ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	THE POSTHUMANIST VISION OF ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET
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Alain Robbe-Grillet has long been a favorite object of investigation of literary criticism within French studies. A prolific writer, filmmaker, and theorist, he is often considered as the primary member of the group known as the New Novel, a collection of mostly French authors active in approximately the 1950s-1970s who sought to reinvent the novel through innovative narrative structures. While critical interest on Robbe-Grillet has slowed in recent years, he retains the reputation within literary criticism of being difficult to solve.

Robbe-Grillet's project, both literary and theoretical, is characterized by opposition to what he sees as the humanism of nineteenth-century literary realism. He seeks to invent narrative structures and elaborate a theoretical vision that would: (1) move away from humanism as a narrative and epistemological model, (2) invent a new conception of the human subject, and (3) more accurately reflect the state of the postwar Western world, which he views as being characterized by complexity, continual change, and technoscientific innovation.

Critical posthumanist theory, which coalesced as a relatively coherent theory primarily in Anglophone humanities departments in the 1990s, addresses many of the same issues and adopts many of the same approaches as Robbe-Grillet. In my dissertation, I argue that Alain Robbe-Grillet should be considered a posthumanist author because of the a-humanist bent of his literary and theoretical project and the similarities that exist between his vision and that of posthumanist scholars. Furthermore, contemporary posthumanist scholars such as Stefan Herbrechter and Mads Thomsen have argued for the use of literature as a field for further development of the theory, as well as for use of the theory as an investigative tool for literary studies. Despite this, only a handful of full-length texts have been published on the link between narrative and posthumanist theory, and I have found no full-length studies produced on French-language texts. In this way, this dissertation provides a new understanding of Robbe-Grillet, contributes to the development of posthumanist critical theory, and demonstrates the potential utility of this theory as a tool for literary criticism in an interdisciplinary approach that combines French literary criticism with Anglophone theory.

THE POSTHUMANIST VISION OF ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Dr. Joseph Brami, the first person to expose me to French literature, and whose mentorship, encouragement, and tireless support over many years inspired me to follow this career path.

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Introduction

The author Alain Robbe-Grillet was a prolific and writer and filmmaker who was active from the 1950s until his death in 2008. He produced many novels and films, and one collection of short stories, as well as several projects that blended genres and media, including three "ciné-romans" or "movie-novels;" a book combining written fiction with visual art, produced in collaboration with René Magritte; and a series of semi-autobiographical texts he called "romanesques." He also produced a sizeable body of theoretical commentary, originally published in the form of articles and essays in various print journals and newspapers, many of which were then compiled in two full-length books: *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963), which he produced himself, and *Le Voyageur* (2001), which was compiled and edited by Olivier Corpet and Emmanuelle Lambert. He also recorded a series of critical commentaries for the channel *France Culture*, produced in 2003.

His first works were novels, beginning with *Les Gommes*.[1] Robbe-Grillet has been an enigma for the critical establishment since he first began publishing in the 1950s. At his debut, the unconventional nature of his novels shocked and destabilized -- but also fascinated. Some of the most prominent critics of the time, such as Roland Barthes, considered him a serious challenge. This only further tempted critics to take on the enigma he posed:

> This irretrievability profoundly troubles a certain
> institutionalized conception of literature (which judges the

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[1] Although *Les Gommes* (1953) was his first published novel, he had already written *Un Régicide*, which he first proposed to a publishing house in 1949. After it was refused, he wrote and published several other novels, beginning with *Les Gommes*, before resubmitting *Un Régicide* for publication at Les Editions de Minuit, who finally published it in 1978 (Robbe-Grillet, "Présentation: Un Régicide").

> novels *unreadable*) and the unease provoked by Robbe-
> Grillet's texts might be demonstrated across a whole spectrum
> of critical reaction, ranging from outbursts of indignant
> hysteria to the more serious attempts to retrieve these texts
> (Heath 67).

These critics seized on his unconventional style of his writing, which did not conform

to norms and standards of "traditional" novels. His work has been compared to

mathematical patterns and to music, due to its repetitions, variations, self-reflexivity,

and circularity. It is also full of uncertainty and contradictions, and characterized by a

lack of conclusion and resolution.

Robbe-Grillet saw himself as a "modern" author taking up the reins from

writers like Flaubert, Joyce, Kafka, and Faulkner, which he names as his

predecessors. Much of what he produced was explicitly in response and opposition to

the writers Balzac and Sartre, writers who he felt represented a particular humanist

narrative code that modern society and modern writers had moved beyond. For him,

Balzac was the epitome of the realist style, which he felt was the greatest expression

of this outdated code. He reproached Sartre his existentialism, which he saw as a

return to the "tragedy" of the humanist mindset.

Although he insisted on the individuality and uniqueness of his work, early

critics insisted on grouping him loosely with other contemporary writers who were

producing similarly nonconformist works, though not always in the same way or for

the same reasons. Through the influence of the critical establishment, this group of

writers, which included Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Ollier, Claude Simon, Robert

Pinget, and Marguerite Duras,[2] became known as the "Nouveau Roman" or "New

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[2] The group of writers that constituted the "Nouveau Roman" was not fixed, and some critics include
different authors or exclude some of the ones listed here. The "original" group that inspired the name

Novel." Eventually, Robbe-Grillet begrudgingly accepted the title of "chef" of the New Novel, which also came to be known as the "Ecole du Refus" (School of Refusal) or the "Ecole du Regard" (School of the Gaze) due to the writers' common rejection of conventional norms and the prevalence of observing characters.[3] Eventually, with a new generation of new post-structuralist writers that critics associated with the group beginning in the 1970s, a "New New Novel" was signaled by the critical establishment. Robbe-Grillet participated in the conversations surrounding the New Novel and the New New Novel but never felt entirely comfortable considering these writers as a coherent group.

Over the years, Robbe-Grillet has consistently remained a critical object of investigation, resurrected each time a new theory (constructivism, structuralism, phenomenology, and most recently, various science theories) might provide insight into his mathematically patterned, intricately structured texts. But throughout these attempted recuperations, he retains his reputation for being "irretrievable." Criticism of Robbe-Grillet today continues to be characterized by fascination and frustration.

One of the many ways in which critics have sought to recuperate him is by dividing him into multiple Robbe-Grillets, each reflecting the different lines of inquiry through which they investigated him. In 1963, in the preface to Bruce

consisted of those who were captured in a 1959 press photo taken at the entrance to Les Editions de Minuit by Mario Dondero and included Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon, Claude Mauriac, Jérôme Lindon (editor), Robert Pinget, Samuel Beckett, and Claude Ollier. Alain Robbe-Grillet, for his part, insisted on including Duras as part of the group, despite her objections ("Comment le Nouveau Roman est-il né?" 5:08-5:49)

[3] The origin of the label "Ecole du Refus" comes from the title of an article on the Nouveau Roman written by Bernard Pingaud in 1958 (Pingaud, 1958). The term "Ecole du Regard" was attributed to the Nouveau Roman group by Claude Simon, on a photograph he took of Robbe-Grillet; Irene Albers explains, "Simon s'y réfère dans un photocollage intitulé "Robbe-Grillet (l'École du Regard)" : dans le portrait de Robbe-Grillet, il a inséré, à l'invers, une paire d'yeux qui regardent dans une autre direction" (Albers 157).

Morrissette's book *Les Romans d'Alain Robbe-Grillet*, the first major full-length

study of his works, Roland Barthes posited two Robbe-Grillets: a Robbe-Grillet

"destructeur des sens" and a Robbe-Grillet "créateur des sens" (Morrissette *Romans*

8). In 1972, Stephen Heath proposed three Robbe-Grillets: The anti-humanist Robbe-

Grillet, the Robbe-Grillet of extreme subjectivism, and the Robbe-Grillet that deals

with the mind, consciousness, and perception – the phenomenological Robbe-Grillet.[4]

The problem with multiplying Robbe-Grillets is that it does not solve the problematic

at hand. Such multiplications of Robbe-Grillet involve ignoring or leaving aside

major aspects of his vision as well as his own claims about his project.

Indeed, it is not just his novels that confuse and obfuscate, but also his

theoretical texts. Robbe-Grillet used his fictional work to develop, evolve and

elaborate a changing, loose textual "theory" that would articulate his project and his

worldview. His theory continually changed, in part because it was often written in

response to the critical establishment's evaluation of his fiction, rather than by a drive

to develop his own cohesive theory, and critics have always been further frustrated by

the fact that it often seems to be at odds with his fictional work. Thus, critics seeking

to interpret his work have often felt as though they must choose one or the other; they

work on his theory or they work on his fiction while putting his theory aside; Jean

Miesch, Bruce Morrissette, and Jean Alter all admit to doing this in their respective

full-length studies of Robbe-Grillet.[5] But, although he says he privileges his fiction,

Robbe-Grillet saw both as working in tandem, informing each other. His fiction and

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[4] In his book *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* (1972).
[5] Which are *Les Romans d'Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Morrissette, 1963), *Robbe-Grillet* (Miesch, 1965), and *La Vision du monde d'Alain Robbe-Grillet: Structures et significations* (Alter, 1966).

his theory are inherently intertwined, and any investigation that does not take both into account cannot constitute a satisfactorily thorough analysis of his work.

Meanwhile, a relatively recent theory that has significant potential for evaluating Robbe-Grillet in light of these issues has been making its way through the discursive disciplines of the humanities. Posthumanist theory, in brief, constitutes a general questioning of humanism, and its theoretical approach to this issue consists of taking up various scientific theories and combining them with those of the humanities, in particular French theory. Although it coalesced starting in the 1990s, it is only recently making its way into the humanities, and especially into literary studies, in a remarkably significant way. One major problematic along which Robbe-Grillet's work has been evaluated but never satisfactorily "retrieved" is that of humanism versus anti-humanism. Robbe-Grillet's work is directly related to his criticism of humanism and his questioning and reconceptualization of the human subject; recognition of the primacy of this theme in his work resulted in early critical debates that sought to recuperate him respectively as "humanist," "antihumanist" or "chosiste," recuperations which Robbe-Grillet himself refused.[6] Posthumanist theory likewise developed as a response to a general questioning of what it means to be human and formed largely, but not exclusively, in opposition to humanism. I will elaborate in more detail on the specifics of this theory and its relation to Robbe-Grillet's opposition to humanism in Chapter 1. As I hope to demonstrate with this project, posthumanist theory may provide the critical tools necessary to address the a-

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[6] "Prenant dans les années cinquante mes romans comme des machines infernales lui permettant d'exercer la terreur, [Barthes] va s'éfforcer de réduire leur glissements sournois, leurs fantômes en filigrane, leur autogommage, leurs béances, à un univers chosiste qui n'affirmirait au contraire que sa solidité, objective et littérale" (Robbe-Grillet "Le parti de Roland Barthes" loc. 2783).

humanist bent of his project -- without dividing him into multiple Robbe-Grillets --

while simultaneously investigating the other problematics important to his work, such

as subjectivity versus objectivity, and the notion of perception and cognition. It also

allows for a reconciliation of his theory and his fiction, and responds to the more

recent trend within literary studies and Robbe-Grilletian criticism to use scientific

theory for analysis of his work.

In fact, as early as 1992, perhaps sensing this movement, Raylene Ramsay

published *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity: Science, Sexuality and Subversion*. Another

scientifically-driven, though not exclusive, evaluation of Robbe-Grillet's work is Ben

Stoltzfus's *The Target: Alain Robbe-Grillet and Jasper Johns* (2006), a study

comparing the works of the two artists through the lens of autopoeisis, a theoretical

concept borrowed from biology, modified by systems theory and the cognitive

sciences, and incorporated into posthumanist theory. As posthumanist theory is

making its way into the discursive disciplines, this particular branch's potential for

literary evaluation is compelling. Stoltzfus is correct to seize on the potential of such

a theory for textual analysis of Robbe-Grillet not only because of this general trend

within the humanities, but also because Robbe-Grillet himself posits the use of

scientific theory for evaluation of his work, and the connection between art and

science generally. "The fact that the new non-Newtonian logic and non-Cartesian

universes find clear correspondences in Robbe-Grillet's enterprise of (self)

knowledge…suggests a certain power of generalization of the new paradigms," says

Ramsay (*Modernity* 5). A posthumanist approach to his work would also address this

aspect of his theoretical vision, as well as responding to the double "French" and scientific sides of Robbe-Grillet's own theoretical background.

Indeed, a general trend toward a mixing of science and literature is occurring generally across the humanistic disciplines, of which the increasing traction of critical posthumanist theory is reflective; in fact, Ira Livingston calls this development "the most important axis of literary and cultural theory throughout the past century" (1). Posthumanist theory has rapidly been gaining traction in the discursive disciplines and does not seem to be slowing anytime soon. Herbrechter continues, "It is no wonder that, in the face of the challenges that these new sciences, after the so-called 'science wars', the question of the human and the question of the relationship between literature and life come back to haunt the humanities;" and as Mads Thomsen puts it, "The posthuman horizon is not likely to go away, and this book, like many others, is written in media res of a process that many would prefer to have avoided" (Introduction 5; 1). A responsible humanities department should acknowledge this movement that bridges the humanities with the sciences and be prepared to critically engage with this trend and with posthumanist critical theory.

As critical posthumanism gains momentum and develops more thoroughly, posthumanist scholars have signaled that the next major developments of this theory can and should take place in the literary domain. They advocate for the use of literature as a means of exploring and developing the theory – much like Robbe-Grillet did with his own literary theory through production of fiction – as well as for the use of critical posthumanist theory as an interpretive lens for literary criticism. "I believe that there are a number of ways in which literature and other arts make

valuable contributions to the debates surrounding the posthuman, of which modes of

reflection are not, or are less capable," says Thomsen (9). After all, "analyses along

these lines will also have the side-effect of revealing how a constellation of literary

works present fresh nuances, and gain new actuality after being seen in the light of

other visions of human change" (Thomsen, 9). The last decade has seen the

publication of a handful of full-length books on the link between the posthuman and

narrative and literature, most of them published in the last few years, such as Bruce

Clarke's *Neocybernetics and Narrative* (2014)*, Literature and the Posthuman* (2017),

Posthuman Metamorphosis: Narrative and Systems (2008), Herbrechter's

Posthumanist Shakespeares (2012), and Thomsen's *The New Human in Literature*

(2013), cited above. Each of these undertakes preliminary textual analyses of selected

texts and outlines the potential of literature as a field for the development of the

theory, as well as the usefulness of the theory for literary analysis. However, only

Herbrechter's book seriously undertakes a thorough posthuman evaluation of texts

that are not recent science fiction ones; and his book consists of a collection of essays

on different Shakespearean works by various scholars. No single full-length

posthuman study of a particular literary text or particular author has yet been

published, and little to no evaluation of French texts exists, despite the significant link

between French theory and critical posthumanist theory (I will outline this connection

in more detail in Chapter 1).

    This is the case despite the call by posthumanist scholars that such projects

need to be undertaken, in particular from texts whose existence precedes that of

posthumanism as a critical theory. In the type of approach advocated by scholars such

as Herbrechter, "retroactive" readings -- application of posthumanist theory to texts that precede it historically – is not only acceptable and justified, but advocated. Herbrechter speaks of "retrofitting," or evaluating classical texts such as Shakespeare through the new posthumanist lens, while Thomsen says, "The theme of the posthuman can reinvigorate the status and use of canonical works of art and literature. Finally, the study of human change and the posthuman offers an approach to art and literature that may elicit new understandings of classical works" (Introduction 12; 12). And while more recent texts that explicitly feature the posthuman, especially in the field of science fiction, constitute an interesting and fruitful object of investigation, Thomsen in particular calls for the examination of texts other than those of science fiction: "While these are certainly worth examining in the context of this theme, as has been done by a number of scholars, there are less obvious works of twentieth century literature that may be of even greater interest" (2). I argue that the texts of Robbe-Grillet could constitute such a work.

This dissertation therefore responds to two different demands within the humanities: on the one hand, the continued desire within French studies to retrieve the "irretrievable" Robbe-Grillet and the irresistible potential of shining a new light on decades-old problematics. And on the other hand, using literature as a developmental space for posthumanist critical theory, as well as a demonstration of the utility of critical posthumanist theory as a tool for literary criticism. As far as I am aware, this dissertation would constitute the first project to bring together critical posthumanist theory and literary texts under the umbrella of French studies, a project which seems all the more relevant in that posthumanist critical theory takes up several prominent

lines of thinking within French theory. Furthermore, by applying theory that has roots in the sciences to a major figure in French literature, this dissertation constitutes a multidisciplinary project that falls in line with the general movement towards interdisciplinary studies and the bridging of arts and sciences that is currently en vogue within the humanities.

I hope to prove that Robbe-Grillet's project can be considered a posthumanist one, in that his particular vision and project correspond in manifold ways to those of posthumanist critical theory. A few things that are worth noting for the purpose of this study: Whether Robbe-Grillet is successful in his fiction in shaking off the mantle of humanism is up for debate -- after all, critical consensus in the 1960s and 70s, for example, was that Bruce Morrissette was able to rather convincingly produce a humanist Robbe-Grillet from a thorough examination of his fictional works; Jean Alter for his part unapologetically defends the fact that his conclusions run in direct opposition to the stated intention of the author.[7] Robbe-Grillet himself admits to being a victim of the humanist mindset.[8] Rather, what is being examined here is his overall critical vision and the manifestation of that vision as it occurs in his fiction. Nor am I evaluating the validity of his ideas. I am merely elaborating his theoretical vision and the way in which this vision manifests in his fiction, in order to demonstrate in what way that vision – whether accurate or misplaced - can be considered posthumanist.

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[7] In *La Vision du monde d'Alain Robbe-Grillet: Structures et significations* (1966).
[8] "Même si je dis qu'à l'intérieur de moi il n'y a rien…en fait il y a en moi tout le monde qui m'a précédé: les civilisations occidentales, l'histoire judéo-chrétienne, l'histoire grecque, les civilisations celtiques et que sais-je encore. Il y a donc aussi une morale humaniste, et par conséquent à chaque instant, dans mon expérience vécue…je continue néanmoins à ressentir la vieille idée d'une conscience pleine qui donne son sens au monde" ("Monde trop plein" loc. 3606).

I have chosen to work on a single author rather than a selection of different authors for a few reasons. Firstly, Robbe-Grillet's work lends itself to evaluation through posthumanist critical theory on so many levels that there is much to be said about the way in which they align. Space dedicated to other authors would have limited my exploration of these ideas. Secondly, as I mentioned previously, the intersection between posthumanist critical theory and literature is relatively new, and little to no critical literature exists on the link between posthumanist theory and French literature. I therefore would not have had much critical recourse for a "big-picture" evaluation of several authors. Additionally, this means that this project thus constitutes a preliminary critical investigation and I wanted it to be as thorough as possible.

Many lines of investigation using posthumanist theory other than the ones I propose here could be opened up in Robbe-Grillet's work, as well as that of other authors. Posthumanist critical theory may allow for explorations of Robbe-Grillet's work that address the aspects of his narrative technique that Richardson terms "unnatural narrative" while also addressing his stance against humanism, for example.[9] In the future I would like to examine the notion of communication within Robbe-Grillet's work, in particular through the systems-based sociological theory of communication of Niklas Luhmann, which I will explain in detail in Chapter 6. I am also interested in pursuing the question the relationship of textual creation and autopoeisis. In terms of other authors who have been read or understood under the umbrella of the French New Novel, the biological aspect of autopoeisis and Luhmann's communication theory might productively be used to analyze Nathalie

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[9] Presented, for example, in "Unnatural Narrative Theory," (2016).

Sarraute's pre-verbal concept of communication. The posthumanist notions of Nature/Culture and the idea of the preponderance of landscape and diminution of the human subject could be a fruitful line of investigation for the works of Claude Ollier, to name a few.

As Robbe-Grillet was a prolific writer, and my strength is in textual rather than cinematic studies, I have chosen to limit myself to his written texts, fictional and theoretical, to provide a reasonable field of investigation; however, there is plenty of potential for posthumanist evaluation of his cinematic works. My project is divided into two sections: theory and fiction. The first half of this dissertation will examine the theoretical parallels between posthumanist critical theory and Robbe-Grillet's own critical vision. The second half evaluates the manner in which these visions manifest themselves within Robbe-Grillet's fiction. In the first chapter, I present a brief and general outline of posthumanist theory and its genealogical development, as well as its overall relation to Robbe-Grillet, situating each of them in their sociohistorical contexts. In Chapter 2, I examine the specific criticisms of humanism that Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars share, and demonstrate the affirmative alternatives they propose in their place. In Chapter 3, I examine the ways in which Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars envision the repositioning of the humanist human subject. In Chapter 4, I analyze the ways in which the posthumanist affirmations outlined in Chapter 2 manifest themselves in *La Maison de rendez-vous* and *Topologie d'une cité fantôme*. In Chapter 5, I analyze the ways in which the posthumanist repositioning of the human subject manifests itself in *Dans le labyrinthe* and *La Reprise*. In my final chapter, I propose a posthumanist reading of

processes of cognition in Robbe-Grillet via Niklas Luhmann's systems-theory based theory of communication and society, following the posthuman affirmations made in the previous chapters, in order to demonstrate in what ways posthumanist models of subjectivity can be used to evaluate Robbe-Grillet's texts.

When referring to Robbe-Grillet's theoretical commentary, for those essays that have been compiled within *Pour un nouveau roman*, I will refer to the book, since it was compiled by Robbe-Grillet himself and the span of time it covers is relatively short (essays published between 1958 and 1963). In the interest of saving space, I will refer to this book as *PUNR* in further references. For those theoretical articles and essays compiled in *Le Voyageur*, I will refer to the individual essay or article from which the comment came, rather than the book, in order to signal the specific time and context in which the comment was made, as the book covers the entirety of his career (articles published from 1947 to 2000) and was compiled by editors, and as it is essential to this dissertation to indicate the consistency of Robbe-Grillet's theoretical ideas over a span of time and media. The works in the second half of this paper were selected in view of the presence of the thematic within the text as well as the historical distance of each pair of texts from each other; by selecting texts that are situated relatively far away from each other in terms of publication date, I can show the consistency with which these ideas are expressed in his fiction.

Chapter 1: Alain Robbe-Grillet and Posthumanist Critical Theory -- A Summary

1.1 Robbe-Grillet and Humanism

In his theoretical writings, Robbe-Grillet expresses viewpoints regarding humanism that, while variable across time and contexts, reflect a relatively consistent worldview that lines up neatly with many of the principal tenets of posthumanist theory.[10] In fact, when looked at from a posthumanist standpoint, they become remarkably consistent. His critical commentaries, interviews, and essays tend to concentrate in particular on the following lines of thought: a changed and changing "modern" world; man's place within that world; the role and responsibility of literature vis-à-vis man and his world; and the notion of writing, and by extension, creation. In each of these principal lines of questioning, Robbe-Grillet's ideas adhere to an unmistakable current of post-humanist sentiment.

Pinning down a coherent Robbe-Grilletian worldview has been a tricky issue, not the least because of his spontaneous writing style and his changeability. Critics have often accused Robbe-Grillet of inconsistency in his critical writings,[11] a charge which Robbe-Grillet himself readily acknowledges, stating, for example, that among the essays compiled in *Pour un nouveau roman*, there exists "une direction divergente, ou parallèle, ou même franchement antagoniste…[elle est] extrêmement

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[10] Early praise for Morrissette's book *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet* (1962) was often due to the fact that Morrissette was able to prove the existence of a coherent Robbe-Grilletian worldview from the "chaotic structure" of his fictional works; Frank Wagner evokes "la cohérence des positions robbe-grilletiennes" (Erickson 209; Wagner 128).

[11] Laurent Lesage, for example, characterizes Robbe-Grillet's work as "intrinsic difficulty complicated by equivocal statements of intention." (Lesage "Review" 223).

sensible dans le cours des articles qui [le] constituent," and admitting in the work

itself, his only full-length critical text, that "il n'y [a] qu'un parallélisme assez lâche

entre les trois romans que j'ai publiés à ce jour et mes vues théoriques sur un possible

roman futur" (Morrissette "Discussion: Robbe-Grillet no. 1, 2…X" 140; *PUNR* 46).

However, for him, this changeability in theory is not negative or problematic,

but instead productive. He tends to view it as the result of the natural evolution of the

mindset of an author in practice, for whom the formulation of critical ideas is a

continual phenomenon that takes place over the course of the act of writing: "Mes

romans ont certes pour moi un aspect théorique, mais ils ne peuvent représenter

chacun que leur propre théorie, chaque roman étant à la fois la construction et la

destruction de sa théorie" (Pinget 338). He also views changing critical views as part

of a fruitful continual exchange between theory and fiction:

> Chacun estimera… normal qu'un livre de deux ou trois cents pages
> ait plus de complexité qu'un article de dix; et, aussi, qu'il soit plus
> facile d'indiquer une direction nouvelle que de la suivre, sans qu'un
> échec – partiel ou même total -- soit une prévue décisive, définitive,
> de l'erreur commise au départ (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 46).

Thus, changeability is a norm and expectation, rather than a fault. As Paul Surer notes

in his review of Barthes' introduction to Morrissette's book, "On serait même tenté de

dire [qu'il est] contradictoire (nous savons que notre romancier n'admet pas cette

critique: il ne se contredit pas, affirme-t-il; il modifie son point de vue)" (330).

Additionally, Robbe-Grillet views such changeability as the product of an

ongoing productive process of literary innovation: "Ces textes ne constituent en rien

une théorie du roman; ils tentent seulement de dégager quelques lignes d'évolution

qui me paraissent capitales dans la littérature contemporaine" (*PUNR* 9). An

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innovation and evolution that are so relentless as to escape even his own attempts at pinning it down; in an interview on the television show *Apostrophes* he reproaches the participants who try to define him and his literature, saying that he has only ever reclaimed the right to perpetual and permanent invention, "c'est-à-dire le refus de se figer à des règles -- même fixées par moi!" ("Le style c'est l'homme" 21:13-21:18). While these particularities have frequently frustrated critics in the past, looking at them as a posthumanist mindset alleviates the problem somewhat, for, as I will demonstrate, this notion of continual change can be considered an instance of emergence and therefore is actually quite valid from the standpoint of posthumanist theory. Regardless of the variation in his theoretical ideas over time, however, consistent lines of thought can be detected throughout his theoretical oeuvre, in particular in regards to the idea of humanism.

While not exclusively founded upon direct opposition to humanism, posthumanism has its roots in a generalized skepticism of its validity as well as in French anti-humanist theory. This is the first line of convergence between Robbe-Grillet and the posthumanists. That Robbe-Grillet was ardently opposed to humanism as an artistic and critical approach is well established, so much so that by the 1990s critics came to invoke the phrase "new humanism"[12] when writing about Robbe-Grillet, while others took his a-humanist standpoint as such a given that they addressed the topic tongue-in-cheek; Raylene Ramsay, for example, describes his work as a "ludic intertextual journey through the ruins of humanist enlightenment" ("Ruins" 231). Earlier critics, of course, attributed to him and those they grouped

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[12] For example, Ben Stolzfus, in "Review of *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity: Science, Sexuality and Subversion* (1992) and Baraoui, Hedi,"Alain Robbe-Grillet's Projet pour une revolution à New York: An Existential Nouveau Roman" (1984).

under the heading "Nouveau Roman" the label "école du refus" to describe his

resistance to those ideas he would eventually identify as humanist, while Melvin

Friedman describes early criticism as seizing (perhaps too eagerly) on his "distinct

anti-humanist tendencies" (Friedman 133). Much of the early debate around whether

Robbe-Grillet was *chosiste* or *humaniste*, while later demonstrated to be

problematic,[13] illustrates nonetheless the centrality of the question of humanism in

Robbe-Grillet's vision.

In effect, in all of his theoretical writing, Robbe-Grillet has displayed a steady

antipathy for humanism, although he did not use the term "humanism" consistently

until publication of his essay "Nature, Humanisme, Tragédie," in 1958. Before then,

Robbe-Grillet uses various terms to refer obliquely to humanism: "la vérité humaine

supérieure;" "une civilisation mentale…du passé;" "conceptions essentialistes de

l'homme;" "romantisme systématique;" his most well known being the "mythe de

profondeur" (*PUNR* 20, 17, 22, 37, 22). He uses the word "myth" because he believes

that humanism had previously been broadly accepted as truth in Western thought, and

also is fundamentally fallacious. Robbe-Grillet also employs the term "profondeur" in

a specific and particular way, using it basically as shorthand for humanism, or, as he

says, "la civilisation humaniste de la profondeur tragique" (Mansuy 98). In later

critical commentary he often discusses humanism in terms of "ideology" and "codes."

The publication of "Nature, Humanisme, Tragédie" marked his first real attempt at

developing and explaining his anti-humanist sentiments as such. But if the word

"humanism" is absent in his earlier work it is not because the idea was not there -- it

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[13]In the same 1976 article, for example, Friedman summarizes succinctly, "The early *chosiste* pronouncements of Barthes and others seem rather elementary and even misguided. Much of what was said in the 1950s and early 1960s is now, quite simply, out of date" (Friedman 133).

was indeed present – rather, his theoretical ideas had not yet fully coalesced in opposition to a target he was willing to name as humanism.

Thus, a criticism of humanism, whether implicit or explicit, has been present in Robbe-Grillet's theoretical work from the very beginning (in one of his first published essays in 1955, he evokes the "mythes du XIXe siècle;" in his first televised interview in 1957 he speaks about certain "systèmes d'interpretation" that "faussent complètement" the nature of the world) (*PUNR* 10; "Jalousie" 7:29-7:53). Eventually, Robbe-Grillet, for his part, stated unequivocally that elimination of humanism is a key component of his literary project: "Il y a effectivement de ma part la volonté de faire disparaitre tout ce qu'on peut appeler l'humanisme" ("Chemins" 9:08-9:15). All in all, both Robbe-Grillet and most of his critics – for once in agreement – maintain that the question of humanism has been central to his vision from its earliest days. The importance for Robbe-Grillet of this loss of "profondeur" in relation to of the "modern" moment, therefore, should not be underestimated; it is essential to understanding his project.

Posthumanist theory, similarly, most often positions itself in relation to humanism/s, but tends to take a softer stance than anti-humanist theories. Posthumanism does not necessarily base itself exclusively in opposition to humanism, but rather attempts to acknowledge, confront, and "work through" or deconstruct many of its most problematic tenets while still "[showing] 'care' for the human" (Herbrechter Introduction 3, 4). Most posthumanist scholars view posthumanist theory as an affirmative renewed conceptualization of the human and his surroundings rather than a negation; it validates the problematics but does not contain

the pessimism inherent in French antihumanism critiques of humanism, such as

Foucault's apocalyptic declaration of the "death of man." (Foucault 342). Critics like

Rosi Braidotti recognize the contributions of anti-humanist thought has made, and

offer tentative hope that posthumanism may validate their concerns while overcoming

their limitations; Braidotti, for example, thinks of the impasses faced by anti-

humanist thought as imposed by "lethal binaries" that may be overcome by

posthumanism's more open-ended, pluralistic approach:

> Posthumanism…traces a different discursive framework, looking more
> affirmatively towards new alternatives…The posthumanist perspective
> rests on the assumption of the historical decline of Humanism but goes
> further in exploring alternatives, without sinking into the rhetoric of
> the crisis of Man. It works instead towards elaborating alternative
> ways of conceptualizing the human subject (*The Posthuman* 37).

Despite the impression of some early critics, especially in the wake of publication of

For a New Novel,[14] Robbe-Grillet's approach was not meant to be simply "anti" or a

negation of that which he criticized. To counter the elements of humanism that he

finds troubling, Robbe-Grillet proposes positive alternatives. As R.O. Elaho states,

"l'école du refus – Cette description n'est pas tout à fait valable car R-G dépasse le

stade du refus; il propose, lui, des "solutions" (106).

And the similarities do not end at opposition to humanism. Neither

posthumanist theory nor Robbe-Grillet's literary project are simply a humanism call-

and-response. To see it that way would be too reductive. While starting from a

viewpoint of criticism of humanism, both posthumanist scholars and Robbe-Grillet

move away from this point of departure, toward the creation and elaboration of new

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[14] "By failing to reiterate the positive aspects of the program outlined in the *Express* series, such as his
remarks on constructional principles, and by increasing his emphasis on the negative aspects of
divesting fiction of its untenable bonds with the past Robbe-Grillet furthered in many quarters the view
that he was, in truth, an 'anti-novelist'" (Morrissette "Theory and Practice" 261-262).

alternative mindsets that address other ideas. Elements of his work that do not

necessarily directly address humanism, such as his notion of creation, open up

exciting new possibilities of interpretation when examined using his a-humanist

stance as the starting point. With critical posthumanism as a guide we can look to new

methods for interpretation of various elements of his work, which is, notably, an

approach welcomed by Robbe-Grillet himself.

1.2 Sociohistorical Origins of Critical Posthumanist Theory

The term itself can be traced to an article by influential postmodern scholar Ihab

Hassan, who remarked in 1977 that

> We need first to understand that the human form - including human
> desire and all its external representations - may be changing radically,
> and thus must be re-visioned. We need to understand that five hundred
> years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms
> itself into something that we must helplessly call posthuman (Hassan
> 843).

Hassan's comment reflects the reality of his historical moment, characterized by a

burgeoning doubt in Western intellectual and general culture about the validity of

humanism as the dominant model for knowledge and representation, a doubt brought

on by a range of historical and epistemological factors. At the time Hassan was

writing, structuralists, poststructuralists, postcolonialists, and deconstructionists were

all setting humanism in their critical sights, and the postmodern age was dawning. In

everyday life, technology was advancing and proliferating at an unprecedented rate,

no longer exclusively consigned to the purview of an intellectual elite but

increasingly accessible to the average Joe, a circumstance originating in the World

War II era and the development of computers and computer science. In fact, just five

years after the publication of Hassan's article, as Neil Badmington points out, a notably a-humanist event occurred when *Time Magazine* selected as its 1982 Man of the Year *the computer*, a choice rife with posthuman significance. Badmington says,

> Breaking with more than half a century of convention, the cover of the first issue of *Time* to appear in 1983 featured a different type of star. 'Several human candidates might have represented 1982,' wrote the magazine's publisher…'but none symbolized the past year more richly, or will be viewed by history as more significant, than a machine: the computer.' This time, it seemed, humans had failed to leave their mark (Introduction 1).

Badmington goes on to describe the cover's visual representation of the computer centered in the frame, with a forlorn-looking human figure placed off to the side, for him an accurate figurative depiction of the contemporary situation of the human in regards to technology (Introduction 1).

The displacement of the human by the mechanical/computational and its relationship to the non-human came to be an increasingly common theme in both academic and popular culture of the period. As a brief illustration in regards to popular culture, I'll cite some examples from cinema, for, as Badmington points out, commercial movies from around this time often depict the human being as confronting a non- or a-human other; *The Exorcist* (human/supernatural), *Jaws* (human/animal), and *Star Wars: A New Hope* (human/alien-robotic-animal other), for example, all rank among the most popular films of the 1970s.

This trend increased in the 1980s, as many of the highest-grossing and most widely popular films continued along this tack: the *Star Wars* franchise*, Ghostbusters, E.T., Back to the Future, Terminator, Beetlejuice, Aliens, Poltergeist,* and *Predator*, to name a few. Most of the time, as Badmington notes, films of this

type depict humanity as coming under threat by a non-human other, and the storyline operates in such as a way as to reaffirm the notion of a singular and peerless humanity; the hero and humanity triumph over the non-human other, usually through some sort of quintessentially human quality, a human "essence." (Even in *E.T.*, where the alien/non-human is good and certain men are bad, the separation between human and non-human remains unbridgeable, with every entity ultimately restored to his "proper" side of the divide when E.T. returns home to his own kind). But the mere fact that this motif occurs so consistently in films from this time period hints at a collective uncertainty about what it means to be human. (It is also notable that many of the most popular films from that time that *do not* feature a non-human other tend to emphasize a loss of innocence, as well as depict coming-of-age experiences broadly considered as "universal" and "uniquely" human, serving as a reactionary reply to this uncertainty: *Sixteen Candles, The Breakfast Club, Fast Times at Ridgemont High, Ferris Bueller's Day Off*).

But films featuring the non-human, especially those of the 1980s, did not merely stop at the "us-vs.-them" mentality. Many of these films *combined* the human with the non-human: *Terminator* is a part-human, part-robot assassin. Marty McFly manages to keep his (human) identity intact by visiting the future with the help of his time-traveling Delorian in *Back to the Future*. The city of Los Angeles in the film *Blade Runner* is equally populated by humans and human-like robots, which, significantly, are indistinguishable from each other.

It was this image of the technologically enhanced human, or cyborg, that paved the way for a contemporary and posthumanist scholarly reconfiguration of the

human, not only shaky from the onslaught of technology and its integration, but also under attack from anti-humanist thought, as well as from a postmodern mindset that no longer gave credence to the kind of Lyotardian grand "metanarrative" that humanism had previously provided (Lyotard *Condition* xxiv). The figure of the cyborg ("cyber organism"), so prevalent in the mass culture landscape of the late 1970s and early 1980s, serves as the jumping-off point for Donna Haraway's now-famous academic essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1985), which, although not containing the term "posthumanism" itself, many scholars, including Stefan Herbrechter and Rosi Braidotti, point to as one of the chief points of origin of posthumanist critical thought.[15]

In it, she argues that while technology has made us ever more doubtful of the existence of the "inherent" and "essential" in the human – and was right to do so -- it is not just the border between man and machine that is at stake. The boundaries between the human and all of its "others" - animals, the (ecological) environment, monsters, and aliens, to name a few - are crumbling; perhaps they have never been valid in the first place. At the very least they should be fundamentally questioned. And while many theorists had previously attempted to problematize humanism, for Haraway, none had provided a theoretical framework that satisfactorily reflected her current technoscientific sociohistorical reality, encapsulated by the image of the cyborg. Already the postmodern moment had influenced Western thought through its refusal of binaries and a valuation of fragmentation, multiplicity, and transgression

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[15] For example, Herbrechter, *Analysis*, 41-42; Braidotti, *The Posthuman,* 155

over boundaries and essences. Haraway's observations on the cyborg constitute an illustration and shoring up of these notions from a technological and feminist standpoint.

Specifically, in her essay, she approaches the cyborg from the standpoint of "socialist feminism," targeting the Freudian psychoanalytical paradigm of oedipal-derived gender. Haraway's critique therefore falls within the bounds of feminist critical theory, one of many late-twentieth-century theoretical approaches that took aim at the humanist framework via the problematic of marginalization, alongside postcolonial and queer theory. But Haraway's essay is particularly interesting in that, rather than reclaiming a gender identity marginalized by the hegemony of a white/male/European model (for instance, as in the case of other feminist theorists, a reclamation of the female gender), she postulates that we have moved beyond gender entirely: For Haraway we are living in a "post-" society, in a world and a moment that is post- nearly everything, including gender. Furthermore, and importantly, while the notion of an essentialist, universally shared humanity usually won the day in film and popular culture, Haraway's essay posits the notion of the cyborg – man *as* other - as valid and accurate. She accepts, rather than disparages, a new amorphous, unbounded, dubitative vision of the human, as it appears in both life and artistic representation, thus laying the groundwork for its further examination in critical theory. "I am making an argument for the cyborg as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality…the cyborg is our ontology…it is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality" (*Cyborg* 7).

Haraway's essay is not simple, nor is it unproblematic. It was both heralded and criticized by scholars and continues to be so nowadays. But its importance in launching posthumanist theory as a consolidated critical approach is substantial. It was one of the first publications to put forth in one text several of the various threads commonly gathered today under the umbrella of posthumanist theory, including the decentering of man; the breaking down of boundaries between human and various others; fractured identities; simultaneous similarity and difference; technological hegemony; information theory and systems models; a rejection of essentialism, dualities, and binaries; and an embrace of polymorphism, flow, and exchange. Her essay takes these lines of thought up from various disciplines, ties them to her socio-politico-cultural moment, brings them together, and points them toward a future of posthumanist critical theory. It charged into its social moment with a synthesis of ideas and recognition of sociocultural malaise that was sorely needed at the time. As Badmington notes, "Although they shared a common concern with the end of human sovereignty, theory and mass culture were kept generically apart. When they eventually met, however, posthumanism was born" (Introduction 8).

The prevalence of the cyborg and the breaking down of boundaries in mass culture that inspired Haraway to write continued to increase and to inspire scholars to follow Haraway's initial path of questioning. Writing in 1993, Bruno Latour investigated this phenomenon and its relation to modernity in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), inspired by his dismay at the incapacity of something as mundane as a daily newspaper to decisively categorize a phenomenon as firmly established and ubiquitous as global warming. Other major technological developments of the 1990s

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cited by scholars as reasons to investigate the post/human include the growth of an ear on a mouse's back, the cloning of Dolly the sheep, and the Navy's use of dolphins in weapons technology programs, among many others.[16]

Towards the end of the 1990s, posthumanism was increasingly investigated more systematically as a critical theory.[17] In 1999 N. Katherine Hayle's *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, another key text in posthumanist theory, appeared. Although posthumanism as both a notion and a term did exist before Hayles's book, Hayles's work in particular, especially as it built upon the work of Haraway, made "posthumanism" more academically widespread, in part because of the extent to which her ideas found an audience confronted by a rapid surge of technological and scientific developments in both mainstream and academic culture, and who were hungry for a way of situating them in relation to the human: "The real breakthrough, however, undoubtedly comes with N. Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* (1999)" (Herbrechter *Analysis* 36). This may be because she openly advocated for the adoption of theories from other disciplines, especially the sciences, and additionally because she was among the first to propose a somewhat comprehensive vision of what "the posthuman" and its accompanying comprehensive critical theory might entail.

With her book, Hayles acknowledges her own critical malaise in the face of certain technological developments and, more specifically, puts into the question the quasi-ubiquitous critical division between "information" and "materiality," often

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[16] *What is Posthumanism?,* "In Search of Post-Humanist Theory" (Wolfe, 2010, 2000); *Posthumanism* (Badmington, 2000)

[17] "Until the mid-1990s, the term 'posthuman' was rarely used, but it has since established itself across a number of disciplines." (Thomsen 1)

characterized as the distinction between "mind" and "body" in various manifestations of humanist thought.[18] Noting that many technological developments of her time, such as the notion of downloading human consciousness into a computer, trouble this distinction, or worse, erase it, Hayles highlights the importance of rethinking the notion of the human, specifically the "liberal humanist subject," as she puts it:

> The overlay between the enacted and the represented bodies is no longer a natural inevitability but a contingent production, mediated by a technology that has become so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject…This realization, with all its exfoliating implications, is so broad in its effects and so deep in its consequences that it is transforming the liberal subject, regarded as the model of the human since the Enlightenment, into the posthuman (*Became* 2).

Thus did critical posthumanist theory begin to coalesce as a viable discipline, with these texts serving as its first major textual points of reference. As it has since developed, posthumanist theory has taken up the threads of several major theories in many disciplines that align with this technoscientifically driven destabilization of the human, borrowing from the sciences, information theory, and the humanities, especially French studies. The most important of these are French antihumanism and cybernetics/information and systems theory (which was then extrapolated into theories of communication, cognition, and sociology currently used by posthumanist theory). I will now outline a brief genealogy of posthumanist thought that demonstrates the role that each of these plays in contemporary posthumanist critical theory, and examine to what extent Robbe-Grillet can be said to be familiar with and influenced by these same theories.

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[18] Obviously, there are many manifestations of humanism/humanisms; in this work, Hayles names Descartes as the major source of this distinction.

<u>*1.3 A Brief Genealogy of Critical Posthumanist Theory*</u>

A principal characteristic of critical posthumanist theory is that it brings together theory from the humanities with those of the sciences. The posthumanist critical theory that debuted in the 1990s was a singular creature that merged humanities critical theory, especially that of French theorists, with contemporary theoretical developments in more scientific fields, including cybernetics, chaos theory, information theory, cognitive science, sociology, and systems theory (cybernetics and neocybernetics uniting much of these last in a cohesive manner); Bart Simon names the particularity of "a critical posthumanism" as an "interdisciplinary perspective informed by academic poststructuralism, postmodernism, feminist and postcolonial studies, and science and technology studies" (2-3). The particular iterations of these two distinct branches of theory – from the humanities and the sciences -- that inform posthuman critical theory developed more or less independently along parallel timelines throughout the second half of the 20th century before being combined as posthumanist theory in the 1990s. I shall now outline the development of each in turn before demonstrating how they come together within the bounds of posthumanist critical theory.

Most posthumanist scholars view posthumanist critical theory as being a natural and logical successor of several major theoretical trends within the humanities in the mid- to late-20th century thought, many of which found their most extensive expression within French studies. Posthumanist theory is seen as variously taking up the reins of poststructuralism, postcolonialism, (post-) feminism, deconstructionism, and postmodernism, to name a few. One of the best summaries of the epistemological

precursors of posthumanist theory comes from Rosi Braidotti in her book *The Posthuman* (2013). She views posthumanism as a natural descendant of anti-humanist strains of thought (although it must not itself be confused with anti-humanism) that appeared during the second half of the 20th century, and of French anti-humanist theory in particular.

For Braidotti, the period immediately after World War II was a time when "the Humanist ideal came to be questioned quite radically," especially by French intellectuals, who "acquired a special international significance as spokesmen for the age" (*The Posthuman* 16, 19). She views certain pivotal historical events of the 1960s and 1970s, such as decolonization, social feminist movements, and youth activism, as generating new antihumanist epistemologies by forcing those involved for the first time to seriously question the dominance of the Humanist ideal in the Western mindset, especially within Europe. For her, "up until the 1960s, philosophical reason had escaped relatively unscathed from its responsibilities of domination and exclusion," and the growing exposure and acknowledgement of marginalized groups such as women, minorities, and colonized peoples, as well as their theorizing by French intellectuals such as Luce Irigaray and Frantz Fanon, irrevocably destabilized the dominance of the white male European universal in both the critical and the popular psyche (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 20).

Braidotti cites those of the generation of '68, also known as the "post-structuralist generation," as being particularly influential: "France occupies a very special position in the genealogy of anti-humanist critical theory" (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 19). As she notes, by 1970, when Foucault published *The Order of*

Things, in which he questions man's place at the center of world history and decries his "delusions of grandeur," the Humanist ideal of the human had already been radically put into question by many of the dominant radical and political discourses of the post-World-War-II French intellectual set (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 23). Braidotti also cites the later theories of Derridean deconstructionism and Lyotard's postmodernism, successors to the epistemological lineage begun by the intellectual generation of '68, as being taken up by posthumanist theory. The expansive multinodal rhizomic networks of Deleuze and Guettari have also been adopted as a model by posthumanist theorists seeking a decentered and multidirectional paradigm. The problematics raised by these French theories correspond in many ways to those raised by Hayles and Haraway, such as differentiation; the dissolution of grand narratives (such as that of humanism); the marginalization of non-human others and minorities by the humanist white male hegemonic model of the human subject; and plurality, fragmentation, and decentralization.

Thus do the poststructuralists, feminists, postcolonialists, and antihumanists of French theory, as well as their successors, serve as one major constituent of posthumanist theory. However, according to Braidotti, as useful as these theories and as salient as their problematics are, these lines of thought have their limitations, which, for Braidotti, ultimately keep them from being in and of themselves viable platforms from which to re-examine the notion of the human. For her, antihumanism as a whole has too many internal contradictions to serve as a productive theory and also hinges on the negative while failing to provide a workable affirmative alternative. She favors feminist and postcolonial theory because they do not simply

offer negative critiques but also "propose new and alternative ways to look at the human from a more inclusive and diverse angle" (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 28). In addition, these theories fail to address the cybernetic, technological and informatics aspects of the posthuman raised by Hayles, Haraway, and others. For her, this is the promise of posthumanism, which carries on the legacies of the poststructuralism, antihumanism, and postmodernism of French studies in a way that seeks to surmount their limitations and adds to them through theories adopted from the sciences.

The majority of scholars who have discussed the genealogy of posthumanist critical theory in book-length studies share the general content of Braidotti's genealogy. Stefan Herbrechter, for example, also points to what he refers to as "French Theory," in particular post-structuralism and deconstructionism, as a key precursor to and constituent of posthumanist critical theory, and gives special mention to the thinkers Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, and Lacan (*Analysis* 196). Like Braidotti, Herbrechter points to French antihumanist thought generally as being an important forerunner to current posthumanist theory, but, like Braidotti, is careful to note that posthumanist theory is essentially different from and not be confused with (strictly) antihumanist thinking.

Like the French thinkers cited by Herbrechter and Braidotti, the intellectuals involved in the development of concurrent theories in the sciences later adopted by posthumanist theory were confronting a conceptual reconfiguration of the human. The developments that were made as a result of this confrontation were turned into new theories that were ultimately adopted by posthumanism. One of the most fruitful

breeding grounds in the development of those theories was the Macy Conferences of 1941-1960.

Bruce Clarke and Mark B.N. Hansen offer one of the most concise summaries of the generation of this strain of cybernetic theory their edited book *Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays on Second-Order Systems Theory* (2009). They state that starting in the 1940s, scientists concerned with the development of command-and-control systems started using information and communication theory to develop artificial intelligence, which combined biological and computational systems (Clarke and Hansen 2). They named their new field "cybernetics" and quickly found that such a mixing of the biological and the technological "raised new issues about the 'definition of man': If human behaviors can be duplicated by machines, how is one to "differentiate man" from other entities?" (Clarke and Hansen 2). This question was attacked by leading information and cybernetics scientists at the Macy Conferences throughout the years it was held, and from there the emerging "cybernetic discourse entered psychology, anthropology, and other social sciences and from there, in the 1950s and '60s, the humanities and the creative arts" (Clarke and Hansen 2).

One of the most influential theories to come out of the Macy Conferences is that which is known as second-order cybernetics, or neocybernetics. In brief, cybernetics proved useful as an approach to the problematic of the human by positing the constructive nature of knowledge and reality, but being based upon binaries such as form/substance and virtuality/actuality, was ultimately deemed too simplistic. Through the Macy Conferences a new theory was developed – neocybernetics -- that "de-ontologized the question" (Clarke and Hansen 4). Such a theory allows for more

complex models of communication and information, and, after being extrapolated by scholars such as the sociologist Niklas Luhmann, subjectivity and cognition. Indeed, Clarke points out that neocybernetics has informed "some of the most important theoretical and critical conversations going on today in the cognitive sciences, chaos and complexity studies, and social systems theory" (Clarke and Hansen 5).

They also note that many of the French thinkers cited by Braidotti, such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, were also influenced by this same branch of scientific theory and have used it for analysis in their own work (Clarke and Hansen 5). The Macy theories thus have a history of informing French theory. Clarke and Hansen also note that the development of the Macy Conference theories was "historically concurrent with the postwar spread of linguistic structuralism in Europe" of the type cited by Braidotti (Clarke and Hansen 2). Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, French intellectuals and inheritors of the "French Theory" cited by Herbrechter, and theorists in the discipline of science philosophy, situate their work squarely between the two domains, drawing from both of these two strains of theory. Their work has in turn has been adopted and elaborated by posthumanist critical theory. Thus are these two threads of theory – scientific and humanities -- not only taken up by posthumanist theory, but also have a preexisting history of informing each other. Additionally, the two theories were co-present and intertwined at precisely the time Robbe-Grillet began to write, in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Clarke and Hansen state that "a growing body of scholarly work is rethinking the shape and evolution of the relations among science, technology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, literature, and the arts" (Clarke and Hansen 5). This confluence of diverse fields is exactly

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where both posthumanist critical theory and Robbe-Grillet situate their respective projects.

Robbe-Grillet was himself an inheritor of the French antihumanist intellectual tradition and of course well familiar with structuralism and poststructuralism. Like posthumanist scholars, he claims to be witnessing a particular historical moment that is changing what it means to be human: "Si ces objets-là [in Balzac] sont, comme on dit, plus "humains" que les nôtres, c'est seulement – et nous y reviendrons – que la situation de l'homme dans le monde qu'il habite n'est plus aujourd'hui la même qu'il y a cent ans" (*PUNR* 117). And that in this moment, he is acutely aware of the nascent development of a new conception of the human: "Chacun sent confusément…qu'un autre homme est en train de naître depuis déjà le début de ce siècle, fait de fragments mobiles et dépareillés – pulsions, représentations imaginaires, stéréotypes culturels, détails brisés de l'homme ancien et de l'ancien monde" (Robbe-Grillet "Nathalie Sarraute" loc.777). While he is thoroughly familiar with structuralist and poststructuralist theory, it is worth nothing that he continually resisted these approaches to his work; in this way he is different from writers like Ricardou, who embraced this tradition. And while Robbe-Grillet acknowledges the role of anti-humanist thinkers like Foucault, and their productive influence on the development of literature and theory in the postwar moment, he indicates at the same time that it is not sufficient to understand his work. He seems to accept their problematics but wants something in addition to those theories, in the way posthumanist scholars such as Bradiotti and Paul Rekret do:

> It is worth noting that on a theoretical level posthumanism
> consolidates around what it sees as the exhaustion and inability to

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respond to the new state of hybridity by an earlier 'linguistic turn' associated with Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and more recently, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, amongst others. Needless to say, the poststructuralist critique of the subject holds an important place in theories of the posthuman, but its emphasis upon language or discourse is nevertheless regarded as inadequate for reflecting upon the digital mediations by which thinking is increasingly conditioned" (Rekret 82).

He also seems to suggest that the answer to this lack lies in the use of scientific theory as a framework. Trained and employed as an agronomist and engineer, and raised in a family of engineers and scientists, Robbe-Grillet was well placed to observe and comprehend contemporary developments in scientific theory, as Roch Smith points out:

It might be expected that, as an applied scientist, Robbe-Grillet would be certain that things could be made to make sense. But this is also the century of Albert Einstein's relativity and Werner Karl Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty, both of which challenged accepted views of physical reality and knowledge. Robbe-Grillet is perhaps better placed than most twentieth-century novelists to understand the ambiguities and uncertainties inherent in modern science (21).

Indeed, in his critical commentaries he often discusses recent developments in such scientific theories and lauds them, saying, "On devrait être plus attentifs à la façon dont la science moderne a changé nos rapports au concept de raison. La physique quantique, par exemple, a bouleversé le principe de causalité. Comment l'humanisme peut-il rester ainsi enlisé alors que la science fait de tels bonds?" (Dufour loc. 8644). In fact, he directly states that he is familiar with current scientific developments of his time: "Vous savez que d'une façon generale je me suis beaucoup interessé aux théories, pas seulement aux théories sur le roman, mais également aux théories scientifiques" (Montalbetti loc. 7809). He muses on their utility for use as interpretive

critical frameworks in his own field of art and literature, explicitly naming

"connaissances scientifiques, qu'il s'agisse de sciences de la matière ou de sciences

de l'homme" as a major agent of epistemological change (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 137).

In the 1972 Colloque at Cerisy, he cites sociology and recent sociological

developments as having particular potential for use in literature and the arts, a

comment that runs historically concurrent to the development of such sociological

theory by Niklas Luhmann in the 1970s and 1980s – a major component of

posthumanist theory (Leenhardt 172-173). In fact, he made similar observations

regarding sociology as early as 1957, but, interestingly, situates their development *in

the future*: "Plus tard, sans doute, les sociologues découvriront dans les solutions de

nouvelles similitudes" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 35). In another 1977 interview he

expounds in depth bout the vast potential of interpretive frameworks in the domain of

information theory, in regards to the notion of order and disorder (Morrissette "Order

and Disorder"). And again at Cerisy, he even posits a total crossover of "the science

of literature" in a comment strikingly prescient of the future development of

posthumanist theory:

> L'idée d'une science, ou de plusieurs sciences de la littérature qui se
> récupéreraient, fascine…nous sommes peut-être en train d'assister à la
> naissance des sciences de la littérature, et, dans la mesure où je crois
> cette naissance possible, non sans doute immédiatement mais dans
> plusieurs années sinon plusieurs décennies (Hoek 322-323).

Robbe-Grillet thus is not only familiar with the literary and philosophical

French theories of his day, but he is also cognizant of their relation to

potential discourses in the sciences that could constructively address the same

problematics.

And he not only recognizes the *potential* utility of scientific theory for evaluation of his work (and art in general) but he also seems cognizant of the *actualization* of a movement within the sciences, characterized by developments such as the Macy Conferences, to question the notion of man and to develop new hermeneutical frameworks in response to that particular question. He, like posthumanist scholars, sees this movement as being motivated by a general interrogation of what it means to be human; in fact, this destabilization in regards to the human is understood by both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars to constitute a "crisis" of humanism, an idea that I will explore further in the following section. In any case, concurrently to the development of the scientific theories described above, Robbe-Grillet recognizes that there is a notable impulse among scientists to develop theory to respond to this problem in precisely the way he envisions; for example, he contests that while certain scientific disciplines may have once been under the grip of humanism, they are laudable for having since moved towards a new framework for understanding:

> Pendant très longtemps [la science] a cru [découvrir des lois dans la nature]. Ce qui est intéressant dans la science, c'est que plus elle a étendu son pouvoir sur le monde, plus elle a renoncé à postuler une nature commune entre le monde et l'homme. Il y a cent ans, le mathématicien, le physicien croyaient que l'équation était identique au mouvement de l'astre; plus aujourd'hui. L'homme de science actuel a renoncé à la naturalité de la science ("Discussion: Sur le choix des générateurs"163).

He praises "le physicien moderne [qui] ne pense plus que les équations mettent au jour des vérités cachées appartenant au monde" that he attributes to the "tyrannie de significations" that is humanism (Robbe-Grillet "Discussion: Sur le choix des

générateurs" 163; *PUNR* 20). And he implicates himself and his literary project as being part of that movement; speaking about certain contemporary critics and authors, including Foucault, whose projects seem to be in line with that of the Nouveau Roman, he says, "Nous étions comme en train de créer une nouvelle philosophie que nous ignorions nous-mêmes, non seulement en tant que philosophie cohérente, mais en tant que formulation conceptuelle de quoi que ce soit" (Barilli 128). In this way, one can say that Robbe-Grillet perceived a proto-posthumanist movement: He realized the potential for the use of both French theory and scientific theory in a framework that would address the "crisis" of humanism and witnessed and recognized the stirrings in those same fields that eventually became the development of posthuamnism as critical theory. Now I will examine that crisis as it is envisioned by Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars.

1.4 Alain Robbe-Grillet and Critical Posthumanism: Parallel Visions of Crisis

As illustrated in the first section of this chapter, both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars focus on a criticism of humanism as the starting point for their respective projects. They consider that the actual state of the contemporary material world has revealed humanism to be, at best, no longer sufficient as an epistemological and ontological framework, and at worst, a fraudulent and faulty paradigm that has deceived and misled. For Robbe-Grillet and for many posthumanist scholars, this exposure constitutes a "crisis" of humanism that marks our current sociohistorical moment. For Robbe-Grillet this crisis situates itself mostly in the context of literature and the critical literary establishment, while for posthumanist scholars it it situated in academic studies within the humanities. Although they don't necessarily situate the

"crisis" in the exact same place, both contend that it is a problem for the world at large, and both have similar visions of the events and developments within general culture that led to its development.

Robbe-Grillet invokes the epistemological uncertainty of his time thusly: "La connaissance que nous avons de ce qui est en nous et de ce qui nous entoure…a subi de façon parallèle des bouleversements extraordinaires" (*PUNR* 137). If this disruption was at least partially engendered by Freud's work in the subconscious, it is perhaps most epitomized by Foucault's "death of man," which both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars invoke as indicative of this crisis. Braidotti states, "The 'death of Man' announced by Foucault formalized an epistemological and moral crisis that resulted in insubordination from received humanist ideals," while Robbe-Grillet, for his part, says, "C'est vrai que l'apport de Michel Foucault a joué son rôle, que la pensée collective à ce moment-là…a changé" (Braidotti "Posthuman Critical Theory" 14; Barilli 123). Even those posthumanist scholars, like N. Katherine Hayles, who choose to avoid the term "crisis," claim that "What is new is that there is a change or a transformation in our human condition to which the humanities need to respond" (Van Puymbroeck and Hayles 25). Like the posthumanists cited in the previous section, who focus on technoscientific development as a major catalyst for this exposure, Robbe-Grillet posits himself and his artistic peers as being in a "modern" world vastly changed from precedent history,[19] one that is characterized by rapidly developing technology and that causes our previously rooted humanist notions to be put into question.

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[19] Robbe-Grillet tends to use the term not in any technical sense, but to describe his vision of "a literature for our times" (Smith, 4).

According to both, this major shift in worldview was at least in part engendered by the production of psychoanalytical theory ("nous sommes dans une période post-freudienne"), albeit less by virtue of the theory itself than for that which it belied (Robbe-Grillet "Discussion: Sur le choix des générateurs" 169). Broadly speaking, for Robbe-Grillet, Freud's psychoanalytical discoveries about the human subconscious had the perhaps unwanted effect of revealing that the world contains no particular significance, or meaning, for man, and that man himself is less important in the world that he had previously thought. "Il faut bien voir qu'à partir du moment où la psychanalyse a démonté ce qu'il y avait dans la profondeur de l'homme, cette profondeur a disparu," (Morrissette "Discussion: Robbe-Grillet No. 1, 2…X" 141-142). From a posthumanist perspective, Neil Badmington also points to Freud as an impetus for this crisis, by way of exposing through his theories of the subconcious that man himelf is not under man's control, thus removing him from the humanist narrative of domination, power, and control: "Psychoanalysis took the challenge to humanism one step further. In proposing that human activity is governed in part by unconscious motives, Freud further problematized the Cartesian model, in which the critical determinant of being is rational, fully-conscious thought" (Introduction 5).

Thus do Robbe-Grillet and scholars like Badmington maintain that this "profondeur de l'homme," as Robbe-Grillet terms it, once widely accepted as truth, has been revealed as invalid and the collective belief in it exposed as misplaced. For Robbe-Grillet it is this revelation – that the "profondeur de l'homme" is no longer relevant as an interpretive framework for the world - that most drastically marks the "modern" historical moment:

Quelque chose [est] en train de changer – et même d'une façon totale, sans doute définitive – dans les rapports que nous entretenons avec l'univers…"Pourquoi maintenant?" Il y a aujourd'hui, en effet, un élément nouveau, qui nous sépare cette fois radicalement de Balzac, comme de Gide ou de madame de La Fayette: c'est la destitution des vieux mythes de la "profondeur"…la révolution qui s'est accomplie est de taille (*PUNR* 22).

Or, more simply: "nous ne croyons plus à cette profondeur" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 22). Robbe-Grilletian critics agree that his particular historical moment is characterized by a loss of the trust that was once placed in humanism; for his part, Jean Alter states, "Plus spécifiquement, l'époque actuelle serait marquée par un affaiblissement de l'emprise que l'individu avait semblé exercer sur le milieu ambiant durant les siècles passés" ("Humanisme" 210). In this context it is inevitable and necessary that the idea of the human subject, as well as the epistemological legacies of humanism, need to be questioned. We can see just how well this lines up with posthumanist explanations. In their explanation of posthumanist in *The Postmodern Adventure*, the scholars Steven Best and Douglas Kellner state:

While posthumanism is a vague term used in various ways, it is a marker for a number of critical mutations unfolding in the Third Millenium. If the time before the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was our prehumanist history…and the Renaissance and Enlightenment were the classical period of humanistic values that had roots in Greco-Roman culture, then the period since 1945 can be considered the beginning of a transition to a posthuman epoch. From this perspective, humanity is now in a liminal zone where individuals are forced to confront the meaning and the future of the human (195).

As noted in the previous sections, posthumanist scholars consider material advancements in science and technology to be the major catalysts of the theoretical questioning of humanism and the subsequent search for new viable theories. For

them, although the notion of the in- or non-human is certainly not new, and

humanism has been questioned since its inception and throughout its existence, this

glut of technoscientific innovations, and their adoption by the general public, taking

place in the 1980s and 1990s, made confronting the posthuman unavoidable:

> Posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of
> the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatics, and
> economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical
> development … that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies,
> the philosophical protocls and evasions, of humanism as a historically
> specific phenomenon (Wolfe *What Is Posthumanism?* loc. 104).

Herbrechter also claims that the crisis is driven by technological development,

especially in the public sphere, and that confronting humanism is no longer a choice:

> [It is] predominantly driven by technology. It also seems to
> increasingly correspond to the public face of a 'popular'
> posthumanism, a more or less sensationalist mixture of the arts and
> culture sections in newspapers, popular science magazines,
> futurologists, the wider intelligentsia, marketing gurus, and other
> lobbyists, everything, in short, that might be termed 'third culture,' as
> Slavoj Zizek maintains (*Analysis* 16-17).

These advancements are characterized by constant and rapid change (Herbrechter

cites a "context of radical changes affecting the material economic base" that

"constitutes a radical transformation") and engender a general feeling of uncertainty

and instability, an idea echoed by critics of Robbe-Grillet, like Alter, whose project

consists on understanding his world vision: "Le développement de la science, loin de

raffermir la croyance en un ordre universel, a miné les certitudes qu'on croyait avoir:

l'univers parait incertain, flou, et indiffèrent à la nature humaine" (*Analysis* viii;

"Humanisme" 210).

Indeed, Robbe-Grillet can be said to have much the same viewpoint as posthumanists regarding the material motivations behind the crisis of humanism. As Robbe-Grillet sees it, this shift in worldview is not limited to a literary or even humanities perspective; he sees "modernity" as a time of change generally, remarking that a parallel shift can be observed in the intellectual milieu across various disciplines: "La pensée abandonnait ses fondements essentialistes, la phénoménologie occupait progressivement tout le champ des recherches philosophiques, les sciences physiques découvraient le règne du discontinu, la psychologie elle-même subissait de façon parallèle une transformation aussi totale" (*PUNR* 120). Indeed, for Robbe-Grillet, in agreement with the posthumanists who see a transformation in the material world and popular culture generally, change in the modern moment has come not just to the intellectual realm. The world as a whole is also vastly changed, (albeit in rather vague terms) than that which came before:

> Le monde change, lui aussi. D'une part, il n'est plus objectivement le même, sur de nombreux points, qu'il y a cent ans, par exemple; la vie matérielle, la vie intellectuelle, la vie politique se sont modifiées considérablement, ainsi que l'aspect physique de nos villes, de nos villages, de nos routes, etc. (*PUNR* 136-137).

And if literature has changed, "ne constitue-t-elle qu'un des aspects du changement général des relations que l'homme entretient avec le monde dans lequel il vit" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 31). It is important to note that he also considers the change is constant and in the process of occurring; it is not a break with a static "before" and a static "after," but a point in a process of continual transformation; Robbe-Grillet classifies it as "une modernité en train de se faire" (Barilli 124). In addition to being

in agreement with posthumanist scholars about the transforming and transformative nature of this particular crisis, this has particular ramifications for his adoption of the notion of emergence, which I will elaborate upon in the following chapter. Technological development also plays a role in Robbe-Grillet's vision. Although Robbe-Grillet himself concentrates mostly on the notion of change in art production, his earlier critics have highlighted the role of technological development in this changing worldview; Jean Alter discussing his work at the Colloque de Cerisy notes "l'influence de la civilisation électronique;" Olga Bernal cites the "vie technologique moderne" as major influences on Robbe-Grillet's project (Barilli 126; Bernal 243).

Like many of his contemporaries, Robbe-Grillet observes that feelings of destabilization, alienation, and uncertainty prevail in his time period. Alter has highlighted this aspect of Robbe-Grillet's work, stating, "Il n'y guère encore, l'homme traitait le monde en conquérant, l'interprétant en fonction de ses idées, sentiments ou désirs. Tout était clair, raisonnable, ordonné. De nos jours ce lien s'est brisé. A l'anthropocentrisme a succédé le sentiment d'aliénation" ("Humanisme" 210). As late as 2000, Robbe-Grillet considered this uncertainty to be characteristic of the historical moment: "Aujourd'hui, de toute façon, on constate la même chose dans le monde entier, pas seulement en France: la conviction fait défaut" (Ferrand loc. 9370). Robbe-Grillet uses the word "reassure" often to describe the purpose of humanist discourse; for example, before, the humanist descriptions in "le grand roman français du XIXe siècle en particulier…constituait un univers stable et sûr" in which "les objets balzaciens étaient si rassurants" (*PUNR* 125, 119). This is because he sees humanism as assuming its own innateness. Humanist discourse, Robbe-Grillet

says, tends to posit itself as natural, that is, give the impression that its organization is due to an innately occurring distribution of power, or "natural" order, rather than a historically contingent belief system. Indeed, much of humanism's power comes from its premise that its precepts follow immutable transcendental laws: "l'idéologie ne s'impose que sous le masque du naturel" ("Cinéma et idéologie" loc. 2176).

In the absence left by the disappearance of this comforting myth and its attendant reassurance, there is uncertainty and destabilization: "Notre monde, aujourd'hui, est moins sûr de lui-même" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 28). The disappearance of "profondeur" has left a void: "La disparition des vieux mythes de profondeur avait créé un vide determinant" (Barilli 127). In the wake of the abrupt disappearance of the reassuring objects of humanism, there is shock; we are reeling from "le choc de cette réalité têtue" after "la belle construction s'écroule" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 18). This feeling of uncertainty and alienation is felt both in popular culture and in art production, and Robbe-Grillet speaks about them in the same breath:

> C'est…ce qu'il faut bien appeler *l'aliénation* de la littérature dans le monde moderne. Cette aliénation…est entretenue par la quasi-totalité de la critique, à commencer par celle d'une extrême gauche qui prétend, dans tous les autres domaines, lutter contre la condition aliénée de l'homme…Comme toute aliénation, celle-ci opère bien entendu une inversion générale des valeurs comme du vocabulaire (*PUNR* 43).

The feeling of alienation is then, in Robbe-Grilletian terms, due not only to social changes, but also to epistemological ones, as with the technoscientific advancements and new scientific theories cited by posthumanists. Hayles observes a similar reaction in herself, also using the word "shock" to describe the sentiment of focusing on

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literature after absorbing the changes entailed by recent scientific theory: "When I made the transition from science to literature, it was a huge shock; it was a shock to the system. I discovered that everything I thought I knew was wrong and had to be re-learned in this new context. What counts as evidence? What counts as learning? What counts as argument? And so forth" (Hayles "Ten Years On" 319).

Finally, like posthumanist scholars, Robbe-Grillet notes that this changing world is also characterized by *speed*; and the rate of change is accelerating: "Et depuis vingt ans, sans doute, les choses s'accélèrent" (*PUNR* 116). We find ourselves "dans une société ou tout va très vite; tout va de plus en plus vite" ("Le Nouveau Lecteur" 7:53-7:56). It is easy to see how this is sentiment is echoed by scholars like Herbrechter: "That technological development at the end of the twentieth and at the beginning of the twenty-first century has been accelerating and intensifying – at least in most parts of the Western world and its sphere of influence – seems undeniable" (*Analysis* 19). The effect of this speed is disorienting: The average reader "se perd quelquefois dans le monde même où il vit, lorsque tout cède autour de lui des vieilles constructions et des vieilles normes" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 116). The result of all this is that, in general terms, "les relations subjectives que nous entretenons avec le monde ont changé du tout au tout" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 137).

In other words, we are forced to confront the notion that humanism is no longer a valid framework for understanding – and has perhaps never been. That the historical moment in which Robbe-Grillet was most active was a key moment in the development of posthuman critical theory is reinforced by scholars like Best and Kellner, who claim that the period after World War II is a "a watershed for

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posthumanism" and like Herbrechter, who says, "the crisis of humanism and the

Enlightenment intensified during and after the two world wars, in the first half of the

twentieth century" (*Analysis* 52).

Both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars note that while they see this

crisis as being characteristic of their particular sociohistorical moment, it is not new

or unique. It is simply the latest and logical permutation of a problematic that has

consistently existed and evolved. Andy Mousley notes that "the posthuman is an old

term for a new problem, one that haunts the humanist tradition from whenever or

wherever we think that tradition began" (99). Neither is the idea of the crisis of

(human) subjectivity new, for, as Jonathan Dollimore notes,

> The crisis of subjectivity was there at the inception of individualism in
> early Christianity...neurosis, anxiety and alienation of the subject-in-
> crisis are not so much the consequence of its recent breakdown, but the
> very stuff of its creation, and of the culture…from which it is
> inseparable…what we are living through now is not some postmodern
> collapse of Western subjectivity but another mutation in its enduring
> dynamic ("Shakespeare and Theory" 271).

And however importantly the primary characteristics of his lived historical moment –

a major epistemological shift, a general feeling of destabilization and alienation, a

crisis of interpretation, an art world that attempts to move forward in the light of both

-- may strike him, Robbe-Grillet does not consider them to be unparalleled. If his

lived historical moment is distinct, it is not exceptional. It may be unlike any other

but it is just one in a series of moments that are also unlike any other. The exposure of

the "myth of profondeur" and the social and artistic changes that follow are for

Robbe-Grillet a normal part of the flux of social and literary change over time, rather

than a singular and improbable event. Change is the constant state of the world: "tout

change sans cesse" and we live in "ce present perpetual" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 144, 128). Art, like the material world, is in a continual process of transformation in which no particular permutation or outcome is more or less probable or important than any other: "Les formes romanesques doivent évaluer pour rester vivantes …les héros de Kafka n'ont que peu de rapport avec les personnages balzaciens…le réalisme-socialiste ou l'engagement sartrien sont difficilement conciliables avec l'exercice problématique de la littérature, comme avec celui de n'importe quel art" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 8). We can see in Robbe-Grillet's treatment of history a parallel with the posthumanist conception of human development: "[The] approach only becomes posthumanist when the human is no longer seen as the sole hero of a history of emancipation, but as a (rather improbable but important) stage within the evolution of complex life forms" (Herbrechter *Analysis* 9).

Although it may not be singular or unique, both posthumanists and Robbe-Grillet agree that such a crisis is indeed happening, and it can be perceived across disciplines. Robbe-Grillet speaks of "[le] moment où l'art et la société, parés des épanouissements comparables, semblent traverser des crises parallèles," while Badmington states, "The crisis in humanism is happening *everywhere*. Although it continues to be debated by critical theorists, the reign of Man is simultaneously being called into question by literature, politics, cinema, anthropology, feminism, and technology. These attacks are connected, part of the circuit of posthumanism" (*PUNR* 35; Introduction 9).

This crisis of humanism can summarized as a sort of cognitive dissonance between the actual state of the world and the epistemological frameworks available to

evaluate it; the section of Braidotti's book that deals with "the identity crisis of the contemporary Humanities" opens in fact with the title "Institutional Patterns of Dissonance" (*The Posthuman* 153, 150). Posthumanists maintain that with humanist assumptions about the human being upended by scientific developments and transformation -- whether theoretical or material – a new framework for understanding is needed. But the cultural and historical domination of humanism is such that it remains the primary basis on which such institutions as universities are founded. Posthumanism is being developed as a critical theory, but it is far from having the type of influence or coherence that humanism provided for the organization and operations of such institutions. One only has to consider the label "humanities" to understand to what extent liberal arts studies are built around humanism. The problem then, for critical posthumanists, is that they remain stuck in an outmoded paradigm that no longer corresponds to the objects of its study, but cannot seem to find their way out of it, due to its outsize influence and the lack of a more feasible alternative. Herbrechter says,

> While popular ideas of posthuman humanity augmented by technology
> often continue to be influenced by ideologically naïve humanist
> values, traditional approaches in cultural theory and in the humanities
> usually remain too anthropocentric in their defense of a notion of the
> 'human' that is not sufficiently historicized or grounded in a quasi-
> mystical notion of 'human nature' (*Analysis* 7).

He calls for a "transformation of what is arguably the most humanist of institutions, namely the university" (Herbrechter *Analysis* 14). Herbrechter, like other posthumanists, sees this crisis mainly as playing itself out within the academic humanities, which have reached a "point of no return," a moment in which they must confront this cognitive dissonance:

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> After several decades of heated ideological debates, theory, canon and culture wars, if not settles have petered out in the general crisis and decline of the humanities…the uncertainty this time, however seems more profound – too pressing are the 'future of the humanities' and the 'role of literature' questions to allow for a simple return to business as usual in the post-theoretical English department (Introduction 4).

While perhaps a bit exaggerated, it is clear that the problem is there, and is due to a gap between that which has been exposed and the lack of something new to evaluate it.

Robbe-Grillet examines this dissonance mostly in the realm of literature and literary criticism, but the problem he poses is the same as that of the posthumanists. Much has been made of Robbe-Grillet's targeting of Balzac and 19th century "bourgeois" literature. Robbe-Grillet's insistence on Balzac is not – or at least not only – oversimplistic obsession but instead is tied to what Robbe-Grillet considers to be the greatest critical problem of his day, this interpretive crisis. He sees it as stemming from the outsize prestige humanism gained in the 19th century in particular, which in turn has given rise to a cognitive dissonance within contemporary criticism, due to humanism's continued use as a critical framework: "Si la société s'est transformée peu à peu, si les techniques industrielles ont fait des progrès considérable, notre civilisation mentale, elle, est bien restée la même" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 16). He sees humanism as having reached the apex of its ascendance in the 19th century, and its widespread adoption as "common sense" being due to its insistence on the innateness of its own principles.

Robbe-Grillet traces the historical genesis of the version of humanism he critiques to the seventeenth century, claiming Mme de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Cleves* as its first appearance in literary representation (*PUNR* 15). Over time,

according to Robbe-Grillet, the humanist point of view eventually came to dominate the Western European mindset, reaching a peak the 19th century. From roughly the eighteenth century until Freud's psychoanalytical work in the 20th, despite the differences among artistic movements, Robbe-Grillet considers the majority of Western artistic production to have been subordinated to the "predominance" of this mindset: "What we could call bourgeois art…This middle-class order shaped itself slowly and had a century of predominance, the end of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth…also the end of the nineteenth if we think of writers like Zola" (Hayman 275).

He sees not just literary production but the entire engine of bourgeois society of that time period as having organized itself around the myth of humanism and having drawn its power from it: "le mythe de naturalité a servi, comme vous savez, à tout un ordre social, moral, politique, pour s'établir et se prolonger" (Robbe-Grillet "Sur le choix des générateurs" 159). Its power and its continuing legacy come from the supremacy it acquired during the 19th century, not just in literature but in society, epistemology and every aspect of life. This is due to humanism's insistence on "natural" order: "Cet ordre, que l'on peut en effet qualifier de naturel, est lié à tout un système, rationaliste et organisateur, dont l'épanouissement correspond à la prise du pouvoir par la classe bourgeoise. [Cette] première moitié du XIXe siècle [en] vit l'apogée" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 31). According to Robbe-Grillet, this led to a cultural and literary production that privileges humanism to the point that many people see it as being innate, something inherently human, rather than the sociocultural phenomenon that it is.

Rather than innate, however, Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars both insist on recognizing the sociohistorical contingency of humanism: "There can be no talk of purity. Everything we know (scientifically, theoretically) and say (linguistically or in other forms of semiotic notation)…takes place within some contingent, radically non-natural (that is, constructed and technical) schema of knowledge," says Cary Wolfe (Wolfe *What Is Posthumanism?* loc. 228). Robbe-Grillet says, "Le système balzacien est un système récent, et c'est un système…qui n'est pas plus naturel qu'un autre…Nous savons bien que c'est une supercherie. Il n'a rien de plus naturel que le nôtre, simplement il a été instauré comme nature par une société qui en faisait le bien absolu et définitive, dans l'ordre du récit. C'était le code au pouvoir…etc." ("Ordre et Desordre" loc. 2307). Both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars point to Foucault as a major point of general recognition of the constructed nature of humanism:

> It is important to acknowledge the productive contribution that post-structuralism and other critical theories have made…Foucault argued back in the 1970s that the Humanities as we have come to know them are structured by an implicit set of humanist assumptions about 'Man' which are historically framed and contextually defined, in spite of their universalistic pretentions (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 151).

Robbe-Grillet recognizes this contribution, citing "sociologists": "Les sociologues ont identifié de bonne heure cet ordre narratif à l'ordre politique et moral de la société qui l'a mené à son apogée, c'est-à-dire cette bourgeoisie sûre de ses pouvoirs, qui les croyait de bonne foi naturels, éternels et justes. On sait ce qu'il en reste aujourd'hui" ("Après Eden et Après" loc. 1467).

So for Robbe-Grillet humans are not a given but are intrinsically embedded within their particular sociohistorical context, and the very concept of human is but a contingent historical construct that can be traced to the 17th century. In this he is in agreement with scholars like Herbrechter, who says, "Humans and their humanity are historical and cultural constructs rather than transcendental concepts free from ideology" (*Analysis,* 9). Herbrechter illustrates well this posthuman moment, reminding us simultaneously of humanism's contingent nature and yet how strongly we still cling to this "grand narrative": "[the] venerable tradition of humanism is at stake, and with it, that which is held to be the essence of our species, namely 'our' humanity. There is no question, however, that the notion of humanity itself has a concrete history and that, in fact, it is the effect of a combination of humanism as an ideological discourse and modernity as a socio-historical formation" (Lyotard *Condition* 37; *Analysis* 16). Thus did humanism, for Robbe-Grillet and posthumanists, allow itself to be established and remained in power due to its insistence on the innateness of its own precepts.

For Robbe-Grillet, with humanist ideology being the reigning force of organization in all aspects of bourgeois society, it became the dominant engine behind art production along with the rest. Under the domination of the humanist mindset, much of 19th century artistic production was highly reliant on and reflective of what Robbe-Grillet considers to be its core ideas, which will be examined in the next chapter. For Robbe-Grillet, the principal manifestation of this humanistic dominance in literature is the genre of realism, of which Robbe-Grillet holds up Balzac as the quintessential example.

Interestingly, posthumanist scholars also single out realism as the most typical expression of humanist artistic representation: "The regime of knowledge which accompanies the rise of the humanist paradigm (or 'episteme') within modernity is called 'realism,'" says Herbrechter (*Analysis* 10). Posthumanist scholars agree with Robbe-Grillet that starting in the 19th century in particular, realism dominated artistic production: "This humanism of common sense transposed onto art, literature and aesthetics and ultimately onto all forms of cultural production represents the basis for realism's hegemony as far as reading is concerned" (Herbrechter *Analysis* 11-12). Furthermore, Robbe-Grillet's definition of bourgeois culture and humanist narrative code as striving to simplify complexity falls precisely in line with Gary Morson's definition of culture:

> The first principle of prosaics is: the fundamental state of the world is a mess. Thus, to satisfy our need to feel in control we must overcome the very nature of things. We must impose order on contingency, minimize the unforeseeable, and ensure the triumph of mind over raw experience. That, perhaps, is the fundamental purpose of culture (223).

For Robbe-Grillet, then, the major critical problem of his day – and one of the primary reasons for which he considers himself to be misunderstood by critics – is that the humanist model persists, in spite of its debunking, in literature, and especially in literary criticism. "On constate que les mythes du XIXe siècle conservent toute leur puissance," he laments in his essay on criticism, "A Quoi Servent les Theories" (*PUNR* 10). He even chides contemporary critics in person at the Colloque de Cerisy, for example, when correcting their interpretations of his work, maintaining that because they remain suck in an outdated framework for interpretation, they will never correctly or completely understand his notion of "jeu" or "libérté," decrying "[une

critique] qui tient…à montrer l'écrivain comme prisonnier de l'humanisme universel." (Alter "Discussion: Perspectives" 66). The "difficulties" that some critics signal in the reading of his work are due to the fact that such readers insist on applying outdated codes to a modern book: "Ce qui est difficile est la lecture d'un livre où on essaie -- de force -- d'introduire une catégorie qui ne lui appartient pas" ("Poésie" 3:52-4:00). For Robbe-Grillet, a reader who is "conditioned" by the outdated models of the 19th century and who picks up a book by himself or Claude Simon and who expects to read something like Balzac "aura essayé de retrouver le code de la société passée dans un livre présent. Et par conséquent, il aura atteint la difficulté maximum" ("Poésie" 4:13-4:23).

He insists that eventually artists will be able to open critics' eyes to the retrograde platform from which they evaluate art: "On va arriver à vous faire avouer…que la civilisation dans laquelle vous vous placez intellectuellement est justement la civilisation humaniste de la profondeur tragique" (Mansuy 98). Subsequently, the public is subject to the continued domination of the humanist mindset, which leaves them feeling unsettlingly at odds with the world in which they find themselves; they are at once "un public qui est toujours très conditionné par les mythes du 19e siècle" and also find themselves perplexed by "le caractère *inhabituel* du monde qui nous entoure: inhabituel, lui, aussi, dans la mesure où il refuse de se plier à nos habitudes d'apprehension et à notre ordre" ("Chemins" 6:59-7:04; Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 20).

Those posthumanist critics who have considered the relationship of the crisis of humanism to art agree with Robbe-Grillet's assessment of scholarly art criticism;

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in 2013, Herbrechter complains that "the conviction that art, literature and culture function as a humanizing force is (still) the foundation of the cultural industries as well as all educational institutions" (*Analysis* 59). Johnathan Dollimore says, "Far from being liberating, the humanist aesthetic has become a way of standing still amidst the obsolete, complacent and self-serving clichés of the heritage culture industry, the Arts establishment, and a market-driven humanities education system. The aesthetic has become anaesthetic" (*Radical* xxvi).

And so, according to Robbe-Grillet, in the 20th century, following the revelation of humanism as a flawed framework, some of the general public and many artists have come to accept the falsity of humanism and, among artists in particular, moved on to new modes of production. While some authors continue to operate within a humanist framework (he sees those that do as being those who tend to be praised by critics),[20] writers like himself and many of the authors he cites as contemporaries and influences (such as Kafka, Beckett, Butor, and Sarraute) attempt to move beyond it to create something new located outside it – this constitutes his literary project.

Thus for both posthumanists and Robbe-Grillet the problem is that there is a startling dichotomy between the "actual" state of the world and the values by which much of the public and critics continue to judge the significance, importance, and meaning of art. Although he does not concentrate on it as much as posthumanist critics do, Robbe-Grillet does note that the institution of the university is subject to

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[20] "Ce qui me surprenait le plus, dans les reproches comme dans les eloges, c'etait de rencontrer presque partout une reference implicite – ou meme explicite – aux grands romans du passé, qui toujours etaient poses comme le modele sur quoi le jeune ecrivain devait garder les yeux fixes." (Robbe-Grillet, *PUNR,* 7).

the very same crisis; in fact, he claims that the role of a university is to uphold and prolong the dominant ideology (that is to say, humanism): "L'université est un de ces organismes reproducteurs idéologiques, c'est-à-dire que toute société sécrète des organismes qui sont faits pour la réproduire…il est tout à fait normal qu'une université fonctionne comme ça" ("Réactionnaires" 19:02-19:18). Academic critics are especially to blame for this persistence of humanist critical theory: "Ce que [Jean Alter] dit de moi c'est exactement l'opposé de ce pour quoi j'ai pris la parole…la récupération universitaire, pour moi c'est ça, c'est le carcan qui nous empêche de bouger" (Alter "Discussion: Perspectives" 64).

Interestingly, Robbe-Grillet does not fault the critical establishment for the persistence of humanist interpretation, acknowledging that, as a general rule, criticism does not move as quickly as art does, and it must constantly lag behind it somewhat. "La critique fait un métier difficile, elle doit juger les oeuvres nouvelles et bien evidemment elle ne peut se servir que des critères du passé…il est plus facile pour un spectateur d'aimer un film ou de ne pas l'aimer que pour un critique d'expliquer à ses lecteurs pourquoi il l'aime ou pourquoi il ne l'aime pas" ("Imortelle" 3:52-4:17). This is why he insists on the importance of his literary project more than his critical one – although it simultaneously constitutes his attempt at producing new criticism -- and one reason why, for him, this search for new paradigms must ultimately take place in literature. He calls for a new system of understanding that would go beyond "toute theorie explicative qui tenterait de les enfermer dans un quelconque système de référence, sentimental, sociologique, freudien, metaphysique, ou autre" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 20). In view of this crisis, both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist signal

the need for new modes of interpretation, and both have similar visions for what these new modes might entail.

1.5 Alain Robbe-Grillet and Critical Posthumanism: Parallel Visions of the Solution – Reconceptualization of the Human through Narrative

As I have demonstrated, both Robbe-Grillet and critical posthumanists are concerned with the question of the human but claim to be witnessing a crisis of humanism. In response to this crisis they propose projects that seek to *invent* a new conception of the human that would accurately reflect his current position in a technologically mediated modern world. Both envision this new framework as being interdisciplinary and affirmative, and both look to literature and narrative as a major medium for development of such a project.

Robbe-Grillet sees humanism as having imposed a particular narrative code, one that has infiltrated all aspects of bourgeois life and its systems (like universities and literary criticism). His literary project consists of subverting this code: "Dans un roman, il y a deux codes: il y a le code de la langue et le code de la narration. Dans mes livres, seul le code de la narration est subverti" ("Réactionnaires" 37:43-37:50). By actively subversing this code he will achieve two goals: Firstly, he exposes it for the social construct it is: "He can protest the ideological codification of reality, which promotes one social group's domination of another, by deforming bourgeois myths and thereby displaying the arbitrary nature of their formation" (Bogue 35). Secondly, through the invention of new codes he seeks to invent or create new visions of the human, while at the same time continuing this project of deconstruction and exposure of humanist narrative code: "His strategy is to remake the world after his desires, but

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in such a way that the world must recognize the nature and workings of its ideological structures" (Bogue 44). Only then can a truly new conceptualization of the human take place; he works at "la destruction des règles, pour laisser le champ libre à l'homme libre qui viendra encore après" (Barilli 128). Posthumanists like Herbrechter also see humanist narrative code as constituting the ideology by which we live, and express concern about its power in propagating humanist tendencies: "[posthumanist critical theory] demands probity when dealing with events in order that their singularity is not lost in the haste to comprehend them according to the well-known narratives of our habitual sense-making practices" (*Analysis* 56).

That the creation of a new vision of the human subject is at the heart of the posthumanist project, like Robbe-Grillet's project, is pointed out by Pramod K. Nayar: "'Posthumanism'…especially in its *critical* avatar, is also a new *conceptualization* of the human" (3). The role of literature, then, is to reinvent the human, to provide new visions of him, much as Braidotti claims that the development of a critical posthumanist theory "works…toward elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject" (*The Posthuman* 37). By generating this literature, deconstructing humanist narrative, and constructing new codes, Robbe-Grillet does indeed seek to invent a new conceptualization of man. Modern literature, that which shies away from the expectations of the critical establishment, is "à la recherche d'un home nouveau;" this generative aspect of literature is further reinforced with the title of his essay "Nouveau roman, homme nouveau" (Saint-Jacques 143; *PUNR* 113). Reinvention of man in a way that is contrary to the

preconceived notions of humanism is the proper goal of literature; Robbe-Grillet

states that he is against the idea of a humanist conception of a human subject,

> C'est-à-dire qu'il existe un homme fait d'avance, un homme avec un grand H auquel on ne peut que se conformer. Si, au contraire, il s'agit d'un homme qui n'existe pas encore et qui est à faire, en particulier à faire par l'oeuvre. A ce moment-là je peux dire comme tout le monde que je m'intéresse à l'homme. Seulement c'est un homme que je ne connais pas, qui n'est pas encore là…qu'il s'agit de faire ("Le Nouveau Lecteur" 3:20-3:49).

This is possible because literature serves a particular purpose in that it is through

literature and narrative that new concepts are generated. Literature's function is "à

inventer, à faire, à former" (Saint-Jacques 146). Literature is constitutive of the world

at large; the changes and inventions that take place in literature are ultimately

transposed to the material world; Robbe-Grillet says, "Pour moi je ne vois pas bien

comment le monde pourrait être "au-delà" de la littérature" and "Il y a eu un

changement dans le monde qui a été aussi un changement dans le Nouveau Roman"

(Mansuy 96; Barilli 123). Real-world transformation and invention are the goals of

literary innovation: "Notre parole ludique n'est pas fait pour nous protéger, pour nous

mettre à l'abri du monde, mais au contraire pour nous mettre en question nous-mêmes

et ce monde, et par conséquent le transformer, au moyen de ce que vous pouvez

appeler imagination" and artists are "en train d'inventer un nouveau monde" (Mansuy

97, Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 124). And for Robbe-Grillet, this new literature would not

only be constitutive but also be reflective of the "true" complex state of the world; in

this way he participates in the posthumanist "disidentification from established

patterns of thought is crucial for an ethics and politics of inquiry that demands respect

for the complexities of the real-life world we are living in" (Braidotti "Critical Theory" 16).

Posthumanists are in agreement with Robbe-Grillet about the potential for narrative and literature as a space to effect-real world change: "Informed by recent work in biogenetic anthropology, information theory, and the science of chaos, this theory will attempt to rehabilitate narrative by suggesting that it can be a principal agent of cultural change" (Argyros 659). They agree also on the generative nature of literature; narrative and literature are singled out by posthumanist scholars, who see in textual studies great potential for the development of critical posthumanist theory. "Literature – this humanist invention – might be seen as a privileged cultural practice that engages in this representational negotiation between the human and the inhuman. Where else therefore should one seek out the human/inhuman nexus than at the heart of the literary canon?" (Herbrechter *Analysis* 57). Hayles says, "Literature imagines new roles and uses the powerful tool of narrative. Recent research in neurology suggests that our brain architectures are uniquely adapted to narrative, and literary narratives can often reinforce or ignite social movements by vivid depictions of alternative futures" (Van Puymbroeck and Hayles 25).

Robbe-Grillet's literature therefore constitutes his attempt at breaking the code and dismantling what he conceives of as the main tenents of humanism and the humanist human subject. However, although he hoped to question humanism and invent "away" from it, Robbe-Grillet realized that a full departure from humanism would be impossible. Rather he seeks to deconstruct and question it from the inside, something that posthumanist scholars call "deconstructing from within" or "working

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through" (Herbrechter Introduction 3). Badmington says, " If we cannot simply step outside tradition – one foot forever drags in the past – 'we' can, nonetheless, expose the incoherence of humanism from within, a strategy which Derrida calls, in another context, 'the necessity of lodging oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it" ("(Com)promises" 86). Indeed, Robbe-Grillet refers to his dismantling of humanism through narrative code as the "deconstructing" and "destructur[ing]" of "realist illusion" through his films, and through this, "established order [is] destroyed" (Hayman 281-282). In this way Robbe-Grillet's project corresponds to Badmington's project of destruction as well as the Herbrechter's "understanding of posthumanism as humanism's ongoing deconstruction" (*Analysis* 45).

Like Robbe-Grillet, posthumanist scholars maintain that a complete escape from humanism is not possible, such is its influence, so there must be an attempt from within the current paradigm to dismantle and expose it.

> The familiar, easy announcements of a complete change of terrain, a pure outside, need to be complemented by work that speaks to humanism's ghost, to the reappearance of the inside within the outside…[the version of posthumanism that I am trying to develop here] does so in a certain way and with a view to the deconstruction of anthropocentric thought. If the pure outside is a myth, it is nonetheless possible to "lodg[e] oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it" (Derrida 1978, "Vio- lence," 111), to reveal the internal instabilities, the fatal contradictions (Badmington "Theorizing" 15).

Robbe-Grillet seems to have this in mind when he tells Katherine Passias, "The New New Novel still operates around fictional elements. We have maintained fragments of the novel and have remained within the bourgeois ideology in order to criticize it," situating himself in opposition to the writers of *Tel Quel*, who attempt to "[place themselves] completely outside of that ideology as if the revolution had already been

accomplished" (Passias 133). The challenge for modern literature, as Robbe-Grillet sees it, is to accurately reflect the complex state of the world while not falling prey to the principles of humanism, to which attachment remains strong despite its flaws, a concern shared by posthumanists. "Apocalyptic accounts of the end of "Man," it seems to me, ignore humanism's capacity for regeneration and, quite literally, recapitulation. In the approach to posthumanism on which I want to insist, the glorious moment of Herculean victory cannot yet come, for humanism continues to raise its head(s)," says Badmington in his article on how critical posthumanist theory might be theorized ("Theorizing" 11).

In this, critical theory has a role to play. For Robbe-Grillet, literature and critical theory are inseparable; one leads inevitably to the other; and both must remain in a constant dialogue. For him, theory and fiction work together to effect change and innovation: " Il doit y avoir dialogue entre l'auteur et le critique" (Morrissette "Discussion: Robbe-Grillet No. 1, 2…X" 139). This sentiment reflects the posthumanist vision of literature and critical theory working together to produce new conceptual alternatives to humanism and the human subject.

For both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars, this collaboration would be characterized by interdisciplinarity, because in the wake of a lack of essentialism (which I will elaborate in the next chapter) "the posthuman thus offers a style of theorizing or weapon invention in which disciplinary boundaries become sites of connection rather than enclosures of autonomous interiorities" (Muckelbauer and Hawhee 770). Herbrechter says, "A more serious and intensified form of interdisciplinarity between human, social, natural, cognitive, and bio- or life sciences

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thus forms a major imperative for the future posthumanities – or whatever name will be given to the institutional framework in which the new forms of critical knowledge production…will take place" (*Analysis* 20). In this search for new epistemological frameworks the connection between art and science becomes paramount: "The current stage of human *logos* demands that new connections between art and science become possible, especially as far as 'performance' or the aesthetic 'experiment' or installation is concerned" (Herbrechter *Analysis* 34). Wolfe, for his part, citing the "epistemological problems vigorously engaged by systems theory across disciplinary lines" and their counterparts in the humanities that are "typically posed as problems of language or textuality" advocates "encounters with the "outside" of theory in areas like cognitive science [which] might prove useful in confronting the *human* sciences with a *disciplinary* "outside" that might ehp reveal some of the humanities' underexamined assumptions and procedures" (Wolfe *Critical Environments* loc. 143).

Robbe-Grillet has consistently invoked various mathematical and scientific theories in regards to his literary work, as noted in the previous section. In addition to sociology and information theory, he has invoked chaos theory, topology, Klein worms, and systems, among others. He also refers to the creative textual space of literary production as a "laboratoire" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 38). And in an interview in "Art Press," he says, "Pourquoi ne pas imaginer que la science moderne pourrait aider à fonder un nouvel humanisme….eh bien, le rôle de l'art, je le crois comparable à celui joué par la science la plus moderne" (Dufour loc. 8644). Thus, the vision of the response to the crisis of humanism of Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars shows a multitude of similarities and intersections, including the idea that the

dialogue between literature and literary criticism will constitute the space for

development of new modes of understanding in the wake of the upheaval of

humanism, and serve to invent new conceptualizations of the human. This project will

be deconstructive "from the inside" as well as interdisciplinary.

Chapter 2: Taking on Humanism – Posthumanist and Robbe-Grilletian Approaches

2.1 Criticisms of the Humanist Paradigm

So what constitutes the humanism or the "mythe de profondeur" whose rejection marks the point of departure for Robbe-Grillet and critical posthumanist theory? The vision of humanism being targeted does not lend itself to an easy, singular definition, a fact recognized by posthumanist scholars. "This humanism because of its own plurality and slipperiness cannot just be classified without remainders and repressions but needs to be 'worked through' in a critical deconstructive sense," says Stephen Herbrechter (*Analysis* 16). Badmington summarizes more succinctly: "Humanism can be a wonderfully vague subject" (Introduction 2). A brief survey of some of the most prominent posthumanist scholars, however, gives a general sense of the image of the humanist human they wish to put into question. Braidotti gives a rather thorough explanation of what she conceives of as the classical humanist model: "the classical idea of 'Man,' formulated first by Protagoras as 'the measure of all things, later renewed in the Italian Renaissance as a universal model and represented in Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man…" and includes the notions of a "boundless capacity of humans" to pursue "individual and collective perfectibility," and "faith in the intrinsically moral powers of human reason" (*The Posthuman* 13). Nayar defines the human as "a subject…marked by rational thinking/intelligence, who is able to plot his/her own course of action depending on his/her needs, desires, and wishes" and is "free to

pursue his choice" (5). He lists some of the main characteristics of "the human:" "as a set of features or conditions: rationality, authority, autonomy, and agency" (Nayar, 5). For Cary Wolfe, the 'human' is "The Cartesian subject of the cogito, the Kantian "community of reasonable beings," or in more sociological terms, the subject as citizen, rights-holder, property-owner, and so on" (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 1). Andy Mousley cites "individualism…sovereignty, unbridled freedom, and a magnified image of humanity," and "a transcendent human nature" (Herbrechter Introduction 10).

For his part, Robbe-Grillet's spontaneous and meandering writing style – "coutumier de l'esquive et des revirements inattendus" that he is -- does not make extracting a coherent vision of humanism an easy task (Allemand and Milat 1). Also problematic are his choices of terminology, as he frequently favors stylistic flow over linguistic precision. His use of terms such as "profondeur," "naturel," "séparation," "tradition" and so forth have been cause for confusion among many critics who have attempted to analyze Robbe-Grillet. To take one example, that of "objectivity," Robbe-Grillet explains how his own use of the word is misunderstood by critics who approached it in its generally accepted critical sense:

> Cette objectivité est une chose que me prête la critique. J'ai moi-même
> très peu employé ce mot dans mes essais théoriques. S'il m'est arrivé
> de le faire, c'était toujours en précisant dans quel sens particulier: le
> sens de "tourner vers l'objet," c'est-à-dire vers le monde matériel
> extérieur. La critique prétend que je cherche à faire des descriptions
> impartiales, neutres, comme celles que ferait un appareil
> photographique idéal. C'est absurde! (Montalbetti loc. 4942).

In fact, in comparison to many other theoreticians, Robbe-Grillet refers relatively little to theories other than his own, and in these cases it is often in a detached way, to

comment on how they may or may not be useful as a paradigm, rather than applying them hermeneutically to his own or other texts. In order to really understand what these words mean for his vision, they must be taken in the context of his oeuvre as a whole and their association to "outside" theoretical terminology resisted unless explicitly acknowledged by Robbe-Grillet. However if one has the patience to accomplish this, a clear picture emerges.

Robbe-Grillet accedes that humanism is a slippery concept, can be conceived in the plural, and resists definition, but a survey of his theoretical commentary spanning the period from the late 1950s to the early 2000s shows that,[21] with surprising consistency over the years, he sees humanism -- as a worldview, and as a vehicle for literary creation and interpretation -- as espousing the following key tenets: universality, unity, essentialism, and transcendence; the imposition of boundaries and categories on an irreducibly complex world; a world full of meaning, specifically for man; and an overvaluation of man's place and/or importance in the world. He opposes these ideas and provides his own alternatives. A close examination of his approach to these ideas and the counter-ideas he proposes provides a cohesive worldview that in many ways can be considered posthumanist.

Firstly, Robbe-Grillet sees humanism as presuming essentialism, the idea that man and his world contain inherent qualities by which they can be defined and understood. Diana Fuss offers a precise definition of the type of essentialism criticized by Robbe-Grillet and by posthumanist theorists: "a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a

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[21] Robbe-Grillet died in 2008 but had largely stopped publicly discussing his theory and criticism by about 2001.

given entity" (Fuss xi). Robbe-Grillet questions precisely this notion of a fixed essence, whose existence precedes perception and cognition by a consciousness: "[les critiques qui] reprochaient à mes romans d'être phénoménologiques avaient l'air de considérer que le phénomène était une chose en soi en dehors de toute conscience humaine!" ("L'Exercice problématique de la littérature" loc. 3915). Any idea of an essentialist nature is faulty: "Dans tout ce que dit Baudelaire, il y a quelque chose qui nous gène terriblement, parce que son idée de symbole renvoie à une nature, à une essence divine qui serait par-derrière" (C. Simon 104). Such a criticism of the idea of universal human nature is also at the heart of the critical posthumanist project, and for many of the same reasons. Posthumanist scholars tend to pinpoint essentialism as a key feature of the humanist approaches they put into question, and it is easy to see how well definitions of "nature" like Badmington's line up with Robbe-Grillet's: "Humanism…appeals (positively) to the notion of a core humanity or common essential feature in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood" (Introduction 2).

For Robbe-Grillet, an external material world does exist beyond the text and the observer, but it does not contain any essential nature/s through which it can be objectively known or even objectively observed (despite the attempt by some early critics to establish him as a zealously "objective" writer). Rather, any individual entity can know only what he observes, and then interpret those observations, interpretations that are influenced within his individual cognition by his own previous experience, knowledge base, memories, and imagination: "[les Nouveaux Romanciers] s'intéressent tous comme moi à la réalité telle qu'elle est perçue,

transformée, métamorphosée par l'esprit qui se souvient ou qui imagine. Au XIXe

siècle, au contraire, les romanciers conçoivent leurs oeuvres en se référant à une

réalité qui existe en dehors de l'esprit humain" (Piatier loc. 5083). I will expound on

these ideas in the next chapter, but in brief, inherent natures have no place in this

constructivist and subjective conception of reality/ies. Robbe-Grillet states that it is

tempting to pretend that there is, because this idea is "reassuring." Robbe-Grillet

therefore reproaches humanist essentialism its promise that man and his material

world can be known, discovered, or defined by their possession of such qualities:

"C'est bien à une essence commune pour toute la "création" que nous somme convies

à croire," he says (*PUNR* 51). The notion of essence lies at the very heart of the

vision of humanism he targets: "La croyance en une nature se révèle ainsi come la

source de tout humanisme, au sens habituel du mot" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 51).

Subsequently, Robbe-Grillet also takes issue with the related notions of

universality and eternity, namely that these essential qualities would apply to all

entities, in all situations, across time and regardless of the particular context in which

they are discovered or defined; in other words, essence as "transhistorical, eternal,

immutable" (Fuss xi). One of his most famous attacks on the "traditional" character in

a Balzac style novel references the universality implied therein: "il lui faut assez de

particularité pour demeurer irremplaçable, et assez de généralité pour devenir

universel" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 27). If he takes issue with the idea of man having a

privileged rapport with the world around him, it is in part because this connection is

considered to exist "pour l'éternité;" if he takes issue with the use of 19th century

literary models in the 20th century, it is at least in part because he sees the

establishment as advocating its validity "pour toujours" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 50;

"Réactionnaires" 56:55). He mockingly derides "le "coeur" humain qui – c'est bien

connu – est eternel" and a facile 19th-century "logique des choses juste et universelle"

(Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 16, 31). This is not the case, Robbe-Grillet argues; no unitary

"essences" exist, whether in man or objects. There is no "unité cachée" nor

"profondeur indivise" (*PUNR* 50, 52) unifying the material world or establishing a

privileged bond between man and his universe.

Like Robbe-Grillet, posthumanist scholars resist the notion that the human

may be defined by any universal or essential quality: "Critical posthumanism rejects

the very idea of anything innate to the human," states Nayar unequivocally (11). This

is true in part because of the human's entanglement with his material surroundings.

Echoing Robbe-Grillet's valorization of the notion of individual subjectivity over an

objectively knowable material world, from a posthumanist standpoint, humanity has

no access to an extradiegetic or omniscient point of view that would allow for the

objectivity or remove necessary to perceive such a nature: "There are no essential

features of the human subject because 'human nature' is socially constructed and

enmeshed in the very systems of observation that characterize it as 'human'" (Nayar

12). Posthumanist critical theory's criticism of universality and eternity is principally

inherited from its progenitors, postmodern and poststructuralist antihumanist theory:

> it is precisely this idea [universality] which has been attacked by
> postmodernism and poststructuralism in their respective critiques of
> humanism…this humanism is termed "liberal" in the sense that it
> presupposes a bourgeois capitalist subject who promotes 'tolerance' in
> the face of seemingly 'superficial' difference (like gender, race,
> culture, location, history) in the name of the universal principle of
> 'humanity' (Herbrechter *Analysis* 12).

Notably, contemporary posthumanist scholars arrived at this particular current of

antihumanist thought in large part via gender studies, of which one of the most

prominent manifestations is Donna Haraway's vision of a postgender world in *A

Cyborg Manifesto*, which, as noted in Chapter 1, is considered a key foundational

posthumanist text. Nayar observes that in this essay as well as in her later work

"Haraway accepts the feminist position in which 'essential' identities – the man, the

woman – are destroyed…Haraway concedes that essentialisms cannot be relevant any

more" (Nayar 22). Interestingly, fifteen years before publication of *A Cyborg

Manifesto*, Robbe-Grillet makes essentially the same point on the topic of biological

sexual and socially gendered difference in an interview in *Diacritics*:

> First of all, I don't believe much in the difference between the sexes.
> That is to say, as a result of my entire biological background…I know
> the sexes are not separate. There aren't Men and Women. It is known
> today that we have male and female hormones whether we are men or
> women…If you take my physiognomy, this is a male trait: a beard.
> This is a female trait: hair. At age fifty-five, I have a lot of hair,
> something which is completely abnormal…So it is already a false
> problem…let us suppose that [women] has been set apart by a kind of
> oppression. Very well, society has classified women, etc. But it is a
> social classification. It does not exist in reality (Mistacco 42).

Thus, Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars reject what they see as humanist

essentialism.

Consequently, Robbe-Grillet also criticizes a humanist notion of unity. For

him, humanist essentialism and universality imply an overarching unity of the world,

both in its character as a singular, distinct, and definable entity, and as an inherent

complicity uniting man and his material world. For him this is but a myth and does

not apply to the actual state of the material world, which is actually complex, chaotic

and fragmented: "La cohésion organique et dynamique du monde bourgeois s'est

désagrégée" in Robbe-Grillet's work, observes Jean Alter ("Humanisme" 211).

Robbe-Grillet similarly denounces the corollary notion of unitary integrality: that man

and the elements composing his exterior world exist as whole, singular, integral units,

distinct from each other and from anything else by their essential and universal

qualities. If, as Robbe-Grillet says humanist thought supposes, an essential quality

permits a particular entity to be defined, it also sets it apart from others in its totality,

its singularity and its wholeness. He disagrees with this idea, stating,

> The traditional novel…presented human beings in their separate
> existences and the whole world surrounding them, as coherent and
> perfect totalities. For example, a person was defined by his
> "character," fixed once and for all, and this guaranteed, in any
> situation the intelligibility of his thoughts, his words, and his
> deeds…well, such a solidification of character and existence was long
> ago renounced by experts in the workings of the psyche (Otten 264).

If he agrees his project has any overlap with that of Nathalie Sarraute's, it is by dint

of her relentless attack "à la notion humaniste de… tout individu vivant que l'on

prétend rassembler dans une totalité cohérente, stable" (Robbe-Grillet "Nathalie

Sarraute" loc. 777). Rather than unity and integrality, the works of Robbe-Grillet

reflect an "esthetic disunity" and "discontinuity" (Morrissette "Oedipus" 69; Stoltzfus

Body 13).

Finally, Robbe-Grillet takes particular issue with the humanist notion of

transcendence, an "out there" agent of order; a God or a set of natural laws that

organize and order the universe, whose existence precedes perception and the

discovery of which will lead to understanding: "la récupération des éléments négatif

ou abérrants en vue d'une construction transcendante: un ensemble glorieux où tout

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aurait sa place…une sorte d'opération magique" (Montalbetti loc. 4988). He often

employs the term *métaphysique* to refer to this idea of a single explanation that would

recuperate the world and its rules of existence in its totality. The essentialism he

critiques inevitably leads to transcendance: "l'idée d'une nature mène infailliblement

à celle d'une nature commune à toutes choses, cest-à-dire supérieure. L'idée d'une

intériorité conduit toujours à celle d'un dépassement" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 52). For

Robbe-Grillet, humanist transcendence is dangerous because it allows belief in an

underlying eternal order that is reassuring but this is a false promise; it does not at all

reflect the true state of the world and keeps the passive reader from accepting the true,

chaotic state of the world.

Transcendence for Robbe-Grillet equates to any type of order perceived as

natural and timeless, which can include but is not limited to, a notion of God. In his

full-length study on Robbe-Grillet, Alter devotes an entire chapter to the absence of

God in Robbe-Grillet's novels, signaling the absence of churches in his villages. This

was brushed aside by some critics as being superfluous, as religion was never a

central question in serious critical evaluations of Robbe-Grillet, and as humanism is

often associated with secularism, but here Alter is right to call attention to the absence

of God in Robbe-Grillet's oeuvre, because God is a representative of transcendental

order; his absence stands in for the lack of a humanist transcendence: "L'isolement

[de l'individu]" that occurs in the wake of the collapse of humanism as a valid

framework "se complète par la négation de toute transcendance, de tout dépassement

de l'homme, ce qui inclut, sans que Robbe-Grillet le déclare spécifiquement, le

dépassement vers Dieu" ("Humanisme" 211). The ramifications of this absence are

not simply religious in nature, but lead back to the perceived invalidity of humanism at the core of his project. Braidotti highlights the extent to which posthuman critical theory's forbearer antihumanist thinkers have also already questioned the idea of humanist transcendence: "Anti-humanists over the last thirty years questioned both the self-representation and the image of thought implied in the Humanist definition of the Human, especially the ideas of transcendental reason and the notion that the subject coincides with rational consciousness" (*The Posthuman* 141). Posthumanist scholars have taken up this criticism established by antihumanist predecessors, and extrapolated it for their own use. As Braidotti sums up, "'post-anthropocentric posthumanism'…involves a radical estrangement from notions like moral rationality, unitary identity, transcendent consciousness, or innate universal and moral values. The focus is entirely on the normatively neutral relational structures…of subject formation" (*The Posthuman* 92). However, the project of critical posthumanism and Robbe-Grillet is not one limited to negation (in fact, Braidotti claims that the concentration of antihumanist theories on negation, rather than affirmation, is one reason that antihumanist theory is not sufficient to address its own problematics and that posthumanism is needed). For the most part, both critical posthumanists and Robbe-Grillet posit affirmative alternatives to the aspects of humanism that they criticize. I will now examine the alternatives Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars propose in place of the tenets of humanism they criticize.

2.2 Posthuman Alternatives

To the idea of transcendent meaning, Robbe-Grillet posits *absence* thereof. For without transcendent order there can be no universal meaning, no essential truths:

"s'il n'y a pas de Dieu la réalité est vide" (Montalbetti loc. 4932). The complexity of the world has no hidden all-encompassing significance or meaning; there is no "behind the curtain:" "Or le monde n'est ni significant, ni absurd. Il *est,* tout simplement" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 18). The state of the world as Robbe-Grillet sees is not due to an underlying intent, organization, or deeper meaning; things can therefore only be what they are through their presence in the moment. Entities in the world are above all characterized by their presence rather than essential identity, and this only in the current moment; all there can be is *presence* in the *present*. Things in the world "enfin…pourraient être…*ce qu'ils sont.* La réalité ne serait plus sans cesse située ailleurs mais *ici et maintenant"* (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 37). In fact, he states directly that at least part of his literary project amounts to dismantling humanist essentialism: "Le travail que nous opérons n'est-il pas ainsi la déconstruction permanente d'une nature qui cherche sans cesse à avoir le dernier mot?" (Leenhardt 172).

The notion of lack or absence at the heart of Robbe-Grillet's antihumanist project has been well established; in fact it is prominent enough that Olga Bernal produced an entire full-length study of Robbe-Grillet dedicated to this theme. As with the absence of God highlighted by Alter, Robbe-Grillet insists here on the parallel between absence of meaning in his works and in the material world. This lack of transcendent order, in fact, is perhaps the only thing that is sure in a world characterized by uncertainty: "[du] monde sa qualite la plus sûre: le simple fait qu'il est là" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 38). To critics who found symbolic meaning in the

character of the mad king in *La Maison de Rendez-Vous*, Robbe-Grillet postulates

that perhaps it is the opposite:

> Il n'y a pas dans *La Maison de Rendez-Vous* de personnage
> symbolique…ce n'est pas allégorique. Il serait trop facile de dire, le
> roi c'est Dieu dans un monde sans Dieu…c'est-à-dire ce serait cette
> présence omniprésente, omnisciente, mais dans un monde qui aurait
> renonce à cette toute-puissance d'un jugement supérieur ("Lindon"
> 13:47-14:13).

And in an interview in *L'Express*, he reinforces this idea of absence by agreeing with

the interview that instead of writing Racine-like "interpretable" works, his works

begin and end with an emptiness, "comme l'est probablement la réalité même"

(Montalbetti loc. 4919).

This transformation of essence into absence is echoed in the critical

posthumanist project. Previously, humanism postulated the inherent essence of man,

which separated him from his others. But the proliferation of the non-human and the

inhuman, along with their implication with that which had previously been considered

"human" have made absence rather than presence of any particular defining

characteristic the reigning standard. In fact, absence is the true "essence" of the

human; Lyotard states, "In short, our contemporaries find it adequate to remind us

that what is proper to humankind is its absence of defining property, its nothingness,

or its transcendence, to display the sign 'no vacancy'" (Lyotard *Inhuman* 4). The

increasing inability in a technologically advanced (and advancing) era to distinguish

the "human" from its others has left a void.

This lack of essence does not equate to absurdity, however, which for Robbe-

Grillet is simply "une catégorie commode" that in fact is nothing more than another

attempt at oversimplification of the irreducibly complex: "S'agit-il là de ce qu'on nomme l'*absurde*? Certainement pas…avec le soupçon d'absurdité revient le danger métaphysique. Le non-sens, l'a-casualité, le vide attirent irrésistiblement les arrière-mondes et les sur-natures" (*PUNR* 18, 37, 140-141). Absurdity is but another return to a type of absolutism and transcendence: "en-deçà de la signification immédiate on trouve l'absurde, qui est théoriquement la signification nulle, mais qui en fait mène aussitôt, par une récuperation métaphysique bien connue, à une nouvelle transcendence; et la fragmentation infinie du sens fondé ainsi d'une nouvelle totalité, tout aussi dangereuse, tout aussi vaine" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 142-143). Robbe-Grillet sees the binary of sense-making/nonsense as too reductive, locating the state of things "entre le non-sens absolu et le sens épuisé" (*PUNR* 70). Neither absurdity nor transcendant humanism leaves space within that oversimplication for that which would contradict it or put it into question. A more complex model, or a model that allows for more complexity is needed to understand Robbe-Grillet's rejection of transcendence; as Ronald Bogue states, examining Robbe-Grillet from the standpoint of language (and criticizing Morrissette's analysis), "to argue that language either refers directly to reality or does not refer to reality at all is to accept a false formulation of the problem" (35).

Indeed, the world cannot be reduced to a simple set of rules, however reassuring that might be. Rather, it is full of irreducible complexity: "La réalité est…déroutante…ambiguë;" "le réel est sans cesse troué et le sens passé à travers les trous" and contains "[des] rapports flous, mouvants et incertains." (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 33, "Entretien" 16). He reproaches humanism its attempt at reassurance and

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certainty, which for Robbe-Grillet do not at all correspond to the actual state of the world. Rather than seeking to uncover universal and eternal laws, the New Novel "reflects what we know of the world today," which is "discontinuous" and fragmented, the humanist promise of the discovery of transcendental meaning "misleading" (Otten 264). For in the face of complexity the promise of certainty and simplification is untenable, even dishonest. One of Robbe-Grillet's main criticisms of humanism is that it simplifies too much; it attempts to simplify complexity that is irreducible. "Le propre de l'humanisme, chrétien ou non, est precisement de *tout* récuperer, y compris ce qui tente de lui tracer des limites, voire de le récuser dans son ensemble," but this is but a "simplification illusoire" (*PUNR* 46, 21). New literature feels disturbing to readers familiar with the humanist paradigm because it does not offer this reassurance, which results from the oversimplification of complexity: "The vague and slippery image that emerges out of the whole situation is located exactly opposite the world of Balzac, where people, plots, and settings convince the reader with their enormous, persistent, and reassuring qualities" (Otten 264). The effect of the world on a subject and therefore of literature on a reader should not be reassuring but unsettling.

This mirrors the stance of thinkers like Morson, and posthumanist theorists like Cary Wolfe, who draw on theories of irreducible complexity in systems and information theory as representative of what they see as being the actual state of the material world, which is one of "overwhelming environmental complexity," says Wolfe; Maturana and Varela for their part discuss the "multiplicity, complexity, and heterogeneity of the environment" (Wolfe *What Is Posthumanism?* loc. 173, 214).

Robbe-Grillet's idea of the tentative of "reassurance" of humanism parallels the

persistence of what Morson calls an outdated "Newtonian" scientific approach in the

face of the actual, complex state of the world:

> Thinkers imagine that if the vast diversity of social phenomena were
> traced back cause by antecedent cause, they would gradually converge
> on a few simple laws. It seems indubitable that order, not mess,
> defines the fundamental nature of things. But why make such an
> assumption? Could the world…not be governed by a principle
> analogous to entropy, the maximization of *dis*order? (Morson 224).

For Robbe-Grillet, in attempting to force a false simplification of his world, man is

voluntarily turning a blind eye to the "chaos" that is the true nature of the world,

which is "complexe and doué d'une existence sensible" (*PUNR* 37, 90). Paradoxes

and contradictions, such as an incongruous sound accompanying an image in a film

scene should be accepted by an audience for a novel or film precisely because "le

monde où nous vivons est un monde de contradictions" ("Chemins" 11:25). For

Robbe-Grillet, contemporary art in general should reflect this complex and

unsimplified state of the world; humanist art is problematic precisely because its

desire for simplification resists acceptance of this complexity. Modern literature

should try instead to accommodate it. Indeed, rather than peeling back layers of

complexity to arrive at a central nexus of laws of order – Morson's "Newtonian"

approach – an approach is needed that accepts the notion of irreducible complexity.

Posthumanist critics like Cary Wolfe agree with Robbe-Grillet that humanist

attempts at reduction are futile: "[a useful philosophy] must avoid at all costs the

quintessentially modernist and Enlightenment strategy of reducing complexity in the

name of social consensus," and like Robbe-Grillet, he calls for "a thinking that does

not turn away from the complexities and paradoxes" (*Critical Environments* loc. 137; *What Is Posthumanism?* loc. 179). For Wolfe this way of thinking is precisely what posthumanist critical theory aspires to be and one of the reasons for which it is advantageous as an approach. This turn towards scientific notions of complexity as a starting point also corresponds to the more recent critical works on Robbe-Grillet by critics such as Raylene Ramsay and Ben Stoltzfus, who have used chaos theory and systems theory, respectively, for some of their most recent evaluations of Robbe-Grillet's work.[22]

In Robbe-Grillet's world (both literary and material), complexity is often addressed through the notion of the construction (and destruction) of order. Robbe-Grillet mentions the notion of order and disorder often in his critical commentary, and many critics rightly focus on the question. But rather than leaning towards one or the other, the most important thing, as Robbe-Grillet says, is to recognize the space between the two. In his works, like in his reality, order is never fully realized but it is attempted constantly in a Sisyphean effort to introduce it. In his criticism, Robbe-Grillet critic John John Sturrock has signaled this desire for order in a chaotic world as it appears in Robbe-Grillet's fiction: "This everyday or contingent world appears to [the imagination] a chaos, because it does not display the order the imagination would like it to display" (Sturrock 227). Much of the plot action as well as the narration in his fictional texts focus on an agent who attempts to introduce order in a complex world that resists it. Robbe-Grillet cites the character of Garinati of *Les Gommes*, who constantly rearranges objects on a mantel in search of the best order but never finds it.

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[22] In *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity* (1992), Ramsay; and *The Target* (2006), Stoltzfus.

Sturrock observes this tension in Robbe-Grillet, stating, "Underlying all his books there is a dynamic conflict, analgous to Simon and Butor, between the forces of order and the forces of chaos" (Sturrock 181).

But order is not always successfully created and when it is, it is simultaneously self-destructive. When an agent does succeed in creating an order, the order is context-dependent and provisory rather than timeless and enduring; it does not last; it is not universal; it is unique to its particular context, and it collapses at the same time it is created; in the Garinati example, none of his arrangements is ever satisfactory, and he keeps starting over; the best order is elusive; it is never achieved. In short, order is continually attempted but never realized. For Robbe-Grillet this is typical of the actual state of the material world, where "order itself is not endurable…order and disorder never cease to interact, to contaminate each other, to practice a sort of mutual recuperation" (Morrissette "Order and Disorder" 3, 11). Overall, this effort at creating order is characterized by movement that results in prolonged and fluctuating tension rather than arrival at a definitive conclusion.

On yet another level, Robbe-Grillet maintains that this attempt at order is also the primary act of the author, a primary component of the act of writing. The text does not constitute the "discovery" of a preexisting order revealed by the author through his writing; rather, it is the product of writing as a means to create an order, actively and intentionally, even laboriously: "The role of a writer – or of any other artist – is to be a creator of forms, an organizer of forms" (Morrissette "Order and Disorder" 3). This order is created as praxis, as a performance or act of tension between order and chaos and not in view of a lasting result; for Robbe-Grillet the

writer does not expect to definitively impose order on complexity. Compared to writers writing as critics would like them to, that is, conforming to a pre-established order, the goal of the writer as Robbe-Grillet conceives it is to create a new order, even temporarily. Even though that order can never achieve any permanence or fixity, it remains the goal: "Here then are two conceptions of order which are fundamentally opposed: One is established order, the other is created order" (Morrissette "Order and Disorder" 3).

One can see how closely this reflects the posthumanist standpoint brought about through cybernetics theory. "Experience teaches us that left to themselves, things tend to become a 'muddle,'" as Gregory Bateson observed. "If one takes no special effort, neat things get messy, but messy things never get neat. That is why order requires work" (Morson 224). Morson's "work" describes precisely the effort that Robbe-Grillet describes as the act of writing, and that which many of his characters, like Garinati, carry out in in his books – in fact he and Morson even use the same word, "work," to describe the action: Robbe-Grillet citing "the very work of the writer" (Morrissette "Order and Disorder" 3). This same attempt at order also takes place at the extradiagetic level (if one can use such a term for Robbe-Grilletian narration, which constantly fluctuates between the frontiers of "inside" and "outside" the story being recounted). The *raison d'etre* of the narration in *La Maison des Rendez-Vous* constitutes precisely this attempt at establishing order regarding the events that occurred (or not) during an evening at the *maison*, at attempt that ultimately proves futile: "Quelqu'un essaie de mettre de l'ordre dans tout ça…il

essaie constamment de donner une cohérence à toute cette soirée. Et évidamment, il n'arrive pas" ("Lindon" 12:55-13:17).

The notion of disorder and order is one to which many scholars have returned in evaluations of Robbe-Grillet's work. They are right to do so, as he states himself that the question of order and disorder has nearly always been a primary preoccupation for him (Morrissette "Order and Disorder" 1). But where critical evaluations of his work along this thematic go awry is that they often attempt to conclusively place him on one side or the other of this binary, which effectively ignores where he himself places the problematic: squarely in the tension between the two. For Robbe-Grillet, it is a state of complex tension that is the most accurate and reducible unit at the heart of the question. "It is that which interests me…these unresolved tensions between two poles…such unresolved contradictions maintain in the book or in the film lines of force and I think that if there is a possible reading it's thanks to this quality" (Hayman 284).

This is equally true of Robbe-Grillet's approach to other binaries, and this is one of the reasons that make Robbe-Grillet so frustratingly *insaissable* by critics attempting to use binary thematics to evaluate him. Several critics, including Barthes, made a considerable effort to categorize him in the subjectivity/objectivity debate, for example, when in fact the very question becomes moot when viewed through Robbe-Grillet's valuation of complexity and tension: "ce qui intéresse notre auteur, c'est seulement de créer une littérature *conflictuelle*, c'est-à-dire une littérature de tensions non resolues" ("Un écrivain non reconcilié" loc. 1655). For this reason too, absurdity is problematic as an approach, as it amounts to artificially reducing the state of the

world to the binary of "sense-making"/"total absence of sense." Bruce Morrissette's

early evaluation of Robbe-Grillet using the binary of surface/profondeur is a good

example of how both Robbe-Grillet's terminology and his rejection of binaries can

prove problematic for critical evaluation that does not acknowledge his refusal of

binaries. In his 1958 article "Surfaces et structures dans les romans de Robbe-Grillet,"

Morrissette argues that if objects have a "surface" there must also exist a

"profondeur" (366). However, when Robbe-Grillet says "surface" what he refers to is

the state of an object that we can know only through the limits of one's observation

and which does not contain any essential transcendent truth (i.e. "profondeur"); he is

not using the words "surface" and "profondeur" in any traditional sense, nor is he

setting them up in an oppositionary duality. Thus the surface/profondeur binary is not

a binary at all, nor about "surface" or "profondeur" in a straightforward sense. No

binary surface/profondeur can be possible, precisely because there *is* no profondeur.

The "surface" *is* the nature of the object, and any misunderstandings that may arise

can be said to be due to its forced positioning into a false duality: "Tant qu'on

valorise comme Michel Mansuy une profondeur, une âme cachée de l'homme et des

choses, un Dieu, il est evident que cette supérficie ne pourra paraître qu'insuffisance

et perte de densité" (Mansuy 98-99). Robbe-Grillet, pretending to be a third party,

explicitly denounces this interpretation in an essay in *Obliques* (originally the preface

to *La Maison de rendez-vous*):

> Dans ses essais théoriques, Robbe-Grillet a souvent employé lui-même
> ce terme de "surface", ou ses dérivés. Mais que faut-il au juste
> entendre par là? La première impression du lecteur occidental,
> conditionné qu'il est par des siècles de valeurs humanistes et
> chrétiennes, c'est que "superficiel" signifie sans importance, distrait,
> qui néglige l'essentiel par manque d'attention ou de jugement…pour

les écrivains du Nouveau Roman, c'est bien autre chose: le refus précisément de croire au monde des "essences", à l'indicible, à l'ineffable ("Un écrivain non réconcilié loc. 1628).

Robbe-Grillet's work, as well as the material world, in his view, nearly always resists recuperation by one side or the other of a given duality. In fact, binaries generally for Robbe-Grillet are not a valid approach. He rejects them as being yet another attempt at oversimplification of irreducible complexity:

> Les bons sont les bons et les méchants sont les méchants. Mais, précisément, le souci d'évidence qu'ils y mettent n'a rien à voir avec ce que nous observons dans le monde. Quel progrès y a-t-il si, pour échapper au dédoublement des apparences et des essences, on tombe dans un manichéisme du bien et du mal?...[on est] dans un monde complexe (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 37).

Indeed, if for Robbe-Grillet, total recuperation is too reductive, binaries are also too reductive. In the very article in which Robbe-Grillet lays out his "tension" approach to order and disorder, he reproaches the interviewer for accusing him of "never leaving a binary system": "Not at all, dear sir…It is my impression that it is rather a question of a series of slippages…of decentralizations, of displacements…It is never a question of replacing the Tsar's statue by a statue of Stalin. It is a question of never placing any statue in position, but continuing to slip" (Morrissette "Order and Disorder" 16).

In fact, Robbe-Grillet often fights or corrects binary readings of his work by critics, pointing out, for example, at the Colloque de Cerisy that his film *Eden et Après* was constructed "non pas sur la structure binaire réalité/imagination que certains critiques y ont vue," but rather along a series of twelve themes reproduced in series of ten, and he attempts to dodge binary reduction generally in his fiction;

Raylene Ramsay mentions that her doctoral thesis was on "dislocations of traditional binary logic" in his work (Gardies 205; *Modernity* 4). Robbe-Grillet sees this – rejection of binaries for being too reductive of complex systems -- as yet another way in which art parallels science in confronting the reality of the contemporary material world: "Les différents niveaux de signification que nous venons de signaler ont entre eux des interférences multiples. Et il est probable que le nouveau réalisme détruira certaines de ces oppositions théoriques" (*PUNR* 143).

Posthumanist critical theory agrees with Robbe-Grillet in this regard. Technological and scientific developments, along with their associated hybrid figures like Haraway's cyborg, demonstrate the futility of the binaries produced by ontological distinctions conceived to distinguish the human from its others, such as man/machine, human/inhuman, and animal/human. Posthumanist theory views ontological categorizations like human and other as a constructed epistemological attempt at creating (a non-naturally occurring) order. It seeks to address the processes that gave rise to those distinctions "as a term of cultural criticism, posthuman aims at dismantling the many binaries endorsed by Western dualism: body/mind, self/other, culture/nature, global/local, and so forth" (Remshardt 135). Of course, binaries such as these rely to large extent on the idea of essential natures to establish their oppositional identities, which as I have shown, is viewed as problematic by posthumanist thought. Like Robbe-Grillet, posthumanist scholars view binaries as being overly reductive in the face of the actual complexity of the material world. As Braidotti states, following tendencies in scientific theory to valorize plurality and networks, posthuman scholarship embraces

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the dislocation of difference from binaries to rhizomatics; from sex/gender or nature/culture to processes of sexualization/racliaracialization/naturalization that take Life itself, or the vitality of matter as the main target. This sytem engenders a deliberate blurring of dichotomous differences, which does not in itself resolve or improve the power differences and in many ways increases them (*The Posthuman,* 96).

With this in mind, Wolfe praises systems theory in particular for its potential for posthumanist theory, as it "might more readily engage the "hybrid" or "cyborg" networks of postmodernity…a challenge to which the old ontological dualisms of subject/object, organism/machine, and so on would seem to be woefully inadequate" (*Critical Environments* loc. 150). Wolfe also points out that while midcentury first-order systems theory was enormously useful to the creation of a posthumanist critical theory, one of its major limitations was "the dialectical antithesis of matter and information," a problematic which is taken up and resolved by second-order systems theory via its emphasis on emergence rather than essence, which, as noted in Chapter 1, has particular import within posthumanist theory, and which may be seen in modified form in the work of posthumanist scholars like Luhmann (*What is Posthumanism?* loc. 133). Here, Wolfe also gives credit to Deleuze, whose work was achieved by "passing through all the dualisms which are the enemy" (*What is Posthumaism?* loc. 160).

Indeed, it is not just binaries that are viewed as moot but "traditional" ontological categorization in general. A consequence of the rejection of essence, universality, and unity, and the binaries they generate is a widespread breakdown of boundaries generally. From a posthumanist standpoint, in the face of events such as major technological development, the categories established by humanist essentialist

and unitary frameworks, such as human and non-human, are put into question, or even are exposed as having never been valid in the first place. Clarke states, "Nature at all scales is penetrating the prior boundaries we thought to place around the human essence," while Reket says, "technological mutations of the human species…erode the symbolic binaries constitutive of modern thought. As divisions between the natural and the cultural, the mind and the body, and the human and the technological all grow increasingly difficult to maintain, so too, it follows, do the anthropocentric terms by which social theory tends to operate" (Clarke *Literature* xiii; Reket 82).

For both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars alike, such categories amount to yet another humanist attempt at epistemological oversimplification, a bid to force order and meaning on a world that is too complex to be categorized and labeled, which actually resists the order such categories would impose. As John Muckelbauer and Debra Hawhee point out in their article on posthumanism,

> Is it really so easy, for example, to distinguish between a speaker, an audience, a message, and a context? Most readers will undoubtedly acknowledge that these con cepts are quite slippery in practice, but that one tries to do the best one can in each situation -- assuming, of course, that a "situation" can be circumscribed. Instead of attempting to reduce the complexity of actual events, might there be a way of rethinking rhetoric that would encourage us to engage this complexity and to respond to it? (768-769).

Critical posthumanists approach the question of breakdown of boundaries from many different angles, from the "boundary-dissolving" figure of the cyborg in Haraway to Derrida's "animal question" (Remshardt 136). However, one of the most highly developed critical approaches to epistemological categorization that has been taken up by posthumanist theory is Bruno Latour's Nature/Culture divide. In the treatise *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour maintains that the main project of modernity has

consisted of attempts at imposing artificial distinctions among material phenomena and human knowledge, which he calls "purification." These artificial categories have proven increasingly problematic with time, more so in recent years (he was writing in 1991). He gives as an example a daily newspaper, with its ubiquitous distinctions between "science," "political," "cultural," "religious," and "local" news – distinctions that are more or less universally recognizable by the general reading public (Latour 1-3). And yet such a widespread and widely observable phenomenon as global warming does not fit neatly into any category, or rather, it fits into all of them.

The phenomena, such as global warming, that refuse to submit to categorization he terms "hybrids" because they cross or deny the boundary between one or more established categories. According to Latour, our "modern" culture has witnessed a proliferation of such hybrids, a proliferation that was facilitated by our willful ignoring of their true interrelatedness. For Latour, the entire project of modernity has been to establish categorical boundaries in an attempt to organize knowledge; the most prominent of these boundaries are what he terms Nature (in brief, the material world; that which can be "discovered") and Culture (that which pertains to human existence and the exercise of power). Or, to put it more succinctly, the human and the non-human; as Latour puts it, "Let us not mix up heaven and earth, the global stage and the local scene, the human and the non-human" (3). For him the foundational problem of modernity is this artificial division between the human and non-human, and subsequent imposition of ontological categories, which belies the true state of the world, that is to say the human being implicated in relationships along with the non-human. The increasing and incontestable presence of hybrids like

global warming is evidence of the falsity of the Nature/Culture divide and of the futility of the modern desire to impose categories like the paper's sections on these phenomena, which are after all not separate but inherently linked or unbounded. Instead of distinctive categories, Latour proposes a model of innumerable "networks" emphasizing multidirectional connections, permeability, and multiplicity. Hence the title of his treatise; if the modern project amounts to establishment of such boundaries and the reality of contemporary existence has exposed their futility, then "we have never been modern" (Latour 46). In the face of such phenomena that buck categorization, boundaries begin to dissolve; it is the symptom of a "late modern, posthumanist culture, in which the boundaries between human and animal…once again, this time through bio- and other technologies, have become, to use Donna Haraway's word, 'leaky'" (Herbrechter Introduction 14).

Robbe-Grillet, like Latour, thus sees the presence of these "false" categories as part of the contemporary condition, and their breakdown as an important part of his project: "C'est à chaque instant que nous devons lutter contre ces liens qu'on tisse autour de nous" (Alter "Discussion: Perspectives" 65). Interestingly, Latour makes a similar statement regarding imposition of such categories as having the goal of "reassurance," saying, "we would be dizzy without these soothing features" (2).

Posthumanists tend to emphasize current technological developments as the main catalyst that "challenge[s] the entire humanist system of categorization and exclusion," while Robbe-Grillet focuses more on the critical reticence to let go of the humanist apparatus of the 19th century that established such categories, but both point the finger at humanism, accusing it of having as an epistemological imperative the

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construction of artificial essentalist boundaries (Herbrechter *Analysis* 28-29). Take,

for example, Herbrechter's explanation:

> It is this risky partitioning-off of an essential difference…which produces a
> more and more frantic process of exclusion…boundaries have been
> constructed which are supposed to create a community of humans based on
> their 'humanity'…On the other hand, these boundaries are supposed to protect
> 'us' in our essence from more or less concrete and threatening forms of
> 'otherness.' The side effect – and this is where true criticism of humanism's
> essentialist approach lies – is that the constructions of these boundaries which
> are always portrayed as absolute, inviolable and universally valid for all time
> are in fact concealing a perfect permeability (*Analysis* 47).

It is exactly this kind of essence-driven false boundary that Robbe-Grillet attacks in

one particular commentary on the sexes, injecting his trademark penchant for

sadomasochism. The similarities between the two commentaries are strikingly

obvious:

> All the studies that are being conducted on sexuality…show that the
> great categories that have been fixed do not correspond to truth at all,
> not even to statistical truth. According to stereotype, for example, man
> is sadistic and woman is masochistic. Man likes to beat and woman
> likes to be beaten. In all the specialized newspapers, like the ones that
> exist in America, where people ask for partners in order to indulge
> their pleasures, what one finds most are men looking for women who
> would beat *them*. It runs completely counter to the great stereotype. I
> think all that is very important; it shows very well that such barriers do
> not exist. They aren't real. So that's the first point…the reversals of
> situations in my books already correspond to that reversal (Mistacco
> 42)

Boundaries in Robbe-Grillet's approach tend therefore to dissolve. He consistently

operates by breaking down established categories, whether ontological or narrative,

both in terms of his fictional writing and in terms of his worldview. As noted in

Chapter 1, for example, he makes little to no distinction between literary production

and the material external world. The border between the two, if it exists, is entirely

permeable; the writer's task is to "faire parler le monde" and also to "inventer le monde," an open exchange between literature and materiality (Mansuy 96, 97).

This breakdown of categories also applies to his fiction, and in his evaluation, critics frustrated by the plot of a given novel might well chalk it up to their frustration to their insistence on *assigning categories* in their reading, where instead Robbe-Grillet has emphasized permeability and fluidity; for example Robbe-Grillet points out that the book *Dans le labyrinthe* does not respect "cette différence fondamentale que vous [la critique] faites entre la chambre et la ville;" instead "tout le livre a été fait pour mettre en place un jeu d'écluses, de glissements constants entre l'une et l'autre" (Alter "Discussion; Perspectives" 65). Boundaries of the relationship between the reader, the narrator, and the hero are likewise affected: "Le premier narrateur est écrivain, le second est un soldat, mais que se passe-t-il?...Tout d'un coup le narrateur est le médecin, produit par le soldat" (Alter "Discussion: Perspectives" 65). And this from the beginning of his critical presence; in his first televised interview, on the topic of *La Jalousie* he says, "Mon personnage, le héros, est le mari, c'est aussi le narrateur, mais est-ce qu'on ne peut pas imaginer que si le lecteur fait l'effort [de participation] en question, il sera lui-même le narrateur? Et il sera le héros à ce moment-là" ("Jalousie" 5:30-6:18).

Such a refusal of categorical belonging is effected not only in his books, but also applies to himself as an artist. Indeed, one of the aspects that critics find most frustrating about Robbe-Grillet is his stubborn resistance to categorization at nearly every turn. Interviews and roundtables prove quickly disheartening for anyone wishing to assign him a label, as Robbe-Grillet often agrees with an interlocutor only

to change or qualify his remark in the next breath. In one televised interview, for example, within the first thirty seconds he corrects the interviewer who presents him as "un écrivain" – a rather innocuous label that few would likely refute -- by saying he is an "auteur-realisateur," adding that in terms of education, he is more of a biologist than anything ("Le Cinéma" 00:24-00:53). In another, he has himself applied the cross-genre label "ciné-roman" (already a blending of formerly distinct categories) to three of his novels, but when asked what exactly the label means by a presenter, demurs to answer definitively and emphasizes their differences rather than their similarities, thus refusing to legitimize any label, even one that he created himself ("Le ciné-roman" 00:01-2:09). And of course he resisted for a long time the label of "chef" of the Nouveau Roman, and when he does write or speak of it as a group, he almost never does so without qualifications. It is much for this fluctuating treatment of labels, categories, and boundaries that many critics have viewed Robbe-Grillet as unreliable or too contradictory to be taken seriously. However, when viewed from a posthuman perspective, his resistance to categorical classification can be seen not as a contradiction but as an affirmation of the reality of the complex state of the material world, and a rejection of humanist essentialist distinctions.

Like Robbe-Grillet, who makes no real distinction between literature and the material world, posthumanists also observe a categorical breakdown between general and academic culture and, what's more, see this breakdown as becoming more and more pronounced in the face of "modern" society and its sociotechnological developments; Herbrechter, for example, points out the growing use in popular language of portmanteaus that reflect the permeability of previously distinct

categories: "The borders between science, culture and technology have been eroded to such an extent that it has become customary to refer to contemporary culture as 'technoculture' and to contemporary science as 'technoscience'" (*Analysis* 19). Robbe-Grillet's stance on literary representation and the external world might well be termed *liter-culture*. He too, recognizes the dissolution of categorical boundaries as a contemporary phenomenon, one which he also credits to changes in general culture as well as the sciences: "La vie d'aujourd'hui, la science d'aujourd'hui, réalisent le dépassement de beaucoup d'antinomies catégoriques établies par le rationalisme des siècles passés" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 143). It is for this reason that he considers his literary project capable of "creating" reality and "inventing" man.

Instead of these separate "categorical antinomies" Robbe-Grillet emphasizes "slippages" or "glissements" between different ideas ("Des goûts et des couleurs" 57:42-57:52). The vocabulary is revealing; instead of a distinct line marking discontinuity between two disparate ideas, the crossing of which would necessitate breach or rupture, there is rather flow, openness, and continuity. His boundaries, when they exist, are fluid, permeable, changeable, not rigid and not permanent. Ben Stoltzfus in particular has observed this phenomenon in Robbe-Grillet's fiction, noting:

> The perpetual dialectical movement between the self and the other, between the subjective and the objective, between the inside and the outside. Thus, rooms, cellars, corridors, and attics communicate mysteriously and spontaneously – with no visible openings or transitions to justify the connection – with streets, cafes, buildings, cities, beaches, and forests on the outside (*Life* 39).

Here Stoltzfus rightly puts the emphasis on *between* when discussing binaries and notices that not only does Robbe-Grillet stay in the middle between two ideas, but

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that traditional boundaries, and the traditional means of breaching them -- the doors that would separate inside from outside – are conspicuously absent.

To humanist ideas of unity and integrality, Robbe-Grillet posits plurality and multiplicity. Instead of there being a question of "l'homme," he says, "il y a *des* questions et *des* reponses" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 53). Speaking of his book *La Belle Captive*, he says, "Contre [l'ordre etabli] ma petite captive propose au contraire du *mobile* et du *pluriel*: les possibles multiples" (Robbe-Grillet "Le droit au jeu et à la volupté" loc. 2108). He points out that characters in his books are in fact meant to be plural; critics who spend their time trying to discern a singular identity for a given character are misled and should simply accept that any given character could be singular or plural; that characters are plural is an interpretation that is "plus intéressant" ("Echos du Cinéma" 20:33). The same can be said for the state of the novel, whose future comprises a simultaneous plurality of existence: "Quant à dire ou va le roman, personne évidemment ne peut le faire avec certitude. Il est d'ailleurs probable que différentes voies continueront d'exister pour lui parallèlement." (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 13).

In the Colloque at Cerisy he again comments on his attempt to establish multiplicity in narration –this time in film -- and once again finds it erroneously interpreted into the singular:

> Voulant mettre en scène une voix narratrice, j'avais pris la peine de la
> dédoubler sous la forme de trois personnages [dont un] que j'ai
> imprudemment…joué moi-même. Le public a vu…un véritable auteur
> expliquant son film, qui, en même temps, est en train de se dérouler
> sous les yeux du spectateur. Mais le film entier était précisément
> construit de façon de rendre cette interprétation-là impossible, c'est-à-
> dire absurde (Rossum-Guyon 232).

In fact, Robbe-Grillet considers "proliferation" to be a key aspect of the New New Novel: "on est passé du récit d'une histoire à la proliferation des histoires, ce qui définit justement le Nouveau Nouveau Roman" (Pinget 341).

One sees the parallel in posthumanism: "The cultural politics of humanism's ideology thus remains the target for any posthumanist critique inspired by postmodernist and poststructuralist principles, which, instead, have been stressing alternative values like 'particularity', 'difference', 'multiplicity', and 'plurality'" (Herbrechter *Analysis* 12). Through its adoption of plurality, posthumanist critical theory manages, or at least attempts, to escape the paradox of humanism and its unity principle, wherein humanism posits essentialist unitary identities but does not itself correspond to this precept, because no such singular humanism exists. Posthumanists point out that a multiplicity of humanisms contradicts what they see as the humanist emphasis on singularity and unity, and is one of the reasons posthumanist critical theory finds it problematic as the most widely accepted framework for interpretation: "There is no immediate consensus about what constitutes some imaginary "human nature." This alone should be reason to abandon the simplistic idea of a monolithic (presumably Eurocentric) humanism" (Herbrechter "passion" 45). The true state of the world is that of complexity, wherein there may be shared experiences through overlaps and interactions, which occur among multiple entities and their composite realities, but such shared experiences do not constitute singularity or even consensus: "The world is an ongoing, differentiated construction and creation of a shared environment, sometimes converging in a consensual domain, sometimes not, by autopoetic entities that have their own temporalities, chronicities, perceptual

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modalities, and so on…the world is thus a virtuality and a multiplicity" (Wolfe *What is Posthumanism?* loc. 214).

Over the idea of universal essence, Robbe-Grillet proposes emergence, constructivism, and contingency. As critics such as Jean Alter and Zahi Zalloua have noted, one salient characteristic of Robbe-Grillet's oeuvre seems to be that of contingency,[23] which can also be conceived of as conditionality: "The effect of X on Y when W is low is different from the effect of X on Y when W is high…There is no valid bivariate relationship between X and Y that can be stated" (Donaldson 6). Or it may be conceived of in terms of chance. Morson prefers the simple Aristotlian "something could either be or not be" (223). Hacking is more specific: "X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable" (Martin 920). In any case, contingent events hinge on chance or possibility, rather than immanence or determinism. Hans-Georg Moeller highlights what he calls "the contingency and even the unlikelihood of the present state of affairs. Given all the infinite evolutionary possibilities, what is actually the case was by no means necessary" (loc. 66).

While there is an element of chance, a contingent world is not totally absurd, nor is it completely random. Borrowing from systems theory, posthumanist critical theory posits the actual state of the world as the result of a series of interactions and reactions between systems, none of which is more likely or more meaningful than any other. This idea can be conceptualized in terms of possibilities. As Rosi Braidotti points out, posthumanism benefits from "[stressing] the crucial importance of the

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[23] Zalloua cites the "contingent perception of reality," (20). Jean Alter invokes "contingence" in his first chapter of *La Vision du monde d'Alain Robbe-Grillet* (7).

process of actualization of virtual possibilities, over and above universal essences and linear realizations" (*The Posthuman* 170). Any given state of a subject or object at any given moment constitutes the outcome of an event that could have also occurred with different results, the event itself the consequence of the actualization of a previous event that could itself have ended up with different results, and so on. As Moeller puts it, for every observable element of our universe "it could have come out otherwise" (loc. 66). At any given point an actualized possibility has consequences, either a single necessary outcome, or a limited set of outcomes, which give rise to more possibilities, and so on.

One of the most helpful models of the posthumanist/systems theory take on contingency comes from Niklas Luhmann, who posits the notion of *Sinnhorizont*, or "horizon of sense" (Moeller loc. 1190) In this paradigm, a sense-making system (a perceiving subject, in phenomenological terms), confronts a multitude of possibilities of interpretation; his "knowledge" constitutes the selection he chooses from among the possible interprations available. No single possibility is any more probable, consequential, or important than any other; contingency takes precedence over inevitability. Moeller helpfully illustrates Luhmann's view of the contingent nature of cognition through the analogy of a ship on the sea (loc. 1187). The sense-making subject is the ship and his material external environment is the sea; the ship is unbounded by limitations in any direction, but it may move in only one: The sea constitutes infinite (or nearly infinite) possibilities; choosing any given one "could have produced any one of numerous, ontologically incompatible interpretations" (Martin 921) And the one that is actualized – the direction in which the ship chooses

to travel -- is equally as likely as any other. "The ship is not bound only by its actual location; its horizon is a horizon of possibilities. It could also be elsewhere. Sense-making is this interplay between the actual and the possible" (Moeller loc. 66). I will develop these ideas further in Chapter 6.

For some, contingency is also a mark of modernity: "Clearly the notion of causality, implying necessity and absoluteness, is at odds with a theory that converges around contingency – in politics, in law, in science, in intimacy, in art – in brief, modernity!" (Schultz 170). As with many of the other elements treated above, Michael Schultz notes that contingency has already worked its way through general culture as well as many disciplines in response to the supposition of inevitability within humanism. Robbe-Grillet makes the same observation: "Les conceptions essentialistes de l'homme voyaient leur ruine, l'idée de "condition" remplaçant désormais celle de "nature," says Robbe-Grillet (*PUNR* 22-23). Or, in posthumanist terms, "The subject is not a given. Eternal Man is no more; 'he' now has a history and a contingency denied by humanism" (Badmington Introduction 5). This vision of the contingency of the environment in Robbe-Grillet's fiction has been noted by John Sturrock, in particular in the novel *La Jalousie;* he writes of "an awareness of the contingency and irreducibility of all external phenomena" on the part of the narrator (195).

This is one reason for which Robbe-Grillet favors the idea of "jeu" so much in his work: he envisions a game as an analogy for the contingent state of the world: a series of possibilities, with limited consequences, the combinations of which allows

for an infinite number of eventual actualized possibilities, which do not ultimately contain any deep significance.

> Le sérieux suppose qu'il y a quelque chose derrière nos gestes: une âme, un dieu, des valeurs, l'ordre bourgeois…tandis que derrière le jeu, il n'y a rien. Le jeu s'affirme comme une pure gratuité. Quand, peu à peu, par la pratique de notre écriture au sein du contact sensible avec le monde, nous nous sommes trouvés non plus hantés par une profondeur mais de plain-pied avec des surfaces…c'est elle qui définit le champ de cette liberté. On vous distribue les cartes et vous commencez à les organiser en ce qu'on appelle une main; et ce seul ordre donné à des figures plates commence à projeter votre intervention dans le monde (Barilli 127).

This is the reason for which Morson links the idea of games and contingency together in his chapter "Contingency, Games, and Wit."

Robbe-Grillet speaks often of the notion of "freedom" as it applies to writing and the writer: "Ce qui fait la force du romancier, c'est justement qu'il invente, qu'il invente en toute liberté, sans modèle. Le récit moderne a ceci de remarquable: il affirme le propos déliberé de ce caractère" (*PUNR* 30). This freedom can be understood as the writer as being in the same position as Luhmann's ship; confronted with a sea of possibilities, the writer is free to make any number of choices; the modern writer in particular would be inventing without the intervention of fixed codes or roles – without the artificial imposition of determinacy. The text, then, would be the sum total of these actualized possibilities, the combination of which is what makes the final product unique. And these possibilities do not contain any inherent value, any inherent meaning, any "profondeur" that would drive or order their actualization; the choice of an agent (a writer, a player, a ship) is simply a matter of choice in which all possibilities are open and no action or outcome matters more than any other. "His fictions, like those of Michel Butor, have their exemplary

aspects; they are the product of *this* novelist, but also of *any* novelist, and *any* novelist includes all those able to use their imagination," says Sturrock (201). That Robbe-Grillet does not consider any particular possibility to be more likely or more important than any other is highlighted by Hédi Bouraoui:

> The novelist supplies us with a wide spectrum of possibilities as he stages each event, conditioning our interpretation within the given limits of the "clues" he provides. Within those limits he affords us complete freedom of interpretation. Although certain consistent patterns can be disengaged from the work, a certain continuity without which there would be no novel, for the most part Robbe-Grillet resists the temptation to tilt the scale one way or the other in presenting alternatives (87).

When one interpretation does occur it is but "un des sens possible de son oeuvre," which illustrates not only the idea of a horizon of possibilities of which one is selected, but also of the multiple nature of interpretations – one reader can make one choice; another reader may make another; both are equally valid and simultaneously existent (Robbe-Grillet "Un écrivain non réconcilié" loc. 1539).

What gives a particular choice signification and/or significance, whether in games or in books, is the choice of the agent *within the context of the game*. Robbe-Grillet describes this contingent aspect of games thusly:

> Les figures plates que l'on distribue aux joueurs sont des purs signes, et qui ne signifient rien en eux-memes: pour un bridgeur, il n'y a rien derriere la dame de pique ou le dix de trèfles, pas de sens, pas de valeur…donc, ces cartes qu'on lui a distribuées, il commence par les ranger dans sa main, et déjà l'ordonnance qu'il leur donne constitue un projet de sens. Et quand il fera ses announces et quand, ensuite, il abattra ses cartes l'une après l'autre face à celles de ses partenaires et adversaires, son geste sera libre et l'ordre de la partie qu'il invente constitutera un ordre original du monde…son intervention créatrice ("Après l'Eden et après" loc. 1505).

In these terms, wherein a given event is to some degree fortuitous rather than inevitable, when a discovery or perception is made, it is context-dependent rather than eternal and universal. Its meaning is unique to its own existence and conditional upon the particular qualities of its circumstances. If meaning is to be made, it depends on context, or what Robbe-Grillet would term "structure." For Robbe-Grillet in texts, the meaning is also contingent upon the reader and his individual perceptions, past, and biases. Hence his heavy insistence on "active" rather than "passive" reader participation – it all comes down to the contingent nature of meaning, and to the choices of the writer are added the qualities and choices of the sense-making subject, or the reader: "the reader [is] solicited as a collaborator in building a tenuous structure" (Smith 63). The combination of the choices of the author and the qualities of the reader constitute the "game" of possibility that produces meaning and significance, the choices of meaning and interpretation analogous to the ship on the sea: "For the reader to plunge into the "game" of the novel requires a kind of existential commitment amidst an infinity of choices, of *grilles d'interpretation*, tentatively advanced by the author" (Bouraoui 85).

Borrowing from other "post-" theories, posthumanism likewise stresses the contingent and contextual production of meaning: "A poststructuralist and postmodernist critique emphasizes the radically local and temporal context-specificity, negates the immanence of signification and instead stresses the…construction of meaning" (Herbrechter *Analysis* 12). Posthumanist theory valorizes and takes up those theoretical approaches, including, but not limited to, postmodernism and poststructuralism, which constitute "the critiques of the

traditional philosophical paradigms of positivism, empiricism, and the like, which stress instead the contingency and social construction of knowledge (pragmatism, poststructuralism, materialist feminism)" (Wolfe *Critical Environments* loc. 44). As Latour states, describing the scientific approach to measuring the weight of air, "No science can exit from the network of its practice. The weight of air is indeed always a universal, but a universal in a network. Owing to the extension of this network, competences and equipment can become sufficiently routine for production of the vacuum to become as invisible as the air we breathe; but universal in the old sense? Never" (24).

For Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars, contingency is closely related to emergence. A contingent actualization is not fixed; reality is not chronically static; it is in constant flux, and from moment to moment liable to change. The same sea that carries the ship in Luhmann's analogy is in unceasing flow and unrest, never still. Interestingly, Morson turns to literature to illustrate his notion of the contingent and emergent nature of the world, citing Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in a scientific article: "'What science can there be,' asks Prince Andrei, 'in a matter in which, as in every practical matter, nothing can be determined and everything depends on innumerable conditions, the significance of which becomes manifest at a particular moment and no one can tell when that moment will come?" (225). Emergence, as Morson conceives it, constitutes the qualities of a given phenomenon as they are "'at a particular moment': *presentness* matters in the sense that at least some moments are not simply the automatic derivative of earlier moments. They possess what Bakhtin called

"eventness" and "surprisingness." They contain an ineliminable element of contingency" (225).

Robbe-Grillet understands the world and the entities that inhabit it as being in a constant state of change or transformation. It is not for nothing that he consistently speaks about "movement," for dynamism, not static, is the default quality of any given system. Qualities are never fixed, but continually mutating. He frequently qualifies his remarks with the expression "en train de" or "sans cesse" to communicate this notion of continual coming-into-being. As Stoltzfus puts it, "Robbe-Grillet is in constant motion, emphasizing not what he is, but what he is becoming" (*Life* 39). Robbe-Grillet sees the material world is constantly in a state of flux: "C'est la matière elle-même qui est à la fois solide et instable" ("Description, representation" loc. 1137). With no fixed, eternal essences, entities in the world, including man, can only be in an endless state of transition or emmanence: "le monde change, lui aussi" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 136). This emergent nature applies to literature as a discipline as well as to the human subject: "Le roman ne peut exister que s'il change. Comme l'homme, il ne peut exister, non pas comme héritage, mais que s'il est en mouvement. C'est seulement le mouvement des choses qui les conserve en vie" ("Réactionnaires" 58:00-58:08). Wolfe closely echoes this sentiment when he says we must "consider human life as a project in 'composition'" and "any notion of the posthuman that is to be more than merely the extension of the human…must be premised upon a mutation that is ongoing and immanent" (*What Is Posthumanism?* loc. 199, 133). Nayar, for his part, highlights the emergent nature of the posthuman via systems theory: "Systems, including human ones, are in a state of

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emergence rather than in a state of being when the system is constantly traversed by information flows from the environment" (9).

In this fluctuating state of being, material phenomena can only be captured, perceived, described or observed as they are in the moment; they are characterized by Morson's "presentness": "La réalité ne serait plus sans cesse située ailleurs, mais *ici et maintenant*" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 37). When non-human objects are described in Robbe-Grillet's works, rather than an inherent essence that is revealed, it is a depiction of a perception (or perceptions) of how the object is only in the moment of observation. His objects are not just things-in-themselves but things in-the-process-of-becoming; their literary representation is a sort of screenshot taken from a constant stream of data, an image captured and extracted from the unceasing movement of existence: "Ces objets appréhendés dans une prétendue fixité sont au contraire un transformation permanente" (C. Simon, 93). Barthes once said of Robbe-Grillet's project, "The author's entire art is to give the object a *Dasein*, a 'being-there,' and to strip it of a 'being-something' (Barthes "Littérature Objective" 15). It might rather be more accurate to say that Robbe-Grillet strips objects of a 'being-something' and transforms them into a *becoming-there*. Robbe-Grillet himself gives the example of the painting in *Dans le labyrinthe*, an object that might at first be presumed to be static: "Le tableau du *Labyrinthe* est le contraire même d'un objet figé, ce qu'il représente est en continuel mouvement" (C. Simon 93).

Robbe-Grillet sees not only the world at large and literature as a whole as being emergent, but also his individual texts: "L'oeuvre d'art, comme le monde, est une forme vivante" (*PUNR* 41). And it is not just the art, but the writer who is

constantly changing: "Je n'ai pas arrêté de changer au cours de – au fur et à mesure -- de mes romans. Et ce que je réclame pour le Nouveau Roman, c'est justement l'invention permanente du roman" ("Le style c'est l'homme" 21:05-21:12). This is where posthumanism allows Robbe-Grillet to escape accusations of contradictions by his critics – in a model that stresses emergence, his theory and his literature are constantly in flux. There is no fixity, nor should there be. And he demands a critique that respects it, responding affirmatively to Jean Alter's summary of his arguments at the Colloque de Cerisy in 1972 that "C'est le mouvement et la liberté qui lui dictent sa production et il aime les interprétations qui justement respectent ce mouvement" (Alter "Discussion: Perspectives" 73). And so, just six years before Ihab Hassan put a name to a framework that encompassed the phenomena he observed, Robbe-Grillet, invoking the same phenomena, voiced the need for just such a framework.

Chapter 3: Repositioning the Human Subject

3.1 Alain Robbe-Grillet, Posthumanism, and the Human Subject

Within this "modern" world, where a general rejection of the "myth" of "profondeur" has taken place, what, then, is man's place in the world? And what can our understanding of him be? Robbe-Grillet is preoccupied by this question. He maintains that his work, both critical and fictional, is, like humanist texts, concerned above all with the question of the human and is human-focused; his work consists of "la réflexion précise (et limitée) sur l'homme, sa situation dans le monde, les phénomènes de son existence" (*PUNR* 47). However, as part of his reflections on the human subject he rejects the humanist approach to knowing or "creating" the human, for the reasons listed in the previous chapter. In doing so he casts aside the type of classical model of humanist subjectivity described thusly by Braidotti: "universal consciousness [that] …posits the power of transcendence as its distinctive characteristic and humanistic universalism as its particularity," which follows "the binary logic of identity and otherness" (*The Posthuman* 15). Instead he "invents" one of his own, a subject that would respect the conditions of the Robbe-Grilletian and posthumanist affirmations discussed in the previous chapter, including plurality, breakdown of boundaries, complexity, relationality, constructivism, contextuality, and emergence. From the time of his first publication critics accused him of forsaking the human, a claim which held strong for decades; as late as 1982, R.O. Elaho stated "pour Robbe-Grillet l'intérêt du roman n'est plus l'homme mais autre chose" (107). The critical response to this new human subject surprised Robbe-Grillet, who did not

expect such a negative reaction: "l'on me condamnait au nom de l'humain" and "je suis…reconnu coupable de crime contre l'humanité" (*PUNR* 46, 47).

According to Robbe-Grillet, such criticism is illogical, for to question the effect of humanism is not to reject the human but to concentrate on him: "Que pourrait être, autrement, une œuvre "inhumaine"? Comment, en particulier, un roman qui met en scène un homme et s'attache de page en page à chacun de ses pas, ne décrivant que ce qu'il fait, ce qu'il voit, ou ce qu'il imagine, pourrait-il être accusé de se détourner de l'homme?" (*PUNR* 47-48). Indeed, while his call for "art for art's sake" has been invoked as proof of his turn away from the human, many of the same critics point out that this does not constitute proof of a rejection of the human, and that the human remains a primary preoccupation for him. Morrissette, for example, reformulates the phrase into a human-focused one, stating "Loin de régresser vers un idéal désuet d'*art pour l'art*, la doctrine de Robbe-Grillet peut nous conduire à une conception plus vraie, l'*art pour l'homme*" (*Romans* 36). Indeed, for Robbe-Grillet, the fact that man was an essential concern for him was never in question; a surprised Robbe-Grillet responding to critics says, "Le Nouveau Roman ne s'intéresse qu'à l'homme et à sa situation dans le monde" (*PUNR* 116).

However, "to engage with humanism, to acknowledge its persistence, is not necessarily to support humanism," a claim at which many of those critics who recognized Robbe-Grillet's preoccupation with the human arrived (Badmington "Theorizing" 15). Jean Alter, for example, rightly sees that the notion of the human is a particular problematic of Robbe-Grillet's but then relegates him right back under

the umbrella of humanism by concluding that because Robbe-Grillet wrote a book at which man was the center, the work was necessarily a humanist one:

> De ce tableau pitoyable une certaine valeur humaine émerge: une bonne volonté pathétique mais irréductible qui porte l'homme à projeter sa petitesse même sur le monde qui l'entoure: les choses et les êtres. Parce qu'il a su voir cet effort, et qu'il l'a placé au centre de ses romans, Robbe-Grillet a bien fait d'œuvre humaniste ("Humanisme" 217).

Morrissette famously found a "humaniste" Robbe-Grillet in his earliest critical study; the previous citation of his about art for man's sake was used in his defense of this conclusion.

Nor does his focus on the human mean that Robbe-Grillet is antihumanist. Those who did not see in him a humanist often saw a sort of destructive antihumanist who wanted to do away with any ideological or interpretive system whatsoever: "La fonction de cette forme est non seulement de renvoyer à une métaphysique implicite, mais encore et surtout, à détruire la métaphysique" (Bernal 247). However, Robbe-Grillet himself emphasizes the notion of *invention*, of inventing the human, of inventing new systems. Despite the label of "école du refus" attributed to him by critics, he does not only negate humanist phenomena but proposes alternative affirmations in their place (Pingaud 1958). As seen in the first chapter, his entire project can be considered to be oriented toward the invention of a new literature designed to respond to the challenges posed by the exposure of fallacies in the humanist paradigm. He can therefore be said to be just as if not more interested in the creation of new interpretive frameworks than in the destruction of old ones.

So he must be situated somewhere between the two poles of humanist and antihumanist. In this way also Robbe-Grillet can be considered to be posthumanist.

As Braidotti points out, "The issue of the limits of both humanism and of its anti-humanist critics is therefore central to the debate on the posthuman predicament" (*The Posthuman* 7). Posthumanism attempts to find a middle ground between the two, to avoid falling into one or another camp. As Hayles says: "the posthuman need not be recuperated back into liberal humanism, nor need it be construed as anti-human" (*Became*, 287). Indeed, the impulse of critics to relegate their objects of inquiry back into the fold of humanism, even as the reason for their study is "a-"humanist, as critics of Robbe-Grillet did, is recognized by posthumanist scholars as a common tendency, one that must be consciously addressed when carrying out such research and one that posthmuman critical study, when done with care, allows one to avoid: "One has no choice but to face the prospect of posthumanism if one is serious about a critique of humanism and anthropocentrism without giving into the rehumanization reflex, which does not really seem prepared to question humanist foundations" (Herbrechter *Analysis* 71). Posthumanist scholars like Herbrechter stress the importance for the critical posthuman project of avoiding facile regressions to different versions of humanism; this is why other authors like Wolfe and Nayar critique transhumanism, a subset of posthumanism that emphasizes the enhancements to human qualities or abilities that technology can render. For Wolfe, for example, such belief in the perfectibility of the human is nothing more than an "intensification of humanism" (Nayar 6).

Robbe-Grillet, then, asks his readers what it means to be human, asking the same fundamental questions as humanists, anti-humanists, and posthumanists: "Et l'on arrive à la grande question: notre vie a-t-elle un sens? Quel est-il? Quelle est la

place de l'homme sur la terre?" and "Si '[l'homme] n'est pas un mot vide de sens,

quel sens possède-t-il au juste?" (*PUNR* 119, 47). This is the main preoccupation also

of posthumanist scholars: "Humanism's most fundamental question – What does it

mean to be human? – is being asked with more urgency than ever before"

(Herbrechter *Analysis* 76). What sets such inquiry apart and where Robbe-Grillet and

posthumanist scholars split with humanism is not a rejection of the human, but of a

humanist treatment of the question of the human, a preconceived notion of the human

subject: "N'y aurait-il pas, d'abord, dans ce terme d'humain qu'on nous jette au

visage, quelque supercherie?" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 47). As Herbrechter states, "The

aim is not in any way to 'overcome' the human but to challenge its fundamental

humanism, including its theoretical and philosophical underpinnings and allies (e.g.

anthropocentrism, speciesism, universalism, etc.)" (*Analysis* 123).

As seen in the previous chapter, many of Robbe-Grillet's criticisms of

humanism and the affirmations he proposes fall neatly in line with those of

posthumanist scholars and for this reason alone it is worth considering in what ways

he may be considered posthumanist. Yet viewing Robbe-Grillet as a posthumanist

also allows for a more accurate examination of his preoccupation with the human

subject, one that allows him to address it as a problematic while simultaneously

criticizing humanism, and does not force him into one of the categories of the binary

humanist/anti-humanist, neither of which satisfactorily correspond to his project; for,

as Clarke states, "posthumanist discourses promote neither the transcendence of the

human nor the negation of humanism. Rather, critical posthumanisms engage with the

humanist legacy to critique anthropocentric values and worldviews" (*Literature* xiv).

Some posthumanist scholars consider wrestling with the issue of humanist anthropocentrism a question of moral engagement: "Whoever cares about humans and their past, present, and future might want to critically engage with humanism's anthropocentric ideology" (Herbrechter *Analysis* 3). While Robbe-Grillet maintains that artists should not be socially or politically engaged, he also seems to consider questioning humanism a moral imperative. He refers to his project as a "revolution" and the retention of a humanist literature "dangerous" and places his hope for new literary frameworks that would reflect the true state of the world in man: "Nous reportons sur l'homme tout notre espoir" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 16, 25, 120). This parallels posthumanist scholars who see the search for a new conceptualization of the human not as simply as a negation of humanism but as an affirmation driven by a genuine concern and hope for the human: "A critical posthumanism is indispensible…out of care for humans and the survival of the human and other species" (Herbrechter *Analysis* 200). By asking himself these fundamental questions about the human subject and looking to invent a new framework that would correspond to his inquiry, Robbe-Grillet is participating in the posthumanist project by creating affirmative, and, for him, morally acceptable visions of what the human subject could be:

> While some prophets of a coming post- or transhumanity joyfully proclaim (once again) the 'end of man,' the kind of critical posthumanism advocated in this volume seeks to investigate the possible crisis and end of a certain *conception* of the human, namely the humanist notion of the human, and, if possible, contribute to the accelerated transformation of the latter (Herbrechter *Analysis* 3).

Robbe-Grillet himself points out the affirmative, rather than negative, nature of his project: "Personne ne voulait admettre qu'une telle affirmation [la destitution des mythes de profondeur] n'entrainait pas nécessairement la négation de l'homme." (*PUNR* 45). And, like Herbrechter, he emphasizes that the creation of new frameworks is indeed done with the goal of the human in mind: "Ce n'est guere être inhumain que de vouloir batîr une nouvelle vie pour l'homme" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 143). Thus, for both posthumanists and Robbe-Grillet, the goal is to envision a new human subject that moves away from the classical humanist subject, while still privileging the human as the main point of inquiry and care. Now I will examine in more detail just what the new vision of the (posthuman) human subject proposed by Robbe-Grillet entails.

3.2 The Human Subject: Anthropocentrism, Hierarchies, and Centrality

As with humanism and its posthuman alternatives, although no definitive posthumanist conception of the human subject exists, there is broad agreement among scholars regarding some of its most basic characteristics and the alternatives to aspects of the classical human subject that a posthumanist subject might encapsulate. As in the previous chapter on humanist priciples, I will begin by enumerating the criticisms that posthumanists and Robbe-Grillet share of their vision of the classical human subject, before laying out the affirmative alternatives they propose in place in place of the characteristics they criticize.

A good definition of the humanist subject that is put into question by posthumanist scholars is proposed by Nayar:

The human is traditionally taken to be a subject one who is conscious of his/her *self*), marked by rational thinking/intelligence, who is able to plot his/her own course of action depending on his/her needs, desires and wishes, and, as a result of his/her actions, produces history. The human has traditionally been treated as male and universal. It is always treated in the singular (*the* human) and as a set of features or conditions: rationality, authority, autonomy, and agency (5).

Roughly speaking, this is the image of the classical humanist subject that Robbe-Grillet also criticizes. Additionally, the model of the human subject that Robbe-Grillet takes to task is a singular, bounded, thinking subject which can be defined by an essential nature and by the difference of that nature to that of his environment. He maintains that Nathalie Sarraute belongs in the category of the Nouveau Roman because she "s'attaque sans relâche…à la notion humaniste du personnage, c'est-à-dire tout individu vivant que l'on pretend rassembler dans une totalité cohérente, stable, entièrement perméable au sens, dont les morceaux épars et l'apparent désordre ne seraient que les pièces d'un puzzle que le romancier doit remettre en place pour constituer une image fixe et rassurant" (Robbe-Grillet "Nathalie Sarraute" loc. 780-784).

The criticism of both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars is not limited, however to the specific attributes of the classical humanist subject. One of the most salient criticisms by posthumanists and by Robbe-Grillet of the humanist human subject, concerns not his person but rather his *placement* or *positioning* in the humanist paradigm. For Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars, humanism's emphasis on the human as its main point of the departure has made the human subject an artificially inflated figure. From its normative tendencies that privilege the Western, white and masculine; to its ordering of the material world into a hierarchy in

which man is placed at the top above the animal, object, and the non-human; to its

disposition of man as the generator and measure of objective knowledge,

posthumanist scholars criticize what they regard as humanism's placement of man at

the central focus of the paradigm. From being the object of its epistemological

investigations, to the subject that carries them out, to being the measure of their value,

posthumanists maintain that humanism attributes to man an outsize importance that

elevates him above all non-human elements of the material and spiritual worlds and

puts him everywhere all at once. As Sorin Ivan states,

> From a philosophical perspective, humanism places man at the center
> of the universe, at the top of the ontological and axiological scales of
> creation and being. This anthropocentrism has its origins in Greek and
> Latin culture….humanism is based on reason and rationality, which
> serve as instruments of understanding of the world, seeking truth and
> interacting with the universe. Humanism exalts man, his intellectual
> powers and his ability for higher understanding, in an anthropocentric
> vision in which everything evolves, and is ordered around, the human
> being (62).

While for Ivan, this central position of the human subject is attributed to his superior

intellect, for others it is by dint of his role as the principal actor in the universe, of

whom the universe carries the mark of his innermost thoughts, feelings, and exterior

activities. As Nayar states, posthuman criticism postulates that "[humanism] treats the

human subject as the center of the world, which is influenced by the human's

thoughts and actions;" Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden invoke a posthumanism

that would eventually move away from a world that is understood

"humanocentrically" (5; 644). For his part, Robbe-Grillet bemoans this "point de vue

humaniste selon lequel il ne suffit pas de montrer l'homme là où il est: il faut encore

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proclamer que l'homme est partout…l'humanisme décide de choisir l'homme comme justification de tout" (*PUNR* 48).

It is for this reason that both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars speak of humanist "anthropocentrism." For them, the humanist model makes man "the center of meaning, value, knowledge, and action" and "considers humans as the source of knowledge and value," placing him as its locus and inflating his importance (Weitzenfeld and Joy 4, 5). In fact, for Adam Weitzenfeld and Melanie Joy, "anthropocentrism, in its purest and most pervasive form, could only come into being with humanism" (5). For his part, Wolfe speaks of the dangers of the humanist "anthropological universals" that have led to a "dogma" dictating what man must be and placing him at the forefront of any epistemological inquiry, a dogma "which [the inquisitive spirit of] the Enlightment], if we are true to its spirit, should have no patience" (*What Is Posthumanism?* loc. 108). Like these scholars, Robbe-Grillet evokes the notion of anthropocentrism, reproaching humanism its "atmosphère anthropocentrique, vague mais baignant toutes choses, donnant à toute chose sa prétendue *signification,* c'est-à-dire l'investissant de l'intérieur par un réseau plus ou moins sournois de sentiments et de pensées [humaines]" (*PUNR* 47). Interestingly, Robbe-Grillet also uses to term "dogma" to lament what he feels are the prescribed humanist notions of what literary form should be, imposed on him by the literary critical establishment, and which include not only a particular humanist narrative form, but also a particular type of human character that reflects the classical humanist model of the human subject:

> J'ai réagi contre les dogmes de cette critique: c'est-à-dire une critique
> qui imposait comme forme littéraire du roman, pour toujours, par une

espèce de justice, de droit divin, une forme qui était très récente et qui
était celle qui a connu son apogée au moment du triomphe de la
société bourgeoise en France ("Réactionnaires" 56:54-57:11).

Thus, posthumanist scholars and Robbe-Grillet wish to question, if not completely

restructure, their vision of a humanist paradigm that places man at its center and in so

doing, reformulate the human subject. In terms of man's anthropocentric situation, for

posthumanists and for Robbe-Grillet, and as illustrated by Sorin Ivan's quote, the

humanist paradigm situates the human subject simultaneously at the top of a

hierarchy that places him in a position of superiority above the non-human elements

of the material world, and at the center of epistemological investigation. That

posthumanism postulates the humanist situation of the subject at the *center* of

knowledge and the *apex* of power is neatly summed up by Elena Gomel: "Recently,

theoretical elaborations of posthumanity have described "new forms" that subjectivity

assumes within the postmodern configurations of power/knowledge" (178). And that

recongfiguring this position in terms of man in his environment ("Nature/Culture")

and his role in knowledge production ("subjectivity") is truly at the center of the

posthumanist project is affirmed by Mackelbauer and Heehaw: "Drawing on work by

Katherine Hayles and Bruno Latour, Brooke suggests that what is at stake in

posthumanism is a refiguring of relations between nature, culture, and subjectivity"

(771). Other elements of the classical human subject that are seen as being

problematic are the notion that the human subject can conform to a preconceived

notion, one that includes an inherent essence or nature, that he is singular, unitary,

and bounded, and that his attributes can be considered fixed and immutable. Thus

posthumanists and Robbe-Grillet attempt in their respective projects to "decenter"

man from his place at the locus of the paradigm as well as create the image of a subject whose characteristics would be other than those of the classical human subject, or as Herbrechter puts it, "'deanthropocentring' the principle of subjectivity" because as Robbe-Grillet states, we must recognize that man is not "a natural and eternal animal" (*Analysis* 200; Morrissette "Order and Disorder" 5).

Robbe-Grillet thus participates in this "posthuman" project by "reconfiguring" these precise relations. He "demotes" and "decenters" the human in his fiction by constructing his narrative in such a way as to oppose the following ways in which he sees the humanist human subject as manifesting itself in popular culture and in literature: by placing the human subject at the center of narrative; by depicting man as having a unifying and unitary connection to the material world; by asserting his dominance over the same material world; by presuming that the world is full of meaning which has import for man specifically and uniquely; by presuming that the actions and qualities of man have any significance or impact for the material world at large; by endowing him with the unique and universal capacity to "know" an objective external reality and extrapolate objective truths from his own observations and interpretations; by endowing him with the unique ability to acquire or produce meaning; by endowing him with the unique capability of communicating such knowledge to others; by depicting him as capable of domination and mastery; and by presenting him as a unitary, unbounded, fixed entity with individuating and easily identifiable characteristics that would set him apart from his non-human others. As with the elements of humanism that I examined in the previous chapter, Robbe-Grillet criticizes these tendencies while counter-proposing affirmations of his own. I will

now examine these in more detail, and demonstrate the ways in which Robbe-Grillet's approach to these problematics parallels that of posthumanist critical theory.

For Robbe-Grillet, one salient characteristic of the humanist subject is that of his relationship to his environment, or the material world. As seen in the previous chapter's section on unity, Robbe-Grillet sees humanism as implying that the human subject has a privileged connection to the world, a unitary link that connects the human subject in a favored or advantageous way to the world at large, uniting the two inherently together. Speaking of humanistic representation, Ivan says, "In this representation…the humanistic man is endowed with all the essential, defining qualities of being, emblematic of his position in the universe. He is…defined by harmony with oneself and the world" (62). Robbe-Grillet espouses a similar sentiment: "Il ne peut s'agir, pour les écrivains qui usent d'une semblable terminologie, que d'établir un rapport constant entre l'univers et l'être qui l'habite" (*PUNR* 49).

The "hidden unity" criticized by Robbe-Grillet in the previous chapter thus does not just pertain to the unity of a singular entity but also to these connections between man and his environment. Robbe-Grillet sees humanism as positing the human subject and his world as constituting a symbiotic unitary relationship: "c'est justement cette participation qui est fâcheuse puisqu'elle conduit à la notion d'une unité cachée," he says (*PUNR* 50). He speaks often of the problematic "solidarité" between man and the world posited by humanism: "on posait en principe l'indéfectible solidarité entre notre esprit et le monde" and "le regard de l'humanisme

est avant tout le gage d'une solidarité" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 46, 48). According to

Robbe-Grillet, for humanists, this complicity between man and his world is evidence

of a unity that ties man to the universe at large, a sort of "sublime communion" that

serves as proof of transcendence (*PUNR* 50). This insistence on nature as a support

for man is at least then partially due to the essentialist belief in a transcendent

"nature," which becomes transferred to Nature in literary representation and

metaphorical language: "Ce n'est pas l'effet d'un hasard si la Nature justement –

minérale, végétale, animale – s'est trouvée la première chargée de vocabulaire

anthropomorphique. Cette Nature, montagne, mer, forêt, désert, vallon, c'est à la fois

notre modèle et notre cœur. Elle est, en même temps, en nous et en face de nous"

(Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 51-52). This Robbe-Grilletian conception of the humanist

vision of the relationship of man to his environment is evoked by Morrissette:

> The essentials of Robbe-Grillet's tightly conceived answer to these
> attacks may be summarized as follows. At the bottom of most
> objections to his doctrine lies a false humanism, a humanism which is
> in reality a transcendental metaphysics by which man is linked to
> nature through mystical correspondences, anthropocentric images and
> metaphors, symbols, and the like. Even when man is envisaged as
> "separated" from one-ness with nature, it is only because those who
> see him thus wish to exploit this division in the name of tragedy.
> Tragedy, along with humanism, implies the possibility of man's
> "recuperation" into a divine or quasi-divine scheme of potential one-
> ness ("Theory and Practice" 264).

For Robbe-Grillet, as manifested in humanist artistic representation, this

subject/environment distinction is not balanced, with both having equal weight, but

always returns its focus to the human subject in one way or another. For him, through

humanism, the human subject is located on the top of a hierarchy in which non-

human others are subordinate to him; posthumanists like Braidotti agree: "The

dominant norm of the subject was positioned at the pinnacle of a hierarchical scale that rewarded the ideal of zero-degree of difference. This is the former 'Man' of classical posthumanism" (*The Posthuman* 28).

Robbe-Grillet's project, then, like that of the posthumanists, questions this prioritization of the human subject: "Posthumanism studies cultural representations, power relations, and discourses that have historically situated the human *above* other life forms, and in control of them." And "[it] interrogates the hierarchic ordering – and subsequently exploitation and even eradication – of life forms" (Nayar 3, 9). Indeed, in place of the humanocentric humanist model, Robbe-Grillet proposes a world in which man is on the same plane as the rest of the material world; he is but one agent in it, and not a particularly important one. He has no privileged position and no inherent unity with the world: "L'homme regarde le monde, et le monde ne lui rend pas son regard" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 53). Man is "that animal," an object in the world just like any other, and not one that can claim any particular importance: "Les choses sont les choses et l'homme n'est que l'homme" (Morrissette "Order and Disorder" 14; Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 47).

One way in which this lopsided relationship between man and the material world is manifested in humanist representation is by characterizing the relationship of man to his environment as one of domination. As Jörn Rüsen points out, in various iterations of the humanist model, the external environment is often conceived of as being made to serve man; man is depicted as dominating his material world, taking from it what he needs: "Humanism emphasizes the difference between man and nature. By doing so it creates, or at least supports, cultural attitudes by which man

refers to nature as a matter of domination and possession, as a matter of

subjugation…an ideology of human mastery over nature" (269). Man is the master

over Nature; Nature is meant to bend to his will and interpretation; it is to be

exploited for his own gain. Arguing that the humanist notions of liberty, equality, and

property can be defined in terms of Nature's exploitation by man, Rüsen states,

> This holy trinity of the modern secular world expresses the guidelines
> of human agency as follows: All humans are equal in the liberty to
> acquire property. Property is the result of appropriating nature.
> Appropriating nature is done by exploiting it as a means to realize
> human purposes. In this cultural context, nature is an object of
> exploitation. It becomes exploited in three dimensions: Cognitively, by
> science, practically, by technology, and socially by economy (270-
> 271).

Indeed, one need only look to Descartes, one of the fathers of humanism, to find this

notion of man as the "maîtres et possesseurs de la nature" (36). Even the division

nature/man or nature/culture can be conceived of as a humanist attempt to reduce the

irreducible through the imposition of ontological categories that do not actually exist,

as seen in the previous chapter with Latour's take on Nature/Culture and the modern

Constitution. Latour makes the same claim but invokes capitalism as a cause: "By

seeking to reorient man's exploitation of man toward an exploitation of nature by

man, capitalism magnified both beyond measure" (8). Robbe-Grillet agrees with this

vision of the humanist model of the human subject's domination over the world: "Le

monde [est] cette sorte de proie, qu'il s'agissait moins de connaître que de conquerir"

(*PUNR* 28). In consequence, the literary role of a humanist character becomes

"l'exercice d'une domination" over the world (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 28).

For Robbe-Grillet, then, humanist literary descriptions of natural objects are useful only insofar as they can tell man something about man, to the extent that they reflect his image or act as supports for his actions; they are subordinated to man rather than acknowledged on their own terms. In terms of literary manifestations of this phenomenon, Robbe-Grillet criticizes above all the use of metaphor to speak about natural objects. Robbe-Grillet maintains that, by using human terms to describe objects, literary description artificially subordinates natural objects to man: "La hauteur d'une montagne prend, qu'on le veuille ou non, une valeur morale; la chaleur du soleil devient le résultat d'une volonté." (*PUNR* 49). The purpose of such metaphors is not actually to describe the natural object as it is, but to use it as a means of returning to the idea of man: "La métaphore, qui est censée n'exprimer qu'une comparaison sans arrière-pensée, introduit en fait une communication souterraine, un mouvement de sympathie (ou d'antipathie) qui est sa véritable raison d'être." (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 49). In this paradigm, Nature, landscapes, etc. are nothing in themselves but are important only because of what they can communicate to us, about us. Man sees them in his image, and sees his image in them.

For Robbe-Grillet, the existence of such metaphors that always point back to man is proof of the ubiquity of the humanist mindset still present in literature, despite the changing times that demand a new framework for understanding: "Dans la quasi-totalité de notre littérature contemporaine, ces analogies anthropomorphistes se répètent avec trop d'insistance, trop de cohérence, pour ne pas révéler tout un système métaphysique." (*PUNR* 49). They reveal an all-encompassing focus on man, underlining his "omnipresence" in the system. Using the example an analysis of the

nature metaphors in *L'Etranger*, Robbe-Grillet signals "les métaphores classiques les plus révélatrices, nommant l'homme ou sous-tendues par son omniprésence: la champagne est "gorgé de soleil", le soir est comme "une trêve mélancolique", la route défoncée laisse voir la "chair brillante" du goudron, etc." (*PUNR* 57). Humanist literature has contributed to this mindset of dominance over the world and serves as a vehicle for the voice of the man who is sure of his power and domination:

> Descendu dans l'abîme des passions humaines, [l'écrivain] envoyait au monde tranquille en apparence…des messages de victoire décrivant les mystères qu'il avait touchés du doigt. Et le vertige sacré qui envahissait alors le lecteur, loin d'engendrer l'angoisse ou la nausée, le rassurait au contraire quant à son pouvoir de domination sur le monde. (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 22).

Once again speaking of his project in moral terms, Robbe-Grillet maintains that such metaphors are not "innocent" because, even if it helps a reader better understand the scene by associating himself with it, it misleads because it brings the reader back to a humanist narrative, one that is false and does not accurately reflect the true state of the world; as Stoltzfus puts it, "words…remain impure, forever contaminated by man's tendencies to order, control, and dominate his environment" (*PUNR* 48; Stoltzfus "Bon Dieu" 304). These kind of descriptions should simply "fournir des indications sur les choses elles-mêmes: forme, dimensions, situation, etc." but they do not (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 48). Rather than staying on the outside, where they should be, such descriptions "implique[nt] toujours plus ou moins un don reçu par l'homme." (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 50). Although not coming strictly from an artistic perspective, Herbrechter agrees that "anthropocentric humanism is first and foremost of course human self-representation." (*Analysis* 10).

According to Robbe-Grillet, in this model, man-made objects are also depicted only insofar as they serve man. In this world where man is inherently connected to the material world around him, the world was his reflection; in literature the objects are at his service: "Ainsi ce décor était-il déjà l'image de l'homme: chacun des murs ou des meubles de la maison représentait un double du personnage qui l'habitait – riche ou pauvre, sévère ou glorieux – et se trouvait de surcroit soumis au même destin, à la même fatalité" (Robbe-Grillet "Description, représentation" loc. 1111). In this sense, man-made objects, like natural objects, are subordinated to the human subject. Man is given a primary place over objects, which are but tools used to serve him and prop him up. In response to the type of realist description he criticizes in the previous citation, he reverses it in his work: "'Objects' have the precedence: it is they that support the anecdote and not the other way round" (Sturrock 215).

Robbe-Grillet and posthumanists alike take issue with this imagery of man dominating the physical world. Following Latour, they see the ontological differentiation between man and Nature as a false delineation, made to reassure those still operating in a humanist mindset: "The economic, social, and political formations of Western modernity have been constituted by and through constructions of social inequality, of class, race, and gender, and these social categories of difference and domination have also been cross-cut by prevailing ideas about 'nature' and the separation of the human from it" (Cudworth and Hobden 645). For posthumanists and Robbe-Grillet alike, the actual state of the world is not one in which man has any sort of mastery or dominion over his physical world, and, furthermore, it is too complex to be reduced to the categorical determinations of "man" and "nature." In the modern

moment, Robbe-Grillet points out to what extent this trope is prevalent while also

signaling to what extent it is no longer accurate, if it has ever been: "nous ne

considérons plus le monde comme notre bien, notre propriété privée, calquée sur nos

besoins et domesticable." And "Le monde lui-même n'est plus cette propriété privée,

héréditaire et monnayable, cette sorte de proie, qu'il s'agissait moins de connaître que

de conquérir" (*PUNR* 22, 28). Posthumanist scholars make similar observations:

"Nature, over which we were supposed to gain absolute mastery, dominates us in an

equally global fashion, and threatens us all," says Latour (8). Gillian Whitlock points

out that "Huff and Haefner associate humanism and life narrative with a (gendered)

desire for "mastery" that is profoundly disturbed by posthumanism's distributed

notions of agency and affect" (xii-xiii).

Rather, both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanists see man as co-existing in his

world alongside the non-human, with one having no particular privileged relationship

to the other. "We concur with those who suggest that 'our' human condition was ever

populated with, by and in, other worlds of beings and things. The imperative of

posthumanism is not just to develop tools for developing an understanding of human

embeddedness in non human animate and inanimate systems" (Cudworth and Hobden

644). Robbe-Grillet often speaks of this situation in terms of "distance" or

"separation" while posthumanist scholars talk about the inherent connectedness of

man to his environment through "networks," but although this terminology would

seem at first glance to be contradictory, both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars

are more or less advocating the same idea. When he talks about "distance" and

"separation," specifically in terms of "profondeur," Robbe-Grillet means that he

refuses the signification and privileged ties he claims are established between man and the world by humanism; he is remarking on this lack of humanistic privileged connection that would elevate the human above his non-human counterparts: "Il existe quelque chose, dans le monde, qui n'est pas l'homme, qui ne lui addresse aucun signe, qui n'a rien de commun avec lui" (*PUNR* 47). He also uses absence in this way, removing man from the top of the hierarchy and the center focus by removing him entirely. His fictional works constitute an attempt to cleanse description of this connection, to detach objects from the human in terms of their significance and their subservience to him:

> La nature et le monde des choses, tels qu'ils sont décrits dans les romans de Robbe-Grillet, n'offre guère prise au sentiment de complicité. Ce ne sont qu'indications de texture, de volume, de couleur, de formes géométriques, de distance exprimée en unités métriques, de mouvement rectiligne, circulaire, elliptique – toutes notions qui relèvent des disciplines scientifiques et soulignent la disparité entre l'homme et ce qui l'entoure. (Alter "Humanisme" 214).

Such clinical descriptions are what caused him to be termed by critics such as Barthes as overly "objective," a "chosiste" and accused of neglecting the human (Barthes "Preface" 1963; "Littérature Objective" 1972). However, if he is concerned above all, as he states, with the question of the human, then an interpretive paradigm is needed that would allow the detachment of this privileged connection, a demotion of man to the same level as the non-human elements of the material world and at the same time allows man to continue to be the focus of investigation. Posthumanism provides this perspective, and attempts to embody the lesson to be drawn from Robbe-Grillet's fiction, which, according to Stoltzfus, is that

until [change in perception] occurs, man will always be the victim rather than the master of his environment. Man must reject 'tragedy,' accept 'distance,' and refuse to anthropomorphize the world. He must learn to see the world with new eyes…Man must relearn to see the world and, by implication, understand his own relationship to it (*Life* 89).

When overly reductive onotological categorizations such as "man" and "nature" are removed, one is confronted with the various and multiple ways that the disparate elements once contained within these categories operate with and interact with each other. "When we contend that theorisations should be critically posthuman in quality, we mean that they need to understand our human condition as embedded in and constituted with, relations and practices with other species," say Cudworth and Hobden, while Nayar states, "critical postumanism does not see the human as the center of all things: it sees the human as an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings with all forms of life" (645; 5).

One may see then, the overly "objective" passages in Robbe-Grillet, his "privileging" of the object in narration not as neglecting the human subject but rather as "acknowledging the embodied and embedded character of the human situation within a myriad of non-human systems brings these inter-relations into the foreground and through the analysis of complex systems provides the tools to explore these relation ships beyond a central focus on territory" (Cudworth and Hobden 645). Indeed, the posthuman model "*demonstrates how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines*" (Nayar 2). In fact, some of Robbe-Grillet's critics have used the term "network" to discuss just this equalization of man and object that occurs in his work: "The

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materials Robbe-Grillet draws on are cultural myths, but their articulation is atypical, calculated to expose a network of relations between sacred, sexual and violent activities which myths generally repress" (Bogue 39).

As seen in the previous chapter, rather than the reduction and simplicity ("recuperation and reassurance" in Robbe-Grilletian terms) they see as sought out by the humanist imposition of ontological categories, Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars both insist on the dissolution of such categories in favor of complexity. Man's "demotion" from his place at the top of the hierarchy in the move "from the comfortable *old* hierarchical dominations to the scary *new* networks" is considered a step toward the acceptance of complexity: "Ecological crisis is taken to intensify the sense that human existence is entangled with a complex infrastructure," (Haraway *Cyborg* 28; Reket 82).

This repositioning of man within networks along with the non-human can even be seen as a move toward a systems-theory approach to the human subject. Theorists such as Wolfe and Clarke talk about feedback loops, by which a system (which can be understood to be, but is not necessarily, a human subject) and its environment act and react to each other in an exchange that allows for the constant transformation of both. A system will restructure itself in response to its environment and vice versa, increasing the complexity of both with each operation. In this way, networks and complexity can be understood as the most "basic" state of the material world: "By posthuman we mean an analysis that is based on complexity theory, rejects Newtonian social sciences and decentres the human as the object of study. We argue for a 'decentring' of the human in our scholarship as imperative to

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understanding the complexity of the world" (Cudworth and Hobden 643). What this means for the human subject is that if one understands him to be a node within a network, he is implicated within an environment in which he does not have a privileged position but has the same importance and significance as the non-human others as a standard part of the material world. Olga Bernal observed as much in her analysis of Robbe-Grillet's work: "Il s'agit d'un théâtre écrit pour l'homme. Pour quel genre d'homme? Pour un homme qui est comme ces objets, dépourvu a la fois d'historicité et de tout caractère absolu" (211).

Robbe-Grillet's project, then, is to reflect a world in which man is no more important than his non-human others by demoting man from a position of superiority over the material world to one in which he is implicated on an egalitarian basis within it. Accusing the humanistic metaphors that would use nature as a support for man's desires, thoughts, and image, he posits a posthuman vision in which man is implicated with his non-human others, substantiated in networks in which he is but one nodule in an endless mass of them, equal to them in stature and importance. In this illustration, man does not sit in a position of dominance over nature; in fact, the nature/culture dichotomy is a falsification of humanism, an attempt at reducing complexity that is impossible to reduce. Instead the complexity of the world escapes his mastery; he is but one system, like any other, surrounded by an environment of overwhelming complexity, in a network, not at the top of a hierarchical pyramid that insists on focusing on him.

<u>*3.4 Repositioning Man and Knowledge*</u>

This repositioning of man alongside his others – rather than superior to them – has implications for the subject: "[posthumanism] imagines agentic assemblages, where human agency is entangled with the nonhuman in ways that call for new models of agency, recognition, and subjectification" (Whitlock xii). In addition to removing man from his hierarchical position of superiority over the material world, Robbe-Grillet and posthumanists also seek to "decenter" him from what they see as a rather arrogant position at the core of the humanist epistemological model. Humanism favoring man's reason and rationality as one of the salient characteristics of the human, they see humanism as maintaining that this a power unique to the human, distinctly human, a "Humanistic norm" (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 15). This vision of the humanist epistemological model criticized by posthumanist scholars is neatly summed up by Ivan:

> On this philosophical basis, humanism promotes a type of holistic knowledge, using the instruments of reason, science, and artistic sensibility. It is a model of knowledge [that combines Antiquity with Renaissance humanism]…the humanist paradigm of knowledge is encyclopaedic knowledge, which includes sciences, humanities and arts, in a holistic approach that is integrated, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary (in more modern terms), and as a result, is able to explain and provide representations of the world and the universe. And man is at the centre of the universe…the man created by the humanist vision of the world is able to span all the fields of knowledge with his mind force. By having access to knowledge, in all its domains, he gains access to universality (63).

Like Robbe-Grillet and his "bourgeois ideology," Braidotti indicates that humanism's insistence on the inherent nature of human rationality allowed Western thought and civilization to build itself around this vision: "Humanism historically developed into a

civilisational model, which shaped a certain idea of Europe as coinciding with the universalising powers of self-reflexive reason. This self-aggrandising vision assumes that Europe is not just a geo-political location, but rather a universal attribute of the human mind that can lend its quality to any suitable object" ("Yes" 10).

In terms of literature, Robbe-Grillet sees this model of rationality play out thusly in narrative constructions: Man uses his superior capacity to unearth or discern nuggets of objective, incontestable, transcendental, essential truths from within the material world, and the text constitutes the means by which he communicates this discovery to others (also human). The observations made by such an author and the interpretations of those observations lead him to the essential truth that he has discovered, through writing, often about human nature. In this paradigm, man's role within this paradigm is that of discoverer or investigator. His function then becomes to communicate this knowledge to the reader, also through writing: "Le rôle de l'écrivain consistait traditionnellement à creuser dans la Nature, à l'approfondir, pour atteindre des couches de pus en plus intimes et finir par mettre au jour quelque bribe d'un secret troublant" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 22).

Furthermore, says Robbe-Grillet, in this model, any truth(s) revealed have both particular significations and significance for man. What discoveries are made about human nature, whatever meaning is found, are particularly relevant to the human subject in particular. Any serious reflection done by man in the humanist paradigm, according to Robbe-Grillet, is only carried out within the confines of his own consideration; whatever discoveries are made can only be important insomuch as they relate to the human: "[dans] La contemplation du monde…de nouveau nous

avons retrouvé l'affirmation humaniste: le monde, c'est l'homme." (*PUNR* 63). And, moreover, Robbe-Grillet, claims, humanist narrative assumes that the material world and the non-human are also concerned with the state or destiny of man; whatever he may discover or know has import – it matters - for his universe and for the non-human others surrounding him. In other words, the material world *cares* about the human discovery. But in today's "modern" moment of the crisis of humanism, that is beginning to change: "Le destin du monde a cessé, pour nous, de s'identifier à l'ascension ou à la chute de quelques hommes, de quelques familles" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 28).

In this paradigm, according to Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars, not only is man the investigator or discoverer or essential knowledge but he is also its recipient and its judge. He is the measure of the quality or utility of such knowledge; he decides what constitutes knowledge and he decides on that which is useful (insofar as it concerns a global idea of man). This role of man as both endpoint and measure of knowledge is explained by David Cooper as "…an insistence that human beings are the sole source and measure of value…It is worth observing that Heidigger refers to humanism as not merely *explaining* 'whatever is' in relation to man, but as '*evaluating'* this solely from 'the standpoint of man'" (2). In this way, according to Robbe-Grillet, man is the instigator, the object, the agent, and the measure of epistemological investigation. He is the start and endpoint of knowledge, its generator and recipient. The human is everywhere all at once, the question and the answer:

> La nature commune, une fois de plus, ne pourra être que l'éternelle
> réponse à la *seule question* de notre civilisation Greco-chrétienne; le
> Sphinx est devant moi, il m'interroge, je n'ai même pas à essayer de
> comprendre les termes de l'énigme qu'il me propose, il n'y a qu'une

réponse possible, une seule réponse à tout: l'homme (Robbe-Grillet
PUNR 52-53).

Posthumanist scholars both share this particular vision of the humanist liberal subject

that puts him in a position of centralized dominance within the paradigm.

Badmington, for example, points to the shift from religion to man as the ultimate end

game: "God is no longer as central a figure as in previous times. Centre-stage is now

occupied by the human, by the figure of Man [sic], the cogitating 'I': 'I think,

therefore I am" (Introduction 3). Braidotti, for her part, cites "the humanistic vision

of Man as the measure of all things" (*The Posthuman* 28).

But in this crisis of humanism,"The ideals of Enlightenment rationality are

having a very hard time" (Levine 228). In the current "crisis" mode of the historical

moment,

> We no longer believe that the world is teeming with inherent
> resemblances whose signatures are inscribed on the face of the world,
> things already emblazoned with signs, words lying in wait like so
> many pebbles of sand on a beach there to be discovered but rather that
> the knowing subject is enmeshed in a thick web of representations
> such that the mind cannot see its way (Barad 812).

As Robbe-Grillet puts it, "Le culte exclusive de "l'humain" a fait place à une prise de

conscience plus vaste, moins anthropocentriste" (*PUNR* 28). Therefore, a new

paradigm, is needed, one "*decenters*" the human subject from this epistemological

position. Robbe-Grillet says, "La raison des Lumières a fait faillite…L'homme aurait-

il à inventer un autre type de raison?..lançons-nous dans les égarements, et alors,

peut-être, une autre raison apparaîtra-t-elle, qui ne sera plus la *ratio* de nos ancetres"

(Dufour loc. 8632). This describes precisely the critical posthuman project, which

according to Nayar, constitutes "the *radical decentring of the traditional sovereign,*

coherent and autonomous human" (2). Badmington says, "To read Freud is to witness

the waning of humanism. Unmasked as a creature motivated by desires which escape

the rule of consciousness, Man loses 'his' place at the center of things" (Introduction

6). For his part, Robbe-Grillet signals the modern literary character, in particular the

American soldier in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* as being "celui qui a perdu le

centre fondateur du moi humaniste" and says, speaking of himself, "[je vis] cette

projection hors d'un centre abandonné par le sens" (Montalbetti loc. 3598, 3607). It is

interesting to see to what extent this lack of center place is signaled in the work of

critics examining Robbe-Grillet's texts, especially earlier ones. In her work on the

notion of absence, Bernal indicates the *absence* of center in particular: "[absence], le

creux au coeur de la réalité…c'est parce qu'il y a le manque d'un centre – centre qui

pourrait être une idée, une histoire, une valeur, un point de vue définitive, une morale

ou une croyance univoque" (246). Roch Smith is even more unequivocal: "Robbe-

Grillet's fiction subverts any possibility of finding a center" (61).

In Robbe-Grillet's "decentered" knowledge paradigm, rather than man's all-

encompassing, infinite mastery of knowledge, the *absence* of objective truth or

meaning is emphasized, and the *limitations* of the subject and that of the "knowledge"

that he can create are highlighted. The human subject is still a "conscience active,

soucieuse de se comprendre and de se reformer," but the paradigm in which he

operates is different. (*PUNR* 62). If, as George Levine, states,

> in the Cartesian tradition, authoritative knowledge entails a purging
> away of the merely personal – even if it settles on the foundation of a
> thinking self -- a purging of the limitations of individual perspective
> and the establishment of a method by which human consciousness may
> overcome its fallen – its perspectively and sensibly limited – condition
> and gain access to true knowledge (230).

then the posthumanist/Robbe-Grilletian paradigms seek to confront and concentrate on those limitations of individual perspective and human consciousness. They start by denying the very possibility of completely objective truth. For without transcendence, objectivity is impossible. After all, if essence, natures, and unities do not exist, then pre-existent meaning does not exist either. Man cannot "discover" a ready-made truth located externally to him. They refute the existence of a singular, "true" knowledge of the type evoked in the citation; in fact there are no preexisting essential truths to be "found." Modern man must, says Robbe-Grillet, "say "No" to tragedy, and accept existence in an objectively meaning- less universe" (Morrissette "Theory and Practice" 264).

Both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanists see the notion of objectivity as one of those aspects of humanism that is in fact a social construct but seems natural because of humanism's emphasis on its own innateness: "Knowledge cannot be grounded in the human subject and its cognitive processes because knowledge, like human nature, is socially constructed," and a "social constructionist critique of account of knowledge [that] has been so thoroughly taken for granted since the epochal work of post-structuralists in the 1970s" (Nayar 12; Wolfe *Critical Environments* loc. 76).

For his part, Robbe-Grillet opposes this constructivist idea of knowledge to the type of objective realism suggested by realist literature, in which "[la description balzacienne] ne pouvait que convaincre de l'existence objective – hors de la littérature – d'un monde que le romancier paraissait seulement reproduire, copier, transmettre, comme si l'on avait affaire à une chronique, à une biographie, à un

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quelconque document" ("Description, Representation" loc. 1111). Like Robbe-Grillet, posthumanist theorists, following upon the poststructuralist vein of thought, criticize exactly this notion of a single reality "which, through appropriate…means of representation, can be 'transferred' realistically, objectively and with universal validity" (Herbrechter *Analysis* 81). The revelation of the constructed nature of humanism, which disguises objectivity as natural, is echoed by Robbe-Grillet's critics: "The objective or mathematical stance itself is a freely chosen one, however great the pressure which the scientific culture of the present exerts on intelligent men to adopt it" (Sturrock 201). Imbricated and implicated through networks to his "others," no human being can possibly occupy the outside perspective needed to produce such objectivity:

> Qui décrit le monde dans les romans de Balzac? Quel est ce narrateur omniscient, omnipresent, qui se place partout en meme temps, qui voit en meme temps l'endroit et l'envers des choses, qui suit en meme temps les mouvements du visage et ceux de la conscience, qui connait à la fois le présent, le passé et l'avenir de toute aventure? Ca ne peut etre qu'un Dieu…c'est Dieu seul qui peut prétendre être objectif (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 118).

No human subject occupies this impossible place of objective positioning – and as noted in the previous chapter, God himself is absent from this post.

Knowledge in this paradigm becomes constructed, multiple, subjective, and contingent, with little to no import outside the bounds of the individual entity that constructs it. *All* knowledge is unobtainable by man. Perhaps man is indeed the center of a limited kind of knowledge, but it is a subjective, individual knowledge, not an objective, collective knowledge. There is only the individual and the knowledge he creates himself through his own observations and experiences: "Le Nouveau Roman

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ne vise qu'à un subjectivite totale" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 118). Once again, plurality

replaces unity – there is not human knowledge and experience, but an individual's

knowledges (perhaps it is not for nothing that this word – *connaissances* - is

pluralized in French) and experiences; Haraway's essay "Situated Knowledges" on

the topic emphasizes this idea even simply in the title (Haraway *Simians* 1991).

Subjective plurality supplants singular objectivity, a condition signaled in Robbe-

Grillet's work by his critics: "While it may be true that the spaces are relative and the

objective center nonexistent, such is the nature of the modern world. If this state

causes distress, man can take comfort in the fact that while no true objective center

exists, he, at least, can provide a subjective focus with which to orient the relative

spaces" (Stoltzfus "Labyrinths" 302-303).

Instead, man must manufacture his own meaning, his own significations, from

his individual observations and interpretations: "ce sont les forms qu'il cree qui

peuvent apporter des significations au monde" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 120). In Robbe-

Grillet's fiction, meaning cannot be found externally but must be actively produced

by an individual subject: "Only man can order, relate, and give objects, images, and

events any kind of meaning" (Stoltzfus *New French Novel* 91). Knowledge thus

amounts to an individual and subjective cognitive process: "Bien évidemment il ne

peut s'agir, de toute façon, que du monde tel que l'oriente *mon point de vue*; je n'en

connaîtrai jamais d'autre. La subjectivité relative de mon regard me sert précisément

à définir *ma situation dans le monde*. J'évite simplement de concourir, moi-même, à

faire de cette situation une servitude" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 66). A subject observes a

phenomenon in the external world, and then attempts to "make sense" of this

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phenomenon by drawing on his own interiority – his previous experiences, his memory, his dreams, his imagination. From these processes he may produce interpretations that constitute what is "known." But such interpretations are limited in that they can only be produced by and apply to the individual producing them; they no longer apply to a universal conception of man. The objective reality of humanism is displaced in favor of constructed, subjective, individual realities: "Chacun voit dans le monde sa propre réalité" (*PUNR* 136). This Robbe-Grilletian meaning-making corresponds to Chris Calvert-Minor's understanding of posthumanist epistemology as "practice:"

> Epistemologies have improved over the years. The 'social turn' revealed that what we take to know or take to be rationally justified is a function of social and cultural contexts. In more recent times, many social epistemologists, sociologists of knowledge, and science studies practitioners recognize that what lies at the heart of knowledge production are not individuals, or communities, but *practices* (124).

And, for Robbe-Grillet, man does not only manufacture meaning, he also constructs his own reality/ies: "C'est pour la même tâche, l'interprétation du même univers ou bien sa création" (*PUNR* 89). This alignes with the posthumanist paradigm in which, "Knowledge does not simply represent reality, it also makes reality. In other words, knowledge literally matters" (S. Smith 105). Examining this notion in the works of Robbe-Grillet, Sturrock claims that "for Robbe-Grillet, as for Butor, the reality which the novelist creates must be seen to be distinguishable from the reality in the midst of which we live" (170). Sturrock is correct that the individual reality created within the texts is different from the objective "out there" reality posited by humanism. But Sturrock does not go quite far enough in his interpretation to account for Robbe-

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Grillet's extreme subjectivity; there *is no* objective reality in which we live; the

material world simply acts as a catalyst for a reality constructed by each individual.

In this paradigm, the relationship of man to the material world follows a

different model – rather than man using the material world as a resource for the

unearthing of essential truth, the material world serves as a sort of stimulus for the

cognitive processes of any given individual, from which he constructs his own reality

and knowledge base. A material world exists, but not as a pre-fabricated deposit of

truths waiting to be unearthed; rather it is a catalyst for the processes of cognition that

are triggered within any individual observer: "Le rêve n'est que cela: le

"préssentiment" de ce que sera le monde réel quand notre esprit aura donné sa forme

définitive à la matière," and

> Même si l'on y trouve beaucoup d'objets…il y a d'abord le regard qui
> les voit, la pensée qui les revoit, la passion qui les déforme. Les objets
> de nos romans n'ont jamais de présence en dehors des perceptions
> humaines, réelles ou imaginaires; ce sont des objets comparables à
> ceux de notre vie quotidienne, tells qu'ils occupant notre esprit à tout
> moment (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 89, 117).

Robbe-Grillet also illustrates this idea in terms of fiction: An author takes elements of

this external world – which Robbe-Grillet terms his *éléments générateurs* – and

creates the "reality" of a text using them as a base, in the same way as a cognizing

system conceives its own reality: "Le seul "personnage" important est le spectateur;

c'est *dans sa tête* que déroule toute l'histoire, qui est exactement *imaginé* par

lui…l'oeuvre n'est pas un témoignage sur une réalité extérieure, mais elle est à elle-

même sa propre réalité" (Robbe-Grillet "Sur le choix des générateurs" 1972; *PUNR*

132). As I will illustrate in Chapter 6, this subjective and constructionist conception

of reality and cognition parallels closely Niklas Luhmann's (posthumanist) theory of communication.

Interestingly, relatively early in his career, Robbe-Grillet and the critic Bruce Morrissette had an exchange regarding the notion of "objets correlatifs," a term coined by Morrissette to describe the relationship of Robbe-Grillet's human characters to objects in his books. Morrissette correctly observed the attempt by Robbe-Grillet in *Les Gommes* to eliminate any hint of the specialized rapport between humans and objects that Robbe-Grillet sees as being characteristic of humanism and its subsequent manifestation in realist literature:

> Cette gomme, dans sa masse compacte, irréductible, de son être-là, existe, plus encore que le loquet de porte ou la racine de marronnier de *La Nausée*, d'une façon neutre, extérieure à l'homme, dans cet univers non humain des choses qui n'entendent aucun appel à elles adressé par l'homme et qui ne lui font aucun signe "familier." Cette gomme ne cache aucune correspondance baudelairienne; elle n'a aucun lien mystique avec l'homme; elle n'est pas, dans le sens courant du mot, un *symbole* (*Romans* 65).

In this way, Morrissette recognized the tentative by Robbe-Grillet to describe objects as they are in their own right and to minimize or eliminate any hint of a special or privileged connection between them and man. However, channeling Barthes and his "chosiste" interpretation of Robbe-Grillet, he then proposed his theory of "objets correlatifs," in which such objects serve as supports for the literary expression of a human character's passions and thoughts (Barthes "Preface" 1963). In this interpretation, then, objects continue to serve as supports for the goal of expression of psychological phenomena that ultimately places man back at the top of the hierarchy (objects are subordinate to man because their role is to support his psychological machinations). In this way he ended up effectively keeping them in an unbalanced

dynamic that ultimately privileges man. At first, Robbe-Grillet effectively agreed

with Morrissette, writing him a letter thanking him for saving him from

interpretations in which *objects served as symbols* for the kind of humanistic

metaphors previously outlined (Spencer 286). However, there is a difference between

supports for psychological analysis (which continues humanist placing of man

"above") and having objects be generators for cognition/symbols. In later years,

Robbe-Grillet insisted instead on the appartenance of such objects, as well as other

thematic elements, to the category "éléments générateurs" in the paradigm described

previously.

This is why Robbe-Grillet speaks of connections between man and the world

as not pre-existing but being created; they are created through the cognitive processes

of the subject seeking to "make sense:" "Le monde sensible qui [nous] entoure n'est

plus, comme le rêve ou le souvenir, que la matière à laquelle il doit prêter son

imagination pour la sauver du néant…il n'est plus ici question d'insuffler après coup

une conscience à des phenomènes ayant déjà leur vie propre: sans cette création, la

matière ne saurait avoir aucune forme" (*PUNR* 83). This lines up almost exactly with

Hayles' description of the posthumanist concept of intra-action:

> Intra-action posits that there is no prior existence of determinate
> objects and things. Instead, the properties and boundaries of things are
> enacted in intra-active processes. What this implies is that the
> distinction between the human and the non-human is not pre-existing,
> nor does it emerge from interaction between the two. Instead, the
> distinction is emergent within the phenomena themselves: properties
> and boundaries are enacted by certain constellations that give meaning
> to the phenomena to the exclusion of others (Van Puymbroeck and
> Hayles 23).

A perceiving subject's perceptions serve as the first step in processes of cognition; starting from his perceptions, he creates his own individual subjective reality by drawing on his own memory, dreams, and imagination. As such, reality and knowledge cannot be considered to be linear; memory deals with the past and dreams and imagination are timeless: "[dans la littérature modern les histoires] se dissolvent pour se recomposer au profit d'une architecture mentale du temps" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 32). A non-linear chronology thus becomes the model: "posthuman theory rests on a process ontology that challenges the traditional equation of subjectivity with rational consciousness, resisting the reduction of both to objectivity and linearity" (Braidotti *The Posthuman* 169).

In this new (posthuman) conception of knowledge and reality, the nature of narration changes. For Robbe-Grillet, in humanist narration, the purpose is didactic, that "communication" of essential truth:

> For the literate 18th-century public, the chief utility of history consisted in its true narrations of lives and events presented as guides both moral and practical for readers. On this rhetorical humanist model, history schooled both judgment and character by exempla. The more ambitious forms of philosophical history also sought out universal generalizations, especially in the realms of politics and human nature (Bod 28).

That insistence on an objective reality translates to an emphasis on the "real" and "believable" in narrative; Robbe-Grillet says, "pour avoir son poids de vérité humaine, il lui faut encore réussir à persuader le lecteur que les aventures dont on lui parle sont arrivés vraiment à des personnages réels et que le romancier se borne à rapporter, à transmettre, des évènements dont il a été le témoin" (*PUNR* 29). In the new mode, the function of writing becomes, for Robbe-Grillet, not the conveyance of

meaning and signification, but its creation: "Une nouvelle sorte de narrateur y est né: ce n'est plus seulement un homme qui décrit les choses qu'il voit, mais en même temps celui qui invente les choses autour de lui et qui voit les choses qu'il invente" and: "les oeuvres nouvelles n'ont de raison d'être que si elles apportent à leur tour au monde de nouvelles significations, encore inconnues des auteurs eux-mêmes" (*PUNR* 140, 123). Furthermore, the text constitutes the construction of just such a reality: "L'écriture romanesque *constitue* la réalité" (*PUNR* 138). In this paradigm the role of narrator is not that of a transmitter of a discovery but an individual subjective creator of meaning and of reality.

However, if man's epistemological role becomes the creation of meaning, rather than its discovery and transmission, man is not necessarily up to the task. Rather than embodying authority over his object of investigation, he is (potentially) perennially incapable of realizing this fuction. Unlike the humanist paradigm outlined by Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars, which emphasizes dominance and mastery, in Robbe-Grillet's vision, man may not succeed at his job of the creation of meaning. Attempts at creating meaning can be characterized by failure: "This ordering of events, however, is a dimension of consciousness which, with the exception of the author and of *X* in *Marienbad*, is not an attribute of Robbe-Grillet's heroes. They are the victims of the very things which they, as men, should be capable of ordering and directing but do not" (Stoltzfus *New French Novel* 91).

Or, when a subject does successfully create signification, it is not inherently *significant*, nor is it permanent. Whereas, according to Robbe-Grillet, in the humanist paradigm, the actions and thoughts of man had import for the universe at large, where

a in the new paradigm, no unitary human subject exists. When that meaning is created, it does not have import for the world, or for some singular and universal "man," but only for the individual creator. His opinion is not the measure of the utility of all knowledge, but rather a viewpoint limited to himself - as an individual -- and himself alone. "C'est ici l'homme lui-même qui doit donner l'unité au monde et l'élever à sa ressemblance. On regrette surtout qu'il ne soit pas précisé que l'operation restera à l'échelle humaine et aura de l'importance pour l'homme seulement" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 94). Or, as Alter puts it, "l'homme y est bien le seul temoin de l'homme" ("Humanisme" 210). The individual human subject is the only measure and producer of knowledge and his capacities are characterized by limitation: "Tandis que dans nos livres, au contraire, c'est *un homme* qui voit, qui sent, qui imagine, un homme situé dans l'espace et dans le temps, conditionné par ses passions, un homme comme vous et moi. Et le livre ne rapporte rien d'autre que son expérience, limitée, incertaine. C'est un homme d'ici, un homme de maintenant, qui est son propre narrateur, enfin" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 118). Each individual thus creates his own individual meaning, which has import for him alone – if he is even capable.

Observation plays a central role in this schema of knowledge, since observation of external phenomena constitutes the catalyst for development of its construction "Le regard apparait aussitôt dans cette perspective comme le sens privilégié" in a model that leads to "la contemplation" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 65-66). Once again, limitations are emphasized; knowledge is not universal; one can only know what he perceives: "L'homme voit les choses et il s'apercoit" (Robbe-Grillet

PUNR 53). And man is limited in his point of view, his ability to observe and perceive: "La médiocrité du monde tient à l'imperfection de notre vision, à notre incapacité d'attention. Notre vision des faits demeure vague et brumeuse, pareille à la perspective creusée dans la nuit par les phares d'une auto, et si imparfaite que l'imagination du conducteur doit sans cesse interpréter et paraphraser les signes aperçus" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 90). And the observers, the cognizing systems that produce these realities, are not necessarily human, but could also be constituted by the non-human others with which he is imbricated: "The strength of systems theory in relation to posthumanist critique lies thus in a 'deontologization of the human subject' and the resulting transformation of the question of an autonomously acting free individual. Instead humans can be seen as one form of observing subjects among many others" (Herbrechter *Analysis* 201).

The contingency and context-dependency outlined in the previous chapter also then applies to the concept of knowledge. If reality is constructed in the mind of each individual, then any "knowledge" is not essential and timeless but contingent and context-dependent, following the individual's own perceptions, point of view, observations, and his cognitive processes, which draw on experiences such as memory, dreams, and imagination to interpret observation: "Le domaine de la vue, du reste, comporte lui-même différentes qualités d'appréhension: une forme, par exemple, sera généralement plus sûre qu'une couleur, qui change avec l'éclairage, avec le fond qui l'accompagne, avec le sujet qui la considère" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 59). Posthumanism acknowledges this contingent nature of knowledge: "Posthumanism…makes the truths available to reason partial, limited, and context-

bound" (Best and Kellner 195). Truth itself is contextual rather than eternal: "Truth is 'the successful working of an idea' with a specific (and always limited) context. Truth is verification in practice" (Wolfe *Critical Environments* loc. 100). After all, after "the failure of objectivity… by now commonplace in the social sciences, in history, and in literary theory,…A large number of theorists, scholars, critics, and social scientists will accept the premises that all knowledge is limited and situated" (Levine 228). Robbe-Grillet himself comments on the subjective and contextual nature of individual knowledge, calling out Newton, (like Morson), in the process: "L'équation de Newton sur la chute de la pomme, ce n'est pas le portrait de la pomme, c'est le fonctionnement du cerveau de Newton" (Montalbetti loc. 7809). This is yet another reason for which a systems-theory based model of cognition can be useful for reading Robbe-Grillet, for "the priority of systems theory resides in its pursuit, rather than "evasion," of the problem of the contingency of knowledge" (Wolfe *Critical Environments* loc. 125).

Thus do Robbe-Grillet and posthmumanist scholars conceive of a paradigm in which knowledge and reality are contingent, subjective and multiple; where no objective transcendent meaning exists, but is rather created by the individual cognizing subject, using the perceptions he makes of the material world. In the function of the production of knowledge, man is no longer the master of knowledge but is potentially incapable of its manufacture. He is also "demoted" from his humanist position of domination at the top of the hierarchy that includes him and all the elements of his material existence. He is placed on the same plane as they, his importance diminished, the egalitarian, plural, and emergent connections between

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him and his "others" highlighted in a model that emphasizes the complexity of

networks over the reductive nature of essentialist ontological distinctions.

Chapter 4: Posthuman Narration – Emergence, Contingency, Plurality, and Breakdown of Boundaries in *La Maison de rendez-vous* and *Topologie d'une cité fantôme*

4.1 Emergence

As seen in Chapter 2, Robbe-Grillet proposes a paradigm in response to what he considers the traditional humanist one. Elements of this paradigm that may also be considered posthumanist include: an emphasis on emergence rather than essence and fixity; contingency over universality; plurality and multiplicity over singularity and unity; a valuation of complexity over reductivity; an emphasis on the idea of possibilities; dissolution of ontological boundaries, rejection of binaries; and a general rejection of transcendence. I will now demonstrate the ways in which these affirmations manifest themselves in two of his fictional texts, *La Maison de rendez-vous* and *Topologie d'une cité fantôme,* which, in the interest of space, I will refer to in my citations as *Maison* and *Topologie*, respectively.

In his theoretical texts, Robbe-Grillet emphasizes the notion of emergence, or the idea that the standard state of the world is to be constantly coming into being; there is no fixed essence or permanent state for any person or object, including the text itself. The object of narration or observation can be observed only as it is in the moment, at any moment. Within his narration, Robbe-Grillet indicates regularly this notion of constant coming-into-being. In *La Maison de Rendez-Vous*, this notion is signaled to the reader before the principal narrative even begins, in one of the two "avant-propos" to the text:

> Si quelque lecteur, habitué des escales d'Extrême-Orient, venait à
> penser que les lieux décrits ici ne sont pas conformes à la réalité,
> l'auteur, qui y a lui-même passé la plus grande partie de sa vie, lui
> conseillerait d'y revenir voir et de regarder mieux: les choses changent
> vite sous ces climats (*Maison* 8).

Here he indicates the notion of consistent change in two ways: by stating it directly ("les choses changent…") and also by implying that reality itself is subject to change; if elements in the book do not resemble elements in real life that is because the "real" elements change. Of course, Robbe-Grillet's avant-propos are often meant to destabilize, play with, or confuse the reader so any statements made therein should be not necessarily be taken at face value. However, regardless of his intention of its effects on the reader, the emphasis on the notion of change is certainly present in this passage.

The notion of emergence continues to be present in the main part of the narrative. One of the most common ways in which Robbe-Grillet emphasizes the notion of becoming and continual transformation is through his use of the present tense. He uses the present tense often to describe a scene, notably often when in a novel of the type he labels "traditional" would use past tenses; he himself indicates the desire to evoke the "presentness" of a given situation through use of the "present de l'indicatif," indicating that film has an advantage in this regard, for

> Cette irréductible *présence* de l'image filmique s'oppose
> incontestablement au jeu complexe des temps grammaticaux dont
> dispose le roman classique: il n'existe aucun code photographique qui
> permette de signifier que telle ou telle scène est au passé – ni défin, ni
> indéfini, ni imparfait – ou au futur, encore moins au mode
> conditionnel. Si je vois un évènement se dérouler sur l'écran, je le
> reçois comme en train de s'accomplir: il est au présent de l'indicatif
> (Robbe-Grillet "Pour un nouveau cinéma" loc. 3083).

In the novel, then, he uses the present indicative tense to evoke this same presence, or

"present-ness" as Morson puts it (225). Whereas the past tense would indicate

finished events already seen and experienced, the present tense indicates events that

are *in process*. As I will outline in Chapter 6, Robbe-Grillet seems to be more

interested in process than final outcome, especially in regards to cognitive processes.

This emphasis on process applies not only to cognition of events taking place in his

novels, but also to the events themselves. The events being observed by a narrator are

in process – both/either in process of occurring and in process of being observed; the

event and the observation are both actively happening at the moment of narration.

For example, in an early scene from the party at the Villa Bleue, the narrator

describes a dancer, pointing out both the present-ness of her movements and actions

and of his own observation of her:

> Souvent je m'attarde à contempler quelque jeune femme qui danse,
> dans un bal. Je préfère qu'elle ait les epaules nues, et aussi, quand elle
> se retourne, la naissance de la gorge. Sa chair plié luit d'un éclat doux,
> sous la lumière des lustres. Elle exécute avec une application grâcieuse
> un de ces pas compliqués ou la cavalière se tient éloignée de son
> danseur, haute silhouette noire, comme en retrait, qui se contente
> d'indiquer à peine les mouvements devant elle, attentive, dont les yeux
> baissés semblent guetter le moindre signe que fait la main de l'homme,
> pour lui obéir aussitôt tout en continuant d'observer les lois minitieux
> du ceremonial (*Maison* 10).

In this passage the use of the present tense indicates the action as it is happening, as

well as the observation being made simultaneously of the same actions. The idea of

observation is invoked several times, with the words "contempler," "attentive,"

"yeux," "guetter," and of course "observer." The notion of the present-ness of the

observation, in addition to use of the present tense, is further emphasized with the use

of "continue": "continuant d'observer," even if in this particular instance it is used in

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a figurative sense (observing the rules of the ceremony). Thus both the coming-into-being of the actions and of the observation of the actions are emphasized.

Interestingly, in this passage the narrator subtly indicates yet another level at which the notion of emergence takes place – that of the creation of the story itself. By stating "je prefere qu'elle ait" the narrator signals to the reader that the text is an invention, his invention; the reader is supposed to know that the person whom he is observing is not meant to be a real person but a creation, an element imagined and chosen by the narrator. Robbe-Grillet himself confirms the story/ies in *Maison* as being in process, with the use of *en train de*, in an interview on *Lecture pour tous*: "l'histoire est continuellement en train de se constituer dans le livre même. Le livre est déjà l'aventure de quelque chose qui est en train de se faire" ("Maison de rendez-vous" 1:23-1:41).

The continuity indicated by the present additionally indicates the present-ness of the act of communication: By using the present tense to narrate the scene, the narrator/observer is indicating that he is inventing the woman at the same time he is observing her and her actions, and at the same time conveying all of this information to the reader. All of these actions on the part of the narrator – invention, observation, communication - are happening simultaneously and actively - they are in process of occurring and being narrated at the moment of narration. Furthermore, the reader is actively reading the text that contains all of these emergent actions, thus creating a further layer of actions and observations *in process*. The signalization of the emergent nature of the text to the reader also implicates the emergent process of *reading* that the reader is enacting at the moment he encounters this comment. All in all, this

passage is exemplary of the emphasis that Robbe-Grillet places on becoming and

emergence, taking place over several levels of text and even implicating the reader.

Similar use of the present tense establishes the emergent nature of narrative

observation, narrative communication, and textual construction from the beginning in

Topologie: "Mais il n'y a plus rien, ni cri, ni roulement, ni rumeur lointaine"

(*Topologie* 9). The text continues almost exclusively in the present tense for almost

90 pages, keeping the narrative in a continual state of present-ness. Occasionally the

narration changes from past to present tense; for example, in the first passage in

Maison in which the narrator purports to undertake an attempt recount the party at

Lady Ava's:

> Comme j'avais l'impression d'être un peu en avance, c'est-à-dire de
> me trouver parmi les premiers invités à franchir la porte…j'ai préféré
> ne pas entrer tout de suite et j'ai obliqué vers la gauche pour faire
> quelques pas dans cette partie du jardin, la plus agréable. Seuls les
> alentours immédiats de la maison sont éclairés…on ne distingue
> bientôt plus que le contour des allées de sable clair…Le bruit est
> assourdissant (*Maison* 18).

Once again, the narrator implicates the notion of observation, in particular

observation in process; with "éclairer" the ability to see into the garden is implied,

and observation is of course invoked as well with the word "distingue." These

instances serve to emphasize the notion of emergence through contrast with what

Robbe-Grillet considers a more "classic" scene recounted in the past tense.

In the same scene, just a few pages later, the narrator emphasizes the notion of

emergence in a different way. He describes two figures arguing in the garden,

recounting their postures and actions as he observes them; but as he describes them,

they do not conduct themselves in a realistic or typical manner as someone who

would be having an argument. As recounted by the narrator, their gestures are slowed

or their bodies immobile; every movement they make is measured and atypically

isolated:

> Deux personnages immobilisés dans des attitudes dramatiques, comme
> sous le choc d'une intense émotion…A trois mètres environ…se tient
> un home en spencer blanc qui parait sur le point de s'écrouler, comme
> s'il venait d'etre frappé d'un coup de pistolet, la femme ayant lâché
> l'arme aussitôt et restant ainsi la main droite ouverte…Puis très
> lentement, sans redresser le corps ni les genoux ployés, il ramène cette
> main en avant et la porte à ses yeux….et il demeure alors sans plus
> bouger que sa compagne. Il reste encore figé dans la même posture
> lorsque celle-ci, d'un pas lent et régulier de somnambule, se met en
> route vers la maison aux reflets azurs, et s'éloigne, les bras conservant
> toujours leur position levée, la main gauche repoussant devant elle
> l'invisible paroi de glace" (*Maison* 20).

For Robbe-Grillet, immobility can be seen as a way to signal the present-ness of a

given moment; the idea that any object can only be as it is in the moment in which the

description is fixed: "Le souci de précision qui confine parfois au délire (ces notions

si peu visuelles de « droite » et de « gauche », ces comptages, ces mensurations, ces

repères géométriques) ne parvient pas à empêcher le monde d'être mouvant jusque

dans ses aspects les plus matériels, et même au sein de son apparente immobilité"

("Description, représentation" loc. 1137).

This description of figures and scenes in postures of immobility is even more

pronounced in *Topologie*. The narrator even refers to human figures as "insensibles

hommes-statues" (*Topologie* 48). Nearly all the scenes recounted emphasize some

form of stillness or immobility, whether on the part of people or of a city that, under

other circumstances, would be bustling with human activity; a city in ruins. These

ruins are not definitive but constantly in a state of transition between deconstruction

and reconstruction. Some of the buildings are intact while others are completely

destroyed; some are partial. Some of the structures are being rebuilt and repurposed while others are reduced to rubble with no indication as to their future restitution. The narrator often juxtaposes both in his narration, insisting upon both construction and deconstruction rather than one or the other: "Quelques injections de ciment plastique dans les masses fissurés suffiront ensuite à en arrêter la dégradation…mais le plus périlleux sera, sans aucun doute, la construction du Saint des Saints…il n'est plus question de remettre en cause, maintenant, le choix de cette construction en ruine pour l'établissement du sanctuaire" (*Topologie* 120). Thus the notions of construction and deconstruction/destruction are evoked together repeatedly, even as the "construction en ruine" is impossible in real world terms. As the narrator recounts his observations, some of the ruins are actively in process of tumbling down: "derniers craquements des murailles brûlées, cendre ou poussière s'écoulant en menu filet d'une fissure…une pierre qui se détache à la façade éventrée d'un immeuble monumental, dégringole en rebondissant d'anfractuosités en corniches, et roule sur le sol parmi les autres pierres" (*Topologie* 10). This intermediary state between (re)construction and deconstruction can be understood to be another example of emergence – the state of the city is not fixed or definitive but continually in process of being built/destroyed. A similar consistent state of change in terms of the setting is present in *Maison*, where "settings fail to remain static either in time or in space" (Goodstein 92).

4.2 Binaries and Boundaries

Additionally, by insisting on the transitory state between construction and destruction, Robbe-Grillet refuses to settle on either side of the binary of

construction/deconstruction, instead remaining squarely in the tension between the two; in Chapter 2 I discussed this aspect of Robbe-Grillet's vision. The state of flux between the two poles is the default state of the novel's setting, rather than one side or the other. That he insists on remaining between the two, or on their simultaneous coexistence, is demonstrated by the title of the second section of the text of *Topologie*: "Construction d'un temple en ruines à la déesse Vanadé": Construction of ruins would be an impossibility in real-world terms, but the insistence of the text on complexity and multiplicity allows for the simultaneous existence of these two notions, allowing the text to settle in between the two in a refusal to enter into one side of the binary.

The binary of construction/destruction also operates on the level of the text itself. It is not just the story that is implicated in this tension between construction and deconstruction/destruction but also the narration. Often the narrator will make a statement only to refute it and replace it with another one. This sort of deletion indicates the emergent nature of the text itself, and its own situation in the space between construction and destruction. Robbe-Grillet states that his work "s'est accomplie dans un double mouvement de création et de gommage," a technique that Pierre van den Heuvel (and others) call "dysnarration" and that Brian Richardson terms "denarration" ("Description, representation" loc. 1124; "Texte, Film" 2002; *Unnatural Voices*, xi). In the opening of *Topologie*, the narrator states, "C'est le matin, c'est le soir;" in Maison, "Boris's ferry-boat in *La Maison de rendez-vous* itself points to the motion that creates a fiction, according to Robbe-Grillet, the

constant movement between irreducible fact and monstrous fantasy, or creation and destruction" (Sturrock 223).

The binary construction/destruction is not the only one refused by Robbe-Grillet in the two texts. He often talks about binaries in terms of contradictions that, under real-world circumstances, would render impossible. For example, in *Maison,* within a single line, he plays with the notion of immobility and movement, invoking both at once in describing the scene of the young woman walking a dog: "La jeune femme conservant tout le corps immobile, malgré le mouvement vif et régulier des genoux et des cuisses sous la jupe entravée" (*Maison* 25). In another instance, the dog's mouth is dripping with wet saliva and yet it closes its mouth with a "dry snap" (*Maison* 12-13). The narrator even refuses the binary existence/non-existence with contradictory statements about the existence of certain elements in scenes; while observing the woman with the dog, who goes into a building, the narrator wonders what happens to the animal while she is gone, invoking the existence and non-existence of several material items in turn: "L'aurait-elle attaché à quelque anneau, piéton, tête de rampe (mais l'escalier n'a pas de rampe), heurtoir (mais il n'y a pas de porte)" (*Maison* 29). In a similar way, the narrator invokes the simultaneous existence and inexistence of a ceiling in the prison in *Topologie* (*Topologie* 17-25). In Chapter 5 and 6, I will illustrate the functions that such contradictions serve in demoting man from his central place in a humanist epistemological model as it is conceived by Robbe-Grillet; and in producing cognition in Luhmann's systems-theory model of communication; but here I affirm that they also serve to undermine and refuse "humanist" binaries, as outlined in Chapter 2.

Within these ruins, the narrator describes various sorts or barriers or boundaries -- walls, windows, fences. The structure that is most central to the story is (perhaps) a prison for young women. Here the notion of boundaries and barriers is central, for keeping a boundary between those inside and those outside is the sole function of a prison. However, in almost every instance of description of a barrier, especially within the prison, there is a reference to its porosity – the narrator finds a crack, a space, a gap, a hole, etc. For example, following a description of the prison as nearly impenetrable, with thick walls and windows that are placed far higher than any prisoner could possibly reach, the narrator notices the faults in the barriers, the gaps in the bars: "A mieux observer le détail des différentes grilles, on découvre vite que l'une d'elles est incomplète, celle de la muraille latérale gauche, dont un des barreaux manque" (*Topologie* 20). Even as he describes its impenetrability, however, he qualifies his description with references to the openings and lack of solidity of the barriers: the building is "apparently" intact; the walls have no openings "ou peu s'en faut" (*Topologie* 12). As he continues to observe the building, he notes that a more major part of it is missing – either the ceiling or the fourth wall that would enclose the prisoners.

As remnants of the destruction visited upon the city previous to the narrator's visit, this helps to emphasize this tension between construction and deconstruction, but it is also a literal depiction of the inefficacity of strict boundaries, barriers, and delineations. By insisting on openings, space, and movement within solid barriers, Robbe-Grillet emphasizes the notion of the openness and fluidity, and the breakdown of boundaries. In fact, from the very opening passage of the text, the elements

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observed by the narrator are literally unbounded: "Mais il n'y a plus rien…ni le moindre contour discernable accusant quelques différences, quelque relief, entre les plans successifs de ce qui formait ici des maisons, des palais, des avenues" (*Topologie* 9). The boundary – the contour – is not visible, with no apparent delineation between what would normally be disparate elements of a typical city scene - houses, streets, and so forth. In the broken glass from the fallen champagne flute/the crates in the wings of the theater in *Maison*, Sturrock also sees a reference to the inefficacity of barriers: "the crates full of broken glass – since glass represents the flimsy barrier that circumscribes and protects a world projected only in the imagination or reflective consciousness – are *open*" (203).

The dissolution of categorical boundaries also happens on other, less literal, levels of the text. Self-contained, integral, unitary, bounded elements are set aside in favor of what Peter van Heuvel calls "brouillages," a mixing and transitioning that allows for flow, openness and continuity among what would ordinarily be disparate elements (Van den Heuvel 56). One of the most common instances of this is in the lack of delineation between scenes at the level of the story. Events and scenes that are ostensibly distinct from one another – occurring at different times, or different places, or enacted or observed by different characters – are recounted in such a way that there is no distinction or boundary between them; one slides seamlessly into the other with no verbal indication in the narration that would separate them. This happens most notably in *Maison*, where the lack of transition among or between scenes is more apparent than in earlier texts. For instance, early in the text, the narrator recounts elements of what would normally be disparate scenes: a theatrical representation of

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the torture of a young girl, a young woman walking her dog in a public street, a woman dancing at a party, and a man recounting a story at a party. However, in the narration he makes no distinction that would delineate one scene from another. The narration of elements of these scenes in the opening pages is done in such a way as to present these scenes – or fragments of them – without making any categorical separation among them, one sliding seamlessly into another:

Le pied droit de celle-ci, qui s'avance presque jusqu'au niveau de la patte arrière du chien, ne repose sur le sol que par la pointe d'un soulier à très haut talon…la soie blanche de la jupe est fendue latéralement, laissant deviner le creux du genou et de la cuisse. Au-dessus, grâce à un discret système à glissière, presque indiscernable, la robe doit s'ouvrir entièrement jusqu'à l'aisselle, d'un seul coup, sur la chair nue. Le corps souple se tord, de droite et de gauche, pour essayer de se libérer des minces liens de cuir qui enserrent les chevilles et les poignets; mais c'est en vain, naturellement. Les mouvements qu'autorise la posture sont d'ailleurs de faible amplitude; torse et membres obéissent à des règles si strictes, si contraignantes, que la danseuse parait maintenant tout à fait immobile…et tout d'un coup, sur un ordre muet de son cavalier, elle se retourne en une volte-face légère…elle fait seulement bouger l'étoffe mince sur le ventre et les seins. Et voila que le même gros homme sanguin s'interpose de nouveau, parlant touours àvoix haute de la vie à Hong Kong et des magasins élégants de Kowloon, où on trouve les plus belles soies du monde (*Maison* 11-12).

The scenes thus recounted flow from one into the next without any boundary marking the division among them.

It is worth noting that variations of the word "glisser" appear frequently throughout the book, as they do in many of his text, in this instance indicating where a discreet system "a glissière" allows the opening of the dress. Once again, here the notion of "opening" is emphasized. The same is true of *Topologie*: a tramway, in spite of its rickety state, "glisse sans faire autre bruit que la note grêle d'un timbre metallique" (*Topologie* 60). The use of terms like "glisser" emphasizes the notion of fluidity and flow; "couler" is another frequently occurring word in both texts. Thus

rather than rigidity, blockages, or even ruptures, what is emphasized is above all a sort of continuous sliding and slipping, from one scene, image, or moment to the next, in a sort of continual flow without boundary.

Other scenes or collections of scenes are narrated in much the same way: A rickshaw driver running on an exterior avenue surrounded by fig trees merges into the sanguine man attempting conversation at a party, speaking although no one is listening; a theater piece that the narrator leaves to wander about backstage merges into a description of debris floating in a canal on an outdoor street (*Maison* 13, 24). Similar lack of narrative transition among scenes occurs in *Topologie*, although these scenes resemble more of a freeflowing stream-of-consciousness type of narrative style than carefully combined and calibrated passages containing a finite number of scenes. For example, the opening of the chapter titled "Le Navire à sacrifices" transitions directly without any particular demarcations through the following scenes: From an enclosed building, a stylus and a rock are visibly lying on the ground near a body of water; a convalescent adolescent lies in bed thinking of a book which has recently been read to her; in the prison traces of old architectural elements can still be seen, including the remains of a text in Latin, which must be about the ancient goddess Vanadé, of which the mythological function is queen of the girls trapped in the prison and goddess of fertility: "Caillou et stylet gisent à même le sol, dans le soleil…mais la convalscente allongée rêve encore aux mots envolés de la liseuse. Sur la haute muraille extérieure de la prison …les pierres apparantes dessinent la trace de nombreux éléments d'architecture depuis longtemps disparus…" (*Topologie* 43-45). Each of these different scenes, while not combined one within the other, as in

Maison, are evoked by the narration in a fluid way without borders or divisions, in which one flows directly into the other.

Other instances of dissolution of barriers and boundaries in his fiction include the lack of distinction between observation of lived events and the subsequent recounting of the same events; the event and the story of the event become mixed together. What begins as a retrospective "témoignage" transitions into a present-tense observation of the events being recounted. For example, in *Maison*, the narrator states that he is going to try to recount the incident of the police raid of the Villa Bleue exactly as it happened, and for this he begins his narrative in the typical way, using the past tense: "Une fois, la police est arrivé chez elle au milieu d'une réunion, mais une réunion parfaitement ordinaire" (*Maison* 15). Shortly thereafter, however, the narration switches to present tense and the entirety of the rest of the passage is dedicated to narrating the observation of the events as they occur: "Quand les gendarmes en short kaki et chaussettes blanches font irruption dans la villa, ils ne trouvent que trois ou quatre couples qui dansent encore dans le grand salon" (*Maison* 15). Many critics have worked on the notion of chronology and temporality (or lack thereof) in Robbe-Grillet's work; indeed, this is an example of his typical blurring of temporalities. But setting aside a perspective strictly concerned with chronology, it may also be considered a dissolution of boundaries between levels of narration – the events and their recounting -- in addition to a dissolution of temporal boundaries.

In *Topologie* this dissolution between events and their retelling, the dismantling of a chronological temporality between these elements, manifests for the most part in a slightly different way. In this novel, the narrator often makes reference

to the fact that events being reported have not only already occurred – despite the frequent use of the present tense -- but have also already been recounted: "Mais l'eau trouble au sein de laquelle la jeune survivante vient ainsi de baigner sa chair meurtrie était – selon ce qui vient d'être dit – mélangé au sang tout frais de ses compagnes, assassinées par milliers dans la rade. De cette étrange union naquit le demi-dieu David. La suite de l'histoire a déjà été rapportée" (*Topologie* 52). In this way, the observations and events become mixed between the telling and the occurrence through mixed use of the past and present tenses, but also through the narrator making reference to a previous recounting. The references to textual creation and mythology herein add an interesting layer to the mythical stories presented in the text in that these mythological elements constitute "origin" stories that, in a "real world" sense, are perpetually told and retold. Their link to creation as well as the text's as a whole is significant; as Roch Smith states, "*Topology of a Phantom City* simultaneously creates and explores a world in space and time as a means of telling the story of such artistic creation" (95). With the text itself being the site of their generation, the text itself becomes the origin of the origin story, thus further blurring the boundaries between creation and narration.

Robbe-Grillet also blurs the distinction between observation and invention. In their implication in narration, as Sturrock points out, "there is nothing remotely revolutionary about Robbe-Grillet as far as this goes: novels have always been part observation and part invention" (223). However, Robbe-Grillet's innovation lies in breaking down the distinction or refusing to make a distinction between the two while bringing this refusal to the forefront of his work, bringing it to the reader's attention

in an explicit way: "He is an innovator only in so far as he displays [this] within the novel itself" (Sturrock 223). Returning to the notion of textual creation as a primary focus of the text, the narrator often marks his commentary with elements that signal to the reader the invented nature of the text, even as he recounts his observations. Indeed, we can consider this concentration on the practice of writing, over the depiction of events recounted, as a posthumanist trend. In her article "Posthumanist Performativity," Katherine Barad evokes "the move toward performative alternatives to representationalism" that "shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g. do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices/doings/actions" (Barad 802).

Occasionally this observation/invention is juxtaposed and mixed with representations of artistic representations – paintings, theater pieces, posters, etc. – so that the distinctions between observation, creation, and artistic representation become indistinguishable. For example, in one passage in *Maison*, the narrator observes an illustrated party scene on the cover of a Chinese magazine that he sees in the street. As he describes the scene on the cover, it morphs into a live scene that the narrator is observing and experiencing at the moment of recounting, but as he does so, he uses terms such as "au centre de l'image," and "au premier plan," terms alluding to his role in the invention of it all: "Au premier plan, par exemple, sur la droite, deux femmes assez proches l'une de l'autre…n'ont encore rien vu et poursuivent la scene commencée sans se soucier de ce qui se passe à dix metres d'elles" (*Maison* 27). The lived scene, the observation of the scene, the art object (the magazine cover), the observation of the cover, and the mise-en-scene on the part of the narrator are here all

mixed together, fluidly transitioning from one to the other. Similar blending occurs in Topologie: "Sans interrompre sa course, elle se retourne à demi vers la route en lacets jalonnée de gouttes vermeilles qu'elle vient sans doute de parcourir, regardant comme avec effroi le sommet de la colline où se cache l'autel du sacrifice dans le sinistre sanctuaire pentastyle. Non, ce modèle d'architecture est trop improbable…ce qu'il y a, dehors, ce sont seulement des rues" (*Topologie* 28). The boundary between observation/recounting of the young girl running (narrator) and invention of the scenery through which she runs (author), the roles of author and narrator are combined.

I will discuss in Chapter 6 the centrality of processes of cognition in Robbe-Grillet. Involved in these processes are dreams, imagination, and memory, and so these occupy a prominent place in Robbe-Grilletian narration. When they are invoked, the lines between these are also broken down and these elements often mixed together without distinction in the two novels. This blurring occurs in both novels from the very opening passage; in *Maison*, the author says,

> La chair des femmes a toujours occupé, sans doute, une grande place
> dans mes rêves. Même à l'état de veille, ses images ne cessent de
> m'assaillir. Une fille en robe d'été qui offre sa nuque courbée – elle
> rattache sa sandale – la chevelure à demi renversée découvrant la peau
> fragile et son duvet blonde, je la vois aussitôt soumise à quelque
> complaisance, tout de suite excessive…souvent je m'attarde à
> contempler quelque jeune fille qui danse, dans un bal. Je préfère
> qu'elle ait les épaules nues… (*Maison* 9-10).

In this single passage, the narrator invokes dreams with the word "rêves" but then refers to being bombarded with images even while awake, which could invoke either imagination or memory. Then he recounts something he sees, which could either be remembered or imagined; or, as it is recounted in the present tense, something that is

lived at the moment of narration. With words like "souvent," the author implies lived

experience, which would normally be attributed to memory, but then almost

immediately qualifies that image with "je préfère qu'elle ait," which implies

imagination and invention. Thus the boundaries between dreams, lived experience,

memory, and imagination are broken down, each one moving seamlessly into the

others. In *Topologie*, the opening pages contain a similar occurrence:

> L'arme de mort, le couteau à large lame étincelante et froide a
> séché jusqu'aux pleurs, dans la chambre abandonnée où
> maintenant déjà me gagne le sommeil sans rêves d'après la
> destruction. Je suis là. J'étais là. Je me souviens. Avant de
> m'endormir, la ville, encore une fois, dresse devant mon visage
> pâli…Je suis seul. Je marche au hasard devant moi (*Topologie*
> 11).

Once again, the idea of dreams is invoked with the words "dormir" and "rêves" –

except that the author states explicitly that it is a sleep without dreams. Immediately

afterwards is invoked the notion of lived experience – and thus perhaps memory –

with the notion of being there. But by moving from present tense to past tense, it is

unclear whether the author is referring to memories or current and active lived

experience. The text then moves again to the notion of memory as the narrator states,

"je me souviens," then back to the notion of sleep with "avant de m'endormir." The

phrases that follow, the buildings standing in front of the narrator's face, and his

movement through the city, could thus be either observed, dreams, memory, or

imagination. In just a few lines, then, the narrator jumps seamlessly between all of

these ideas, without distinguishing or creating any solid barriers among them. Indeed,

Robbe-Grillet's text explicity puts into place "fusions of reality, dream, and art"

(Bogue 36).

Finally, the dissolution or blurring of categorical boundaries also occurs at the level of the author, narrator, character, and reader. With the blurring of the distinctions between observation, recounting, and invention, the distinctions between narrator and author also break down. The role of narrator (recounting/observing) and the role of author (creating/inventing) are contained within the same narration; for instance in the scene I have already evoked in *Maison* where the narrator is observing a woman dancing but "prefers" her to have exposed shoulders (*Maison* 10). The distinctions between narrator and character are also blurred, as the narrator both observes at a distance and participates in the events he recounts; sometimes at the same time he makes references to his role in their creation as text. As Goodstein notes, "The accounts are structured to present a movement from the subjective narrator to the objective third person coupled with a seemingly contradictory movement from a kind of speculative observation of events to an active participation in them" (94). Later, he notes, "The point of view changes from an unidentified first-person observer to a third-person narrator, but the third-person narration seems to deal with the first-person narrator, now become an actor rather than an observer" (Goodstein 92). Furthermore, the narrator depicts several levels of reading and spectatorship; sometimes he recounts the act of reading or viewing a piece of art (a poster, a theater piece, etc.) himself; sometimes he evokes himself and/or other characters as spectators of art or as observers of events, thus attributing to himself as well as to other characters the role of "reader" or "observer."

And if the narrator's role is to recount what he observes, and by extension, the reader's role is to observe what the narrator observes through his communication,

then the complex and layered levels of observation in the text would make many characters simultaneously also narrators and readers/spectators. I will elaborate on the notion of observation and its role in cognition and complexity in Chapter 6, but these elements also serve to illustrate a breakdown of typical narrative boundaries. For example, in one party scene, a man who has been watching his dance partner bows "devant son interlocutrice dont les yeux demeurent baissés avec modestie, la servant…s'arrête à quelques pas d'eux et reste à les observer en silence….la coupe de cristal qui choit sur le sol de marbre et se brise en menus morceaux, étincelants, la jeune femme aux cheveux blonds qui reste à les contempler d'un regard vide" (*Maison* 28). Here, the narrator observes the man observing the woman, who is not herself observing anyone, who are in turn observed silently by the servant, who also observes a blond woman who is observing the broken glass; all of which scene is observed by the narrator, and through him by the reader. In this way, through the use of observation, several characters simultaneously occupy the roles of character and spectator.

The narrative voice occasionally changes in such a way as to place the narrator as a participant involved in events narrated by someone else, thus casting him as a character and narrator simultaneously. For example, in *Topologie*, the narrator states, "Le sens exact des gestes ou des objets n'y est pas clairement discernable, à cause apparemment de la tête du narrateur qui se trouve juste devant et dont les épais cheveux bouclés brouillent la vue" (*Topologie* 36). In this way, the narrator is inserted as a sort of mise-en-abyme in his own text as an observed character, and this in such a way as to subvert the role of narrator in a ludic manner: The narrator is he

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who is supposed to observe, and subsequently to recount, but in this instance, it is himself, by dint of his own position, that blocks the observation and thus the recounting of the event. Roch Smith sees in this image yet another level of observation, in that the reference to thick hair is a reference to Robbe-Grillet himself, thus adding "author" to the various transgressions of boundaries effected (94).

In other instances, the narrator places on the scene a character recounting a story to which he is listening, thus placing himself in the role of "spectator" and another character in the role of narrator. For example, the narrator in *Maison* places himself explicitly in the role of narrator – he who observes and recounts a series of events – near the beginning of the text: "Je vais donc essayer maintenant de raconter cette soirée chez Lady Ava, de préciser en tout cas quels furent, à ma connaissance, les principaux évènements qui l'ont marquée" (*Maison* 18). However, later on, it is the character of the sanguine man at the party who has taken on the role of narrator and who is recounting the events as the original narrator listens: "Puis, sans liaison apparente avec ce qui précède, il se met à raconter la mort d'Edouard Manneret. Ça, c'était un personnage!' ajoute-t-il en conclusion" (*Maison* 34). By using the term "personnage" the man also invokes the invented and fictional nature of the story, thus referencing also the role of author, and referring to the constructed nature of the text. In *Topologie*, these roles are also mixed; for example, the narrator makes reference to the constructive nature of writing – the role of the author – in the passage where he states, "Je m'approche en tatonnant et je pose la main sur la muraille refroidie où, gravant dans le schiste avec la pointe du couteau à large lame, j'écris maintenant le mot CONSTRUCTION, peinture en trompe-l'oeil, construction imaginaire par

laquelle je nomme les ruines d'une future divinité" (*Topologie* 13). Thus the role of

author, that of writer and creator, as well as he who names his creations, is taken up

by the narrator. The knife used by the narrator in this scene has been implicated in a

possible scene of violence or crime in a previous passage, and thus the narrator is also

implicated in the story as a potential criminal – one of the characters whose actions

are being narrated.

Finally, there is no division between text and commentary on the text (fiction

and critique). As noted in Chapter 1, Robbe-Grillet sees fiction and theory as working

in tandem, feeding off each other and intertwining with each other. This vision of

criticism and fiction plays out also in his novels. Several remarks made by the

narrator in both novels can be understood as being commentary on the text itself or on

the nature of writing and/or artistic representation. For instance, in *Topologie*, the

narrator states "La contradiction chronologique qui existe ainsi entre les caractères et

ce qu'ils racontent posent une énigme que personne n'a encore resolue" in a fairly

obvious reference to the problems of chronology encountered by critics of Robbe-

Grillet's work (*Topologie* 42). In another section, which contains a description of

sexual violence (the shipwreck and rape of a group of women), the narrator cites "les

outrages ainsi cent fois répétés avec les variantes barbares," which can be understood

to be a reference to the text itself, which takes up the same imagery and story

elements again and again in numerous variations throughout the novel and perhaps

also refers to its negative reception by critics (*Topologie* 51). In yet another, more

obvious, passage, the narrator makes a reference to a museum of machines, adding

"dont il a déjà été question dans le texte à plusieurs reprises. Les enquêteurs ont

reconnu là, aussitôt, le schéma générateur initial" (*Topologie* 113). This is a clear

reference to his own use of "éléments générateurs," his repetition of each such

element in various scenes, and the recuperation of this practice by critics.

In *Maison,* as the narrator watches a scene of torture of a young woman that

occurs in the Villa Bleue as part of a theatrical representation, he comments on the

lack of *vraisemblance* in the gestures that the woman makes to protect herself: "La

fille qui joue le rôle de la victime tient les bras écartés de part et d'autre du corps, en

se collant à la paroi…une mise en scène réaliste commanderait plutôt de lui faire se

servir de ses mains pour se protéger…ce mode de défense n'est pas explicable que

par un souci d'ordre ésthetique, visant à introduire quelque variété dans le point de

vue de la salle" (*Maison* 32). This comment can be understood also to be concerned

with the critical reception of Robbe-Grillet's work; it can be seen as a sort of response

to criticism and a defense of the idea that, if his novels do not respond to that which

seems "realistic" it is because he is trying to create a new structure, concerned with

variety and variations, for his own spectators (his readers). Thus can some

commentary on the text, often a response to criticism, be found within the fictional

text itself, mixing criticism with the fiction.

4.3 Contingency

Following the breaking down of boundaries, as ontological categories

dissolve, the observations made by the narrator become contingent. Without the

essences associated with ontological categories, there is no objective truth for the

narrator to communicate. His affirmations are thus conditional, contingent upon his

position, his ability to observe, and his perspective. In *Topologie*, for example, the

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narrator points out explicitly that the scenes that take place and the elements they contain are not a given but depend on his own perspective; in one instance he evokes a "table de bois rectangulaire…ou peut-être, à la réflexion, carrée: ici encore l'effet de perspective est trop marqué pour que l'on puisse en décider à coup sûr" (*Topologie* 21). In this case, the shape of the table cannot be determined, or depends on the perspective of the observer. This information is contingent upon his placement and his ability to observe.

The images and elements observed by the narrator also have different meanings depending on the context in which they are observed. Robbe-Grillet recycles elements, re-using them in a variety of different scenes, or repeating them in scenes with slight variations (his "éléments générateurs"). Each time, the contribution of the elements observed and recounted to the meaning changes depending on the scene. For example, one of the commonly recurring elements in *Maison* is a leash; when it occurs in a scene where a woman walks her dog, it is an innocent accessory for the dog; when it is used in scenes of violence to tie up women it is an instrument of torture. The same, singular element – a leash – thus has a different significance depending on the scene in which it appears. In *Topologie*, the image of a girl lying face up on a bed is one of pleasure or violence, depending on the scene in which it is found; on one page the other elements of the scene imply pleasure; while on the following page some elements are changed in order to imply violence: "une autre adolescente est allongée sur le dos, nue, les membres en croix, le corps étalé en travers d'un divan très bas dans le désordre des draps défaits…même sourire hors d'atteinte, comme oublié là sans raison, témoin perdu de quelque plaisir" (*Topologie*

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11). In contrast, the same image appears on the following page, signifying violence this time: "le lit défait où repose le corps offert, éventré, la flaque de sang qui déjà se fige sur le drap blanc" (*Topologie* 12). The same image of a girl splayed across the bed thus has two different meanings depending on the context of the scene in which it occurs.

The idea of context and contingency is further emphasized in particular in *Topologie*, with the many scenes involving a game of cards. As noted in Chapter 2, the notion of games is significant to Robbe-Grillet in particular because of their relationship to contingency and possibility. This is depicted textually in *Topologie* in various scenes portraying a game of cards played among the female prisoners. The meanings of the cards depend on the game being played; the "règle du jeu" is written but its contents are not communicated by the narrator, so that there is no context on the part of the narrator or the reader for interpreting the cards that are shown. When a card is finally played, its meaning is not communicated directly and explicitly, but remains in suspense, to be "deciphered" according to the rules and context of the game by the player whose turn comes next: "Au lieu de déchiffrer en hâte, ou même avec avidité, le dessin colorié reconnaissable au premier regard grâce à la tâche rouge vif qui en marque le quart inférieur…la jeune femme qui est assise en face, cessant alors au contraire de montrer le moindre intérêt pour cet arcane majeur enfin abattu par sa partenaire, a levé la tête à son tour vers la tâche du soleil qui brille sur le mur de droite" (*Topologie* 26-27). Without the rules of the game, and thus context being made explicit, and without the active interpretation within that context that must be made by the participant, the meaning and significance of the card played cannot be

known. And Roch Smith, in his critical reading of *Maison*, envisions the murder as a sort of game: "[The death of Manneret] "takes place on a narrative chessboard without obvious rules" (67).

In other instances, the import of information proffered by the narrator has different significations depending on the choice and interpretation of the reader, and occasionally, narrator. In *Maison,* for example, the narrator hypothesizes the potential existence of a ring to which the woman could have tied her dog while going indoors; this is followed by an affirmation regarding the state of the ring: "L'aurait-elle attaché à quelque anneau, piton, tête de rampe…heurtoir…patte-fiche, crochet, vieux clou grossièrement recourbé vers le haut, tout tordu et mangé de rouille, planté dans le mur à cet endroit? Mais ce clou lui-même n'est pas bien solide" (*Maison* 29). The state of the ring, presented as an affirmation, is in fact contingent upon the ring's very existence, which is presented as a hypothetical. In the same passage, the narrator signals to the reader that the subsequent sequence of events in the story depends on the choice he and/or the reader make regarding the possibilities of the actions of the woman in attaching the dog: "Si, comme tout l'indique, il n'est pas monté avec elle, a-t-il attendu tranquillement au pied des marches, n'ayant désormais plus besoin d'être tenu en laisse? Ou l'aurait-elle attaché…" (*Maison* 29). The series of suppositions regarding the object to which she attaches the dog depends in the first place on the narrator and reader choosing the possibility of the attachment of the dog over the possibility of the dog waiting calmly outside. The use of the conditional tense reflects the conditional existence of these elements. With the use of "si" in the beginning, the narrator also establishes that these possibilities are conditional upon

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the veracity of the indications laid out by the text, which is itself not a given. As Smith points out, regarding the villa, "its very existence is questionable, a dependency of the oft-used conditional of conjecture in this novel's original French narrative" (Smith 70). All of the subsequent elements – the various objects to which the dog could be attached, the state of the object – depend on this choice being made; they are thus contingent on the respective selections made in this particular series of textual or narrative possibilities. By basing his affirmations contingent on the conditional, Robbe-Grillet is emphasizing contingency and contextuality over objectivity and essence.

4.4 Plurality

Finally, the texts are characterized by acceptance of and mise-en-scene of multiplicity and plurality over singularity and unity. As seen in Chapter 2, Robbe-Grillet emphasizes plurality and multiplicity, which manifests itself in the text in several ways, one of the most obvious being the multiple identities of a given character. In *Maison,* for example, one of the primary characters has a multitude of names: Johnstone, Johnson, etc. as does Lauren, Laureen, Loraine, etc. Johnson also has multiple nationalities; at one point he is referred to as being American; at another point he is referred to by the narrator as being British. The name "Sir Ralph" seems to apply to multiple indviduals, and "The American" is both a nickname for Sir Ralph and a reference to the Johnson character: "celui qu'on appelle Johnson, ou même souvent "l'Américain," bien qu'il soit de nationalité anglaise et baron…Sir Ralph (dit "l'Américain") ne peut se départir d'un demi-sourire presque méprisant" (*Maison* 34). Even unnamed characters have multiple nationalities; one of the servants in Villa

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Bleue who recurs as an observer throughout the story is simultaneously Japanese, Chinese, or both. Not only do particular characters have multiple names, but the names also each refer to multiple items; Jonstone might be the American/British character, but it is also the name of the sculptor responsible for the statues in the garden. "L'appât" is both the name for the sculpture group and for the theater piece put on during the soirée. That critics should consider the characters multiple as such, rather than attempting to assign them invidual identities, is confirmed by Robbe-Grillet himself. When correcting a critic who says that some find his work difficult to read, Robbe-Grillet suggests that the difficulty is coming perhaps from the fact that such a reader would be relying on old models that presuppose singularity, and that the reader who would accept an approach permitting multiplicity instead would find *Maison* easy:

> Si vous acceptez de le lire comme il a été écrit, c'est-à-dire … sans s'arrêter à ce qui semble être des contradictions. Par exemple, un personnage, on vous dit qu'il est américain à la troisième page, on vous dit qu'il est anglais un peu plus loin, qu'il est portugais encore un peu plus loin. Mais il faut admettre tout simplement que c'est un personnage à nationalité multiple (" Lindon" 17:35-18:13).

This multiplicity also extends to the narrator and to narrative voice. The text in both books cycles through different yet simultaneous identities for the narrators as well as changing variously from first to third-person. These differences are not just changeable, but coexistent and multiple. In *Maision,* the central event of the text – the murder of Edouard Manneret – is recounted in various ways by various characters, repeated with variations. As Goodstein points out, in *Maison*, "The novel is made up of five distinct sections," including "four separate accounts of the events surrounding an evening at the Blue Villa" (93). These multiple narratives cannot be readily

combined into a unified whole but coexist simultaneously. They "are not readily attributable to a single psychological perspective" but remain "a multiplication of narrative perspectives and spaces" (Smith 62). A multiplication of narrative voices also occurs in *Topologie*, as the narrative passes from narrator to various characters, and from first-person to third-person point of view.

The murder of Edouard Manneret, not just its narration, is also multiple. As Goodstein points out, "Edouard Manneret has been murdered, but the murder has been committed in three different ways and under three completely different sets of circumstances" (Goodstein 92). He dies variously by suicide, being mauled by a dog, being stabbed by a criminal disguised as a policeman, and by the character Johnson. The text offers another possibility as well: that the death was part of a theater piece called "The Death of Edouard Manneret" and that his death does not "actually" occur at all. All of these various "deaths" of Manneret are equally present in the text. Robbe-Grillet affirms the plural existence of multiple stories in the text: "Dans La Maison de rendez-vous, il y a une histoire, comme vous dites. Il y a même des histoires." ("Lindon" 11:20-11:25).

In the text there is also a proliferation of images, scenes, and "éléments générateurs," one engendering the other in a profusion: "A series of images constitute the presence of the novel and form a thematic motif that runs throughout the novel…The circumstances surrounding them may change, but the images themselves remain constant" (Goodstein 93). These elements multiply themselves: "Two images occur over and over, alternating from one to the other, expanding their contexts into scenes and even groups of related scenes," for example, "The party at the Blue Villa

seems at times a conglomeration of different parties telescoped together and at other times a specific party which is raided by the police" (Goodstein 93, 92). As a text, *Topologie* itself as plural, as it is a "montage of several collaboratively inspired texts" (Smith 88). The text itself is made from multiple texts, each one a collaboration generated by a plurality of authors. "By constructing Topology from diverse collaborative projects," says Ronald Bogue, "[Robbe-Grillet] subverts belief in a work's intrinsic unity" (36). Such multiplicity also allows for the simultaneous coexistence of multiple textual possibilities, as well as possibilities for reader interpretation, which I will address in Chapter 6. Thus do the affirmations of emergence, contingency, plurality, and breakdown of boundaries that are espoused by both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist scholars play out in his fiction. I will now examine the repositiong of the human subject in his fiction.

Chapter 5: Confronting Anthropocentrism – Decentering the Human in *Dans le labyrinthe* and *La Reprise*

5.1 Repositioning Man vis-à-vis Knowledge and Communication

In Chapter 3, I outlined the criticisms that Robbe-Grillet has of the humanist positioning of the human subject. In brief, he understands the humanist human subject to be placed at a position of hierarchical superiority over the material world and non-human "others" such as objects; and to be placed at the center of knowledge production as subject, object, agent and measure of epistemological investigation. In his fictional texts, then, Robbe-Grillet seeks to displace the human from these respective positions. I will demonstrate the ways he effects this displacement in *Dans le labyrinthe* and *La Reprise*, to which I will refer with the terms *Labyrinthe* and *Reprise*, respectively

In regards to the question of "knowing," in the next chapter, I will undertake a reading the cognitive processes or "sense—making" of the human subject that take place in Robbe-Grillet's texts, following Niklas Luhmann's systems-theory based theory of communication. The specifics of the cognitive processes in question will be outlined in that chapter; for now, I will concentrate on the manner in which Robbe-Grillet depicts the human subject as being limited, incapable, or failing in that function (of sense-making and its communication).

To briefly summarize the humanist epistemological paradigm against which Robbe-Grillet is writing, outlined in Chapter 3: Observations of experiments and lived experiences constitute the primary matter of knowledge; conclusions drawn from these observations by the human observing subject constitute what is "known."

The intelligent, rational, autonomous human subject who interprets the observations has enough importance and authority that his interpretation of these observations constitute knowledge. Robbe-Grillet conceives of humanist narrative as a model in which a privileged human author "discovers" – or demonstrates a premeditated - objective truth from observations made through the practice of writing, which he then communicates to the reader, also through writing. The characters in this narrative must be believeable and identifiable in order for the narrative to serve its didactic function of communicating a truth about human nature. Robbe-Grillet's human characters serve to interrupt this paradigm at almost every level.

In response to this paradigm, throughout both *Labyrinthe* and *Reprise*, the characters' *inability* to "know" and to communicate (knowledge or information) is highlighted rather than their knowledge demonstrated. This inability is demonstrated by the characters at several levels, beginning with that observation. While critics such as Roy Jay Nelson have seen in this lack of signification and significance a return to the absurd, due to "la lutte entre la raison humaine et la réalité multiple, inclassable, inexplicable," it is worth remembering that Robbe-Grillet himself denied any recourse to the absurd. If one accepts his claim at face value, another interpretation is needed for this incapacity to know (401).

When an affirmation is stated by the narrator, it is tends not to be stated as fact, but as observation: "grands tilleuls, qui…ont survecu aux bombardements sans mutliations ni blessures visibles" (*Reprise* loc. 532). Even as a third-person, presumably omniscient, narrator, he is unable to say definitively that, objectively, the trees are uninjured; only that he does not *see* any injuries. In this particular case, the

narrator is recounting what he is seeing, but often his characters are limited in their ability to see or observe, and subsequently, to know. For instance, in *La Reprise* when the victim is assassinated, the protagonist is unable to place the direction of the gunshot based on the direction of the sound: "L'amplification du fracas par l'effet de résonance empêche d'en localiser l'origine comme aussi de supputer la nature exacte de l'arme qui l'a produit" (*Reprise* loc. 299). As for visual observation, "Les jumelles de guerre, comme l'avait prédit Pierre Garin, ne m'étaient d'aucun secours" (*Reprise* loc. 274). Because his powers of observation –seeing and hearing -- are not effective, he narrator is unable to establish any information about the identity and placement of the assassin. In *Labyrinthe*, both the narrator and the characters consistently remark on their difficulty seeing; in his description of the bedroom in the opening pages, he cannot tell whether an object is a knife or a flashlight because "il est difficile de l'interpréter; aucun relief en particulier n'est discernable" (*Labyrinthe* 20). Interestingly, here the narrator speaks of "interpreting;" normally in the production of knowledge the first step would be to observe and then to interpret, but the narrator points out that interpretation is impossible precisely because he is unable to complete the step of observation ("discerning").

When a narrator does make an affirmative observation, he either does not attempt to interpret the information -- to transform it into that which is "known" -- or he offers multiple interpretations, possibilities, and contradictions, all of which render impossible the type of objective essential knowledge targeted by Robbe-Grillet. Speaking about this narrative refusal to interpret, in one of his first televised interviews, Robbe-Grillet describes a narrator "qui ne raconte pas exactement mais

qui voit" and who "refuse de beneficier de…ce rôle d'interprétation." ("Jalousie" 4:18-4:20, 6:46-6:55). Ben Stoltzfus states, "His novels are noteworthy indeed for their absence of analysis" (Stoltzfus "Objective Subjectivity" 499).

One narrative technique by which Robbe-Grillet typically "demotes" man is through the use of contradictions conveyed by the narrator regarding his observations. From the very beginning of *Labyrinthe*, for example, the narration is full of contradictions. In the opening lines one finds this passage regarding the weather, or rather, observation by the narrator of the weather:

> Dehors il pleut, dehors on marche sous la pluie en courbant la tête,
> s'abritant les yeux d'une main tout en regardant quand même devant
> soi…dehors il fait froid, le vent souffle entre les branches noires
> dénudées; le vent souffle dans les feuilles, entraînant les rameaux
> entiers dans un balancement, balancement qui projette son ombre sur
> le crépi blanc des murs. Dehors il y a du soleil, il n'y a pas un arbre, ni
> un arbuste pour donner de l'ombre et l'on marche en plein soleil,
> s'abritant les yeux d'une main tout en regardant devant soi (*Labyrinthe*
> 9).

In just this paragraph there is a remarkable amount of seeming contradictions: Outside it is raining, or it is cold, or it is sunny; the branches of the trees are naked or there are leaves; they cast a shadow or there is no shadow or not even a tree. In just a few lines the narrator manages to negate nearly every statement he makes. The only image that remains intact throughout the passage is that of a pedestrian covering his eyes with his hand to protect them from the elements as he moves through the street.

The observations in this passage do not allow for anything to be "known" about the state of the weather outdoors, because the observations contradict each other – there is no singular truth; furthermore, this indicates that perhaps the human is not reliable as an observer. What's more, in this passage, the narrator does not

interpret these same observations; he merely makes them. He does not ultimately attempt to derive any particular conclusion or "truth" from the weather phenomena being observed; he simply recounts what he sees. In another passage, the narrator states, "il devient impossible de retrouver l'intonation qui paraissait à l'instant avoir un sens – crainte, ennui, doute, solicitude, intérêt quelconque –et seule demeure la contestation: "Vous n'avez pas mangé"" (*Labyrinthe* 64). In the absence of interpretation, and thus knowledge, all that remains is the observation.

In *La Reprise* the narrator(s) emphasize this point even more directly, with the inclusion of notes as addenda to the story that put into question the veracity of any statements made by the characters and emphasize the faulty nature of memory. Much of that which the narrator states in the notes enters into direct opposition with the events recounted in the "main" part of the story. An exaggerated obsession with objective facts on the part of the commentator in the notes serves as a means of putting into question the very possibility of existence of such facts, as well as their importance:

> Le narrateur, lui-même sujet à caution…commet ici une légère erreur. Après avoir passé l'été sur une plage de la Baltique, Franz Kafka s'est installé à Berlin pour un ultime séjour, avec Dora cette fois-ci, en septembre 1923, et il est retourné à Prague en avril 1924, déjà presque mourant…Il y a ainsi 26 ans, et non 25, entre sa présence en ces lieux et celle de Kafka (*Reprise* loc. 241).

In some the narrator goes so far as to impugn the integrity of the characters concerned: "Nous avons du mal à imaginer que la bonne foi du scrupuleux Ascher soit totale, dans cette prétendue mémoire défaillante, gommant comme par miracle l'élément capital de son histoire" (*Reprise* loc. 643). In this way, Robbe-Grillet puts

into question, in a tongue-and-cheek way, the possibility of any observing human subject to "know" objectively and also diminishes his importance in this endeavor.

Robbe-Grillet also plays with the idea of meaning and signification, portraying it as impossible or elusive for the characters attempting to pursue it. He therefore often depicts meaning as uncertain, changing, or impossible to obtain. Roch Smith notes in his reading of *Labyrinthe* that "meaning remains elusively resistant" (57). In *Labyrinthe*, when describing the position of the figures in the painting of the café, the narrator signals this, stating, "Leurs mimiques sont figés par les dessin, interrompus, arrêtés net en plein developpement, ce qui en rend la signification également très incertaine" (*Labyrinthe* 25). And not only does he portray meaning itself as elusive, but he often depicts characters as weak or struggling in the face of their attempts to derive meaning from observations or piece of information, whether verbal or visual. This is in direct opposition to the authoritative humanist human subject he envisions, whose knowledge is mastery. In these attempts the characters are unsuccessful more often than not.

Or, meaning is simply marked as absent. For example, in *Reprise*, the protagonist overhears what seems to be an argument, of which he hears only the sounds of "un allemande guttural" in which he "identifie cependant le mot "morder" qui revient à plusieurs reprises, hurlé de plus en plus fort" (*Reprise* loc. 440). The protagonist thus hears a language, but from sounds, not words, which would contain meaning. The one indication of a word is singular – thus extracted and isolated from the context of the argument or conversation itself, which would also provide meaning – and presented to the reader – presumably a French-language reader who is

unfamiliar with German – strictly as such, without any indication as to its signification. In *Labyrinthe*, the soldier is trying to determine whether someone has passed before him in the street, and decides that the footprints that he does not see does not mean anything: "Lorsqu'il parvient au carrefour suivant, aucune piste non plus ne sillonne les trottoirs de la voie transversale, et cela ne signifie rien non plus" (*Labyrinthe* 76). In fact, the notion of footprints is emphasized significantly in both books. This is interesting in that footprints are one of the most common tropes in detective novels as a "clue," a material manifestation that provides important information that can be used through deductive reasoning to arrive at a definitive conclusion. Robbe-Grillet uses footprints in a subversive manner, reversing their role as a provider of concrete, objective information, to that which is demonstrative of meaninglessness and insignificance. Rather than constituting a step in the obtainment of concrete and objective knowledge, they lead only to the unknowable.

It is not only the signification or meaning of information that characters are unable to discern; it is also the significance. When they obtain a piece of information, they find themselves incapable of being able to understand its importance, or even to determine whether it is important or insignificant. For example, in one scene in *La Reprise*, the protagonist (named Ascher in this section of text) confronts a guard as he tries to cross the frontier and encounters both the communication problem of not speaking the same language, and not being able to determine the significance of this problem: "Ascher parle avec faconde dans une langue approximative, dont il n'est pas certain que l'autre suive les méandres, ce qui lui semble sans importance" (*Reprise* loc. 453). In another scene he has discovered that his colleague must have come into

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his room in the night and stolen his affairs and asks himself, "mais dans quel but?"

(*Reprise* loc. 401). The "why" of the act – its purpose, its significance, its motivation

– remains unknown to the protagonist. In a passage in *Labyrinthe*, after an

unsuccessful attempt to give the soldier the information he is looking for, the woman

asks the soldier whether it is important, which he is unable to determine:

> Qu'est-ce que vous allez faire, demande enfin la femme, puisque
> vous avez perdu le nom de cette rue?
> -Je ne sais pas, dit le soldat
> -C'était pour une chose importante?
> -Oui…Non…Probablement (*Labyrinthe* 62).

The same goes for their environment: "Robbe-Grillet's fictions…start in a world that

is inexpressive, deprived of essential significance" (Sturrock 216).

In other instances, the futility of seeking information is emphasized. In

Labyrinthe, the soldier who is looking for directions realizes that even if he were

successful in obtaining a particular piece of information – the name of a street – this

information would be of no use: "Du reste un nom de rue ne lui fournirait guere de

renseignement utilisable, dans cette ville qu'il connait pas" (*Labyrinthe* 31). The

information he seeks has no utility, no importance, and this is due, once again, to lack

of knowledge – the fact that he does not know the city he is in. In another passage, the

process of asking questions and receiving answers ends in a dead end: "Il n'a plus

envie de répondre à cet interrogatoire qui ne mène à rien" (*Labyrinthe* 45). This

reflects "the bewilderment felt by the reader…[as] the narrative provides no

dependable answers to such questions" (Smith 56). Stoltzfus remarks on the futility of

the search for meaning by the reader: "When you are trying to deliver 'dead'

mysteries, that is, the contents of the shoe box, to unidentifiable places or persons, the

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futility is…obvious" (Stoltzfus "Labyrinths" 300). In all of these instances, the importance, or significance, of the pursuit of knowledge is signaled as lacking. Robbe-Grillet thus refuses the importance attributed to the humanist knowledge-seeking subject, removing human subject's capacity for reason as his *raison-d'être*. It is interesting that this futile search for meaning is reflected in N. Katherine Hayles's conception of narrative in posthumanist studies: "Stories help us to make sense of the world by giving shape to experiences that often seem chaotic, incoherent, or meaningless. Even narratives that subvert causality or deny meaning still create frameworks that orient us to a world in which the quest for meaning is itself part of the human condition, even if the quest is ultimately fruitless" (Van Puymbroeck and Hayles 25).

This lack of significance applies to the characters themselves, as they have difficulty knowing or understanding their own purpose. In both books, characters are sent on missions without knowing where they are going, what the significance of the mission is, or what it is they are to do. For example, in *Reprise*, "le pseudo-Wallon," wandering through the city to he place he does not know on a mission he does not understand, seems to envy the supposed purpose of the city's denizens in contrast, who "se hâtent vers un objectif précis, raisonnable, et quotidien" (*Reprise* loc. 480). It is notable that the purported mission of the protagonist of *Reprise* is an investigation ("une enquête"), which can be understood of course as a search for information. "The man who is transmitting these "sacred" relics does so in vain and, in his attempt, dies a premature and violent death," says Ben Stoltzfus; "is not Robbe-Grillet commenting obliquely on the absence of teleological purpose?" (Stoltzfus *New French Novel* 87).

That the entire novel is structured as a fruitless search for information serves to

further cement the idea of the incapacity of the human subject to "know" definitively

and objectively. The depiction of the central character wandering aimlessly through a

foreign landscape serves the double purpose of de-centering the human from the

center of knowledge -- by showing him as incapable of producing meaning,

significance, or knowledge from his observations – and removing him from the top of

the hierarchy over the material world, by eliminating his mastery over external

elements in the material world, such as the structure of the city in which he circulates.

Sturrock emphasizes the "foreign" nature of the city and the characters in them in

Robbe-Grillet's texts:

> Robbe-Grillet's heroes or narrators are always strangers to the world
> they find themselves in – with the single exception of the husband in
> *La Jalousie*…Moreover as well as being strangers, they are also
> visitors, a status that foreshadows their ultimate release from a
> landscape whose presence is not altogether welcome to them (216).

Sturrock takes goes a step further, seeing in the labyrinthine and fragmented

landscape of Robbe-Grilletian texts a metaphor for man's powerlessness in the

obtainment of order and knowledge:

> Whenever Robbe-Grillet introduces roads, corridors, staircases and so
> on, he always does so in this fragmented and deliberately bewildering
> way. The progress of the narrator who tries to follow them and link
> them together into a coherent townscape or piece of architecture
> represents the will to find comfort in a definitive order of things. But
> the motion which Robbe-Grillet permits is only brief and fragmentary,
> each section of street, corridor, or the like, being simply the evidence
> of the mind's frustration. (231).

Indeed, in Robbe-Grillet's labyrinths, knowing is impossible: "there are only neutral

spaces of equal value that correspond to the shattered fragments of a universe in

which no true orientation is possible" (Stolzfus "Labyrinths" 296). While in my own

interpretation, I wish to avoid signaling metaphors, it is clear that the notion of human mastery over both knowledge and environment is destabilized through Robbe-Grillet's use of landscapes and positioning of characters within them.

Finally, the notion of communicating that which is known is continually interrupted, faulty, defective, partial, or unsuccessful, either between characters in the story, between the narrator(s) and characters, or from the narrator to reader. Sometimes this lack of communication happens as a result of speaking different languages, but interestingly, in these cases the status of the ability of the speaker in each language is always changing. Rarely is a character presented as definitively not understanding a regional dialect or language; rather, he does not understand it now where he understood it before; or he is able to understand the local dialect but suddenly has less proficiency in his native language: "Maria, par chance, ne parlait ni ne comprenait le français. Et lui-même, déjà un peu perdu dans sa langue natale, avait cessé désormais d'entendre l'allemand" (*Reprise* loc. 587). Later, commentator states that "La jolie Maria…sait parfaitement le français, mais le cache avec soin, pour des raisons d'efficacité" (*Reprise* loc. 609).

Often this (mis-)communication happens even when the language is understood to be French or at least a language understood by both speakers. In this instance it is more an inherent inability to communicate. For example, in *La Reprise*, the following dialogue occurs explicitly in French:

> -Bonjour Monsieur, est-ce que vous avez des chambres libres?
> …
> -Combien?
> -Vous voulez dire: combien d'argent?
> -Non. Combien de chambres!
> -Eh bien, une, evidemment.

-Ca n'est pas evident: vous avez demande *des* chambres (*Reprise* loc. 558).

This sort of miscommunication often happens when the protagonist explicitly asks for information, thus underscoring to what extent this lack of communication is related to a lack of knowing. In these instances, often the characters try to volunteer the name of a street but can't quite remember the name. This inability to identify or to name is then both a problem of knowing (which is the street, which is the name of the street) and a problem of communication (inability to convey this information to the protagonist). Or there is silence: "[le] silence inhabituel au milieu duquel [un cri] s'élève…l'intérieur est très sombre, encore plus silencieux" (*Reprise* loc. 545).

Interestingly, on this same page, the narrator cites a "bruit parasite," which stays undisturbed by the cry, which could well be a reference to the "order from noise" principle posited by Heinz von Foerster, a founder of contemporary information theory, which is a field praised by Robbe-Grillet as having much potential for use in literary interpretation, including his own work, and which also serves as the basis for many aspects of posthumanist theory. The order from noise principle is also important in complexity and chaos studies (which are adopted by posthumanist critical theory). Very briefly, the theory states that self-organizing systems tend to organize themselves through random selections of actions in a feedback loop that connects the system to its environment. The attempts at making meaning here would constitute the tension between order and disorder, and the intent to impose order onto chaos described in Chapter 2. Indeed, "The attempts which he shows the mind as making towards the imposition of a satisfying order on phenomena

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have a definite positive value," says Sturrock, indicating that Robbe-Grillet is indeed depicting cognitive process in the face of complexity (189).

Noise also has a key role to play in the notion of information, in various models of information and communication. In the "order from noise" principle, the transmission of messages is built upon information that must be actively extracted and constructed by the interlocuteurs from the randomness of a complex material world. These notions form the basis for models of communication in computer science, cognitive sciences, and cybernetics (from which Niklas Luhmann draws) that envision communication as happening between interlocuteurs that are other than human: human and machine; or machine to machine. The "parasite" aspect of this particular theory has been further examined by Michel Serres, who emphasizes the role of complexity in communication and the inefficacity of communication models that use the humanist human subject as their bases.[24] In this way, with a single short phrase, Robbe-Grillet makes reference to the sort of theories that have been adopted by posthumanist theorists as useful for literary interpretation, points to models of communication that do not use the human as their most basic component, and demonstrates the ultimate incapacity of "humans" to know and to communicate, thus de-centering the human from this particular privileged place in his vision of the humanist paradigm.

5.2 Repositioning Man vis-à-vis His Environment

Robbe-Grillet also seeks to reposition man in terms of his environment, displacing him from a position of superiority and importance over the material world.

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[24] In *The Parasite* (2007).

Rather than being emphasized in a way that places the human characters above objects, animals, and the non-human in importance, equal weight and significance is given to humans and the non-human, especially objects. Nor are human characters depicted as integral, unified entities, distinct from the non-human, but are often confused with the non-human; the lines between them are blurred, with their plurality and fragmentation emphasized. Instead of displaying dominance over the material environment, the human characters are depicted as being diminished by it or victims of it.

In both books, the human subject is also depicted as being subordinate to his external environment, at the mercy of his environment rather than a master of it. Both novels feature a protagonist wandering through a city unknown to him, which is at least partially in ruins. Neither protagonist knows exactly where he is going or why and keeps winding up lost. The notion of "labyrinth" is this central to this idea. Indeed, for some critics the labyrinth is emblematic of man's decentering in the modern world and its corresponding depiction in art generally; Stoltzfus says,

> If structuralism, among other philosophies, has demystified the world, and art is full of relative spaces without presumptive centers, then man, by the force of circumstance (hence the fear and the anger), is compelled to seek new answers to the age-old problem of living. The anxiety of modern man reflects the fact that he has not yet been able to adapt to the fast pace of a rapidly changing world in which the "center" of values has shifted and in which everything seems relative. ("Labyrinths" 302).

In this paradigm, "to escape from the labyrinth is to find answers" (Stoltzfus "Labyrinths" 307). It is notable, then, that Robbe-Grillet's characters never do. In this way, again, the notion of domination of man over environment and man as capable of

knowing are intertwined. In *Reprise,* in the train station, the narrator says, "j'emprunte le souterrain qui donne accès aux différentes voies et, dans ma précipitation, je me trompe de sens," in a passage that also links the imposition of the physical landscape over man and man's lack of knowledge (*Reprise* loc. 173).

For example, in the opening passage from *Labyrinthe*, the one unchanging element is the image of a human figure raising his hands to his eyes in a gesture of protection from the weather – whatever it may be. This is significant for a couple of reasons. Firstly, in this passage, the human figure is secondary to that of the external world. Much more space is given to the non-human in the passage than to the human figure. The description concentrates mainly on the weather patterns and the (possibly inexistent) tree, with the human figure constituting only the smallest detail of the descriptive passage. The human figure is not the focus of the observation or narration; rather the non-human is.

Secondly, the human figure is depicted as being at the mercy of these elements. In Chapter 3, I described Robbe-Grillet's notion of the humanist divide between Nature and Culture, in which man is depicted as having mastery over "nature" or that which is external to him. In the description that constitutes the opening passages of *Labyrinthe*, by contrast, man is at the mercy of the elements, making an almost futile gesture of protection; he is not its master. From the very beginning of the book, man has been "demoted," his lack of dominance and mastery over the material world exposed. In this short passage, it is the material world that has mastery over man; instead of having power over nature, he is powerless in the face of it. Similar scenes exist in *Reprise*; the narrator cannot find his way in the train station; he cannot find a

suitable train compartment; he attempts to cross borders but then realize the place

where he finds himself is not at all where he thought he was (*Reprise* loc. 30-173, loc.

480). In this way, man is depicted as not having mastery over his environment.

But nor is he a victim of it. In the type of realist literature criticized by Robbe-

Grillet, such a description of the extremeness of outdoor elements would be listed

only insofar as they had consequences for the human subject; for example Jack

London's evocative descriptions of the cold in "To Build a Fire" are elicited

exclusively in view of their (ultimately fatal) effect on the main character. To speak

about man in terms of victimization is to have recourse to the humanist tragedy

Robbe-Grillet criticizes in "Nature, Humansime, Tragédie." Sturrock observes that

"certainly, there are many moments in his fiction when Robbe-Grillet seems to

be…showing the individual in futile conflict with the universe; at the same time, this

rupture is exploited not for tragic ends but for mediocre or burlesque ones" (195).

In *Labyrinthe* there are no consequences for the human figure attempting to

protect himself against the elements; the reader does not know and the author does

not seem to care whether this situation is of any consequence for the human subject

depicted in it. This element of the story follows no thread and leads to no conclusions

about the figure; as Stoltzfus notes, if man is dominated by his environment, the

effect of this relationship is of no consequence: "These heroes either die in the

labyrinth or are trapped by it, unable to find a center or an exit. They wander,

repeating empty gestures in a space and time that have become meaningless"

("Labyrinths," 296-297).

The human character is "demoted" – not superior to the other elements of the scene, and showing no mastery or domination over his environment. His lack of importance or particular significance is emphasized in that no emphasis is made on what effect the weather has on him, for better or worse, or what the future outcome of the situation for him. The narrator does not appear to care about the "destiny" of the character in question. The man simply appears and is listed as a part of the scene, one object among others; his goals, his preoccupations, his fate are not important enough to become a focus of the storyline. The non-human and the human are equal focal points of the scene. That the ultimate end of the human characters is not important is reinforced by Robbe-Grillet himself. At the end of the book, the reader discovers that the soldier protagonist is dead, and the narrator is likely at once the doctor who tends to him and the author of the text. Commenting on this development, Robbe-Grillet says, "Rien n'est résolu à la fin de Labyrinthe, on ne révèle dans les dernières pages que des choses sans importance, de petits fait adjacents et dérisoires" (Heath 141).

Indeed, often in Robbe-Grillet's descriptive passages, equal if not more space is given to objects rather than human beings. Just after the previously cited passage, the narration goes on to describe in great detail the interior of a house, returning from time to time to the weather outdoors. The descriptions focus painstakingly on geometric and concrete details of the objects that occupy the house:

> La fine poussière qui ternit le brillant des surfaces horizontales, le bois
> verni de la table, le plancher ciré, le marbre de la cheminée, celui de la
> commode, le marbre fêlé de la commode, la seule poussière provient
> de la chambre elle-même: des raies du plancher peut-être, ou bien du
> lit, ou des rideaux, ou des cendres dans la cheminée (*Labyrinthe* 10).

Over the seven following pages, a human subject is never once mentioned, with the exception of a couple of oblique references to an anterior action that would have been carried out by a person -- and even then referred to only as a supposition ("comme par"), not as a certainty: "[rings on the table are] plus qu'à demi effacée, comme par un coup de chiffon" (*Labyrinthe* 14). From the opening of the book, then, the human is established as secondary, both by dint of his absence in the majority of the opening passages, and by the references that refer to him only insofar as he has influenced the state of the objects that are the real focus of the description: a pair of shoes that has made shiny spots on the floor, marks left on the table by the setting down of an ashtray, and so on.

The manner in which the human subject is depicted when it is present is also significant. When human beings are present on the scene, they are often described or presented in ways that diminish their importance compared to the elements of the material world surrounding them. They are attributed the same importance as the objects that surround them by dint of the space they take up in the narration, the focus of the narration, and the manner in which they are presented.

Usually the narrator presents human figures in an equivalent manner to the objects around them; humans and objects are given equal weight and place in the narrative descriptions. Additionally, the human figure is not attributed any particular qualities or signification that do not also belong to objects. For example, in *Labyrinthe*, when describing the appearance of a woman in a doorway, the narrator focuses first on her dress before moving to a description of her face and eyes, depicting each in the same impersonal manner and evaluating the same qualities in

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both: "Le bas du tablier est très ample, ainsi que la jupe, tandis que le haut n'est qu'un simple carré de toile protégeant le devant du corsage. Le visage a des lignes régulières, très accusés. Les cheveux sont noirs. Mais les yeux ont une teinte claire, dans le bleu-vert ou gris-bleu" (*Labyrinthe* 63). The narrator describes the object (the clothing) in terms of form and color, and does the same with the features of the woman (eyes and hair). He avoids emphasizing the "human" elements (the face) more than the object (the dress), and does not attempt any interpretation of emotion or thought on the part of the woman based on those features, any more than he does for the objects. In another passage, the narrator states more directly that representation of human figures has no more importance than any other type of motif representing an object: "Quant au papier peint lui-même, les innombrables et minuscules tâches qui en constituent le motif n'y conservent pas plus une forme de flambeau que de fleur, de silhouette humaine, de poignard, bec de gaz, ou n'importe quoi" (*Labyrinthe* 80).

In addition, depictions of human figures are often mixed with that of objects or presented as being part of objects; the boundaries between human and object tend to be blurred; they are not two distinct entities different from one another but are instead a part of one another. This occurs both at the level of the narration and the storyline, when humans are depicted as being part of an object of art. For example, human figures appear on wallpaper in the bedroom; in another scene, in a painting. However, the mixing of the object with the human does not always take place as part of a depiction of artistic representation. It also occurs at the level of the narrative: "Il peut n'avoir pas tout de suite remarqué [le soldat], qui se confond peut-être en partie

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avec la colonne de fonte contre laquelle sa hanche et son bras droit s'appuient"
(*Labyrinthe* 42).

Further emphasizing this blurring of boundaries between human and object,
when the image of a human figure does occur, whether at the level of narrative
observation or as a depiction of artistic representation, it is often indistinguishable or
imprecise, the human form never being definitively delineated or discerned by the
observer. For example, an observer looking at a human figure represented in a photo
(an example of the human appearing as artistic representation) is unable to discern
features: "Le soldat regarde encore le portrait sur le mur du fond: à cette distance, les
traits du visage sont tout à fait indistincts" (*Labyrinthe* 89). And within the storyline,
there are many instances of the observer not being able to distinguish the human form
of another individual. For example, "[L'enfant] n'est d'abord qu'une silhouette
indistincte, une tâche noire irrégulière qui se rapproche, assez vite, en suivant
l'extrême bord du trottoir" (*Labyrinthe* 41). This occurs not only with visual
perception but also with sound: "…faisant même douter qu'il s'agisse à coup sûr
d'une voix humaine" (*Labyrinthe* 53).

Often the narrating observer is not only unable to distinguish the boundaries
and form of an image of the human figure but is also depicted as unable or struggling
even to interpret as being human or a representation of a human as opposed to an
object. In these instances, the observer cannot decide between whether the object of
his observation is human or non-human. For example, in the passage following the
opening (the seven pages of description of objects before the presentation of the first
human character), the narrator observes a form that might be human, but might also

be a dagger, and the human form is "vague:" "Ou bien ce serait une figurine vaguement humaine: une tête ovale, deux bras très courts, et le corps se terminant en pointe vers le bas. Ce pourrait être aussi un poignard, avec son manche séparé par une garde de la forte lame obtuse à deux tranchants" (*Labyrinthe* 13). This serves two functions: firstly, from the viewpoint of the observer, to demonstrate the limits of human perception and therefore knowledge; to decenter the humanist human from his position as the generator and measure of that which constitutes knowledge. A (presumably) human observer who is not able to know what it is he is observing demonstrates his incapacity or limitations for knowing.

Secondly, it places humans at the same level of importance as non-human objects; one is just as likely as the other; one can be replaced by the other; they are interchangeable. The human is not brought to the forefront; his presence is not privileged; he is on the same level, equally present and equally important as an object. If, returning to Luhmann's model, the observer can be read as a cognizing system interpreting his observations by selecting one possibility among several, this demonstrates that the human is but one possibility among a plethora of others. Others may be non-human; the human option contains no particular significance or importance; it is not privileged by the observer. The human element is but one possibility for interpretation, and one that is not any more likely or significant than any other.

Moreover, often, when actual humans are represented in the text (as seen in previous chapter), they are depicted as being immobile or statue-like, attributions that

are much more applicable to objects, especially objects of art, than to actual human

beings.

> Ils n'ont bougé ni l'un ni l'autre. L'enfant est toujours debout dans la
> pénombre, les bras le long du corps. Il n'a même pas vu remuer les
> lèvres de l'homme, assis à la table sous l'unique ampoule restée
> allumée dans la sale; la tête n'a pas eu le moindre hochement, les yeux
> n'ont même pas cillé; et la bouche est toujours close (*Labyrinthe* 30).

Elsewhere in the text, an unnamed woman "reste immobile à contempler [le soldat]";

the child leading the soldier "se tient immobile" (*Labyrinthe* 57, 65). In *Reprise,* the

narrator recounts a bizarre and awkward moment he comes across as he tries to find a

compartment on a train:

> Il y avait là six hommes…qui se sont immobilisés d'un seul coup à
> mon entrée, dans la posture où je venais de les surprendre; l'un s'était
> mis debout, les deux bras levés au ciel dans un geste d'imprécation, un
> autre, assis, tendait le poing gauche, coude à demi replié, son voisin
> pointait vers lui ses deux index, de part et d'autre de la tête, imitant les
> cornes du diable ou d'un taureau prêt à charger; un quatrième se
> détournait avec un air de tristesse infinie, tandis que son vis-à-vis
> penchait le buste en avant pour se prendre le visage à deux mains
> (*Reprise* loc. 2018).

This serves the purpose of reinforcing the notion of the human subject in the text *as*

art object.

Moreover, in the instances when human beings are fully present and fully

observable, they are commonly not presented as an integral whole but as fragments.

The narrator often reveals a human character by way of enumerating various body

parts rather than referring to him in terms that would be used for a unified, bounded,

individual. For example, in the opening of the book when the main character of

soldier is finally presented, after seven pages of description of material objects, he is

presented fragmentally, beginning with his hip, arm and shoulder. Only after

enumerating body parts does the narration use the word "man:" "Un peu plus haut, une hanche, un bras, une épaule s'appuient contre le fût du réverbère. L'homme est vêtu d'une capote militaire de teinte douteuse" (*Labyrinthe* 16). When juxtaposed with the text that immediately precedes it, one sees again the description that passes from object to human being with no particular transition between the two that would signal that one is any different from the other or has any more significance than the other: "contre la base conique du support en fonte, évasée vers le bas…s'enroulent de maigres rameaux d'un lierre…tiges ondulées, feuilles palmées à cinq lobes pointus et cinq nervures très apparentes, où la peinture noire qui s'écaille laisse voir le métal rouillé" (*Labyrinthe* 16). The parts of man and parts of the streetlight are enumerated in the same detached manner that does not attribute any particular value to either.

5.3 Decentering as Absence

In all of the description that follows the previously cited passage, what is perhaps most remarkable is the complete absence of a human subject – both in the narration and in the storyline, such as it is. With the exception of the narrative "je" at the very beginning of the text, for seven pages only objects are mentioned and no human beings are present on the scene. However, the very first word of the opening page is "je:" "Je suis seul ici maintenant, bien à l'abri" (*Labyrinthe* 9). The narrator does not refer to himself again for nearly the entirety of the book, until the closing, when the word "moi" is used.

The fact that first-person pronouns are used by the narrator to refer to himself at the opening and closing of the book is significant. On one hand, it establishes a (presumably) human presence and the fact that it is evoked both at the very beginning

and end of the book seems to imply his continued presence throughout the book. However the fact that the narrator is almost entirely absent from the narration with the exception of these references is also significant. As mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3, absence is a major aspect of Robbe-Grillet's attempt at decentering the human subject and dismantling humanist principles. Keeping the narrator largely absent from the book may then be seen as an explicit strategy to eliminate the traditional human subject at the center of the novel; neither the characters on scene or the narrator are fully present. Rather, Robbe-Grillet's primary reason for highlighting the narrative "je" is to emphasize the notion of literary creation, since, as the reader later learns, the entire text is in the process of being composed by an anonymous author, a process to which the reader is witness. The focus of the book entails the creation of the novel itself more so than the actions of a particular human being, including the author-narrator. Rather than emphasizing the human element in the narrative with the "je" and "moi," then, Robbe-Grillet is emphasizing the notion of writing and *process* in writing. He further emphasizes this point in the preface to the text of *Labyrinthe*, simultaneously valorizing the invention of the text and (devalorizing) the idea of "witnessing" objective truth: "Ce recit est une fiction, non un temoignage" (*Labyrinthe* 7). Smith agrees that the main subject is the creation of the text: "If the painting in the café has any significance it is "not for what it represents or for any symbolic value but for its role in generating further narrative and, most important, for what it truly depicts: the narrative process at work in this novel" (53).

It is not just the author-narrator who is largely absent, but also the characters. A large part of both texts focuses explicitly on the absence of human beings rather

than their presence. The description focuses on empty streets, seemingly empty houses, deserted sidewalks: "La rue est déserte: ni voitures sur la chaussée, ni piétons sur les trottoirs;" "Wallon s'en rend compte à présent: depuis qu'il est entré dans cette rue provincial, à l'écart de tout trafic, il n'a plus rencontré âme qui vive ni entendu quoi que ce soit" (*Labyrinthe* 23, *Reprise* loc. 545). Sometimes the emphasis on absence is stated explicitly in terms of human beings: "Toute la scène demeure vide: sans un homme, ni une femme, ni même un enfant" (*Labyrinthe* 24). Absence is also evoked in the form of human characters having just disappeared: "Un gris jaunâtre, produit par le piétinement de personnages maintenant disparus" (*Labyrinthe* 18). The use of "personnages" rather than "personnes" here is interesting in that it signals the idea of human characters as being literary creations more so than human beings that are "believable" as real or relatable to the reader. In *La Reprise*, the narrator is much more present than in *Labyrinthe,* but the other characters are absent; again, the protagonist wanders through empty streets: "Et personne n'apparaît, sur toute la longueur de la rue, non plus que dans les artères laterals qu'elle coupe à l'angle droit, pareillement détruites et désertes" (*Reprise* loc. 440).

Interestingly, this absence is often described in terms of objects. In the absence of human characters, the narrator tends to emphasize the remaining objects or the material world rather than the lack of human beings. For example, as previously noted, footprints in the snow is a recurring motif throughout *Labyrinthe* and occurs in both books. As with the opening passage and the "coup de chiffon," the footprints indicate the actions of a human being who has been present on the scene but is no longer there. However, in each case, the concentration of the description almost

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always concentrates on the forms and patterns of the snow and of the shoe rather than any human element:

> Les quelques pas qui rejoignent le sentier montrent avec précision le dessin des semelles: une série de chevrons prégnant toute la largeur du pied, et sous le talon, une croix imprimée en creux au milieu d'un rond en relief…au milieu d'une dépression circulaire creusée dans le caoutchouc (un deuxième trou rond, beaucoup moins profond et de très faible diamètre), marquant peut-être encore le centre de la croix, avec la pointure indiquée par des chiffres en relief: trente-deux, trente-trois, peut-être, ou trente-quatre (*Labyrinthe* 51).

And in *La Reprise*: "La trace de ses pas…Je peux voir ainsi qu'il porte des espadrilles de plage semblables aux miennes, avec une semelle caoutchoutée dont les dessins en creux sont exactement identiques. La pointure aussi, d'ailleurs" (*Reprise* 134). In all of these cases, the human aspect of this manifestation is not foregrounded, but addressed almost as an afterthought, with the physical description of the material world taking the primary place in the narration.

In other instances, the narrator discusses the fact that although humans may be present, or have been recently present, it is *as if* they were absent or perhaps never there at all. They are almost "erased" from the narration. For example, in several passages, snow covers the footprints again to make it as if the human being had never been there:

> Et derrière lui, la neige aussitôt commence à recouvrir la trace cloutée des semelles, reconstituant peu à peu la blancheur primitive de la zone écrasée…si bien que la différence de niveau devient imperceptible avec le régions avoisinantes, la continuité se trouvant alors rétablie, et toute la surface égale de nouveau, intacte, inentamée (*Labyrinthe* 75-76).

In *La Reprise* the same footprints on the sand "n'a pas encore été effacée par les vaguelettes mouvantes" (*Reprise* loc. 134). In other passages, the houses along the

street show no signs of life and seem uninhabited even though the narrator presumes they must be: "Toute la maison a l'air inhabitée" (*Labyrinthe* 58). In *La Reprise*, one of the characters that should engage the most interest – the murder victim -- disappears from the scene: "Je retourne à la fenêtre sans chassis de l'autre pièce. Je constate aussitôt que le cadavre a disparu, devant le monument fantôme" (*Reprise* loc. 340).

In this way even when humans are (presumably) present, it is as if they are absent. Emphasizing the description of the physical world, one in which human beings are largely absent, removes the human from the focus of the narration. In many instances, the narrator indicates that the presence of a human being may as well be their absence, as in the houses that are not unoccupied but might as well be. In this way human presence is equated with absence, signaling that one is equally likely or as meaningful as the other, thus removing the significance of the human figure in the narration. Finally, in the instances where the natural elements cover up or remove any trace of human presence, as in the snow-covered footprints, the narrator is not only once again removing the idea of the human characters having any particular significance (human beings leave no lasting impression, no legacy, no permanent mark on the material world, nor in the narrative); but it is also yet another instance of demonstrating the dominance of the physical world over that of the human; in the division Nature/Culture, nature takes center stage, eclipsing "culture" or the human entirely.

Indeed, in a different passage from *Labyrinthe* recounting the form of footprints in the snow, the narrator indicates to what extent the human element of this motif is insignificant:

> Les déformations provoquées par la course, jointes aux incertitudes concernant les particularités de celle-ci, font que rien, en somme, ne différencie cette piste de n'importe quelle autre laissée par une enfant du même âge – qui porterait aussi bien, d'ailleurs, des chaussures aux semelles identiques (les mêmes chaussures, peut-être, venant du même magasin) et qui effectuerait autour des lampadaires de semblables tournoiements (*Labyrinthe* 77).

The human is not particularly significant; he is a fictional invention that is both replaceable and repeatable. Indeed, characters often have doubles or multiples that are very similar if not totally identical. This serves to emphasize the lack of individuality and integrality of each character, as well as emphasize the created nature of their existence -- they are characters in a text, not supposed to be believed as being real people. Indeed, "Robbe-Grillet loses no opportunity of reminding his readers that the characters of his novels are actors, not real people" (Sturrock 173). Seen from this angle, the ultimate focus of the text always returns to textual creation rather than the "fate" of any human character. While the text may question what it means to be human, it concentrates more on the notion of textual creation in examining the question than it does with the story of the type individual human subject Robbe-Grillet sees as humanist. The same is emphasized in *Reprise*, where the narrator signals directly the invented nature of the text with such statements as " le monument fictif" and "le visage ressemble à celui du vieillard de bronze, ce qui ne veut rien dire, puisque je l'avais moi-même inventé" (*Reprise* loc. 353, 313). With this narrative signaling of the created nature of the text, "l'invention, l'imagination, deviennent à la

limite le sujet du livre" (Robbe-Grillet *PUNR* 30). This passage also highlights the

character's inability to know, with the questions in parentheses; he does not know

where this may have taken place, or how, or who may have spoken.

5.4 Fragmented and Plural Figures

In opposition to the bounded and unitary figure of the humanist subject, the

fragmented human appears at numerous points throughout Robbe-Grillet's novels,

particularly in *Labyrinthe*. In many instances the references to the human body stays

fragmented, with the narrator never acknowledging their appurtenance to a cohesive

whole (unlike the previous citation, in which "man" is mentioned after listing the

different body parts). For example, in a scene in which three adults are discussing

directions for the soldier, observed through a crack in the door by the child character,

all parties are presented fragmentally, with pieces of their bodies standing in for their

presence: the man and woman are "la voix d'homme" and "la voix grave de la

femme," respectively, and the child peering through the crack in the door is presented

as "l'oeil de l'enfant [qui] arrive au niveau du bouton du porte" (*Labyrinthe* 82). It is

worth noting that in the continuation of this last citation, once again, the narrator's

focus jumps from human to object, moving from the child to the details of the door,

thus attributing equal importance and place to both: "bouton de porte, ovoïde en

porcelaine blanche. De l'autre cote, un interrupteur électrique, également en

porcelaine, est fixé près du chambranle" (*Labyrinthe* 82). The focus of this scene is

not the conversation between adults, nor the child's observation of it, but a narrator's

observation of objects and body parts.

By dint of their anonymity and interchangeability the human characters stand in direct contrast to the human characters that Robbe-Grillet sees as being emblematic of realist literature and its humanist "profondeur." In the humanist paradigm, Robbe-Grillet emphasizes that such characters must have backstories, names, and backgrounds that show their place in society, their pedigree, and so on. The characters in *Labyrinthe* essentially constitute the antithesis of this model. All of them are nameless; the most specific designation that any characters receive is that of their profession (the bartender at the café, the soldier), whereas others are even more generically referred to as "man," "woman," and "child." The narrator's use of pronouns also helps to preserve their anonymity; the narrator often goes so far as to use the more generic pronoun "on," rather than "il" or "elle" to designate a person (or people). The narrator establishes this from the very opening of the book, in the second line: "dehors on marche sous la pluie en courbant la tête, s'abritant les yeux d'une main tout en regardant quand même devant soi" (*Labyrinthe* 9). This is significant because "on" is perhaps the least specific designation possible; its antecedent can be male, female, or both; singular or plural; include the speaker or even the reader; or refer only to third person entities. Use of this pronoun by the narrator therefore results in a minimum of individuating information being given about the human characters, thus keeping their anonymity to a maximum.

In addition to revealing a minimum of information about any particular character, use of this pronoun also serves to dismantle the unitary bounded integral human subject. By insisting on a pronoun that can stand in for so many characteristics at once, Robbe-Grillet puts on scene a different, multiple human subject. He blurs the

lines between standard binaries characteristic to the humanist conception of an individual and integral human subject (male/female, one/more than one), thus presenting a human subject that is open to multiple possibilities at once (plural genders, plural in number).

Indeed, generally speaking, in both books, the characters are not singular entities but are presented as pluralities, characterized by multiplicity. I have already addressed the notion of multiplicity generally in his texts, so I will not elaborate on it much here; I will simply give a few examples that demonstrate to what extent the human subject put on scene in these texts can be considered to be a multiple subject. In *Laybrinthe*, the soldier and the child are presented in scenes that are repetitions of previous ones – presented again and again in variations on a theme.

In *La Reprise*, the multiplicity is even more evident. The main character is named, rather than anonymous (while most of the other characters retain their anonymity). Unlike the characters in *Labyrinthe*, background information about the main character is provided: specific memories of his childhood, the fact that he grew up in Brest, his physical appearance. However, the names and details change throughout the book. The main character is alternatively known by both the other characters in the book and by the narrator as Henri Robin, H.R., Ascher, Franck Matthieu, Boris Wallon, and so on. He has multiple nationalities and multiple passports – ostensibly as a cover, but without having any "true" identity either. The anonymous commentator of the notes even states this point directly: "Le point de vue reste toujours bel et bien celui de notre sujet multinominal et volontiers pseudonyme" (*Reprise* loc. 596). The narrator of Reprise is also multiple, changing from the first-

person "je" as spoken by Wall/Henri/etc. to a third-person omniscient narrator who seems to work for the same organization as the protagonist, to a commentator adding notes to the story who refers to himself as "nous," indicating a plural presence. In *Labyrinthe*, the narrator, character, and author are all combined in the person of the doctor, who speaks both in first person and third person omniscient voices.

Thus, Robbe-Grillet "decenters" and "demotes" man from his position in regards to the environment and to knowledge, putting in place in his fiction a manifestation of a theoretical vision. It is clear to see that the human subject thus depicted in his texts reflects closely the vision of the posthuman subject described by Alan France, who speaks about what constitutes the "distritributed identities" of the posthuman: "'multiple personas' -- short-lived fragmented frames of consciousness, each used to negotiate whatever virtual world or network they happen to be in at any particular moment of time..." and resulting in a "freeing up of human consciousness to be more playful, flexible, and even transient . . ." and "a more interdependent and embedded means of perceiving reality" (France 181). Such multiple, unbounded figures also constitute precisely type of subject-as-cognizing-system conceived in Luhmann's model of communication, which I will now elaborate in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6: Posthumanist Subjectivity – Representations of Luhmannian Perception and Cognition in *Le Voyeur* and *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*

6.1 Niklas Luhmann and Alain Robbe-Grillet

Thus far, I have evaluated Robbe-Grillet's work from the standpoint of his opposition to humanism and the affirmative alternatives he proposes in their stead, regarding humanism generally and for the placement of the human subject. I examined the idea of knowledge as it relates to the positioning of the human subject in Chapters 3 and 5, highlighting how Robbe-Grillet's emphasis on the limitations of such knowledge serves to re-position the human subject in terms of its episteme and its environment. But there is another aspect to the "sense-making" subject that constitutes the pursuit of knowledge, and that is the operations of the cognitive processes at work. In this chapter I propose a reading of two of Robbe-Grillet's texts following Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory of communication. This theory addresses the primacy of the idea of cognitive processing in Robbe-Grillet's work and his a-humanist tendencies, both of which are at the heart of Robbe-Grillet's project, while respecting the affirmations he has made in opposition to humanist principles. Interestingly, Ben Stoltzfus has also (briefly) used Luhmann's theory to evaluate Robbe-Grillet's work from the perspective of self-reflexivity.[25] Moreover, Ira Livingston has signaled the growing use of Luhmann in cultural studies as part of the "[expansion of] the interzone between, on one hand, self-reference and performativity

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[25] In "Metafiction, Autopoeisis, and Chaos Theory" (2005).

in literary and cultural theory and, on the other, related notions of autopoiesis and self-organizing systems in biology and other sciences and social sciences" (1).

That mental processes are at the heart of the Robbe-Grilletian project is long established; critics have conducted numerous phenomenological studies of his works, attempting to address the extreme subjectivity in his works and its relationship to realit(ies):

> Many of the difficulties which people have experienced in understanding or interpreting the novels of Robbe-Grillet stem simply from the fact that it is easy to forget, so conditioned are we to the view that langue must represent a pre-existent and transcendent reality, that the reality of these novels is an immanent one, a subjective one in which existence precedes essence and in which the significance of any phenomenon can only be determined as the novel proceeds [contingency], by close study of the way these phenomena are deployed and transformed by consciousness (Sturrock 172).

That processes of consciousness or cognition are central to Robbe-Grillet's work is further demonstrated by the insistence of early critics on producing psychoanalytical interpretations of his work, in which objects were proposed as supports for the psychological operations of the mind – jealously, sexual impulses, desire, and so forth. However, "to treat Robbe-Grillet's fiction as serious psychoanalytical material would be a preposterous mistake," says Sturrock (234). Another mode of interpretation is needed, then, one that would address the importance of the notion of an *observing* consciousness, which has been invoked in Robbe-Grillet's works from the very beginning, while also engaging directly with his a-humanist approach: "Roland Barthes louait, à juste titre, dans *Les Gommes*, la volonté de l'auteur de "regarder le monde […] sans d'autre pouvoir que celui-là des yeux. Si l'on admet,

comme il semble correct de le faire, que ces yeux sont ceux d'une conscience observatrice…" (Morrissette *Romans* 40).

I suggest that Niklas Luhmann's model of cognition may provide a particularly useful interpretive model for understanding this aspect of Robbe-Grillet's texts. One major element of posthumanist theory that was adopted from non-humanities fields is that of systems theory. With the human displaced as the lynchpin of understanding of society's operations, a new explanation society, not based on the human, is needed. Many posthumanist scholars, including Cary Wolfe, Katherine Hayles, Bruce Clarke, and Stefen Herbrechter have found potential in systems theory, and in particular the version adapted by Niklas Luhmann, a German sociologist. One of the most promising and often-cited adaptations of systems theory for use as a general posthumanist framework of social operations is Niklas Luhmann's theory of communication, which also serves as social and cognitive theory. In his book *Neocybernetics and Narrative,* Bruce Clarke signals the utility of this theory for narrative studies:

> This…line of systems discourse has borne the widest and most
> promising dissemination beyond the home disciplines of cybernetics,
> and the most searching theoretical development beyond science proper
> and into the discursive disciplines. For the kind of work done in the
> posthumanities, Luhmann's social systems theory in particular
> represents the second-order line's most thorough unfolding to date
> (Clarke *Neocybernetics* loc. 52-65).

Luhmann's goal was to create a "supertheory" that would tie together other major theories and offer an all-encompassing theory of society. An ambitious goal, this resulted in a generalized and highly adaptable theory that posthumanist scholars like the ones above have looked to for use in various disciplines. Luhmann's theory draws

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on phenomenology, systems theory, and autopoeisis to provide a new framework for society and communication that does not use the "human being" as the basic unit of its operations. As Moeller notes, "Systems theory recognizes that the world – or rather *society* – can no longer be aptly understood as a human one" (5). In their essay explaining the "cognizing system" in constructivist approaches, Niall Palfreyman and Janice Miller-Young state, "We do not presuppose a neurological substrate for autonomous cognition. If autonomy is naturally feasible, we think it should, at least in principle, apply to bacteria, which perform complex and spontaneous cognition-based operations" (Palfreyman and Miller-Young 363). His theory could be quite useful for reading Robbe-Grillet, with its a-humanist approach to perception and sense-making, which, as outlined in Chapter 2, is a major element of Robbe-Grillet's work. In contrast to other theories of cognition, such as phenomenology, Luhmann's theory is explicitly a-humanist and removes the human being from the center of operations while at the same time postulating the notion of "human being" as a plural and/or fragmented figure -- a perfect scenario for evaluating the Robbe-Grilletian subject. In fact, Clarke makes the case for application of Luhmann's theory to narrative (over narratology) for this very reason: "In their prodigious variety, systems may be physical or technological, biological or cultural, natural or designed, or some combination of these. Unlike stories, nothing restricts the nature of systems to "man's" dominion" (Clarke *Neocybernetics* loc. 298).

Luhmann was attempting to create a theoretical framework based on his observations and his readings of human history that explained the processes he observed at work in the world. As noted in Chapter 1, Robbe-Grillet, by his own

admission, attempted to do much the same with his theoretical and fictional works, and for much the same reasons. Furthermore, the two were historically concurrent; their observations were of more or less the same world and motivated by many of the same factors, including theoretical developments in the sciences and technological development generally. Like Robbe-Grillet and his literary project, Luhmann's desire for such a theory was notably motivated at least in part by his dissatisfaction with the ability of contemporary theories to explain the full range of human behavior and organization he observed around him. As noted in the first chapter, with Robbe-Grillet's scientific background, he was likely familiar with many of the scientific theories in the course of their development, including systems theory. In fact, Robbe-Grillet has even described narrative in terms of scientific systems, describing "le systeme balzacien" in the following terms:

> Alors à la fin des temps, quand les particules chaudes et les particules froides se seront déplacées une fois, deux fois, dix mille fois, etc., on va arriver à un état où l'énergie sera toujours la même…c'est ce qu'on appelle la mort par entropie du système. L'entropie d'un système – d'un système clos bien sûr – est donc la tendance du système a produire du travail de plus en plus difficilement ("Ordre et désordre" loc. 2306).

It is not inconceivable that the two arrived at similar conclusions about the functioning of human systems in the world, and it is interesting to see to what extent Robbe-Grillet's writings parallel Luhmann's ideas. For example, like Robbe-Grillet, Luhmann criticizes the notion of a transcendent essential nature being the driving force behind the organization of the socioeconomic status quo, as well as the associated implied conditions of universality and truth.

Luhmann and Robbe-Grillet both signal the manner in which notions of society had heretofore been structured around these ideas. Luhmann refers to this nature as "a central phantom that seems to guarantee the unity of the system," while, as we have seen, Robbe-Grillet often uses the term "naturalité" ("Globalization" 69; "Sur le choix des générateurs" 159). Also like Robbe-Grillet, Luhmann criticizes the notion of the human subject as the basic unit of measure of society. As Moeller notes,

> The primary starting point of social systems theory – or its "turning point" in comparison to its humanist predecessors – is that it no longer holds that current society can be successfully analyzed on the basis that it is (or should be) fundamentally humane, and that it is, on principle, an assembly of individual human beings (5).

In contrast to Luhmann, whose work mainly took place within the domain of sociology, Robbe-Grillet applies this notion to the idea of literature. Yet the parallels between the two are striking, and interestingly, in 1971 Robbe-Grillet himself emphasized the connection between the two realms, remarking on the commonality between his own observations on the novel with those of sociologists of the period, especially their role in debunking the "myth" of humanism that underpinned social structures: "Les sociologues actuels n'ont pas manqué d'etablir un parallèle entre cette perte de confiance du romancier dans la naturalité de sa parole et la perte de confiance de la bourgeoisie dans la légitimité de ses pouvoirs" ("Sur le choix des générateurs" 160).

In conclusion, Luhmann's sociological theory of communication (based on systems theory) may prove inherently useful as a framework for reading Robbe-Grillet. It corresponds to his a-humanist stance, his adoption of plurality over integrality, especially in regards to the human subject, the existence of complexity

and the impossibility of its reduction, the representation of perception and cognition in his fiction, and the importance of observation and its relation to description in both his fictional and theoretical writing; and Robbe-Grillet himself signaled the usefulness of such theories for understanding his work. I will begin with a brief overview of Luhmann's theory before moving on to its analysis in two of Robbe-Grillet's fictional texts, *Le Voyeur* and *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (referred to hereafter as *Voyeur* and *Souvenirs*).

6.2 Luhmann's Theory of Communication and Social Organization

Like Robbe-Grillet, Luhmann's point of departure is from a stance that is critical of the "anthropocentrism" of humanist models of social organization and communication. Luhman begins from the premise that the human being is too complex to be understood through a single concept, e.g. that of the human being. Consequently he rejects the widely held notion of the human being as the basis for the organization of society. In Luhmann's view, the human had long been considered as the basis for social theory in European and Western thought. Moeller, using the term "Old European" to describe Western philosophical tradition, points out that the humanist human has dominated Western thought, from Plato's *Republic*, in which *polis* is defined as a group of *people;* to Hobbes and Rousseau's "social contracts" between a populace and its governors, to later communicative models relying on the notion of communication "*between human beings*" (5). For Luhmann, useful as these notions are, they are problematic because they oversimplify the complexity inherent in society, as well as in the human, and attribute too much importance and focus to the human. As Moeller puts it, in Luhmann's eyes "there is a strong

"anthropocentric" tradition in European and North American social philosophy that is certainly hard to overcome and informs the "common sense" understanding of what a society is" (5).

Luhmann found his a-human baseline for his social theory in the system-environment differentiation of systems theory and in the autopoeisis of Maturana and Varela. In a systems-based model, a system would be any particular entity, and anything located outside of that entity constitutes its environment. Both of these elements can be continually re-bounded and redefined, as they are both emergent; that is to say, constantly in a state of transition from one state of being to another; constantly coming-into-being. Luhmann's systems-based model for social organization and operations removes the human as the basic unit of society and replaces him with *events*. For Luhmann, individual acts or events constitute the smallest, most irreducible unit of society. These events serve different *functions*. For example, one of society's main functions is what Luhmann terms *communication*. Communication does not only take place in terms of language and media. Communication can also take place in almost any social realm where there is an exchange – for example, someone purchasing a packet of cigarettes is participating in an *event* that would qualify as economic *communication*. Someone casting a vote would be participating in an *event* constituting political *communication*.[26] For Luhmann these events, not human beings, are the basic indivisible units of social composition. And while humans can participate in events, unlike events, they are divisible.

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[26] These examples are taken from Moeller's book on Luhmann.

In this schema of functions and the events that constitute them, humans are not an integral standalone whole. They are a plural entity whose parts act simultaneously within society's various distinct systems. Luhmann divides society into three main systems, each based on their functions. Life systems – that which is organic and biological – or, in a reductive sense, bodies – constitute one function; consciousness (or "the mind") is the second; communication, or the interaction that happens between systems, is the third and final major system of society.

Within this model, a human being is a multiple entity that is located simultaneously in each system – body, mind, and communication. Moeller says, "The "human being" does not exist as a singular entity. According to systems theory, the traditional notion of the "human being" is a simplification of the actual complexity of human existence" (10). A person can participate in multiple simultaneous communication events – for example, talking on the phone while paying for a meal[27] – and also be participating in multiple systems at once: While talking on the phone and offering money, therefore participating in communication, the same person is also living and perceiving and cognizing, or thinking, and thus is simultaneously located and simultaneously acting in all three social systems. As Moeller puts it, "The human being "as such" has no theoretical place in systems theory. When there is talk about "human beings," systems theory would have to ask: do you mean the social *person* who is addressed in communication? The *body* that can be seen over there? Or the *mind* that thinks and feels within this body?" (10). As in a Venn diagram, the overlap from different events and systems can occur in a single place and time and

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[27] This example is provided by Moeller.

yet in different ways; their convergence is a pluralistic overlay rather than a singular distinct entity.

From this starting point of the divisible, plural subject/system, Luhmann's theory goes on to develop a notion of cognition by the subject. Borrowing from Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's biological notion of autopoeisis, in which any given living system creates its own reality by cognizing and reacting to its environment, Luhmann realized how autopoeisis might be further developed in its application to the notion of cognition in other fields, and even more widely, to the idea of representation and of reality generally:

> This hypothesis implies a radical shift in epistemology and also the ontology it supposes….It also breaks with the epistemology of the ontological tradition that assumed that something of the environment enters the understanding and that the environment is represented, mirrored, imitated, or simulated within a cognizing system. In this respect, the radicalism of the new approach can hardly be underestimated (Moeller 16).

Following the reasoning of operational closure - that no environment can ever be directly introduced into a system, and that a system produces its own individual response to irritations from the environment, based on its structure and organization - one might suppose that the environment of any system constitutes its external material, and its reactionary internal operations to the stimuli located therein constitute its *perception* thereof (Luhmann 2002). From this perception, any individual cognizing system creates its own reality. As Moeller states, "Reality is not an all-embracing whole of many parts, it is rather a variety of self-producing systemic realities, each of which forms the environment of all the others. There is no common "world" in reality, because reality is in each instance an effect of "individual"

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systemic autopoeisis" (13). It is easy to see how closely this parallels Robbe-Grillet's notion of plural subjectivities outlined in Chapter 3.

Drawing on Husserl's phenomenology, Luhman posits that reality is a construct, created by and existing within each cognizing system – a cognizing system being a system that produces cognition, which can also be understood as sense-making or meaning-making. In this model, no singular, essential, pre-existing defined, cohesive, knowable, objective reality exists; rather, each cognizing system creates its own reality from its environment via its operations. Bruce Clarke highlights to what extent this conception of reality is opposed to the sort of objective knowable singular reality criticized by Robbe-Grillet, noting that Luhmann draws for this part of his theory on the work of Hans von Foerster:

> Von Foerster seizes and refines the case against "information in the environment" – that is, against a positivist approach to information as a preconstituted, empirical datum simpy awaiting a passive reception to be registered as a fact of nature…von Foerster now declares, "The environment contains no information. The environment is as it is (Clarke *Neocybernetics* loc. 86).

This conception of information and environment lies in almost perfect parallel to Robbe-Grillet's description of the humanist and literary realist author as a transmitter of discovered knowledge, outlined in Chapter 3, as well as his affirmation that "le monde n'est ni signifiant ni absurd. Il *est*, tout simplement" (*PUNR* 18). In Luhmann's theory, a system is located within an environment; that environment irritates the system, causing the system to undergo processes that, in a cognizing system, can be understood as *perception*, which then leads to sense-making. Moeller gives the example of a brain perceiving colors:

By observing the individual data provided by the brain, the mind observes, for instance, colors. It selects colors as information in a particular way and thus constructs a world of color. The colors perceived by an individual human mind differ from those perceived by another human mind, and even more from those observed by the mind of a horse or –if there is one – the mind of a fly. Every colorobserving system establishes its own color spectrum, its own colordistinctions and thus its own color-world (69).

Here, then, the sense-making or cognizing subject is a plural entity acting in many domains at once, not an integral standalone whole. External to this plural subject is any number of potentially meaningful items of information; it is up to the cognizing subject to select particular items of information, perceive them, and make sense of them. It is clear how well this lines up with Robbe-Grillet's constructivist notion of sense-making and reality construction from Chapter 3.

A key operation of cognizing systems in Luhmann's interpretation is the idea of *observation*. Observation essentially amounts to making a distinction. It can be said that the act of perceiving is an act of observation, that of the system observing its environment. In order to observe its environment, however, the system must make the distinction between itself and its environment. This other-reference is referred to as *first-order observation*. To take it a step further, the system can recognize that it is the entity that makes the distinction, and thus observation, moving from other-reference to self-reference. This is called the "observation of observation" and is known as *second-order observation.* Each level of observation brings a new level of complexity, but does not bring a cognizing system any closer to "truth" or objective reality, which does not exist. It is simply a step further in the complexity of a

cognizing system's processes. As Moeller puts it, "To observe is to produce cognition, and to produce cognition is to construct reality" (69).

In this model, description and observation are highly intertwined and implicated in construction of reality. "If reality is conceived as a cognitive construct, as an effect or correlate of observation, then descriptions of reality become descriptions of observation…observation becomes an integral part of reality" (Moeller 71). In this model a description of an observation cannot be "innocent;" it is implicated in the construction of a reality, and a second-order observer realizes this. "Observation loses its simplicity – an observer can no longer observe reality without taking into account its very observation as a generating element of reality" (Moeller 71). That reality is generated through description is an idea put forth often by Robbe-Grillet, and reinforced, for example, through the enigmatic prefaces he places at the front of many of his novels, which often deal with each book's relationship to (a) reality/ies. This is perhaps most clearly laid out in his preface to *Labyrinthe*: "Ce recit est une fiction, non un témoignage. Il décrit une réalité qui n'est pas forcement celle dont le lecteur a fait lui-meme l'expérience…il s'agit pourtant ici d'une réalité strictement materielle, c'est-à-dire qu'elle ne pretend à aucun valeur allégorique" (Robbe-Grillet *Labyrinthe* 7). Here we can surmise that he is portraying the construction of realities by human cognizing systems. And if a cognizing system constructs its own reality via observation of its environment, then the heavily observation-driven plural characters in Robbe-Grillet's works can be said to be actively constructing their realities and the text can be viewed as a depiction of these

operations. I will now examine how this model of cognition is represented in *Le Voyeur* and *Souvenirs du triangle d'or.*

6.3 Uncertainty and Knowing: The Limits of Luhmannian Knowledge

As outlined in Chapter 5, Robbe-Grillet's works are strongly characterized by uncertainty – both at the level of the text as a whole and at the level of individual statements. The two texts targeted in this analysis are no exception. In Chapter 5, I examined in what ways the idea of *lack* of knowledge or *incapacity* to know characterized the Robbe-Grilletian human subject. In this section I will look at uncertainty as it relates to Luhmannian emergent cognitive processes in their subjective constructions of reality, and can be read as being indicative of those processes *as they happen.* To begin with, many (if not most, as in *Voyeur*) affirmations made in Robbe-Grillet's novels are qualified with a marker of uncertainty. Statements that would be asserted with certainty – presented as statements of fact -- in a more typical narrative are interspersed with words like "peut-être," "comme si," "paraître," "devait être," "sembler," and "croire," so that ultimately the narrator presents very little to the reader that can be considered objectively true. In *Voyeur*, this happens straight away, with the opening line: "C'était comme si personne n'avait entendu" (*Voyeur* 9). The "comme si" added to the idea of a person (not) hearing negates any certainty on the part of the narrator about whether someone heard or not. Just a few pages later, the narrator states, "[le bateau]" est à l'heure aujourd'hui," dit une voix. Et quelqu'un rectifia: "Presque." Peut-etre que c'etait la meme personne" (*Voyeur* 12). Here the statement of (presumably objective) fact, that the boat is on time, is immediately followed by a qualifier ("presque") that

puts the statement into question. The observing narrator then notes that the correction

may or may not have ("peut-etre") come from the same speaker. Several levels of

narrative uncertainty are thus packed into a single line. In *Souvenirs*, the very first

word of the text is "impression," which indicates a feeling or opinion rather than

certainty; by the second paragraph the narrator is putting into question his own

affirmations; the description of a door that constitutes the entirety of the second

paragraph ends with the narrator stating, "cela pourrait même ne pas être une porte"

(*Souvenirs* 7-8). The opening of the text thus sets the stage and reader expectations

for an entire narrative riddled with uncertainty.

Robbe-Grillet's narrators also frequently take this act a step further,

contradicting previous statements and observations with new ones that negate them

partially or completely. In *Voyeur*, there is the following passage:

> Mathias finit par arrêter son choix sur un signe en forme de huit, gravé
> avec assez de précision pour qu'il pût servir de repere…il ne fut plus
> tout à fait sûr d'y reconnaitre le dessin repéré; d'autres anfractuosités
> de la pierre ressemblaient autant – et ne ressemblaient pas plus – à ces
> deux petits cercles accolés dont il conservait l'image (*Voyeur* 16).

Here, we can see both uncertainty markers and direct contradictions: the stone's

crannies may or may not resemble the sign in the shape of an eight just previously

perceived by the narrator (uncertainty); in the beginning of the passage, the engraving

in the shape of an eight is clearly marked and perceptible, yet toward the end of the

passage, it is not conspicuous enough to be detectable (contradiction).

When the verb "to know" (*savoir*) is used, it is nearly always in the negative;

in both books, the narrator frequently states a variation of "je ne sais pas" on many

occasions; for example, "je ne sais plus," "je ne sais plus quoi," or puts the word into

a question: "la question de savoir si le frère portrait une montre" (*Souvenirs* 20, 72; *Voyeur* 42). Occasionally it is used in the subjunctive, whose grammatical function renders it hypothetical (and therefore nonexistent). Or, the notion of *savoir* is invoked through its antonyms, such as "j'ignore" (*Souvenirs* 69).

Critics have long examined the notion of uncertainty in Robbe-Grillet. One of the most interesting evaluations of uncertainty in Robbe-Grillet is Roch Smith's reading of *Les Gommes*. In this essay, Smith points out that the period in which Robbe-Grillet was writing was characterized by advancements in scientific theory that promote the principles of uncertainty and complexity as the dominating state of the material world, and that as a scientist, Robbe-Grillet would be better positioned than most authors to understand and express this link between science and literature (21). According to Smith, these new developments in scientific thought have made objective truth an artifact of the past and concentrate rather on the search for knowledge as a process. The end result of any search would therefore be an answer that is the "most efficacious" rather than the one true finality, but in fact the process is more meaningful than the answer (21). He thus considers that the narrative of *Les Gommes* may constitute an illustration of this search for efficacious answers, one that highlights process over outcome.

Here we have the foundations of a posthumanist reading of Robbe-Grillet. Smith privileges process over conclusive answers, as well as contemporary science with its emphasis on complexity. However, he ultimately frames the principle of uncertainty in *Les Gommes* as a question-and-answer structure, in which the text illustrates the process of an attempt at answering questions posed by the author:

"What form would a detective novel take when the crime itself is in question? What form might a modern Oedipus tragedy take?" (Smith 22). While I agree with Smith's evaluation of the heavy presence of uncertainty as a marker of the importance of process, the complexity of the material world, and the impossibility of objective truth, I argue that rather than an attempt at answering questions, the Robbe-Grilletian text constitutes an illustration of the operations of perception and cognition in his vision of an emergent and plural human subject. Such a reading acknowledges the scientific principles at play and also addresses the idea of subjectivity in a way that allows for the a-humanist leanings of Robbe-Grillet. It also takes into account the characteristics of unboundedness, emergence, and multiplicity he affirms, outlined in Chapter 2.

In Luhmann's theory, as we have seen, knowledge is contingent upon observation; one can only "know" what one perceives ("observes" in Luhmann's terms). Furthermore, "knowledge" is limited to the individual (though not necessarily a unified one), and is completely subjective. If one associates "certainty" with "knowing," one of the functions of uncertainty in Robbe-Grillet's fiction, then, from the level of narrative down to the level of the individual statement, is to indicate for the reader the impossibility of existence of the type of objective knowledge indicated by techniques such as third-person omniscient narration. These tactics, which have frequently been interpreted as constituting a sort of "game" that the Robbe-Grillet plays in order to destabilize the reader may in fact serve several purposes, perhaps first and foremost to negate the idea for the reader that there exists a certain, knowable, singular reality outside of that of the character who is presenting his observations to the reader. By adding a marker of uncertainty to statements to the

exterior state of the world, Robbe-Grillet does not allow passage of any universally

ascribed fact from narrator/character to reader. When so many statements are

qualified, and even outright contradicted among themselves, the reader is left with no

evidence as to the existence of a singular, knowable reality being inhabited and

described by the narrator-character.

Indeed, one is hard-pressed to find a fully omniscient narrator in Robbe-

Grillet's works. When a narrator speaks, it is nearly always through the filter of his

own perceptions and observations. Rarely does a narrator make a general statement

that may be taken as a universal axiom, or even that is simply about something that

may lie beyond the narrator's own ken. When an affirmation is made, it is nearly

always limited to what the speaker is or could be thinking, seeing, remembering, or

imagining. He resists making more generalized statements about the world around

him, which would effectively take his commentary out of the realm of observation

and into the realm of objective truth. For example, in the opening pages of *Voyeur* the

narrator describes the shape of an eight: "Au centre du huit, on voyait une

excroissance rougeâtre qui semblait être le pivot rongé par la rouille, d'un ancien

piton de fer" (*Voyeur* 17). The narrator's description is limited to that which he can

see and deduce. An omnicient narrator would have described the same scene without

the qualifications of "on voyait" and "qui semblait être" to make a general statement

of objective fact: in the center of the "8" shape there was an iron post. Instead the

reader is presented with the actual version, which is limited to what is observable

("on voyait") and surmised ("qui semblait être"), rather than known, by the narrator.

This emphasis on what is being perceived by the observer can be read as a depiction of perception on the part of a cognizing system. The second step in Luhmann's model is the cognition that takes place in the system after perception has taken place. Much of the two texts can be seen as a depiction of the processes of such cognition. Indeed, if we apply Luhmann's model to *Voyeur*, for example, we can see clearly the functioning of operations of a cognizing system at work. When the narrator in *Voyeur* says, "Quelque chose tomba, jeté du haut de la digue, et vint se poser à la surface de l'eau – un bouchon de papier, de la couleur des paquets de cigaretts ordinaires," the information is given to the reader in the order in which it is *perceived* – firstly, that something has fallen, secondly that is a piece of paper, and finally the color of the paper (*Voyeur* 16). The narrator finishes by making the association between the color and that which he has previously experienced and has stored in his memory – that of ordinary cigarette packets. One can thus see this passage as an illustration of operations of perception (the detail of falling through the detail of color), followed by the first operations of sense-making or cognition: associating that which is observed with that which is remembered. As Sturrock notes, to read Robbe-Grillet's descriptions of perception as anything but cognition in process would be a mistake: "To read this sort of description as a predetermined whole instead of the successive movements of a man's mind as it dwells on a single image is almost certain to lead to radical misinterpretation. Understood as a *process* such a description becomes truly revealing" (197). Luhmann's model allows understanding of this cognition as process while respecting Robbe-Grillet's move

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away from the humanist paradigm and demoting of man from the center of knowledge.

When in the previous passage the author says "quelque chose" – a term indicating uncertainty -- rather than stating a precise object, he is demonstrating the contingent nature of knowledge: Knowing the object depends on his seeing it. He cannot name something that he does yet not know, and he can only know what he has perceived. In this instance, the narrator has not yet observed what the object is, and therefore cannot know it nor communicate it to the reader. This is in direct contrast to an omniscient narrator, who might begin by naming the object as a "packet of cigarettes." Unlike this narrator, there is no omniscient observational position located outside of the realm of his own internal processes that would allow Robbe-Grillet's narrator to affirm that "a packet of cigarettes fell into the water." Any knowledge he may produce and wish to communicate to the reader is dependent on his internal subjective processes, beginning with perception.

In cases where knowing does occur – the narrator is able to name or identify objects and people – this knowledge is often still presented in a way that emphasizes its contingency and highlights cognitive processing. At times in Robbe-Grillet's narration, perception and cognition happen more or less simultaneously, rather than as a series of steps, as in the previous example, and in these instances Robbe-Grillet often uses qualifiers such as "reconnaitre" or "identifier." Using terms that indicate identification or recognition allows the narrator to provide a "factual" statement – something is known – in a way that avoids omniscience and emphasizes the processes of perception and cognition at work. The act of "identifying" or "recognizing," in

contrast to vocabulary invoking vision or observation, or knowing, involves *both* perception (the sight of a person or object) *and* sense-making (referring to memory to name or know the person or object). In a passage from *Souvenirs*, for example, the narrator perceives a person who is positioned nearby and whose "pas grâcieusement balancé de bayadère…me permet de l'identifier, au premier coup d'oeil, dès qu'elle a surgi dans mon champ visuel" (*Souvenirs* 13). Here the narrator does not simply narrate the presence of the woman as being there; he indicates the processes of observation (perception through the visual field) and identification (knowing through memory) that allow him to state with a minimal degree of (subjective) certainty that the woman is there.

Further cementing this concentration on the processes of cognition is the use by narrators of verbs indicative of thought and reflection in affirmative statements. In addition to using the markers of uncertainty noted above, Robbe-Grillet's narrators often narrate their very thought processes or thinking-through of observations. Or they qualify would-be statements of fact with such verbs, including "penser;" "contempler," "considérer," "calculer," and "déchiffrer," among others. The narrator(s) of *Souvenirs* says, "plus j'y réfléchis" while trying to remember the provenance of a particular fur coat, and "la seule pensée qui aurait encore quelque importance" in determining which facts of events are significant for a narrative, referring to his own reflections in the placement of ideas in the storyline (*Souvenirs* 22, 25). In another instance, "La présence de la glace, à la réflexion, est inusitée dans ce genre d'endroit" (*Souvenirs* 41). An omniscient writer would likely leave out the "à la réflexion" that precedes the interpretation by the narrator of its out-of-place

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location. In *Voyeur*, the narrator states, "Mathias pensa néanmoins qu'il y avait quelque chose qui n'allait pas – ou bien qui manquait" and "un calcul s'imposait: s'il voulait vendre ses quatre-vignt-neuf montres, combien de temps pouvait-il consacrer à chacune d'elles?" (*Voyeur* 22, 34). In all of these cases, the narrator refers not only to the events of the narrative but also to his own cognitive processes and their role in the act of his storytelling.

Because of the uncertainty he communicates, the Robbe-Grilletian narrator is often considered to be "unreliable." The changing, fluid, and often contradictory nature of the material he communicates could certainly serve as a means of destabilizing the reader and keeping him guessing, as part of a sort of game that the narrator plays with the reader, but the purpose is perhaps not limited to this destabilization. I have already examined how such fluidity can be understood as an opposition to what Robbe-Grillet sees as the unity, integrality, and boundedness of humanism; and constitute a breakdown of "standard" boundaries in humanistic narration. However, such narrative changeability can also be understood as a demonstration of the *emergent* nature of the processes of observation and cognition. I have outlined in Chapter 2 how Robbe-Grillet emphasizes emergence and coming-into-being over fixity as a general response to the humanist essentialism; Luhmann's model is therefore also particularly useful in that it also accounts for Robbe-Grillet's adoption of the notion of emergence.

Luhmann's model of communication is indeed an emergent one. As autopoeitic systems, his cognizing systems are in a continual state of transition, change, or coming-into-being. Narrative is a particularly useful medium for

evaluation of this emergent nature of consciousness: "Whatever consciousnesses of their environments psychic systems achieve are always emergent and selective performances, but are nevertheless performances that mediating structures such as narratives can potentially bring into resonant redundancy" (Clarke *Metamorphosis* 34).

Their existence is based on a constant give-and-take relationship with their environment, one from which cognition is produced via the processes outlined in the analyses above, and the system in turn moves and reacts in its environment, and so on. Such systems are said to be operationally closed; they cannot directly "take in" any aspect of their environment, but they may react to it through internal processes, to which the environment may then react, and so on. As such, cognition is not simply a recognition of a staged and represented environment, it is a fluid and continual exchange of interactions, where flow and process are dominant. As Evan Thompson explains in his essay on autopoetic cognition, "cognition is effective conduct in [the domain of interactions specified by its circular and self-referential organization], not the representation of an independent environment. In Maturana's words, "*Living systems are cognitive systems, and living as a process is a process of cognition*" (82). Thus, although the system is a product of its process, the concentration is on process rather than product. Clarke also notes that the objective is "to interpret cognitive processes as neverending recursive processes of computation" (Clarke *Neocybernetics* loc. 125). That these processes are continual; always happening, and characterized by *flow* is emphasized by Clarke: "Systems theory catalyzes the emergence of the sciences of emergence, [which emphasizes] self-regulation by the

concept of self-organization, by "order from noise," "order from chaos," and "complexity from noise:" "the flow of energy through a system acts to organize that system" (*Neocybernetics* loc. 331).

The observations made in Robbe-Grillet's texts correspond accordingly to this notion of continuous coming-into-being; for example, the occurrences of corrections or contradictions in the narrative statements in his fiction can be read as constituting a process. The text represents the *mise en scene* of cognition *as it is happening*. If the narrator does not say "the packet of cigarettes fell into the water" it is because such a statement would be a narration of cognition post-facto. Such a statement can take place only after the processes of perception, cognition, and interpretation by the individual have been completed. In a statement such as this, understanding has taken place and meaning attributed (the color means that this is a packet of ordinary cigarettes). This is not so for the representation of cognition that Robbe-Grillet depicts. The observations of the characters and their subsequent sense-making is represented as being in the process of, in the middle of, *en train de*. Just as Clarke emphasizes the idea of flow, Robbe-Grillet emphasizes that of motion, stating, "Tout l'intérêt des pages descriptives…n'est donc plus dans la chose décrite mais dans le mouvement même de la description." ("Description, représentation" loc. 1137-1141). It is worth noting that he points out that such descriptions are "sans cesse en train de s'inventer dans l'esprit de l'homme," emphasizing with the word "esprit" the idea that such processes are indeed cognitive ones ("Description, représentation" loc. 1137). Rather than putting on scene a finalized interpretation of external events, then, Robbe-Grillet puts on scene the internal processes of cognition, with emphasis on the

process. In this case, uncertainty is present because it is sense-making *in action*; there cannot be certainty because sense has not yet been at the moment of narration; or, should the time of narration be posterior to the action, the narration is expressly looking to narrate the process, rather than the outcome, of this cognition.

6.5 Sense-making

In Luhmann's model, cognition essentially amounts to making sense, or meaning, from that which is perceived or observed by the system. As Thompson states,

> *Sense-making = cognition (perception/action).* Sense-making is tantamount to cognition…such conduct is oriented toward and subject to signification and valence. Signification and valence do not preexist "out there" but are enacted or constituted by the living being. Living entails sense-making, which equals cognition (83).

Thompson thus emphasizes the constructed nature of an individual reality through cognition, rather than an external intact reality that can be "captured" by an observer. Furthermore, he makes such cognition an essential element of life; a living being is a cognizing one. As I have already demonstrated, the human subject in Robbe-Grillet's texts can be said to struggle with or fail at making meaning; this constitutes one way in which Robbe-Grillet displaces the human from the center of the humanist epistemological paradigm. However, cognition also serves another purpose – the construction of individual subjective realities. Reading Robbe-Grillet's characters' attempts at meaning-making through Luhmann's model allows us to examine more closely the cognitive processes he is depicting in those failed attempts and in the construction of reality. Luhmann's model is a particularly useful one for this, as in

addition to outlining a process of sense-making that aligns closely with Robbe-

Grillet's conception of possibility (outlined in Chapter 2), Luhmannian subjectivity

constitutes a "repudiation of objectivistic truisms in favor of what we would now call

a form of epistemological constructivism," in much the same way that Robbe-Grillet

rejects objective essential truth in favor of subjective construction of multiple realities

(Thompson 99).

As outlined in Chapter 2, in Luhmann's model, sense-making occurs as the

realization of a series of possibilities. In a world where no transcendent rules exist as

the guiding order of events, the driving force behind their occurrence is that of

possibility. When creating meaning from an observed phenomenon, a cognizing

system selects one interpretation from among many possible ones. Luhmann uses the

term *Sinnhorizont* or "horizon of sense" to illustrate his concept of external "reality:"

> If one accepts this theoretical disposition, one can neither assume that
> there exists a world at hand consisting of things, substances, and ideas,
> nor can one designate their entirety with the concept of a
> "world."…The world is rather an immeasurable potential for surprises,
> it is virtual information that needs systems to…ascribe to selected
> information the sense of being information (Moeller 68).

Any information thereby produced is thus the actualization of a previously existing

possibility, one that was chosen by the system. Every tidbit of information processed

by a cognizing system constitutes an actualized possibility; for each of these there is a

potentially infinite number of unrealized possibilities. "Sense-making is this interplay

between the actual and possible," or as Luhmann himself puts it, sense is the "unity of

the difference between the actual and the possible" (Moeller 66). Each reality is the

totality for the cognizing system of actualized possibilities "of sense" and manifests itself uniquely within the system.

The seeming contradictions and "impossible" statements made by Robbe-Grillet's narrators, can thus be read additionally as signaling the process of meaning-making, where a plurality of possibilities are displayed, selected, and re-selected. When viewed as a report of real-world circumstances, such seemingly contradictory statements can seem impossible and and frustrating to a reader accustomed to "Balzacian" literary forms. However, if one reads the text as a sort of illustration of cognition in process, these contradictions can actually be understood as steps or attempts at sense-making within a cognizing system that chooses among possibilities according to Luhmann's model. It is interesting to note that critics like Stoltzfus see this Luhmannian process – sense-making as a selection from a multitude or possibilities and subsequently, generation of meaning -- as essential elements of Robbe-Grillet's work, in this case invoking the reader: "The work will always retain a limited number of rational possibilities, more or less in- tended by the author, and, as Philip Pettit phrases it, subject to 'reflective equilibrium.'" It is these internal possibilities, constantly in motion, that the reader picks up and which he uses to gen-erate meaning" (Stoltzfus "Labyrinths" 304). As Robbe-Grillet puts it, "Le nouveau roman débute dans une sorte de grisaille, au réveil comme d'habitude; des *possibles* errant dans les coins – des vies possibles, des littératures possibles." (*PUNR* 110). He affirms that these possibilities coexist in a multiplicity: "[l'aventure du texte] reste ouverte à *toutes* les possibilities. Une aventure qui n'a plus de possibilités n'est plus une aventure" ("Maison" 9:52-9:58).

Because Robbe-Grillet's literature is not necessarily chronological ("Il ne s'agit plus ici de temps qui coule, puisque paradoxalement les gestes ne sont au contraire que figés dans l'instant"), when a narrator makes a statement only to contradict it, or supplement it with information that would make the statement an impossibility as a real-world event, it might thus be understood to be a cognizing system selecting one possibility of interpretation from among many, rather than a reporting of occurrences in the external world (Robbe-Grillet "Description, représentation" loc. 1137). The seemingly impossible coexistence of multiple options constitutes a laying out of the possibilities at hand, to be chosen from, and perhaps even a series of attempts interpretation by the cognizing observer, making of the text a space of cognition, where "the novel…which dwells self-consciously…and creatively on hypothetical alternatives demonstrates the free play of imaginative possibility – the imaginative possibilities of a mind which refuses tragedy and is therefore free to give some kind of meaning and order to the chaos of innumerable alternatives" (Stoltzfus *New French Novel* 101). Thus, when contradictions are made, in addition to signaling a lack of objective knowledge, they can be seen as constituting sense-making in the sense of actualizing a possibility resulting from an observation. This process concerns not just contradictions in the text, but reprisals, the frequent repetition with variations that occur throughout Robbe-Grillet's texts. The manner in which "the writing goes through a series of analogous scenes in a process of repetition and rejection" represents a reprisal of possibility on the part of the narrator and/or author" (Heath 151).

For example, in *Voyeur*, in a passage in which the narrator recounts a (presumably) singular childhood memory, the description repeats itself with variations on a theme; the narrator states variously, "C'était par un jour de pluie," "c'était un jour de pluie – en apparence un jour de pluie comme les autres;" "La pièce était très sombre. Dehors il pleuvait;" "il tombait une pluie fine, continue" (*Voyeur* 18-19). In *Souvenirs,* the narrator reprises a scene with a variation, in which he takes the place of a character: "Deux hommes en trench-coat clair et chapeau de feutre se sont installés à une table, comme s'ils attendaient le retour d'un hypothétique serveur en veste blanche," and by the end of the same passage, the narrator states, "la seule pensée qui aurait encore quelque importance concerne le petit appareil dont le signal ouvre la porte noire du sanctuaire: malencontreusement demeuré dans la poche intérieure de cette veste blanche que je porte aujourd'hui" (*Souvenirs* 23-25). Each of these can be seen to be the presence and selection of a possibility; this time of textual structure, and in so being, depict the cognitive processes of the system that is the writer and/or narrator. In an achronological text, the type of "denarration" evoked in Chapter 4 ("Outside it is raining…") can thus also be understood as the processes of a cognizing system that is in the act of selecting from among various possibilities of interpretation (Richardson *Unnatural* 2006).

Thus the simultaneous existence of multiple possibilities of narration and interpretation are possible. "Like a composer, Robbe-Grillet begins with a simple statement of his themes and then goes on to explore their various possibilities." (Goodstein 93). What were once "spatial and temporal impossibilities (inside is suddenly outside, an assassin approaches his victim with a knife which is already on

the floor in the room where the victim has already been killed" become possibilities

of interpretation. The achronology of the functioning of the cognizing system allows

for their simultaneous coexistence (Bogue 36). The text constitutes the field in which

these possibilities are possible: "All these possibilities are suggested in the text.

Intertextual allusions provide even more alternatives" (Smith 69).

Thus, questions like those posed by Roch Smith in his analysis of *Maison* are

unproductive -- "Do these pronouncements cancel each other out? If only one is to be

velived, on what basis can the choice be made? Can both somehow be true?" -- as

they constitute a forced dichotomy between possibilities, when, as read through

Luhmann, Robbe-Grillet is actually insisting on their coexistence (63).

Achronological coexistence displaces sequential impossibilities; in statements like

Sturrock's: "In *La Maison de rendez-vous*, for example, visual expressions are

permitted to change at a hysterical speed," in fact what is being put on scene is an

array of possibilities, not a series of lightning fast affirmations (218). Such

contradictions as the one presented by the two prefaces to *Maison* not only constitute

a possibility chosen by the author/narrator, but is also a presentation of possibilities of

interpretation to the reader: "It is from and to that inscription, a point of semantic

fixity that opens a range of possibilities in its reading." (Heath 150).

In Luhmann's model, once an observation has been made, the individual

cognizing system resorts to his own interiority to provide an interpretation – his own

knowledge base, lived experiences, imagination, and so forth. In Chapter 4, I

demonstrated how Robbe-Grillet mixes the imaginary, the lived, the recounted, the

dreamt, and the remembered in such a way as to break down the barriers between

these (formerly) distinct cognitive functions. Their simultaneous coexistence may also constitute the Luhmannian process of cognitive functioning, at the level of interpretation. The characters who undertake this mix of elements constitute the mise-en-scene of an individual who has made an observation and who has recourse to all the various functions of his brain in order to interpret, to "make sense" happen. As in life, in which these processes occur in an emergent and plural manner, these processes refuse a linear chronology. A cognizing individual may remember and imagine at the same time, for example. In the same passage in *Voyeur* as that cited above, the observations that the main character Mathias makes of the boat he is on is mixed with childhood memories of drawing a seagull (*Voyeur* 18-20). They are mixed together without transition or delineation because they are simultenaousely as parts of the process of cognition. The lack of chronology evoked in Robbe-Grillet's text indicates the Luhmannian functioning of the cognizing system. As Robbe-Grillet states, "Pourquoi chercher à reconstituer le temps des horloges dans un récit qui ne s'inquiète que du temps humain? N'est-il pas plus sage de penser à notre propre mémoire, qui n'est *jamais* chronologique" (*PUNR* 118-119).

6.6 Observation

The notion of Luhmannian observation, especially second-order observation, has particular consequences for reading "le regard" in the texts of Robbe-Grillet. Robbe-Grillet's near obsession with the notion of observing or seeing caused the Nouveau Roman to be labeled "l'Ecole du Regard." Some likened this voyeurism to the objective lens of the video camera; others to a complete and total subjectivity, which is more to the point; but they did not have recourse to the theory of Luhmann

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to interpret it. Within Luhmannian theory, as previously noted, observation is understood to be the making of a distinction between self and the environment. This distinction can be repeated ad infinitum, moving the systems toward ever-increasing levels of complexity as cognitive systems "make sense" of their environments. The "jeu de regards" in the texts of Robbe-Grillet can be read as this particular symptom of Luhmannian cognitive function, and a move toward greater complexity.

For example, consider the layers of "regards" in the opening passage of *Le Voyeur*:

> Mathias se baissa pour ramasser [un objet]. En se relevant il aperçut, à quelques pas sur la droite, une petite fille de sept ou huit ans qui le dévisageait avec sérieux, ses grands yeux tranquillement posés sur lui. Il esquissa un demi-sourire, mais elle ne prit pas la peine de le lui rendre et ce n'est qu'au bout de plusieurs seconds qu'il vit ses prunelles glisser vers la pélote de ficelle qu'il tenait dans la main (*Voyeur* 10).

In this seemingly simple passage is a surprisingly complex network of observation. Mathias observes an object, which he bends down to pick up. This is followed by his remarking a little girl, who he observes observing him, in a two-directional observational exchange. After this realization, he turns his attention to the object, now observing it, while the little girl continues to observe him, increasing the levels of narrated observation to three. All of this is recounted from the point of view of an anonymous third-person narrator, who is observing or has observed the scene (as the verbs are conjugated in the literary *passé simple*, so the chronological relationship of the actions to their recounting is not entirely clear). And, finally, the reader acts as observer as well, of the scene, and, as the text repeats and reprises itself, ultimately of the conception and construction of the text itself. Similar levels of complex

observation occur in *Souvenirs;* for example, the narrator (who may also be a violent sexual criminal) describes the unsettling exchange of surveillance that constitutes his observation of a potential victim at a café. The passage opens with a description of a young girl that implies her observation by the narrator. This is followed by the narrator stating, "regardant toujours en arrière dans ma direction, elle poursuit son examen critique, investigateur, intéressé, attentif en tout cas…bien que je soutienne ce regard sans difficulté…la jeune fille se tarde à se détourner, peu impressionnée selon toute apparence par mon diagnostic de praticien, qui la contemple" (*Souvenirs* 49). Such mises-en-scene constitute a precise illustration of second-order obesrvation: "'Introducing the observer as an active participant…in the process of explaining the observer' is a classic second-order statement. Its recursive arc perfectly captures what "second-order" means – the redoubling or rendering circular of an input or an outcome, the reentry of a product into the process of its own ongoing production." (Clarke *Neocybernetics* loc. 76). Recall that in a Luhmannian system, no "truth" is ever reached by increases in complexity; the systems and their interactions simply become more complex. This is in alignment with Robbe-Grillet's refusal to grant a previously formed "meaning" to the reader in the form of, say, a sufficiently resolved murder mystery. The "regards" in his books, rather than moving the reader toward a final, singular, and conclusive solution, then, serve to increase complexity, leaving the reader to undertake similar complex cognitive processes to arrive – or not - at an interpretation of his own.

Indeed, the reader has a particular and multiple role to play in the reception and interpretation of Robbe-Grillet's text. If we understand the reader as a cognizing system in Luhmann's model, just as those depicted in the text, then the text serves as that "élément générateur," in Robbe-Grillet's terms or "input," in systems theory terms, an external phenomenon that would provoke processes of cognition within himself. The plurality of possibilities of interpretation within the text are such that any cognition produced by such a reader would be unique and individual to him and him alone. The result is the replacement of an overall singular, unitary model of reality by a plural one, as many as there are readers and as many as a single reader would choose to undertake. "There is not "one" reality…but rather a plurality of realities created through [Luhmannian] cognition," just as in Robbe-Grillet's fiction "meaning derives from reader rapport-a rapport that will shift whenever the work changes hands. Each reader brings a different focus to bear in determining the value of the work, which, more and more these days, is perceived as "open"" (Moeller 70; Stoltzfus "Labyrinths" 303).

The reader is thus assigned the role of making meaning. Some see the Robbe-Grilletian mise-en-scene of an active mind as one trying to construct a story or a myth; the desire for conclusion and finality is a manifestation of this (Sturrock 221). "Once the novel has come into being, its objects, that is to say the discontinuous units out of which it has been constructed, confront the reader with the same sort of problems as the narrator who has been confronted with by [sic] the objects of his own world. It is we who are challenged to apprehend them" (Sturrock 231). As previously

noted, Robbe-Grillet continuously seeks to subvert the ability of any individual reader to arrive at a definitive conclusion. Like the human subject depicted in his texts, the reader is called to attempt – and fails – to create meaning, at least in an essential and objective sense. Heath talking about the reader of Robbe-Grilletian text: "We are confronted with a *text*,…its use of various elements which we recognize as elements of comforting sense and which we would like to relate as usual to achieve the satisfaction of meaning, and yet which here…resist our recuperation" (Heath 151).

Thus does the text serve as both an illustration of Luhmannian cognition (via the actions of the characters) and a generator of it (within the reader). But the function of the text does not end there. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, Robbe-Grillet considers the text itself to be the creation of a reality: "Il en va de meme pour une symphonie, une peinture, un roman: c'est dans leur forme que réside leur réalité" (*PUNR* 41). This corresponds to his understanding of the function of literary description, which for him in the New Novel has changed from a demonstrative function to one that is generative of reality (or realities). Whereas for him realist descriptions of the Balzacian type served to "show" ("faire voir") elements of an objective external reality that were significant only insofar as they served as supports for the (human) protagonist, literary description in the New Novel serves to create an individual reality: "Elle prétendait reproduire une réalité préexistante; elle affirme à présent sa fonction créatrice" (Robbe-Grillet "Description, représentation" loc. 1125). Thus the text not only provokes the process of subjective construction of reality within the reader but also constitutes one generated by the author: "l'auteur aujourd'hui proclame l'absolu besoin qu'il a du concours [du lecteur], un concours actif,

conscient, *créateur*…c'est…participer à une creation, d'inventer à son tour l'oeuvre –

et le monde – et d'apprendre ainsi à inventer sa propre vie" and "Il n'y a pas de réalité

du film en dehors du film lui-même" (*PUNR* 134; "L'Année dernière à Marienbad"

1:29-1:23). Speaking of the Nouveau Roman, he says, "Nous, la vie que nous

peignons, c'est celle de l'esprit. Nous n'imposons aucune image de la réalité à notre

lecteur. Nous lui demandons de nous suivre dans l'effort de création pure, donc

poétique que nous faisons" ("L'Orient m'intéresse" loc. 5095). In this way the text is

at once a mise-en-scene of the processes of cognition and the reality that is produced

by the very same processes. It is at once process and product, a system that

corresponds to the *autopoeitic* nature of Luhmannian systems. Coined by the

biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, the concept was adapted by

Luhmann and refers to "*poiesis* as its product…What is meant here is a system that is

its own product. The operation si the condition for the prudction of operations"

(Luhmann *Introduction* 110-111). This concept has much potential for the exploration

of Robbe-Grillet's texts, as demonstrated by Ben Stoltzfus's publication of *The

Target: Robbe-Grillet, Jasper Johns*, an investigation I hope to undertake in further

study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Robbe-Grillet has undertaken a project of "invention," that of reconceptualizing the human subject and his place in the world, a project that falls neatly in line with that of posthumanist critical theory. Drawing on his scientific experience and knowledge of scientific theory, as well as "French" theory, Robbe-Grillet attempted to innovate a new type of literature that would refuse the anthropomorphism of humanism and its associated essentialism, superiority, centrality, and integrality of the human subject.

All of this must seem rather clinical; indeed, Robbe-Grillet has been accused of coldness and detachment in his writing.[28] But human passion is not absent from his works; in fact, scenes of lust, violence, murder, and obsession are common. His book *La Jalousie* has as its principal subject the obsession and jealousy felt by a man consumed by the idea that his wife may be having an affair. Indeed, for Robbe-Grillet the emotion felt by the characters and narrators in his texts and films is a primary motor of their content: "Il ne s'agit plus de ce qui se passe "vraiment;" mais de ce qu'un personnage plus ou moins dans l'état d'angoisse ou de frayeur ou de passion imagine et même qu'il communique à l'autre." ("Echos du Cinéma" 18:00-18:12). The mental machinations of the human subject, as we have seen, are central to his project; these include the "feeling" of emotions and passions:

> On connaît ces intrigues linéaires du cinema dit "de papa" où l'on nous
> fait grâce d'aucun maillon dans la succession des événements trop
> attendus: le téléphone sonne, l'homme décroche, [etc.]…Notre esprit,
> en réalité, va plus vite – ou plus lentement, d'autres fois. Sa démarche

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[28] For example, Yvonne Guers, in her article "La technique romanesque d'Alain Robbe-Grillet" describes the first impression of the reader on encountering Robbe-Grillet's texts as reading "un récit en apparence froid et détaché" (Guers 570).

est plus variée, plus riche, et moins rassurante: il saute des passages, il enregistre avec precision des elements "sans importance", il se répète, il revient en arrière. Et ce temps mental est bien celui qui nous intéresse, avec ses étrangétés, ses trous, ses obsessions, ses régions obscures, puisqu'il est celui de nos passions, de notre *vie* (Robbe-Grillet "L'Année dernière à Marienbad" loc. 872-877).

And if the achronological temporality of his text disturbs some readers, its importance lies in the fact that this atemporality is a function of "notre vie passionnelle," which is "plus importante…que la chronologie du calendrier;" indeed, he refers to this achronology as "la chronologie humaine" ("Echos du Cinéma" 19:33-19:47).

Not only does he depict the workings of a human mind subjected to emotions, obsessions, and passions, but he seeks to extract these from the reader as well. If he demands the active participation of the reader in his texts, he also calls upon their passion: "[les éléments du film] ont besoin de l'intervention, de la passion même du spectateur pour que la passion des héros prennent vraiment corps" ("Echos du cinéma" 21:20-21:27). And in reading his texts, the reader goes through a series of feelings, impressions, and sentiments; in a 1965 televised interview the presenter Pierre Dumayet describes the sensation of reading and re-reading *La Maison de rendez-vous*: "Si je retrace les étapes de lecture de *La Maison de rendez-vous*, j'ai d'abord été séduit, puis exaspéré, puis à nouveau séduit, et j'ai le sentiment que vous m'avez donné quelque chose, c'est-à-dire le vertige" ("Maison" 9:20-9:29). What Robbe-Grillet seeks to elicit from the reader, then, rather than a straightforward emotional response, is nothing less than passionate and active participation in the creation of a new human subject, and to do so is to endow the (human) reader with great power.

Like those who would proclaim themselves humanists, Robbe-Grillet is concerned with the idea of the human and his place in the world: "Je prendrai volontiers [Claude Simon] de l'exemple même de ce que j'entends par le Nouveau Roman…c'est cette passion pour le monde réel, pour l'homme vivant et pour la liberté d'expression que couronne aujourd'hui le prix Nobel" ("Claude Simon" loc. 3482). The question of what it means to be human is the driving force of his work, the human and "care" for the human his central preoccupations. He does not seek to turn away from the human or to make of him a robot devoid of significance or emotion. Rather, he proposes an alternative vision to humanism that would respect and care for the human, as well as that which "makes" him so – including mental and emotional capabilities – and that would address the complexities raised by the technoscientific and theoretical developments of his day.

In this project I have attempted to excavate a coherent vision of Robbe-Grillet's literary project and demonstrate that it may be considered a posthumanist one. By considering him from this standpoint, a coherent worldview may be extracted from his theory and his fiction that situates him neatly with respect to his particular sociohistorical situation and theoretical heritage, including his scientific training and the French theory that so heavily influenced literature and literary criticism at the time he was active. The posthumanist lens additionally allows for a comprehensive approach to individual problematics that have long been examined in his work – such as his non-traditional narrative technique, the role of consciousness, and the question of humanism. Other problematics, such as his notion of text as process and product,

which I did not address comprehensively in this project, might benefit from evaluation that takes into account a posthuman perspective.

I hope to have demonstrated that both Robbe-Grillet and posthumanist critics share a common vision and project; that, beginning with a contestation that humanism is no longer a relevant means of understanding a technologically and scientifically mediated human, new frameworks are needed that would move away from humanism and address the sort of complexities revealed by developments in scientific studies. They share a common goal of developing such new hermeneutic frameworks and new visions of the human subject through the generative power of narrative. In this project, I have laid out a brief description of posthumanist critical theory, its genealogy and development, and the ways in which Robbe-Grillet's literary project parallels that of posthumanist criticism. In the preceding chapters, I outlined the ways in which the posthumanist critical project aligns with Robbe-Grillet's in its criticisms and affirmations of the precepts of humanism; and in its criticisms and affirmations of the figure of the human subject, in particular in response to what they see as its "placement" in the humanist paradigm. I then evaluated Robbe-Grillet's work according to these same affirmations, to demonstrate the ways in which they can be said to manifest themselves in his fiction, as part of his literary project to develop new paradigms of the human. Finally, I undertook a reading of cognition in Robbe-Grillet through Niklas Luhmann's theory of cognition, communication, and society, to demonstrate the ways in which posthumanist theory might prove useful for new evaluations of difficult works.

This paper furthermore responds to a turn in the humanities toward a trend of the "post-" and a movement toward the merging of scientific and humanities theory. Evaluating his work through this perspective may illuminate Robbe-Grillet, but it also has much potential for evaluation of other authors and problematics within French studies, including, but not limited to, those authors who are considered to be members of the *Nouveau Roman.* Such a project, also, I hope, demonstrates the potential utility of posthumanist critical theory for use in French studies generally. Robbe-Grillet's work, as well as posthumanist critical theory, is a varied, changing, complex, and contradictory beast, but by putting them together in this way, perhaps new and useful modes of understanding might be made in both literary studies and in the development of posthumanist critical theory.

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