” [189]). This is what Poe, early on, called the “half-credences” that make believable parlor games, like the murder story. In short: We know, first, that the map is not the territory (the effect is not the cause). We know that, second, because it’s always the map and never the territory that we deal with (there’s no doing without codes and transforms). But then, third, what of the media ensembles, distributed across virtual and real landscapes, making up the material and formal infrastructure of modern society? Is the medial system (in a territory full of maps) map or territory?

The object of media theory “is then not an object but a difference”—the difference between medium and form (with all the paradoxes that involves). The difference between medium and form “oscillates from one side to the other [but] is never univocally defined, because each side depends on the other”—and can be observed only through the other. In Ripley’s Game, a novel and game world so relentlessly given over to observing media of observation and self-observation, and to the conditions of what can be seen and what can’t, it is not at all surprising that the medium of visibility—light itself—reenters as its own theme. It would be possible to point to its arrivals again and again across the novel. But the becoming-medial of the medium occurs late in the story, after Ripley has entered into the game and made it his own. Here Ripley and Jonathan, the pawn in Reeves’s game, have just murdered a couple of murderers and are about to do away with the bodies: “Tom’s car stopped. They had gone perhaps two hundred yards from the main road in a great curve. Tom had cut his lights, but the interior of the car lit when he opened the door. Tom left the door open, and walked towards Jonathan, waving his arms cheerfully. Jonathan was at that instant cutting his own motor and his lights. The image of Tom’s figure in the baggy trousers, green suede jacket, stayed in Jonathan’s eyes for a moment as if Tom had been composed of light. Jonathan blinked” (210). “Composed of light”: this is the puncta inflata of the novel’s optics. The term “composed”—in its terminological change of state, or indifference, between matter and form—could not be more exact, in turn form and medium, oscillating (blinking) between them. Put simply, here “light and matter are on an equal basis” (which is the modernist turn in physics).

Ripley is identified through and through with medial techniques and transformations in the series of novels that carry his name. These novels
operate entirely by way of cultural technologies of body and message transport, their commutability and their self-reflection. And they double the world via Ripley’s self-observed observation. Here Ripley becomes the medium in person. In that light and matter are on an equal basis, observation becomes its own object (a quasi-object, or materialized theoria). The motorized world stops for a moment, such that the medium apriorizes itself (and in doing so marks its own blind spot). The scene is in effect Ripley’s transubstantiation, or transfiguration (into “figure” or “image” or artwork): the moment at which the channel refers to itself. If light and matter are mutually contingent, there is no alternative to the modalization of the world. That modalization of the world introduces the observer at every point. And it’s “impossible to introduce the observer without also introducing the idea of message.” That means that the world and its communication are on an equal basis too.

Under the conditions of a modernizing and technogenic age, anthropological grounds are transposed into historical ones, and historical grounds into media techniques. This can also be played in reverse: media self-reflexivity can be taken, or mistaken, for self-reflection or subjectification. It’s played in reverse via characters in novels, for example—not least via Highsmith’s epochal character Tom Ripley. Ripley (like other serial killers, fictional and factual) is a sort of nonperson, a man without content. He is not merely one among an indeterminate number of others, but the third person in person—one who does not exist apart from the conditions of existence provided by the technical media and union of cultural techniques. The character without qualities gives those techniques a proper name—albeit the name of a reality game, Ripley’s Believe It or Not!

The Systems Turn

There’s another toy in Ripley’s Game: “The gyroscope Jonathan bought for Georges in Munich turned out to be the most appreciated toy Jonathan had ever given his son. Its magic remained, every time Georges pulled it from its square box where Jonathan insisted that he keep it.” The “delicate instrument” is a scale, and working, model of “a larger gyroscope” that “keeps ships from rolling on the sea.” And “to illustrate what he meant,” Jonathan “rolled over on the floor, propped on his elbows” (139).

The embodiment, or anthropomorphization, of the little self-correcting machine is clear enough, and not merely in the tendency toward self-
illustration (the tendency for acts to trace their own diagram) at work in this scene. The sociologist David Riesman, for example, in his 1960s best seller *The Lonely Crowd*, had identified the gyroscope as the analogue of what he calls the “inner-directed” person: “A new psychological mechanism is ‘invented’: it is what I like to describe as a psychological gyroscope. This instrument, once it is set in motion by the parents and other authorities, keeps the inner-directed person, as we shall see, ‘on course’ even when tradition, as responded to by his character, no longer dictates his moves.”

Something more, then, is at stake than the bid for scientific aura implicit in a loose coupling of sociology and mechanics.

The gyroscope here is both a toy and a worldview: the gyroscope thus might be seen as a *Gedenken*-experiment, or better a *Gedenken*-machine, with many forms of life. If Ripley, composed of light, is the channel or medium reflecting on itself, in this scene self-reflection is itself reflected on—via one of the defining instruments of the second machine age.

The gyroscope, put simply, is a mechanism that links self-governing to self-observing—and mechanizes both. The term meaning literally “to view the turning,” the gyroscope is introduced in 1852 by the physicist Léon Foucault (finding its first notable use in the device to demonstrate the earth’s rotation, Foucault’s pendulum). Its application to steering mechanisms takes a half-century (Elmer Sperry’s development of the gyrostabilizer and gyrocompass for the U.S. Navy).

That application is, then, one of the delays of the second machine age. The “principle of feedback” remained like a fish out of water for a period, unable as yet to find a place to breathe. That is, the self-observing and self-steering instrument; the reciprocal flow of information back into a controller; the “control of a machine on the basis of its actual performance rather than its expected performance” (Wiener); the need to take into account what the machine has already said, such that effects of events can be carried all around to produce changes at the point of origin (Bateson)—these escalating or vicious circles remained for a period unthinkable.

It was not yet possible to arrive at a theory of self-reflection that was not also a theory of subjectification. (And both literary theory, and a new media studies eager to repeat the mistakes of phenomenology all over again, continue to complete the same short circuit between reflexivity and self-consciousness.)

It was not yet possible, put simply, to inhabit the conditions of second-order observation: that, first, whatever is said is said by an observer; that, second, whatever is said is said to an observer; and hence that, third, reflexivity (observing the turn) is not the logical paradox on which the
operation of the system founders but instead the temporal condition of possibility that founds it. The modalization of the world is part of that—and the move to periodization via observing modes of seeing. Epochs appear as “turns” (in turn, the linguistic turn, the cultural turn, the affective turn), and thus bound to the distinct forms of media that steer them (from print culture to the age of technical reproducibility to digital culture). This is what it looks like to become acclimated to systems that feed outcomes back into inputs and do so by observing the turn and observing themselves doing so—hence entering into the sequestered, contingent, and self-conditioned form of Gesellschaftsspiele and other social games.

These are the conditions of Highsmith’s murder games—and what might be called Highsmith’s cold war. If there is any doubt about this, Highsmith makes the connection as explicit as possible. In this novel about artificial, forged, and self-reliant worlds, with all its train and air and postal schedules; all its little regimes of body and message transport and assessment, from readouts of blood counts to the feedback of news reports on the murders (command and control via communication); all its maps and “paper places” and art shops and frame stores, italicizations of the cultural techniques of the media (its necessary self-framing of what it maps and frames); all its “endless corridors” administered by “omniscient specialists” in life and death management, the little life support systems of an indoor social life; and, in sum, all its observations on these modes of observing and reflection—given all this, here then is the description of Gauthier, “the art supply man” with an artificial eye, and what his way of seeing looks like: “Gauthier’s shiny glass eye did not laugh but looked out from his head with a bold stare, as if there were a different brain from Gauthier’s behind that eye, a computer kind of brain that at once could know everything, if someone just set the programming” (31). These are the technics of a second order of vision, a seeing and knowing via the protocols of a program; a form of binocular vision that provides the feedback links between the human senses and media, a complex system of discrete processes that is also a differential relation of observation to itself.

The doubling back of seeing and knowing on itself could not be more emphatic than in the later part of the novel, when, for example, “a bomb through that window” is called “Unthinkable”! (189), and when the observation of what cannot be observed—“double-think” (233)—is named. We know that observing and observing what cannot be observed—“thinking the unthinkable”—emerges as the very form of cold war thinking (“the
bomb,” brinkmanship, and its war games). These are the code words for the cold war world. The looping of thinking back on itself, such that effects feed back into causes, so that the effects of events can be carried all around to produce changes at the point of origin: this thinking the unthinkable is of course epitomized and renamed by a cold war novel, Catch-22 (with “22” as the ordinance of double-think—along with the trick, or catch, of the continuous reentry of the outcome into the intent). We might call that literary reflection on the form of a modernity exasperated with the failure of its own self-description “postmodern”; or we might say that it represents something like the R & D phase of R & D.55

World of Warcraft

At this point it becomes possible to set out, with a bit more detail, the ties between these violence games and what I earlier referred to as form games (literary and otherwise). I want to do so by way of another account of the war game strategy for thinking the unthinkable, this time drawn from the New Yorker writer Malcolm Gladwell’s 2005 best seller, Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking. Gladwell presents a series of case studies that amount to something like a “gee-whiz” version of systems theory. In this, the book is directly in line with something like “the New Yorker uncanny.” The same could be said about another New Yorker book, The Wisdom of Crowds by James Surowiecki—which might have been titled “the wisdom of systems.” These adept case studies proceed via a toggling between close-ups (little anecdotes) and pattern (the big picture), and by way of these shifts in scale, the first, as if spontaneously, seems to give the second. That is to say, the narrative form of that process arrives as its subject (the power of thinking without thinking; the wisdom of crowds). In both, a recursive and systemic ecology of ignorance (unthinking or nonknowing) yields wisdom, or at least allows for the appearance of a knowledge a bit more trivial than wisdom: information. It allows, that is, for what Gladwell defines as “creating structure for spontaneity,” the paradox of a meaning that appears without intention, and its implications.56

It is the art of war that comes into focus in Gladwell’s centering chapter, “Paul Van Riper’s Big Victory.” More precisely, what comes into view is the war gamer’s way of creating form for improvisation: the surprise of thinking without thinking that makes for blink-of-an-eye “pattern recognition,” and so decision, in games of strategy. Van Riper, a veteran Vietnam War battalion commander and former head of the Marine Corps
University at Quantico, was recruited to play the “rogue commander” in the most expensive war game in history: Millennium Challenge 2002. It cost a quarter of a billion dollars to play out and amounted to a “full dress rehearsal for war” (104)—that is to say, for the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Here is the way one of his soldiers described Van Riper in action: “He was always out in the field . . . figuring out what to do next. If he had an idea and he had a scrap of paper in his pocket, he would write that idea on the scrap, and then, when we had a meeting, he would pull out seven or eight pieces of paper. Once he and I were in the jungle a few yards from a river, and he wanted to reconnoiter over certain areas, but he couldn’t get the view he wanted. . . . Damned if he didn’t take off his shoes, dive into the river, swim out to the middle, and tread water so he could see” (100). There is something of a resemblance between this double-entry system of observation and act, seeing and recording, and Gauthier’s computer eye or Time’s animate war computer. But there is something of a resemblance as well to the patients whom the psychiatrist Charcot, in his account of fin-de-siècle maladies of energy and will (“fatigue amnesia”), described as “l’homme du petit papier”: men with little pieces of paper, who arrived for sessions “with slips of paper endlessly listing their ailments”—as they knew how they felt and what they saw only by reading about it. The recording of the act enters into the act, such that the act consists of both itself and its registration. What appears in Charcot as a modern malady of agency here appears as the art of thinking without thinking, and a selective adaptation to the second machine age.57

One observes by recording, which makes the act and its recording two sides of a single formation. There is a live transfer between them. There is, therefore, a routinized nondistinction between training and fighting (“believe it or not . . . we would practice platoon and squad tactics or bayonet training in the bush. And we did it on a routine basis” [104; emphasis added]). That is, there is a routine coming down of the distinction between dress rehearsal and act—or between war game and war: “Sometimes when Blue Team fired a missile or launched a plane, a missile actually fired or a plane actually took off, and whenever it didn’t, one of forty-two separate computer models simulated each of those actions so precisely that the people in the war room often couldn’t tell it wasn’t real” (104).

This doubling of observation and act (and so the doubling of reality) structures these war game scenarios.58 The games themselves migrate between military and entertainment industries, as part of what has been
described as the military-entertainment complex. (And Millennium Challenge was not just a run-up to the war in Iraq; its engineered outcome scripted the war plan—and its marketing.) Familiar too by now is the sequestration, or self-suspension, of game worlds and their rules of irrelevance: the war gamers set up shop in “huge, windowless rooms known as test bays” (103) in the Joint Forces Command building—windowless black-boxed monads. Thus Van Riper discovers that the “only difference” between stock traders on Wall Street and those who “played war games on computer” is that “one group bet on money and the other bet on lives” (108).

The war game, in short, is a “management system” (119) mixing “complexity theory and military strategy” (106). It operates via a predictive and recursive guide system—but one without “specific guidance,” intents, or effects: “I mean that the overall guidance and the intent were provided by me and the senior leadership . . . but the forces in the field wouldn’t depend on . . . orders coming from the top. . . . I never wanted to hear the word ‘effects’ . . . We would not get caught up in any of these mechanistic processes” (118). The war game is then one of the parlor games (Gesellschaftsspiele) in which one must observe what the opponent observes or can’t observe, and whether or not he can observe that: “What my brother always says is, ‘hey, say you are looking at a chess board. Is there anything you can’t see? No. But are you guaranteed to win? Not at all, because you can’t see what the other guy is thinking’” (144).

It’s not hard to see, then, how parlor games enter into social games and war games. But it is the form of these games—these form games—that concerns us for the moment. To understand the “internal computer” that creates structure for improvisation or spontaneity (the power of thinking without thinking) is, for Gladwell, to understand that improvisation “is an art form governed by a series of rules” (113). And here “art form” comes to mean, then, the paradox of improvised form: the ongoing reproduction of action out of action.

This art form governed by serialized rules is part of an aesthetic of cold war modernism. One historian of brinkmanship (or blinkmanship) in the “intuitive science” of thermonuclear war, Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi, lucidly sets out the terms of analysis sponsored by the RAND corporation: “Setting the terms for gaming and man-machine simulations in the 1950s and later, RAND analysts commended these techniques for sharpening intuition, stimulating creativity, offering insight into complex fields of interaction, exploring intersubjective exchanges in an interdisciplinary research setting, instilling tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainties, and
heightening sensitivity to the practitioners’ own blind spots and rigidities. That setting of the terms puts R & D in the orbit of an aesthetic modernism premised on art as paradox: the paradox of structure and spontaneity, which one can call “art” (or the paradox of “form and intent in the American new criticism,” which one can then deconstruct).

We might see this, I’ve suggested, as another of the delays of the second machine age. That’s to see modern literature (or literature from the standpoint of modernity) as something of a preadaptive advance on the social systems of reflexive modernity (an advance that can then be played out with real social consequences). And I am referring again as well, then, to the delays in its recognition or theorization, that is, why it takes until the development of cybernetics—and New Critical formalism (and its deconstruction) alongside that—for the self-evidence of autopoietic and recursive literary form to become evident. In this way the little game world of the poem or novel (like the little game worlds of the world) realize modern society—as an exceptional and at the same time exemplary case. We know that literature was always already and from the start a form game, such that the nonrecognition of that seems as strange as the inability (in the paradox of Maxwell’s demon) to understand information processing as real work, or, correlative, as strange as the inability (in the paradox of feedback) to understand that the effect is not the cause (and so the form is not the intent).

Here one moves from dice games to games of strategy; from the calculus of probabilities to recursive systems theory; from the great probability salesman of the nineteenth century, Laplace, to the great cybernetics booster of the twentieth, Wiener. I have tracked elsewhere the first, via Poe and his advent crime story about the death of a beautiful woman—“The Mystery of Marie Roget”—and, along the way, about structure and motive in modern crime; the second, in these pages, via Highsmith. The crime story, with its dependence on the topoi of motive and surprise, is of course the happy hunting ground of intention (the motive of the crime) and outcome (the form of its surprise). Hence it provides an economical way of dramatizing (or overdramatizing) the feedback loops between structure and spontaneity—and the tautological repetition that secures the genre as genre. For Poe, for example, “accident forms part of the substructure.” And the reinhabiting of intentions is a way of apprehending the criminal by reverse-engineering the plot. But this from the start appears as a trick or paradox (not least the paradox of waiting to be surprised). In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” for example, the doubling of motive and act means entering into the motives of an actor who
cannot properly have motives or perform acts (an orangutan, providing a version of what Poe elsewhere calls “motive not motivirt”).

One can start either from the form side or from the intent side, and either way keep discovering that structure and motivation, form and intent keep shifting sides. This is (I’ve elsewhere suggested) something like another game about intent and outcome: the very young child who plays hide-and-seek by saying, “I’m going to hide here, now you try to find me.” Or it is like the looping effects of a historical interpretation by which persons and acts illustrate the conditions that make up the persons who act that way. Or it is like the paradox of the work of art as at once exceptional and exemplary, with respect to reflexive modernity.

“In explaining the work of art,” as Niklas Luhmann frames it, “one frequently draws on the artist’s intention in producing the work, but this is trivial, a tautological explanation, because the intent must be feigned, while its psychological correlates remain inaccessible.” Since the artwork, and its production, can only be comprehended as intentional, “this raises the issue of how to dissolve the tautological construct of productive intent and unfold this tautology in ways that yield intelligible representations.” The work’s “artificiality provokes the question of purpose” in that it displays “something unexpected, something inexplicable, or as it is often put, something new,” and so creates structure for spontaneity.

The unfolding of the tautology of purpose or intent, and all the paradoxes it provokes, raise further questions, some of which I have taken up here. What, then, is the status of these form games in modern social systems? Or, more exactly, what is the status of the work of art in the age of reflexive social systems—systems marked by the apriorization of the media?

For one thing, the unfolding of that tautology then means that, in understanding “art as a social system,” one understands that “the art system realizes society in its own realm as an exemplary case.” But for another, if the art system (and its form games) then reflects reflexive modernity, the notion of the autonomy of art and the notion of the exemplarity of art enter into each other at every point. Luhmann expresses that paradoxical reentry in these terms: “The theme of reflection does not define the meaning of the autonomy of art, but the meaning of the doubling of reality (Realitätsverdoppelung) in which this autonomy established itself.” That is to say, the theme of reflection arrives as its own theme—and, collaterally, the medium appears (or stages itself) as its own object. Put as simply as possible, this means it’s not that art explains society or that society explains art. If one takes seriously the form of recursive causal
systems (form games), then the explanation is precisely that, an explanation, and not what is explained. The effect is not the cause—which is to say, the artwork works like a black box.

*Imaginary Animals; or, 2 + 2 = 5*

The black box is a conceptual machine that makes possible “that most magical of tricks, a way of acting confidently with/from the unknown/unknowable.”\(^6^7\) Consider, for example, a simple version of black box theory, this one from Ross Ashby’s *Introduction to Cybernetics* (1956): “The child who tries to open a door has to manipulate the handle (the input) so as to produce the desired movement at the latch (the output); and he has to learn how to control the one by the other without being able to see the internal mechanism that links them. In our daily lives we are confronted at every turn with systems whose internal mechanisms are not fully open to inspection, and which must be treated by the methods appropriate to the Black Box.”\(^6^8\) The difference between input and output means that there is a before and an after, and that this is a difference that makes a difference. The job is then to find a causal connection between them. (Thus the centrality of the notion of regularities in behavior and pattern recognition—and the shift from discourses governed by meaning and sense to those driven by pattern and code.)\(^6^9\) It means, too, that whitening the black box (to see how it really works) or eliminating it (by positing the identity of intention and outcome) sidelines, it will be seen, the problem of form in these form games today, and not least in terms of the contemporary conception of the work of art.\(^7^0\)

These form games enter into the official world at every point. For one thing, the contemporary differentiation of knowledges and their rival media of communication (from the conflict of the faculties to the extreme narrowness of inter- or trans disciplinary citation circles) make that clear enough. The owl of Minerva may still take flight at dusk, but now there are a lot of them (and, as in the Harry Potter stories, they just deliver the mail). These ecologies of ignorance are black boxes—ways of acting confidently, and building descriptions of the world out of the unknown and out of “knowing about non-knowing,” since there is no alternative anyway.\(^7^1\)

For another, we might reconsider the question of observation in the formation of knowledge (and self-knowledge)—and, too, in the formation of social systems that rely on internal mechanisms of knowing and self-knowing, and the ways in which these are copied into each. For ex-
ample, Foucault’s communication-and-control systems may be seen to instance perfectly the internal mechanisms of these black-boxed cybernetic systems (mechanisms more denoted than explicated via the term “power”).

For example, one way of making use of the seeing-machine, or panopticon, set out in Foucault’s account of Bentham’s architectural mechanism might be to “try out pedagogical experiments”:

In particular to take up once again the well-debated problem of secluded education, by using orphans. One would see what would happen when, in their sixteenth or eighteenth year, they were presented with other boys or girls; one could verify whether, as Helvetius thought, anyone could learn anything; one would follow “the genealogy of every observable idea”; one could bring up different children according to different systems of thought, making certain children believe that two and two did not make four or that the moon is a cheese, then put them together when they are twenty or twenty-five years old; one would then have discussions that would be worth a great deal more than the sermons or lectures on which so much money is spent; one would have at least an opportunity of making discoveries in the domain of metaphysics.

Hence, in these experiments one can make persons believe, say, that 2 + 2 = 5. But this necessarily means something a bit different than that power = knowledge. (In other words, it’s not 2 + 2 = 5 in Orwell’s sense.) That is, to the extent that such experiments issue in discoveries and not simply tautologies, this means something other than that “knowledge follows the advances of power.” The black box remains in place, in that it enters into how modern social systems work.

Another way of saying this is that the little games that Foucault here describes are games of strategy: the seeing-machine must deal with what the machine has already seen and already said, and take cognizance of that. In short, the seeing-machine, via its reflexive monitoring of action, is a black box to the very extent that the players see that too. Or as the narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2005 novel Never Let Me Go puts it: “We lost ourselves completely in our game. . . . And yet, all the time, I think we must have had an idea of how precarious the foundations of our fantasy were, because we always avoided any confrontation”; and “we all played our part . . . in making it last as long as possible.”

The prolonging of the play in Never Let Me Go is a prolongation of knowing not knowing. (And Ishiguro is perhaps the great contemporary novelist of nonknowing, and the little social systems that make it up. It is,
in that sense if no other, “Jamesian.”) The novel is premised on ecologies of ignorance. More exactly, its social premises are the micro-institutions—game-like, sequestered, autistic—that realize the official world, and the forms of life and death proper to it.

The small worlds of the novel—working models both of the world and in it—are everywhere visible, and they are everywhere up and running. These little worlds include the playing field and the boarding school and the ubiquitous hospital. They include “the Sales” and “the Exchanges,” with their autonomous “system of tokens as currency” (38)—which is “how we got hold of things from outside” (41). They include too, and not merely as one world among others, the art world and the system that determines what will count as art and what will not. The art system is in turn, and explicitly, “like a miniature version of one of our Exchanges.” Each resembles the other in that each is self-determined, autonomous, self-evaluative—each is, as Ishiguro concisely puts it, a “smart cosy self-contained world” (157–158). Together these self-contained, self-similar, and discrete systems make up a world: they make up, that is, the indoor social life of the official world.

This also begins to bring into sharper focus the paradoxical situation of the work of art in relation to modern social systems. Here the sales and exchanges are how we get hold of things from outside. The art system is how we get hold of things from inside: “Your art will reveal your inner selves . . . what you were like inside” (254, 260). These systems between the inside and the outside provide the forms in which modern life comes to itself by staging itself—and thus allow the world to appear in the world.

The work of art—in this case, Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go—in its very formality performs its self-reflexive and self-contained, internalized and stand-alone character. In that, the work of art is both exceptional and exemplary today. It is exceptional in its autonomous relation to the outside world. It is exemplary in that it provides the very model of that autonomy of that world. This is, in short, the paradoxical status of the sui generis artwork in the company of social systems that realize what Durkheim—inaugurating modern sociology, and so indicating a society that had achieved self-description—described as the achievement of the almost sui generis society. The modern social system, like the modern work of art, performs its own unity. This is the character of a modern society trending on all fronts toward artificiality and toward autonomy—toward the autonomization of everything. The modern work of art, that is, the work of art in modernity, rehearses and registers its relation to itself. The point not to be missed is that this does not distinguish the work
of art from contemporary social systems. It epitomizes them. Reflexivity is not merely the philosophical and aesthetic predicament of the twentieth century but the defining attribute of the second modernization, and its forms of second life.

Another way of saying this is that the official world plays out, and registers, its own conditions, and in doing so becomes self-conditioning. In this way the form of the game, as Georg Simmel expressed it, models a self-modeling world and what he called “autonomous forms of sociation.” He writes: “The more profound, double sense of ‘social games’ (Gesellschaftsspiele) is that not only the game is played in a society (as its external condition) but that, with its help, people actually ‘play’ society.”77 This does not distinguish game and life, but instead, as Wittgenstein expressed it, it indicates their resemblance to each other: a “game is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there—like one’s life.”

Never Let Me Go sets this out from the ground up. In the self-reporting and captive, autotelic, and quarantined micro-worlds of Never Let Me Go, life itself is like one’s life: life-like. These micro-systems are in turn the scenes of a Bildungsroman of sorts, scenes of the growing of persons. They are also the model institutions of a modern society and its form games.

The pedagogical experiments in the novel—centrally, the boarding school of sorts that centers it—each provide something of a limit case of persons brought up according to different systems of thought. The limit case in point resembles in part “playing in a sandpit,” with all its sandbox elements. It resembles, alternatively, the playing of a “chess game,” and the attempt to “teach . . . the game.” (50). Here playing the game is there, like one’s life, in that playing it out is not exactly a matter of knowing its rules. The chess game is played—and taught—without quite understanding the rules of the game; instead, one observes the play, or makes moves, and so makes things up from that (since rules, and following them, are not self-enforcing).

The novel thus proliferates maps and models of how to play its games, from “scaled down [and scaled up] versions” (66) to “life-size skeletons” (83) to “secret games” (90). It multiplies small worlds. In doing so, it proliferates scale models of a self-modeling world—and cases of defective knowledge.78 The template of this game with unknown rules and reflexive ignorance is given early on by Henry Adams, in his account of the advent of a catastrophic modernity: “Had he been consulted, would he have cared to play the game at all, holding such cards as he held, and suspecting that the game was to be one of which neither he nor any one else back to the beginning of time knew the rules or the risks or the
Today the rules, risks, and stakes are part of normal, everyday life, and death, in a game-like and second-life modernity.

The game-like and the life-like in *Never Let Me Go* turn out to “play their parts” in the official world in another sense, too. It turns out that these little institutions, and the persons who grow up in them, are literally the parts—or, we discover, “spare parts”—of a world. The pedagogical experiment as a limit case in making up persons according to different systems of thought is here literalized—in that it’s not quite clear that these characters are exactly persons.

The schoolchildren are, we learn, or learn that we more or less already knew but deferred knowing, “clones—or *students*,” as we preferred to call you” (261). They are grown for spare parts. These spare parts are the “donations” that will “complete” their lives and prolong the lives of others. The “first-person” narration is provided by one of the students, named “Kathy H.” Hence she is named (without familial name) as if she were a real character in a fiction. Or in this case—in the crossing of artificial and real reality—in that she is an artificial person or clone: a fictional person with a real body. For this reason, the narrative mode of this “first-person” novel, its way of seeing and knowing, is in effect a way of *not* seeing and *not* knowing. And to use again one of the novel’s code words, or terms of art, the mode of the narrative is a way of “deferring” that.

No doubt this coupling of species life and institutional forms of life lends itself to biopolitical analysis. No doubt too it epitomizes how processes of modernization posit the game-like and artificial character of a social order that nonetheless stipulates its biological characterization. But my interest here is a bit different. In *Never Let Me Go*, the problem of the artificial or biological character of persons and institutions is posed in terms of the character of the artwork itself. This makes it possible to redescribe the continuous transformation of life into forms of life that defines the second modernization.

*Never Let Me Go* is a modern murder mystery of sorts. It is a story about making up and taking lives; and along those lines, it is about contemporary cultural techniques of life and death. The art world is one of the artificial small worlds of the novel, albeit not merely one among others: creating “your art,” and then showing it on the market, “will reveal your inner selves” (175, 254). The artwork, in short, is what makes interiors available to perception and communication: it will tell us “what you were like inside” (260). The artwork, and the art scene and market that determine what works as art, thus betoken personhood, and its observation and self-observation. The work of art is an exchangeable, and
collectible, token of personhood. But the internality of the artwork, and how it indexes the nature of inner selves, is a little more complicated here.

Consider, for example, the form of one character’s artwork—his “imaginary animals” (the only student artwork detailed in the novel):

That was when I first saw his animals. When he’d told me about them in Norfolk, I’d seen in my mind scaled-down versions of the sort of pictures we’d done when we were small. So I was taken aback at how densely detailed each one was. In fact, it took a moment to see they were animals at all. The first impression was like one you’d get if you took the back off a radio set: tiny canals, weaving tendons, miniature screws and wheels were all drawn with obsessive precision, and only when you held the page away could you see it was some kind of armadillo, say, or a bird. (187)

The body-machine complex in this scaled-down picture could not be more explicit. The drawing on the page indicates what this animal looks like; it seems, on “first impression,” to indicate what these animals look like inside. They resemble “a radio set” and so a signaling device by which internal mechanisms, at one machinic and biological, communicate with what the novel insistently calls “the outside world.” But the first impression is a bit misleading.

The whole point about these tiny “imaginary animals” is that “it’s like they come to life by themselves” (178). They seem to come to life by themselves, they seem life-like, because their interior states are open to view: you can see inside them, and how they work inside. But more exactly, one doesn’t quite see inside them in that there’s no difference between what they are inside and what they are. The obsessive precision of the form of the work makes them one and the same. The form, the form of the work of art, seems to come to life by itself in the unity of its form and its contents. It is sui generis and autonomous, and it is autonomous and autogenic to the very extent that it stages its own internality, and depicts that.

What’s crucial about their artworks, for the students, or clones, in the novel is that the work of art will show what they are inside—and so that what they are inside is not reducible to the parts inside them: “Art bares the soul of the artist” (254). But what’s crucial about their artworks, for the novel, is not the difference between body and soul, matter and form, but their unity: the obsessive formality by which they seem to animate themselves.

“The more excited he got telling me about his animals, the more uneasy I was growing” (179). “Growing”—another of Never Let Me Go’s terms of art, in this novel about growing up posthuman—indicates that where animal life, or the life-like animal, comes from is itself a black box.
The work of art then seems to do what bodies do, in growing by itself and coming alive. But in doing so and recursively reflecting on it—in staging its own form—it has the self-propagating, autogenic, and magical properties of the black box, a little machine with a life of its own.

The problem of the artwork and the problem of the official world are in this way copied into each other. The autopoiesis of modern social systems and the autopoiesis of the work of art are here arranged like the two sides of a horseshoe, opposed on part of their surface but communicating on another level. “When man wants to learn about himself,” as Stanislaw Lem’s posthuman, and self-aware, machine Golem expresses it to his human students, “he must move circuitously, he must explore himself and penetrate from the outside, with instruments and hypotheses, for your genuinely immediate world is the outside.” As the cybernetics theorist Ross Ashby expresses it, “That homo has a brain no more entitles him to assume he knows how he thinks than possession of a liver entitles him to assume that he knows how he metabolises.”

If art, then, is the measure of interiority in Never Let Me Go, this is not exactly because it reveals that one has an interior of a particular kind, or even that there’s a difference between interior states and bodily ones. The felt difference between having and knowing is the difference between self-reference and other-reference—between, say, having a body and knowing what it does, or how it grows. The work of art, like the body, seems to come to life on its own. The autopoiesis of the work of art does what a body does. (And of course the theory of the autopoiesis of social systems is derived directly from the account of the autopoiesis of biological systems.) But unlike the body, the work of art not merely does that but depicts it: it records the experience in its own presence. It stages, via that circular detour, its own reflexivity. That conserves, or posit, the place value of an opacity and an ignorance—a black box—that makes it possible to keep going (and for parts of one body—say, a liver—to keep the life of another going.)

The continuous transformation of natural life into artificial forms of life, hetero-restrictions into self-restrictions, is not surprisingly most explicit in relation to the autonomization of sex in the novel:

We had to be extremely careful about having sex in the outside world, especially with people who weren’t students, because out there sex meant all sorts of things. Out there people were even fighting and killing each other over who had sex with whom. And the reason it meant so much—so much more than, say, dancing or table-tennis—was because the people out there
were different from us students: they could have babies from sex. That was why it was so important to them, this question of who did it with whom. And even though, as we knew, it was completely impossible for any of us to have babies, out there, we had to behave like them. We had to respect the rules, and treat sex as something pretty special. (84)

The world “out there” differs from the indoor world of the students, and so differs from the little game world, “say, dancing or table-tennis,” in that the sex act can “mean all sorts of things”—killing, fighting, babies—that exceed the act itself. The rules out there, which make sex special, differ from the rules in here, in which bodies are no more than exchangeable tokens, or moves, in a game. But the larger point is, it will be seen, that whereas both the world out there and the world in here then both have rules to respect, the inside of the body has its own autonomy, as if it were part of what’s outside of persons.84

In this way, the form of modern social systems and the form of the modern work of art—its reflexivity, its internality, its stand-alone and autogenic character—index each other, and precisely in terms of the form games of the official world. In short, whitening the black box turns out to be the same thing as taking the back off the artwork. And taking apart the work of art turns out to be the same thing as taking apart ourselves. It would be as if our insides could be turned inside out and opened to view, like the parts of a simple machine—one that turns inputs into outcomes with nothing changing in between. This is to posit an imaginary machine that works like a white box: a perpetual and immortal machine, an immortal body, one that runs on an endless loop. It is to posit, that is, something like the tape recording, the clone reproduction, of the song that gives the novel its title and refrain, “never let me go.” That dream machine, or dream body, is one that runs with a perfect continence, since it loses nothing and gains nothing along the way. But if $2 + 2 = 4$, the game—since there is no longer any reason to prolong the play—is over.

NOTES


1. On self-describing modernity, see, for example, Niklas Luhmann, “Deconstruction as Second-Order Observing,” in Theories of Distinction: Redescribing


3. This not merely, it will be seen, in that the observed scene of the crime—a demarcated and ruled zone of motive and act, outcome and information—looks like the scene of the game. I am here picking up from the postscript to my True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity (New York: Routledge, 2007).


8. For a useful summary of game theory and its discontents, see William Poundstone, Prisoner’s Dilemma: John von Neumann, Game Theory, and the Puzzle of the Bomb (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 167–178. The popular understanding conserves a notion of rational intention that is itself intermittently revised in game theory. The capacity to forecast that future presents will look like present futures is premised on the sharing of those presumptions among other actors, that is, on their decision to behave as economic actors, or economists, are supposed to behave. But the point not to be missed is that the positing of rationality in game theory is thus nontrivial and reflexive too. As Oskar Morgenstern expresses it, “To determine optimal, or ‘rational’ behavior is precisely the task of the mathematical theory of games. Rational behavior is not an assumption of that theory; rather, its identification is one of its outcomes.” Oskar Morgenstern, “Game Theory,” in Dictionary of the History of Ideas, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), 267. “Clearly, if more and more players act rationally,” as Morgenstern elaborates it, “there will be shifts in actual behavior and in real events to be described. This is an interesting phenomenon worth pointing out. It has philosophical significance: progress in the natural sciences does not affect natural phenomena, but the spread of knowledge of the workable social sciences changes social phenomena via changed individual behavior from which fact there may be a feedback
into the social sciences.” Cf. Morgenstern, “Vollkommene Voraussicht und Wirtschaftliches Gleichgewicht,” Zeitschrift für Nationalökonomie 6 (1935): 337–357. That is, one knows that social systems have emerged once there are sociologists. In systems-theoretical terms, one operates ongoingly on imperfect information—and only on that basis: a world that contains decisionmakers has an uncertain future, since it depends on what is decided in the present. Cf. Elena Esposito, “Probability and Fiction in Science and Economics,” lecture, Facoltà di Scienze della Comunicazione. Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia, Italy, 21 June 2006. I return to this matter of feedback in a moment. For now, if this recursive rationality seems implausible, one might consider how the academic archipelago of disciplines—the sequestration and reciprocal ignorance on which the differentiation and mutual opacity of disciplines depends—keeps on going anyway. And not least by ongoingly reflecting on the fact that they do. These self-conditioned social microfields are premised on reciprocal rules of irrelevance—codes of civil inattention or involvement shields—by which self-generated and self-dispelled uncertainties can be processed with relative and “indoor” independence. I return to these rules of irrelevance, and the ignorance-management they enable, in what follows. (The italicized phrases are drawn from Erving Goffman’s description of behavior in public places and its interaction rituals. In adapting them, I mean to suggest that such descriptions might be extended to the relative continence of the social microworlds that concern me here—to their self-conditioning and so to their ways of managing uncertainty and ignorance or nonknowing.)


10. The games I am considering here are pathological games—“funny games” in the sense that Michael Haneke gives to violent play in his film of the same name. In a 1952 letter to Norbert Wiener, Gregory Bateson observed: “What applications of the theory of games do, is to reinforce the players’ acceptance of the rules and competitive premises, and therefore make it more and more difficult for the players to conceive that there might be other ways of meeting and dealing with each other. . . . Von Neumann’s ‘players’ differ profoundly from people and mammals in that those robots totally lack humor and are totally unable to ‘play’ (in the sense in which the word is applied to kittens and puppies).” Quoted in William Poundstone, The Prisoner’s Dilemma, 198. Or, as Herbert Marcuse expressed it, RAND gamers “arrange games with death and disfiguration in which fun, team work, and strategic planning mix in rewarding social harmony. . . . [RAND] reports such games in a style of absolving cuteness.” Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 80–81. Yes, no doubt. But it’s not just that Highsmith and RAND are kitten-and-puppy-free zones. These pathological games (like Haneke’s) are staged
for the sake of their observation, reported and recorded, with a psychodispasionate distance between the little planning world (and its models) and the larger planned one (with its working models too). The fun of that, as opposed to, say, the play-fighting of kittens, is a bit harder to locate, and not exactly my concern here. But it’s joined in these cases to the self-exempting and self-administering and overlit micro-worlds, of, say, Sade or Bentham, Highsmith or Foucault—and hence bound to the differentiation and autonomous validity of modern social systems. It’s linked to what training and measuring and comparing and assessing in these institutions come to look like, and feel like. And it depends on the apriorization of the media as condition of existence (the doubling of reality, via, e.g., the graphomanias of Sade or Highsmith; the observer-recorder worlds of Bentham or Foucault or Luhmann). That there are many disparate disciplinary approaches to explaining these links is a version of the same differentiation (here, of pleasure principles). As Roger Caillois notes, near the close of his *Man, Play, and Games* (trans. Meyer Barash [Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001]): “It is not merely [in defining the domain of play] a question of different approaches arising from the diversity of disciplines. The facts studied in the name of play are so heterogeneous that one is led to speculate that the word ‘play’ is perhaps merely a trap, encouraging by its seeming generality tenacious illusions as to the supposed kinship between disparate forms of behavior” (162). We might then take this “diversity” of self-observed capsule worlds into account as a component, or condition, of modern pathological games.


12. For example, historical reality (singular persons and events that are real but accidental and inessential); and fictional reality (persons and events that are unreal but representative or essential); and real—that is, mathematical or statistical—reality (numbers are, of course, the first virtual reality). The co-emergence of the realistic novel (fictional reality) and the calculus of probabilities and statistics is well known; so too the collateral emergence of the fictional and the historical turns (not least in the rise of historical fiction). As Luhmann concisely puts it: “Modernity has invented probability calculations just in time to maintain a fictionally created, dual reality. . . . [W]hat are we to make of the fact that the world is now divided into two kinds of reality—a world of singular events and a world of statistics (or of inductive references), a reality out there and a fictional reality?” Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva Knodt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 70, 175.

13. In that the player commenting on the game is also its designer, the distinction between game and world reenters the game on that score too: the arbiter of the game enters into it. And how can the game player play the arbiter? On such a becoming-medial as a cultural technique (tacitly on the model of Deleuze’s “becoming-machine”), see Joseph Vogl’s superb “Becoming Media:

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15. Caillois, Man, Play, and Games, 29


19. Ibid., 21; Luhmann, Art, 244, 312–313.


21. I return in the next section to feedback and how the delay in recognizing feedback makes, for example, for the endless rehearsals of the “form and intent” paradox with respect to artificial (intentional) objects.

22. The affective turn today reproduces exactly this preference for affects that incorporate their self-reflection (or consist in it). I have in mind here the provocative recent work, for instance, of Brian Massumi, Rei Terada, and Sianne Ngai. I have in mind, too, work building in part on the earlier social-psychological work of Silvan Tomkins and Erving Goffman. Second-order affect theory trades in derivatives of feeling the same way that hedge funds trade in derivatives of financial products. See particularly Goffman’s splendid account of the communicative structure of the “little social system” of embarrassment in Erving Goffman, “Embarrassment and Social Organization,” in Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 160. Mark Seltzer
The current affective turn in academic criticism is on some fronts a return to sensibility criticism, at times, arguably, via a methodologically concealed conservatism. (Hence the perpetual re-demonstration of the end of “the Cartesian subject,” its deconstruction playing on an endless loop.) It is, unarguably, a retrofitting to the world-systems of second-order observation. Such a retrofitting is embedded in the very notion of “the turn”—the linguistic turn, the cultural turn, the affective turn—as a way of marking historical epochs. This is an extraordinary vehicle of periodization: what amounts not merely to the modalization of history but to its self-observation. I take up “the turn,” its observation, and its media in a moment.


24. And, in the early 1840s, the first scheduled oceanic steamship service; the first railway hotel (in New York), along with railway station bookshops; the earliest department stores; the first modern urban system for the separate circulation of water and sewage (Chadwick in Britain); the first “package” tour—Thomas Cook’s, between Leicester and Loughborough. And so on. For a useful summary of these systems tending toward total mobilization, see John Urry, Mobilities (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 3–16. See also James R. Beniger, The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). It should be clear that 1839 is then a relay point, not a point of origin, what I take up as the apriorization of the media as ground of existence, a self-referential (self-observed) media union.


27. The second chapter of Ripley’s Game opens by italicizing precisely this shift from meaning and sense to pattern and code: “So it was that some ten days later, on 22 March, Jonathan . . . received a curious letter from his good friend Alan McNear. . . . Jonathan had expected—or rather not expected—a sort of thank-you letter from Alan for the send-off party” (13). We might read this as a little lesson in the rudiments of information theory. “So it was” is then the renovated idiom of a now postally sponsored fate, keeping its appointed rounds. The postal friend, then—one who is near but also far (“mcnear”)—is less a subject than a position, a position in the communicative circuit. And what then makes possible the paradoxical equivalence of the expected and the not expected here is the pattern of expectations that yields the sort-of thank-you letter, its technical conditions of possibility: “The more probable the message, the less information it gives. . . . The transmission of information is impossible save as
a transmission of alternatives. If only one contingency is to be transmitted, then it may be sent most efficiently and with the least trouble by sending no message at all.” Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1950), 12. The epistolary novel and the detective/crime novel are the two basic forms of narrative fiction. Here they are braided together: in Highsmith’s crime novels there is a proliferation of letters, copied into the narrative. The love letter (which communicates the incommunicable) and the thank-you note (which says what goes without saying) approach the minimal trouble of the greeting card. In that curvature toward standardized values and the efficient regulation of mutual involvement, the channel represents itself in the channel. A typology of the post-epistolary (the postal squared) novel might be set out from, say, Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and James’s *Turn of the Screw* (1898), both gothicized epistolary novels, to Highsmith’s Ripley novels—criminalized ones.


30. Consider, to take two obvious fictional examples, the rehearsals of that coupling in Thomas Pynchon’s novel of war and information, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, or Neil Stephenson’s about war games and Turing machines, *Cryptonomicon*. My concern in this essay is with what this looks like in parlor games like the murder novel.

31. Siegert, *Relays*, 262. See also note 27.


33. For Wiener, predicting the future in the coming together in space of a missile and a target is like playing poker: “If the action were completely at the disposal of the pilot, and the pilot were to make the sort of intelligent use of his chances that we anticipate in a good poker player, for example, he has so much opportunity to modify his expected position before the arrival of a shell that should not reckon the chances of hitting him to be very good. . . . On the other hand, the pilot does not have a completely free chance to maneuver at his will” (Wiener, *Cybernetics*, 5). Hence for Wiener, as for von Neumann, God does not play dice with the universe; he plays poker with it. See my essay “The Art of the Collision,” in *Speed Limits*, ed. Jeffrey T. Schnapp (Miami Beach: Wolfsonian-Florida International University, 2009), 84–92.

34. I am here invoking the incisive account of Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 57, 58, 151, 159, 158, 152.

35. In systems-theoretical terms, it turns to second-order observation—the observation of observation—and so to a second order of vision.

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37. See Vogl, “Becoming-Media”; and Bernhard Siegert, “Cacography or Communication? Cultural Techniques in German Media Studies,” *Grey Room* 29 (Winter 2007): 26–47. On the mechanized doubling of act and observation that is the condition and technique of motion pictures, see Baecker, “The Reality of Motion Pictures.”


41. On this deconstructive *Leerlaufen*—empty-running: an idling engine—with respect to media-cultural techniques, see my essay, “The Daily Planet” forthcoming in *Post45*. For the moment I am concerned with the materialities of communication, technologies of reference, and the apriorization of the media as condition of existence in these literary-pathological games, that is, with the cultural techniques that become so completely coterminous with the events that they at once record and comprise that they become imperceptible.

42. See my *True Crime*, 57–90.


44. That “terminological indifference” (see Vismann, *Files*, xii) is the crux of a series of media studies that center on cultural techniques—for example, file, post, index—which are at once object and act: they say what they do and, in doing so, do what they say. These relations (to adapt Deleuze’s phrase) are real but abstract—in effect, living diagrams. I am concerned here with the conditions that magnetize these transferential relations—and lend to administration the feel of the performative.

45. Wiener, *Human Use*, 20. Peter Galison provides an extraordinarily detailed and lucid account of the “great modernisms of physics”—the scale-shifting histories of light, time, and space, and the material techniques for


47. Wiener, *Human Use*, 20. For Wiener, it may be noted, this is “returning the emphasis of physics to a quasi-Liebnitzian [sic] state, whose tendency is once again optical” (20). That baroque turn (via Deleuze) is well marked in recent media studies. So too is the systems theory turn to matters of first-order and second-order observation. One finds in a range of “Kittlerian” media studies—on which account the “media determine our situation”—something of a migration to a systems theory outlook. I have in mind, for example, Siegert’s “Cacography or Communication?”—with its emphasis on observation, recursivity, and contingency, and on how media “process distinctions”; or Vogl’s “Becoming Media,” with its emphasis on “a relativized observer who observes him- or herself as an observer.” (I draw directly on both here.) The turn would in part seem to be from a history of media objects (gramophone, film, or typewriter, say) to medial operations. But these “objects” themselves are already (in von Foerster’s formulation) “tokens for Eigenbehaviors”—recursively stabilized and so self-referential processes. See Heinz von Foerster, “Objects: Tokens for [Eigen]Behaviors,” in *Observing Systems* (Seaside, Calif.: Intersystems Publications, 1981), 273–285.


49. David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (1961; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 16. The gyroscope is, however, already quasi-outmoded, for Riesman, as a model for persons. What Riesman traces is a shifting from the inner-directed to the “outer-directed” person; for the second, “the control equipment, instead of being like a gyroscope, is like a radar” (25). On radar and on the black boxes of a “radar philosophy,” see the final section of this essay.


51. See Hans Sachs, “The Delay of the Machine Age,” *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 2.137 (1933): 404–424. The problem of that delay involves, in part, why, for example, the Greeks, adept at making little devices like toy steam engines, never thought of adapting these toys to do real work. On the delay of the second machine age—the delay in recognizing feedback, that is, the “idea that circular causation is of very great importance”—there is Bateson’s useful summary: “Many self-corrective systems were also already known. That is, individual cases were known, but the principle remained unknown. Indeed, occidental man’s repeated discovery of instances and inability to perceive the underlying principle demonstrate the rigidity of his epistemology. Discoveries and rediscoveries of the principle include Lamarck’s transformism (1809), James Watt’s invention of the governor for the steam engine (late eighteenth century), Alfred

52. See Wiener, Human Use, 151, 24; Bateson, Mind and Nature, 116. These self-steering mechanisms (Wiener’s term “cybernetics” is, of course, derived from the Greek word for steersman) involve “a method of controlling a system by reinserting into it the results of its past performance”—the feeding back of outcomes into input. It involves, that is, “the unpurposeful random mechanism which seeks for its own purpose through a process of learning” (Wiener, Human Use, 61, 38).

53. On that short circuit, see Siegert, Relays. There is a return to phenomenology in new media studies. And there is a tendency in that work toward something of an uneven adjectival drift, an entailment drift, from materiality to body to embodiment to experience: that is, the materialities of reflexivity become embodied reflection, which becomes human embodiment, which becomes “richly embodied human experience.” On the presumptions at work in a range of such returns, one might consider Bruno Latour’s critique of such tendencies: “Most often inspired by phenomenology, these reform movements have inherited all its defects: they are unable to imagine a metaphysics in which there would be other real agencies than those with intentional humans, or worse, they oppose human action with the mere ‘material effect’ of natural objects which, as they say, have ‘no agency’ but only ‘behavior.’ But an ‘interpretative’ sociology is just as much a sociology of the social than [sic] any of the ‘objectivist’ or ‘positivist’ versions it wishes to replace. It believes that certain types of agencies—persons, intention, feeling, work, face-to-face interaction—will automatically bring life, riches, and ‘humanity.’” Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 61.


55. The cold war think tank, the operations center of contemporary war gaming, is of course the RAND Corporation, and RAND of course—in what Marcuse called our administrative “syntax of abbreviation”—is an acronym for “research and development.”

56. Malcolm Gladwell, Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking
Mark Seltzer (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), 99. Subsequent references are given parenthetically in the text. It’s of course the case that the popularization of styles of systems thinking—from pop psychology and self-help to ecological/planetary studies to loose couplings of world-systems theory and transworldliness in recent literary history—is extensive and extending. My momentary focus on Gladwell here—at the risk of overburdening that account—is opportunistic: to rehearse, inventory, and take the measure of that spreading of a systems outlook, and the notion of “art” that goes with it. One might compare Gladwell’s account with one of its primary sources, the incisive work of Gerd Gigerenzer, particularly *Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious* (London: Viking Adult, 2007).

57. On the war computer, see http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19500123,00.html. On Charcot, see Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 160. I examine these pathologies of agency and maladies of will in *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 74–81. The point not to be missed is that the reentry of observation into act is the real innovation of the managerial/control revolution: the observation and registration of the work process enter into the work process, or, better, emerge as the work process itself (the transference between the act and its registration, combining the symbolic and the real). There is, it may be noted, a direct tie between media studies and American studies by way of these communicative systems. The newly expanded field of American studies, for example—the enterprise: to boldly go where no Americanist has gone before—is not just one case among others. Americanization and a media a priori indicate each other from the start (from the democratic print public sphere on). Now transcultural, transatlantic, transnational—fields with the names of airlines, each new field, or funding object, setting thousands of keyboards in motion, forms of message and body transport in a culture premised on marketing the contingency that defines it. What has emerged, *via media*, is a notion of *America sans frontières*—unbound, always and everywhere. One finds here a transworldliness that is at the same time something else: for example, literary deep time or genre space as the space-time of the Dewey decimal system (library synchrony). After all, such technologies of recording, storing, and reference—files, index cards, the ring binder, and so on, the cascade of control technologies that proliferate with the second industrial revolution—rank with the plow and the stirrup as epoch-making cultural techniques, and so merit some description in this context too. See, e.g., Vismann, *Files*; Markus Krajewski, *ZettelWirtschaft* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2002). I take up some of the links between American studies and the apriorization of the media in “Die freie Natur,” *Archiv für Mediengeschichte* 9 (2009): 127–138.

58. That is, the “gee-whiz” effect in these reality games is—*Believe it or not!*—constitutive: the construction of reality and the reality of construction are contin-
ually differentiated, and go on in and through each other. The connection between the name Ripley and the reality show is explicit in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.

59. Or, in the terms of *Ripley’s Game*, “How much did the enemy know?” (167). And “Was it even a game?” (189).


62. It goes without saying that such arguments will convince no one for whom the aesthetic difference is precisely abiding in ambiguity—or, better, living through undecidability.


64. Luhmann, *Art*, 68, 309.

65. Ibid., 309. The point not to be missed is that this is to raise the question of art “as” social system, not to posit their identity. For Luhmann, society consists in communications and nothing else. But the notion that art “makes perception available for communication” and the notion of art as social system (and so distinct from perceptual systems) remain in paradox in Luhmann’s account.

66. Ibid., 312–313.


70. The law of distribution, across the equals sign, is inadequate to negative feedback systems. There is (as Bruno Latour has it) no transportation without translation (Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 215). Or as Michel Serres expresses it: “A discourse with no jokers is even conceivable. This universe would reduce to an identity principle. Thus the universe in question is undervalued by a = a” (Serres, *The Parasite*, 163). On the concept of the black box, see Wiener, *Cybernetics*, xi, 27, 108; and Glanville, “(Cybernetic) Musing,” 189–196. The earliest use of the term in this sense is attributed to James Clerk Maxwell in his
Theory of Heat (1871). Peter Galison points out that the term became popular in “radar philosophy” during the Second World War, via the use of common black-speckled boxes to encase radar equipment (Galison, “Ontology,” 247). If the gyroscope anticipates such equipment, I have noted that the gyroscopic model of personhood—the “inner-directed” person—gives way in the cold war period to another model: the “control equipment” of the “other-directed person,” a radar (Riesman, The Lonely Crowd, 25). On all counts, black boxes are “boxes with unspecified interiors,” which report back “their performed action on the outer world, and not merely their intended action” (Wiener, Human Use, 27).


74. Ibid.


76. On the “autonomization of everything” in modern social systems, and its aesthetic implications, see my essay “The Official World.”


78. The novel thus tacks closely to the genre of the Bildungsroman, with its secluded micro-societies—and their “miniaturization” in the “aesthetic harmony of the individual.” See Franco Moretti, The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture, trans. Albert Sbragia (New York: Verso, 1987), 36. It tacks closely to its history of a self-modeling on a model-picture (Bild), with the difference that the genre here epitomizes itself: it is a Bildungsroman told from the standpoint of a clone or picture-model. The microsociety of the novel is a society that sees itself as self-constituting and, therefore, self-observing, via career “carers” and “donor” figures—death and life thus making up the dark side of a career. In short, the novel continues to play out the semantic vocation...
of the *Bildungsroman* after its story of social and individual harmonization has been officially abandoned.


80. It makes it possible, too, to redescribe why the fixation on large abstractions like “social construction” or “agency” leads thinking in a circle, and does so in fields that appeal to forms of art to map social forms of life. In short, inhabiting that circle, and rehearsing it, defines interpretive fields that model the reflexivity they describe, and hence consist, more and more, in defining and redefining what they are, or were. That institutionally prolongs the irresolution—or, in Ishiguro’s terms, the “deferrals”—that sponsors them. And as I have set out (note 8), these archipelagoes of self-conditioned micro-fields thus make it possible for ecologies of ignorance—like those of Never Let Me Go—to prolong institutional play, in the good sense. That’s why, too, every question asked after a talk really is “a great question.”


84. And of course the whole reason why the clones exist in the first place is to substitute artificial for natural conditions, and to eliminate what is “pretty special” about bodies that exceed intentions, and work like black boxes, for, or at the expense of, those who have, or are, them.

**Works Cited**


