In this paper I want to explore the connection between psychoanalytic theories of paranoia and postmodern culture. This will involve offering a definition of both paranoia and postmodernism as conditions characterized by a similar crisis in interpretation. I find clear symptoms of this ‘interpretive paranoia’ in examples of postmodern fiction which obsessively foreground the process of interpretation, often revealing it to be paranoid. By doing so, such texts draw attention to the reader’s own paranoid quest to interpret as s/he reads.

**Reading paranoia in postmodernism**

The link between postmodernism and paranoia is not a new one, but has been made by a number of theorists who draw on the idea of psychosis to describe the postmodern condition. This involves considering the extreme effects on the subject of post-industrial society, a world dominated by rampant consumerism and the electronic media, where intersubjective communication has broken down, discourse is power, and information the most valuable commodity, digested and dispersed by computers. Deprived of unity and integrity, and rendered no more than a free-floating signifier, the human being who lives in this world is consequently propelled into a state which resembles psychosis, where the self is similarly split, without essence in which to retreat (Frosh 132). This alienation is compounded by the very real sense in postmodern society of ‘technological persecution’ at the hands of an unseen
Other. To live in postmodernity is to live constantly under the gaze of an all-seeing eye, gathering information about us (Flieger 87). Capital itself functions, in the words of Slavoj Zizek, as ‘a chimeric apparition which, although it can nowhere be spotted as a positive, clearly delimited entity, nonetheless functions as the ultimate Thing governing our lives’ (Zizek, Enjoy 123).

There is good reason to suppose, then, that the postmodern age is the ‘age of paranoia’ (Brennan 20). As the diagnoses of the persecutory nature of post-industrial society suggest, this is, rather disturbingly, because that paranoia is justified. (Or: just because I’m paranoid, it doesn’t mean I’m not being persecuted.) Persuasive though the rhetoric is, however, this conclusion points to a problem with diagnosing the human response to postmodernity in terms of clinical paranoia. Paranoia, as Lacan describes it, is ‘the especial delusion of the misanthropic belle âme, throwing back on to the world the disorder of which his being is composed’ (Lacan, Ecrits 17). If this is the case, then when the world is indeed disordered, the response is surely not paranoid. This is one reason why I prefer to locate the connection between paranoia and postmodernism away from the question of post-industrial persecution. Another is that paranoia itself, as the psychoanalytic definitions of the condition indicate, is essentially a crisis in interpretation. As Lyotard asks, in a different context, ‘doesn’t paranoia confuse the As if it were the case with the it is the case?’ (Lyotard 8).

Clinically, paranoia is characterized by two distortions in the mind of the subject: the sense of persecution (the feeling that oppressive aspects of the world are more vindictive than they really are), and the tendency to delusion (the internal construction of an alternative system of beliefs to replace the oppressive ones in the external world). The classic symptoms of paranoia, in other words, involve making false sense of the world. The significance of interpretation here is further reinforced when the condition is more rigorously theorized in psychoanalysis. Freud (Freud, ‘Schreber’; ‘A Case of Paranoia’) conceives of paranoia as a
projective mechanism rooted in repressed homosexuality, whereby the libidinous energy directed towards the love-object is re-envisioned as coming back at the subject in the form of aggression. In other words, it enables the paranoiac to change the statement ‘I (a man) love him’ into ‘he hates me’. The somewhat limited scope of this diagnosis is expanded upon by Lacan, who develops the idea of projection in a way which makes paranoia central to his whole system. Paranoia, for Lacan, is simply an intensification of the projective dimension of knowledge, which involves imagining other perspectives: the paranoiac imagines him/herself in the place of the Other and thus sees an alternative version to reality. To do so involves a loss of trust in the capacity of the Symbolic Order to represent things: the paranoiac looks ‘behind’ the ostensible meaning of language to an alternative one. At the heart of paranoia, then, is a battle to understand/impose meaning (Lacan, *Fundamental; Psychoses*).

It is with this model of paranoia that we can best understand postmodern paranoia, which, I want to suggest, is a product of the epistemic shift from modernism to postmodernism. The crisis of representation which is instrumental to the emergence of the postmodern condition engenders a parallel crisis in interpretation. Postmodern existence is a continual process of trying to find meaning in the face of the knowledge that meaning is always relative and contingent. The world which provided the backdrop for modernism may have been similarly bewildering and fragmented to those who lived through it, but it was still part - albeit a gradually disintegrating part - of the ‘Enlightenment project’. Now the Enlightenment Project is finally at an end, the ultimate faith in rationality which was characteristic of modernism has been replaced by an understanding that the world is unknowable. This understanding is not always, as is sometimes suggested, accompanied by a celebratory sense that ‘anything goes’. Postmodernism, I think, is a phenomenon that speaks more of anxiety than is commonly supposed. As the work of those critics who stress the
postmodern preference for double-coding (Jencks, Eco, Hutcheon) suggests, irony is more than simply playfulness but a necessary negotiation in the light of the burden of the ‘already-said’ (Eco 67). Their logic suggests that the dominance of the ironic mode in postmodernism does not preclude the fact that it may be rooted as much in anxiety or earnestness as it is in playfulness.

In postmodernism, the realization that we cannot achieve absolute knowledge has not wiped out the desire for it. The result frequently manifests itself as a kind of paranoia: a desperate desire to make sense of what we know does not make sense. The ability to transcend social and cultural fragmentation and the invisible workings of the industrial machine were still available to the modernists because of their belief in the transcendent creative power of the self. In postmodernism, one of the few ways this transcendence is possible is through paranoia. This is not necessarily negative: psychoanalysis affirms that there is a positive regenerative side to paranoia, whereby the subject builds up a more easily inhabitable and less oppressive world s/he can more easily know and inhabit. But it is a distorted view nonetheless. There is, in other words, a price to pay for the anti-totalizing epistemology of postmodernism. The modernist desire for totalization and the capacity to see connections (for example, Forster’s ‘only connect’) has not disappeared but remains in an altered form. The modernist desire for certainty continues, but as a form of paranoia: an uncanny element of the modern haunts the postmodern.

We can see this at work in the proliferation of socio-historic traumas since the Second World War which involve or inspire the characteristic kind of delusion that is the conspiracy theory: anti-communist obsession in America, the Kennedy assassination and its aftermath, Watergate, Oklahoma, O.J. Simpson, etc. The paranoid response to these events is of course to some extent justified: partly because, being televisual events, some of them speak directly of the crisis of representation, but also because our experience proves that conspiracy is
likely: who can discount the possibility of conspiracy in our legal system after ‘The Guildford Four’ or O.J.? But there is still a tension between the need to come up with one satisfying interpretation and the simultaneous knowledge that interpretations are multiple and contingent.

Paranoia, then, represents the trace of the modern in the postmodern. I want to suggest that it manifests itself chiefly in two forms. The first is suggested by the novels of Thomas Pynchon - the postmodern novelist of paranoia *par excellence* - which define paranoia as ‘the discovery that *everything is connected*’ (Pynchon 703). We long for this discovery in postmodernity, precisely because there is evidence all around that *nothing* is inherently connected. This form of paranoia is the kind observable in conspiracy theory and also, in fact, in postmodern theory. It explains how Jameson can in one move acknowledge the depthlessness and dislocated nature of postmodern culture, yet in another portray it as a social totality.ii Jameson’s work in fact demonstrates a similar logic to conspiracy theory. His description of the operation of late capitalism sounds at times like an uncovering of a massive global conspiracy, a huge invisible system which controls us all. (He himself is obliquely aware of this. He calls conspiracy theory ‘the poor person’s cognitive mapping’ [Jameson, ‘Cognitive’ 356], which is the same as saying that his practice of cognitive mapping is merely the intellectual’s conspiracy theory.) The second manifestation of the paranoid mindset I want to introduce is perhaps even more common than this: the desperate desire to get to the heart of a particular mystery. This we can best describe, in my view, by using the Freudian concept of *epistemophilia*. Epistemophilia, the desire to know, is one of the component instincts in childhood (along with scopophilia, the urge to look) and takes root as a result of a curiosity about sexuality. While Freud himself mostly relates the concept to the question of childhood sexuality (Freud, *Sexuality*; ‘Narcissism’), it is not limited to this stage in psychic development: as Peter Brooks describes it, epistemophilia ‘is possibly the
foundation of all intellectual activity’ (Brooks, *Body* xiii). And, as Freud’s case study of the ‘Rat Man’ indicates, epistemophilia can in some people become something far more obsessive and desperate than normal intellectual endeavour. Freud describes how the Rat Man became a prey to an *obsession for understanding*, which made him a curse to all his companions. He forced himself to understand the precise meaning of every syllable that was addressed to him, as though he might otherwise be missing some priceless treasure. Accordingly he kept asking: ‘What was it you said just then?’ And after it had been repeated to him he could not help thinking it sounded different the first time, so he remained dissatisfied. (Freud, ‘Rat Man’ 70)

The Rat Man was an obsessional neurotic rather than a paranoiac, and this means that, for Freud, epistemophilia is not located in the psychotic register of behaviour. This quotation indicates, however, where there are clear links between epistemophilia and the kind of paranoid desire to make sense we have been discussing: a tendency of the epistemophiliac, Freud explains, is to regard innocuous events as mysteries which require unravelling. If the pursuit of knowledge becomes obsessive enough, there is a point where concealed alternative meanings may be imagined. This is the point where epistemophilia crosses over into paranoia. The link becomes clearer if we bear in mind Lacan’s view, given that the structure of the Ego and that of paranoia are similar, that the pursuit of knowledge itself is essentially paranoid (Lacan in Evans 95). Epistemophilia is a clear example of this paranoid pursuit in its most crystallized form, and is a feature of the response to postmodernity.

In this light we can return to the socio-historic traumas I mentioned above, and suggest that the logical response to them is epistemophilia. In a recent essay the postmodernist historian Hayden White compares the effect of key twentieth-century events on some people (the Holocaust, the assassination of Kennedy, the Challenger disaster) to infantile trauma in the mind of the neurotic: ‘they cannot simply be forgotten and put out of mind, but neither can they be adequately remembered’ (White 20). Alternatively we could suggest that the trauma is characterized by a kind of epistemophilia: such incidents promise
to reveal some clue to the meaning of our society if only we can determine the exact course
of events. The trouble is, try as we might, we cannot penetrate the mystery. ‘Beyond
reasonable doubt’ is not satisfactory for the epistemophiliac who desires absolute knowledge.
Nor, indeed, is the strategy that certain lines of postmodern thought (for example, Rorty’s
pragmatism) invite us to adopt, that we should occupy a position of interpretive finality while
accepting that it is contingent: contingency is too accidental for the epistemophiliac.

**Paranoid reading in modernism and postmodernism**

This paranoid attitude towards interpretation is clearly apparent in postmodern literature. To
suggest this, however, is to be confronted with an immediate problem. When it comes to
cultural products - art, architecture, literature - paranoia has tended to be associated
specifically with *modernism* rather than postmodernism. In Ihab Hassan’s oppositional list of
modernist and postmodernist features, for example, he sets modernist paranoia against the
schizophrenia of postmodernism (Hassan 123). Fredric Jameson and Charles Jencks each
draw a parallel between the nature of postmodern culture and schizophrenia (Jameson,
‘Postmodernism’; Jencks). There is certainly something persuasive about this: when
choosing metaphors from psychosis to describe the postmodern fragmented subject, the
complete confusion of schizophrenia seems more adequate than paranoia, which maintains a
systematic coherence in its delusions. And the analogy between modernism and paranoia
seems to become more persuasive still when we consider the modernist approach to
interpretation.

The Lacanian cultural theorist Slavoj Zizek has done just this, in a number of recent
texts where he considers how the movement from modernism to postmodernism is marked by
a ‘break in the very status of interpretation’ (Zizek, *Everything* 1). Modernism, he suggests,
is governed by an aesthetic of absence, for in the text, the ‘object of desire’ is absent,
something which causes ‘interpretive desire’ in the reader (Zizek, ‘The Limits’ 105). In postmodernism, on the other hand, the object of desire is made present. This does not lead to a sense of resolution, however, but only impresses upon us the truth about the nature of desire: the object of desire can only ever be something which stands in metonymically for the real Thing itself (in Lacanian terminology, it can only be petit objet a rather than the extra-linguistic, ungraspable Other itself). In another formulation Zizek describes modernism as the aesthetic of the symptom, with postmodernism the aesthetic of the cause. Zizek’s approach is particularly valuable in what it has to say about how modernism positions its reader. The typical high-modernist work, he argues, is superficially incomprehensible; in order to make sense of it, we must interpret it. In other words, the logic of the supplement operates here: the modernist text, as Zizek remarks, remains unfinished until a commentary has been added (Zizek, Everything 1). (The postmodernist text, by contrast, appears comprehensible at first, only for this clarity to be defamiliarized by further interpretation.) The requirement that the reader recuperate its initially baffling elements means that the modernist text is characterized by what Zizek terms an ‘interpretive delirium’ (Zizek, ‘The Limits’ 109).

The analogy, implied in this phrase, between reading modernist works and a pathological state of mind has been developed by others, notably Brian McHale. McHale is well known for his persuasive binary case about modernist and postmodernist poetics, in which the former is dominated by epistemological issues, whereas the latter deals principally with ontological ones. Like Zizek’s, but less explicitly, McHale’s theory is dependent to a large degree on the different approach to interpretation involved in each poetics. Where an epistemological poetics generally rewards interpretation, an ontological poetics frustrates it: texts which work at the ontological level necessarily problematize interpretation because they remind us that there are no foundations beneath the surface. The question of interpretation is
addressed more directly in the second of McHale’s books, *Constructing Postmodernism*, where he describes the modernist dynamic of interpretation in a similar way to Zizek. Modernism invites us to make sense out of what is apparently chaotic and random. Every detail is potentially significant. That is, it ‘relies on the reader to find correspondences between names, colors, or the physical attributes of characters and other invisible qualities of those characters, places, and actions, while to do so in “real life” would clearly be an indication of paranoid behaviour’ (Siegel, cited in McHale, *Constructing* 82). In this light, the modernist text resembles one of Barthes’ categories in an improvised psychoanalytic ‘typology of the pleasures of reading’ in *The Pleasure of the Text*: a paranoid reader, he says, ‘would consume or produce complicated texts, stories developed like arguments, constructions posited like games, like secret constraints’ (Barthes 63). But, on the view of the McHale and Zizek, paranoid reading is more than just one of several types of textual pleasure, as Barthes describes it, but the necessary way to approach modernist literature.

The logical correlative of this viewpoint is that postmodern literature, by contrast, ultimately moves towards an *anti*-paranoid ideal. McHale sees this exemplified in fictions like Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* and Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* which deliberately encourage the reader’s (modernist) paranoia in order to frustrate it; they lure ‘paranoid readers - modernist readers - into interpretive dark alleys, culs-de-sac, impossible situations, and requir[e] them to find their way out by some other path than the one they came in by’ (McHale, *Constructing* 82). McHale’s argument here conforms to a familiar line is postmodern theory. From its earliest days, there has been a clear consensus of opinion among theorists of the postmodern (from Sontag and Hassan to, more recently, Jameson and Baudrillard) that one of the clearest distinguishing features of postmodernism is its move away from the modernist ‘surface-depth’ model of interpretation. Such critical consensus is not to be taken lightly: there can be no doubt that the postmodernist attitude to interpretation
marks a departure from modernism. But the question is: to what extent? My view is that it differs less in character from modernism than is commonly thought.

One reason for this is the fact that, to return to McHale’s comparative model, although postmodernist fiction does explore ontological questions in a way modernism does not, it remains at the same time almost as epistemologically dominated as modernism. McHale’s examples are mostly taken from the more formally experimental tradition of (mainly American) postmodernist fiction. He largely ignores what others (like Linda Hutcheon) have seen as the representative form of postmodernist fiction, historiographic metafiction, which is devoted to exploring the ways we come to know the past, frequently by using a ‘questing’ hero-figure who interrogates the past, and thus remains firmly epistemological. What characterizes much postmodern fiction, in my view, is its continual foregrounding of the hermeneutic process. The effect of doing so is not to suggest we should dispense with the conventional model of interpretation, but rather to impress upon the reader that this method is problematic yet indispensible. This tension leaves its mark on texts which explore the question with a distinctive sense of anxiety. Of course there are numerous postmodern texts where the wealth of different interpretations figures as a source of pleasure rather than angst. Others (certain postmodern poems, for example, like Ian MacMillan’s ‘Ted Hughes is Elvis Presley’ or Geoff Hattersley’s ‘Frank O’Hara 5, Geoffrey Chaucer 0’) seem unconcerned about the difficulty of interpretation, and demonstrate this by doing their best playfully to frustrate our interpretive endeavours. But these works choose to confront in an ironic way the problem which many other texts - especially novels, some of which I shall return to below - explore more seriously.

Classifying postmodern literature as anti-paranoid is a difficult argument to sustain when so many postmodern texts display an attitude to interpretation which remains firmly paranoid (or modernist): they explore paranoid reading within their pages and demand it from
the reader just as much as modernism does. In Zizek’s terminology, ‘interpretive delirium’ is not limited to modernism. As far as interpretation is concerned, I regard postmodern fiction as closer to its modernist counterpart than McHale’s and Zizek’s models suggest. Both forms work in a similar way, by progressively stimulating our interpretive desire. It is only the endpoint which is different: postmodern novels refuse to satisfy our attempts to interpret in the way modernist works do. Or, to put this differently: modernism ultimately retains a faith in interpretation not matched by postmodernism. For all the aleatory surface of high modernist literature, it still sets up an underlying myth which makes sense of the fragmentation above. And what this means, in fact, is that to we need to reverse, or at least amend, the analogy between reading modernist works and paranoia. To pursue this comparison is to run up against the problem we identified before in concluding that postmodernism is the ‘age of paranoia’ because that paranoia is justified. In a sense, modernist reading is not paranoid at all. For if there is a totalized structure of meaning beneath the surface, which proves every detail is significant after all, surely this vindicates our paranoid suspicions about some hidden alternative truth to the one we are presented with? If the paranoiac is right, then how can s/he be paranoid? The rhetorical weight of postmodernist fiction, on the other hand, implies that the paranoiac is wrong; it reminds us, to quote Baudrillard, that the ‘privileged quest for hidden meanings may be profoundly mistaken’ (Baudrillard 149).

**Postmodern fiction and the crisis of interpretation**

It is not surprising that the ‘age of paranoia’ should produce so many examples of literature which deal in some way with paranoia. A feature of twentieth-century literature is the way the modernist concern with the individual mind becomes, in postmodernism, an interest in the pathological mind. Texts which deal with this subject range from those, like D. M. Thomas’
The White Hotel, where the mental breakdown of a character is a key feature, to those ‘psychopathographies’ which approach the question of psychosis head on (Plath’s *The Bell Jar* or Doris Lessing’s *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*) (Keitel). Paranoia itself, as McHale suggests, first becomes part of the literary repertoire of topics in the postmodern period (McHale, *Constructing*, 15).vi It is explored directly in many recent American novels (Pynchon, of course, William Burroughs, Donald Barthelme, John Barth etc. [Maltby]). There is also a tradition within the postmodern novel which takes explicitly as its focus conspiracy theory and ranges from popular thrillers (Tom Clancy *et al*.), cyberpunk (Philip K. Dick), to more highbrow material (Robert McCrum, Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum*). Of these conspiracy-fictions there are a significant number of novels (not to mention a whole host of other histories and films) which fictionalize the ur-conspiracy theory of postmodern times, the Kennedy assassination: Bryan Woolley’s *November 22*, Thomas’s *Flying into Love*, Don DeLillo’s *Libra*, James Ellroy’s *American Tabloid* etc. There are also certain novels which themselves have attracted conspiracy theorists, who believe they contain material which begins to unravel a great mystery. The novels of Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd, for example, are enthused over by a mysterious group called ‘the psychogeographers’ who find evidence of a network of ‘occult knowledge’ in their books’ revisiting of old London.vii

Conspiracy fiction, as this last example suggests, is especially open to paranoid reading. But not only by readers who just happen to be paranoid in the first place, and not just because, as McHale suggests, modernist reading is still the orthodox reading practice in literary academia. Much postmodern fiction invites us to become paranoid readers, as I have suggested, because it actively foregrounds the interpretive process. The self-reflexivity which is characteristic of twentieth-century fiction has resulted in a number of novels which feature characters literally reading texts, Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, for example, or Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*. The key figure here is Jorge-Luis Borges, whose stories
feature bookish, pedantic heroes indulging in endless quests for knowledge. Many more novels focus on the act of reading in a more metaphorical sense, where characters read the world and other people around them as if they were texts. Often they do so in a form recognisable as paranoid reading. The significance of this is that the focus on the act of reading ensures that the reader becomes aware of his/her own interpretive endeavours as s/he reads the novel. Watching characters engaged in the process of paranoid reading lures us into our own form of paranoid reading. Very often the result is to problematize our own sense of interpretation. In what remains of this essay, I want to suggest how this works in specific examples of postmodern fiction.

The first of these, *The White Hotel*, foregrounds the question of interpretation by detailing ‘Sigmund Freud’s’ failure to realise that a patient’s psychosomatic symptoms are the result not of past trauma, but of her fate as a victim of the Nazi atrocities in the Second World War. Lisa Erdman, in other words, is in the grip of a compulsion to predict rather than the compulsion to repeat. Through a pastiche of the Freudian Case Study we are given an insight into the conventional psychoanalytic model of interpretation, an approach which also informs ‘Freud’s’ readings of a poem and a journal she has written. In order to prove effective in Lisa’s case the psychoanalytic method of interpretation, which works retrospectively, interpreting the present through the past, needs to be turned on its head. What needs to be done here is interpret the future through the past and present. ‘Freud’, of course, could not have known. *The White Hotel* does not amount to a criticism of psychoanalysis (Thomas has repeatedly made clear his admiration for Freud) so much as a problematization of the rational process of interpretation. Psychoanalysis was born of the same impulse as literary modernism and stands as an example of the surface-depth model of interpretation. The effect of witnessing ‘Freud’s’ attempts to interpret Lisa’s case are that the reader is invited to reflect on his/her own process of interpretation, and to understand that this
is not as straightforward as the surface-depth model of psychoanalysis would have us believe. For, while it is possible for the reader to interpret the case of Lisa in a more satisfactory way than ‘Freud’ can, we cannot reduce the novel as a whole to a totalized interpretation. This seems to me the function of the last chapter of the book. Entitled ‘The Camp’, it looks forward to a time after death when everyone in the novel is reunited (even a lost cat is recovered) and love reigns. As the work of critics who have considered this novel shows, this section is resistant to interpretation: is it an idealized representation of Israel? Or heaven? A dramatization of Hamlet’s ‘For in that sleep of death what dreams may come’? Or an ironic commentary on modernist closure? We cannot help but be especially aware of the indeterminacy of this section, coming as it does after we have acknowledged the difficulty of the modernist method of interpretation.

The novel does not collapse any notions of the value of interpretation rather than remind us of the difficulty of the interpretive process. By being presented with a case of frustrated modernist interpretation which borders on epistemophilia, our own response must be contradictory: our own epistemophilic desire to interpret is underscored by a recognition that the interpretive process is fraught with difficulty. This is the effect of the trace of the modern in the postmodern.

There is an analogous outcome in another major sub-genre of postmodern fiction which frustrates interpretation. William Spanos has argued that:

the paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination is the anti-detective story (and its anti-psychoanalytical analogue), the formal purpose of which is to evoke the impulse to “detect” and/or to psychoanalyze in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime (or find the cause of the neurosis). (Spanos 80).

Where the ‘anti-psychoanalytical’ *The White Hotel* interrogates one paradigm of modernist interpretation, the postmodern anti-detective novel deals with another. The detective story, which reaches its apogee in the modernist period with the Sherlock Holmes stories, as well as the uses to which writers like James and Conrad put the form, is clearly representative of the
values of the Enlightenment: as Catherine Belsey says of the Holmes’ stories, they ‘begin in enigma, mystery, the impossible, and conclude with an explanation which makes it clear that logical deduction and scientific method render all mysteries accountable to reason’ (Belsey 112). The postmodern version undermines this logic in several ways, by constructing stories in which, for example: there is no crime or criminal identifiable (Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor*); the detective is the unwitting criminal (Robbe-Grillet’s *The Erasers*); everyone turns out to be a criminal, and thus the case becomes one of massive conspiracy (Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*). In *The Name of the Rose* the crime is solved ironically, as a result of the detective’s misinterpretation. 

I want now to consider three examples - Borges’ ‘Death and the Compass’ (the archetypal anti-detective text), Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*, and Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor* - which demonstrate how this ‘post’-genre is closely bound up with the idea of paranoid reading - both inside the text, and outside too: a feature of each novel, like *The White Hotel*, is the ‘transfer’ of interpretive paranoia onto the reader. Each novel features a detective whose efforts to use ratiocinative brilliance to crack a case resemble the way the modernist reader approaches a text. Their determination to read paranoiacally proves to be their downfall; they confuse, to echo Lyotard, the ‘as if it were the case’ with the ‘it is the case’. In each example, their rational-minded methods seem initially to produce results, as they think they have succeeded in uncovering a complex hidden pattern behind the inexplicable occurrences which confront them. This in each case involves something akin to literal reading: e.g. Lönnrot in ‘Death and the Compass’ constructs a brilliant thesis based on the fact that each murder signifies a letter of the Tetragrammaton, Auster’s Quinn traces a suspects movements around the blocks of New York and thinks that they spell out the words, ‘Tower of Babel’. But the detectives get nowhere: Borges’ hero finds that his determination to read more into the case than is there leads him to be the next victim; Auster’s sleuth finds
that his suspect has suddenly vanished, Ackroyd’s Hawksmoor is left to ponder how, ‘All these events were random and yet connected, part of a pattern so large that it remained inexplicable’ (157). The paranoid metaphor for the detectives’ actions is emphasized, in the two later novels, by the literal descent of each detective into a state of extreme delirium: real psychosis appears to develop out the paranoid desire to make connections. At the end, it seems that each detective is dead.

The result in each of these novels is that the reader - whose interpretive task in detective fiction has always been analogous to that of the detective - becomes conscious of his/her similarly paranoid activity as s/he reads. Peter Brooks has suggested that in order for a story to be complete (when, in Freudian terms, repetition can become full recollection) there needs to be a ‘transaction’ or ‘transference’ between narrator and narratee. In the case of these postmodern fictions, though, the reader is unable completely to ‘work through’ the meaning of the text, which remains indeterminate. The modernist epistemophilia it seems to dispel is only in fact transferred elsewhere - onto the reader, who is compelled to continue paranoid reading. The complex, undecideable concluding passages of ‘Death and the Compass’ and Hawksmoor work, like the last chapter of The White Hotel, by inviting the reader on an impossible excursion: to decode them. City of Glass achieves this effect more subtly. Before taking on the case Quinn is both a writer of detective stories and a ‘devoted reader’ of them too, because ‘in the good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant. And even if it is not significant, it has the potential to be so - which amounts to the same thing’ (8). The effect of this metafictional insertion is to lead the reader to expect Auster’s novel similarly to yield to modernist reading practices. Yet, like the others, although it works within the conventions of the detective story, continually activating the hermeneutic code to keep the reader’s attention, it frustrates our attempts to explain its meaning, the same way each detective is defeated in his quest. City of Glass emphasizes that
chance rather than design is at the heart of everything. At one point in, waiting for his quarry to come off a train, Quinn is faced with two identical versions of him: ‘Quinn froze. There was nothing he could do now that would not be a mistake. Whatever choice he made - and he had to make a choice - would be arbitrary, a submission to chance’ (p56). Chance is the enemy of paranoia, and, to some extent, of cognition. This is something Auster understands well, as his reason for writing an anti-detective novel makes clear: ‘the detective really is a very compelling figure, a figure we all understand. He’s the seeker after truth, the problem-solver, the one who tries to figure things out. But what if, in the course of trying to figure it out, you just unveil more mysteries?’. This is the modernist nightmare, likely to send the seeker after truth into paranoia (Auster, Notebook 109).

It is also, to some extent, the postmodern nightmare, as the reader of these novels is made to feel. The only truth such fictions unequivocally affirm is the truth about interpretive desire. The nature of all desire, Lacan has taught us, is that it is repeatedly deflected from one signifier to another, never coming to rest on its object. But, crucially, this knowledge does not stop us from desiring. Likewise, in postmodernity, the knowledge that the ‘quest for hidden meanings may be profoundly mistaken’ does not end the longing for final interpretation.

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1 See Frosh for a detailed account of the problems of linking paranoia and postmodernity.
3 Brooks makes fascinating use of the concept in his consideration of how in modern narrative (in painting and literature) the body figures as a potential site of meaning that inspires and resists the epistemophilic desire to know.
4 Though they do not directly address the question of postmodernism, something similar is implied in Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of the oppressive desiring machines of capitalism, the negative response to which is paranoia, in contrast to the positive creative space offered by schizophrenia. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. New York: Viking, 1977.
5 Patricia Waugh (Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction. London: Routledge, 1984.) compares this with the less radical British tradition, where even though it ‘may only be reached through text’, ‘“reality” exists beyond text certainly’ (89).
6 Flieger (96) provides a useful four-point set of categories for novels which deal with paranoia thematically and which are themselves paranoid in structure.
7 See the article in The Observer, August 18th, 1994. ‘Cultists go round in circles’.
Stephano Tani develops a more systematic categorization of the anti-detective novel, dividing it into three types: the 'innovative', 'metafictional' and 'deconstructive'.

What is interesting about Auster’s autobiographical writings is the fact that he himself seems prone to just this kind of paranoid disbelief in chance. In this he in fact resembles D. M. Thomas. The tendency of both authors to regard chance and coincidence as evidence of design strongly resembles the state of mind which Freud, again as a result of his analysis of the Rat Man, called ‘the omnipotence of thought’. See D. M. Thomas. *Memories and Hallucinations*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1988.

Brooks suggests how epistemophilia works according to this view of desire. Its importance in childhood ensures that it sets up ‘a model of the desire to know as an inherently unsatisfiable, Faustian project’; ‘the child’s own physical development is inadequate to allow it to understand the nature of adult sexuality, and the meaning of sexual difference’ (Brooks, *Body 9*).

**Works Cited**


The Observer. August 18th, 1994. ‘Cultists go round in circles’.


