

Matter, System and Agency in William Gaddis' *JR*

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This thesis analyzes William Gaddis' novel *JR* (1975) from a perspective that combines material ecocriticism with systems theory. The aim is to show how *JR* depicts the relationship between human and material agency and how it leads to political, social and economic considerations that resist neoliberal capitalism, which was emerging at the time of *JR*'s composition. *JR* is seen as an example of a creative ontology, where matter signifies and communicates alongside humans and possesses an agency that, while radically different from human agency, makes itself seen and heard. The thesis is also concerned with how material agency in humans, non-humans and the environment interacts with the autopoietic systems of contemporary life in *JR*.

The two primary theoretical frameworks this thesis employs are material ecocriticism as proposed by Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino (2014), and the idea of autopoietic systems proposed by Niklas Luhmann (1984) and Hannes Bergthaller (2014). Readerly response to *JR* is discussed by way of personal experience with the text and Rachel Smith's (2015) idea of impersonal feelings is used to argue for the idea that reading *JR* through immersion is an ecological gesture that serves to orient the reader towards the novel's depiction of material agency.

Keywords: matter, agency, autopoiesis, systems theory, affect, material ecocriticism

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# 1. Introduction

People R Matter

— Joseph McElroy (1987 [2018], 545)

The American postmodernist author Joseph McElroy (b. 1930) resembles William Gaddis, the writer examined in this thesis, in many ways. Both were born in New York City, wrote complex experimental fiction and avoided commercial success throughout their careers. The quote above is from the novel *Women and Men* (1987), in which McElroy investigates the various systems, relations and possibilities of contemporary life in the New York City of the early 1970s. In this thesis, I analyze William Gaddis' novel *JR* (1975), which also addresses these ideas and uses the same setting. More importantly, however, the relationship between humans and matter is central to both novels. Describing the paradigm through which *Women and Men* approaches the topic, McElroy writes: “let R (for rotation) equal any number; having found that R may be positioned between two things in order to (through turning, looking, and merging through converging) make them equal, we suspect that R means ‘equals’” (McElroy 1987, 545). McElroy suggests that through “turning, looking, and merging through converging”, people realize themselves as matter: people “are” matter. This flux-like process of constant (re)realization and negotiation corresponds with the ecocritical ideas I use in this thesis and the structure and content of *JR*.

*JR* is set in the United States of the 1970s, but the world it depicts is in many ways relevant to our contemporary situation. Arguably, we still live in the neoliberal moment, the overture of which was taking place in *JR*'s time and place. In this thesis I use the term neoliberalism in the sense it is described by the Marxist scholar David Harvey. He writes as follows:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. [...] [The state] must set up those military, defense, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need

be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets don't exist [...] then they must be created (Harvey 2005, 2).

Neoliberalism places emphasis on the individual and their ability to function uninhibited by the state, social solidarity or other external factors. Instead, it is assumed that relatively unbridled individual liberty brings about unbridled happiness and human prosperity. Harvey attributes the rise of neoliberalism particularly to U.S. President Ronald Reagan, U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, U.S. Treasury official Paul Volcker and Chairman of the People's Republic of China Deng Xiaoping (ibid.); all figures who came into prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s, slightly after the period *JR* depicts. However, I believe that the conditions which later enabled neoliberalism were already there during the time of Gaddis' writing and *JR* depicts in a prescient manner the nature and ramifications of these proto-neoliberal conditions.

The vast importance of neoliberalism relies on the idea that as an ideology it grew beyond the realms of economics and politics. As Harvey states, it became "hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects of ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (Harvey 2005, 3). Harvey argues that we in the neoliberal moment, think and act according to neoliberal modes of competition, individual freedom and individual happiness over social responsibility with regards to issues such as climate change, inequality and social justice. As I argue later, *JR* already criticizes this way of being in the world and the conditions that enable it. Monetary gain, perpetual growth, profit and personal property as measures of value and success belong to the purview of neoliberalism.

Harvey formulates this thought even more succinctly by stating that neoliberalism "seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (ibid.). When Harvey writes in the block quotation above that "markets have to be created", he does not merely refer to the creation of markets in new areas of technology, natural resources or finance, but to establishing an entire regime of individualism and competition that seeps into every facet of life and the world; where the neoliberal view is taken to be the default and neutral view. I return to this discussion in chapter four, but here it suffices to say that neoliberalism as a

project of individual freedom above social and ecological solidarity is present both in our day and in *JR*.

In this thesis I analyze *JR* from a point of view that combines material ecocriticism with system theory, specifically the theory of autopoietic systems proposed by Niklas Luhmann (1984). I argue that *JR* embodies a creative materiality and its creative ontology has profound ethico-political implications. Humans act differently from material agents in the novel, but the process and result of those actions are equally meaningful. Moreover, I show how through analyzing material conditions, the contingency of human agency in relation to storied matter is revealed in the novel. As I argue later, this becomes one of the main ways in which *JR* resists the dominant neoliberal ideology. Individualism, capitalism and the perceived unity of reality are all questioned and shown to be flawed in their premise, which assumes the dominance and independent exceptionalism of human interest and subjectivity. This is why reading *JR* from a material ecocritical point of view expands its critique of runaway capitalism beyond the relatively simple idea that neoliberal capitalism enables the exploitation of natural spaces and resources, into a more holistic critique of the ways in which it fails to consider humans as ecologically situated and materially constructed bodies, ineluctably embedded within the material web of connections that comprises the world.

One of my central arguments is that *JR* displays its resistance to the dominant neoliberal ideology through two elements; its structure as a text and its thematic content. These two aspects are inseparable, but their connection also makes the work of analyzing *JR* challenging. One of the significant aspects of the novel is how it forces the reader to pay attention by overwhelming them with detail and disorientation. Omissions, ellipses and disconnection is favored over more straightforward narration. The Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser identified a comparable difficulty in discerning the various elements that govern life in contemporary society:

The structure which controls the concrete existence of men, i.e. which informs the lived ideology of the relations between men and objects and between objects and men, this structure, as a structure, can never be depicted by its presence, in person, positively, in relief,

but only by traces and effects, negatively, by indices of absence, in intaglio (en creux) (Althusser 1971, 237).

For Althusser, traces and effects become the focal points, not clearly defined presences. Similarly, the reader of *JR* is encouraged to pay attention to “the indices of absence”, to what is omitted, disconnected and implied, instead of what is overt in the text.

In the second chapter, I offer a brief overview of William Gaddis’ work, career and relationship with American literature. I want to emphasize the lack of attention Gaddis has received in contrast with the value of his work. I then move on to discuss *JR*’s relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with special emphasis on its resurgence after the 2008 recession and the Occupy protest movement. In the last subsection, I give a brief overview of *JR*’s plot and key characters, but also argue that the novel’s plot is secondary to other considerations. In the third chapter, I discuss *JR*’s structure and argue on the basis of my experience with the text and Rachel Smith’s (2015) idea of impersonal feelings that reading *JR* through immersion is an ecological gesture. In the fourth chapter, I use Fredric Jameson’s (1991) idea of postmodernism as a totalization of market valuation, Ihab Hassan’s (1993) concept of indeterminance and Tom LeClair’s (1989) category of the systems novel to conceptualize *JR* as a postmodern novel that is both concerned with and representative of contemporary political, economic and philosophical positions. In the fifth chapter, I first introduce material ecocriticism as defined by Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino (2014) and the theory of autopoietic systems as proposed by Niklas Luhmann (1984) and Hannes Bergthaller (2014) and discuss their relationship. In the subsequent sections, I analyze material assemblages in connection with autopoietic systems and particularly the material agency of the body. I then reflect on the ways in which my reading of *JR* in light of these ideas contributes to the novel’s resistance of neoliberal capitalism.

Throughout this thesis, I emphasize the importance of the concept of agency. Feminist philosopher and physicist Karen Barad defines agency as participation in the constant and dynamic becoming of the world:

[T]he primary ontological units are not “things” but phenomena—dynamic topological reconfigurings, entanglements, relationalities,



(re)articulations of the world. And the primary semantic units are not “words” but material-discursive practices through which (ontic and semantic) boundaries are constituted. This dynamism is agency. Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world. The universe in agential intra-activity in its becoming (Barad 2007, 141).

For Barad, agency is shared between phenomena and it is constitutive of the world as a process of change. In its presentation of matter and the world, *JR* adheres to this conception of agency.

One of the ways in which Barad’s concept of agency is useful is that it leads to ecological responsibility. She writes: “We (but not only “we humans”) are already responsible to the others with whom or which we are entangled, not through conscious intent but through the various ontological entanglements that materiality entails” (Barad 2007, 393). Barad argues that material concerns necessarily entail ecological responsibility through proximity, entanglement and causality even if the materiality is not individually or consciously recognized. This is a claim that I echo throughout the final chapter, and it is one that serves as my premise when I argue for the ways in which *JR*’s ecological solidarity challenges the exploitative ecology of neoliberalism.

In my analysis, I focus on the ways in which material agency is depicted in the novel, how it interacts with autopoietic systems and how the novel disperses both the reader and the characters (especially the eponymous *JR* and the composer Edward Bast) into the material environment. After showing how matter has agency and voice, I affirm this dispersal by discussing the ways in which the human body’s material reality is shown to be comprised of agencies themselves and how they serve to situate humans ecologically. Throughout this thesis I stress each discussion’s relation to the idea of resisting neoliberal capitalism as the dominant ideology in favor of realizing a more politically, economically, socially and ecologically just view of human, non-human and environmental interconnection. I dedicate the final subsection to summarizing this idea as one of the aims of this thesis is to emphasize *JR*’s relevance as a critique of capitalism that also suggests constructive alternative ways of conceptualizing the self and others. By way of its experimental features and relevant subject matter, *JR* proves to be a remarkably rich text for contemporary ecocritical approaches.

## 2. William Gaddis in American Literature

William Gaddis was an American author born on December 29, 1922 in New York City. He died of cancer on December 16, 1998 in East Hampton, New York. During his career he published five novels: *The Recognitions* (1955), *JR* (1975), *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985), *A Frolic of His Own* (1994) and *Agapē Agape* (2002). In addition, a collection of essays titled *The Rush for Second Place*, a reference to Gaddis' career-long fascination with the theme of failure, was published posthumously in 2002 along with a collection of correspondence in 2013. Gaddis lived and wrote in post-war United States, but he travelled extensively in the U.S. and abroad throughout his life. His novels are mainly set in the U.S. but feature occasional scenes in countries such as France and Mexico, as is the case for instance in *The Recognitions*. Therefore, Gaddis is a profoundly American writer whose perspective on the United States is informed by his international experience.

However, Gaddis' role in the literary United States was not widely recognized during his lifetime. Steven Moore, who was among the first to pay attention to Gaddis by publishing a guide to the structure and allusions of *The Recognitions* in 1982, claims that Gaddis' work was overlooked critically and commercially for nearly his entire career (Moore 2017, 574). Gaddis felt that the critical reception to *The Recognitions* was lackluster and very few critics gave the book a sufficient reading, mainly due to its extensive length. Subsequently, *JR* features a sequence where Gaddis parodies the reviews of *The Recognitions* and questions the capabilities of literary critics with regard to complex fiction (*JR*, 515). Moreover, the author Christopher Carlisle Reid used the reception to *The Recognitions* to criticize literary reviews in the United States in his article indignantly titled *Fire the Bastards!* (published under the pseudonym Jack Green; *newspaper*, 1962), a reference to the early reviewers of *The Recognitions*.

However, *JR* won Gaddis a National Book Award in 1976 and numerous favorable reviews, but popular success eluded him. According to Moore, Gaddis had to resort to low-wage part-time work in order to sustain himself. This meant working in various settings, including in New York as a representative for corporate entities and teaching a brief course on the theme of

failure in American literature at Bard College (Moore 2017, 575). He incorporated many elements of his personal experiences into his fiction, as is evidenced, for example, by the education component of *JR* and its detailed discussions of tax law and stock manipulation.

Gaddis wrote in post-war United States and his first novel was published in 1955. This means that his work is among the earliest that could be characterized as postmodern in American literature. Widespread disagreement exists on the issue of what constitutes the notion of postmodernism in literature and my aim in this thesis is not to contribute to that discussion. For my purposes, I view that Gaddis, writing only ten years after World War II, was among the first American postmodern writers. I discuss the postmodern characteristics of *JR* in more detail in a later section. Gaddis' first novel *The Recognitions* was published at a time when the idea of postmodern literature had not yet fully emerged, and therefore contemporary reviews compared him to famous modernist male writers such as Malcolm Lowry and James Joyce. Humorously, the comparisons to Joyce became so ubiquitous that Gaddis responded to a Joyce scholar's letter in 1975 in the following manner:

I also read, & believe with a good deal more absorbtion [sic], Eliot, Dostoevski, Forster, Rolfe, Waugh, why bother to go on, anyone seeking Joyce finds Joyce even if both Joyce & the victim found them in Shakespear [sic], read right past whole lines lifted from Eliot &c, all which will probably for on so long as Joyce remains an academic cottage industry (Gaddis 2013, 297).

Gaddis describes himself as the “victim” of Joyce scholars' interest to find traces of Joyce in Gaddis' work, but this passage also displays a dislike toward being forced into an existing category. Rather than being a reproduction of Joyce, Gaddis' idea was to use similar tools and sources to create something wholly new and unique. It was only after the publication of other postmodern novels—Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963), William H. Gass' *Omensetter's Luck* (1966) and others—in the 1960s that the appropriate vocabulary in reviews and reader responses to Gaddis' debut novel began to form.

Gaddis' position as one of the earliest postmodern writers is one of the reasons why Steven Moore notes that despite the lack of attention from

elsewhere, other writers at the time of Gaddis' writing recognized his work and were influenced by it (Moore 1989, 138). He lists authors such as Thomas Pynchon, William H. Gass and David Markson as examples of Gaddis' influence. The stylistic and other similarities between Gaddis and Pynchon are present to such an extent that William H. Gass (2012, 1) in his introduction to a reprint of *The Recognitions* notes that readers have argued Pynchon to be Gaddis' nom de plume as Pynchon himself is famous for his secrecy and aversion to public appearances.

Three of Gaddis's five novels, (*The Recognitions*, *JR* and *A Frolic of His Own*) could be characterized as maximalist literature. This category, used recently by Stefano Ercolino (2012) with particular reference to postwar American literature, concerns novels which are long and contain many voices, subplots and digressions; a kind of diegetic excess. Through an encyclopedic approach they aim to capture "the complexity of the world in which we live," (Ercolino 2012, 251). Ercolino suggests that Gaddis's long novels adhere to this category to a remarkable degree (ibid.). As I argue later, *JR* is comprised of fragmentation and dissonance. Its length is not self-congratulatory or deliberately aimed toward confusing or defeating the reader, but reflects what Gaddis said to the critic Tom LeClair in a 1980 interview when asked about the length of his books: "If one is involved with a complicated idea, and spends every day with it, takes notes, and reads selectively with it in mind, ramifications proliferate," (LeClair 2008, 21). Gaddis and the maximalist novel are interested in representing and interrogating critically the complexity of the world and in that process, the novel incorporates more and more ideas and aspects. Therefore, when ramifications proliferate, the novel accommodates. The length and complexity of Gaddis' work serves his involvement with complicated ideas, but these features have also been viewed less favorably and they relate closely to the reasons why Gaddis has been overlooked critically and commercially.

## **2.1. *JR* in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

This section describes Gaddis' relevance to our day and the rediscovery of *JR* during and after the recession of 2008. The American author Jonathan Franzen (2002) wrote an essay about reading difficult literature, where he discussed

Gaddis as an example of difficulty in fiction. The essay caused some controversy and discussion and helped to popularize Gaddis, especially after other voices defended him against some of Franzen's accusations. According to Franzen, *The Recognitions* was a novel with which he could have a personal relationship. With *JR*, however, "[t]he bookmark [...] remained stuck on page 469, attesting to my defeat by 'J R.'" (Franzen 2002, 6). Franzen's essay and its numerous proponents and opponents facilitated some discussion about Gaddis in the early 2000s. According to the journalist Jonathan Sturgeon, Franzen's critique was a popular response at the time:

Ironically, Gaddis' novels, especially *JR*, would regain political favor, but not before they were repelled by the Franzen Line, which held in New York between 2002 and 2008. (Or at least it seemed that way to me when I attended panel after panel that cited Franzen's essay as a valuable mainstay against "experimental" and "difficult" fiction.) It wasn't until Occupy surged in the wake of the financial collapse that Gaddis began to reclaim his reputation among a somewhat wider readership (Sturgeon, 2015).

Franzen condemned *JR* as portraying the worst excesses of difficult fiction, but as Sturgeon argues, the novel became unexpectedly relevant in the wake of the 2008 recession. The excesses—fragmentation, multiplicity of voices and experimentation—and the thematic content of unbridled corporate freedom, tax evasion and market fraud functioned as central critiques of contemporary financial capitalism's failures, all of which became dangerously apparent during the 2008 recession and the subsequent Occupy movement.

The Occupy movement was a global protest beginning in 2011. In the United States, Occupy was most visible in the Occupy Wall Street protests which emphasized the various economic, political and social injustices in the United States. The recession of 2008 had exposed the failures of Wall Street and drew attention to the excesses of corporate culture, such as high salaries and bonuses in relation to stagnating wages and low rates of hiring. In a letter to Nadya Tolokonnikova, a member of the feminist punk collective Pussy Riot, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek identified the two main components of the Occupy movement as follows:

1) a discontent with capitalism as a *system* [emphasis in original]—the problem is the capitalist system as such, not any particular corruption; and 2) an awareness that the institutionalized form of multi-party democracy is incapable of holding back the excesses [my emphasis] of capitalism, i.e., that democracy has to be reinvented,” (Žižek 2014, 74).

Žižek connects the Occupy movement with the system and excess of capitalism. I want to draw specific attention to Žižek’s use of the words “excess” and “system” because, as I argue in chapter four, these are key elements in Gaddis’s treatment of capitalism and its role in the world in *JR*. In addition to street protest, Twitter and other social media sites were central as sites of communication, organization and discussion on the internet. Gaddis and especially *JR* was rediscovered in this context of worldwide awareness about various forms of injustice in the neoliberal system. *JR*’s rediscovery manifested not only in the reprints of Gaddis’ work published in 2012 by Dalkey Archive, but also in community-driven discussions and new readerly responses.

Lee Konstantinou (2012) started a reading group focused on *JR* in July of 2012 in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* blog on the blog service tumblr. He called the project #OccupyGaddis and extended it elsewhere online using the same hashtag. In his article about the nature and impact of #OccupyGaddis, Philip Miletic (2016, 168) argues that *JR*’s complexity works to its benefit in this collective environment. The internet discussions resemble the collective voices of *JR* and the co-operation between readers in forming the narrative of the book also encourages them to participate in their own societies. According to Miletic, this is how *JR* and #OccupyGaddis move “beyond the realm of the novel’s fiction and into their own reality,” (ibid.). *JR* not only depicts contemporary society, but actively encourages its readers to understand the world as they work to understand *JR*. Konstantinou refers to this in his original blog post:

*JR* is a book about our fragmented attention and a book designed to tax our capacity to pay attention—to demand higher and deeper kinds of attention from us—in a world imaged to be (both in 1975 and today) a kind of conspiracy to keep us from focusing on what’s right in front of us. The great virtue of collective reading projects is that they give us an occasion to work together to help us sustain our attention, to achieve goals we might have thought too difficult to attain working on our own (Konstantinou 2012).

Here the collective effort to read *JR* is given a political dimension. The injustices of capitalism, the systemic social issues and other problems of contemporary society require constant attention and response. #OccupyGaddis becomes a site of praxis for identifying and engaging with these issues in the world; of maintaining the necessary critical attention towards local and global issues which exceeds the capabilities of any single individual. This process of communication not only resembles *JR*'s voices on a structural level, but also highlights one of the many ways in which Gaddis is an author relevant to contemporary life.

As a representation of American society, *JR* is not only pertinent to its depicted time and place or to the time of its writing. Miletic writes that “[a]lthough the members of the group discuss the novel and help orient each other through the difficult text, there is very little mention of the time Gaddis was writing in; rather, members use the text to discuss the 2012 [U.S.] Presidential campaign [between the Republican Mitt Romney and the incumbent Democrat Barack Obama],” (Miletic 2016, 168). This shows that new aspects of Gaddis’ fiction continue to be discovered and *JR*'s prescience about the realities and potentialities of global capitalism, communication and other issues are arguably even more relevant now than they were in 1975. As a further example, writer John Domini connects *JR* Van Sant, the immature, out-of-control capitalist with the incumbent President of the United States Donald J. Trump (Domini 2016). Domini draws a parallel between *JR*'s speech—which is inconsistent, lexically limited and repetitive—with the speech of Donald Trump. Sardonicly commenting on the current trend of highlighting literary works which in some fashion can be seen to anticipate Donald Trump and his presidency, Domini subtitles his article with the statement “yet another great 20<sup>th</sup>-century writer predicts the rise of Donald Trump.” This comedic gesture reproduces the caustic humor of *JR* as well.

## **2.2. Plot and Characters of *JR***

This subsection presents an outline of *JR*. The novel is centered around its eponymous character, the 11-year-old *JR* Vansant (occasionally rendered in the text also as “Van Sant”). The plot of *JR* is told in a mediated and fragmented

manner, which renders it ambiguous and difficult to trace. As I argue in the next chapter, this is a meaningful effect, which makes the plot and characters of *JR* secondary to the reading experience. The tendency for readers to expect a certain kind of clear and comprehensible plot is even ridiculed in *JR* when Jack Gibbs is advising Edward Bast in composing: “Write a cantata you don’t need a plot, problem everybody running around wants to be told what happens next don’t need a plot,” (*JR*, 399). *JR* follows this advice and refuses to tell what happens next. For the purposes of this thesis, I provide only a brief overview of some of the most important characters and their development in the novel.

JR appears in the beginning of the book during a field trip to Wall Street. He is also the protagonist of *Trickle-Down Economics: JR Goes to Washington* (1987), a short story published in the *New York Times* and written in the form of a congressional transcript in which the now older JR is a government official working with the federal budget. In this thesis, I do not focus on the short story in any way, and instead discuss JR as he is depicted in the novel. JR’s voice is discernible in the text through his constant use of the phrase “this here” as a modifier for a noun (e.g. “I mean that this here big broker,” [*JR*, 167]) and “listen” and “hey” as linguistic filler (e.g. “So I mean listen I got this neat idea hey you listening?” [*JR*, 723]). During the field trip to Wall Street the basic ideas and functions of the stock market are explained to JR by a trader. JR becomes fascinated by the stock market and starts his own business by trading in army surplus materials and low-value stocks referred to as penny stocks. Over the comedically short period of approximately three months, this enterprise develops into the JR Corporation, a large multinational company. Eventually, after causing much environmental, economic and political damage, the corporation is subsumed by the larger Typhoon International lead by the business tycoon “Black” Jack Cates. The novel ends with JR suggesting a new business idea to Edward Bast.

Edward Bast is JR’s music teacher and a composer who is hired to compose advertisement music for Typhoon International. He is an ambitious artist who struggles throughout the novel with balancing working for a corporate entity that he finds repulsive with satisfying his artistic desire to write a symphony. He also helps JR in managing his company and appears to be among the few of



JR's hundreds of employees who has unmediated contact with JR and knows him to be a child. Further, Bast is entangled in a hereditary dispute over shares of the family company as his father Thomas Bast, the CEO, has passed away. Edward Bast is last seen in the novel walking away from JR's suggestion of a new business venture after giving up his shares of the family company and determined to compose his symphony.

The other central characters in the novel are Amy Joubert and Jack Gibbs. They are teachers in JR's school with Amy teaching social studies and Jack teaching science. Their romantic relationship and involvement in the corporate world form the other main focus of *JR*. Amy is the niece of Jack Cates, the CEO of Typhoon International, and Jack Gibbs, as a result of a relationship with Edward Bast's sister-in-law Stella Angel, owns a number of shares in the Bast family company. The management and ownership of the Bast company after the death of the father becomes a problem for the surviving members of the family. I argue that the stories of JR, Bast, Gibbs and Joubert form the core of the novel. However, this core is supported by a host of foil characters, subplots and seemingly random encounters and voices.

### 3. The Reading Experience

In this chapter I discuss how the structure of *JR* affects the reading experience and how the novel benefits from a reading that emphasizes immersion over mastery. Following *JR* is complicated by the number of characters and subplots in the novel, as well as its difficult free-flowing structure. *JR* is set at an unspecified time in the New York of the early 1970s, with Steven Moore arguing that the entire novel takes place during a period of 30 days (Moore 2017, 423). As the novel is mostly constructed of dialogue and reproduces the flow of speech in writing, it echoes another famous American writer, John Dos Passos. Dos Passos wrote in the opening of his *U.S.A. Trilogy* (in a scene that is also taking place in New York City) that “[b]ut mostly, U.S.A. is the speech of the people,” (Dos Passos 1938, 7). *JR* extends this idea to its extreme by representing American society primarily through its speech and affording its speakers very little external depiction or textual space outside of their voices. These voices mix with each other and the voices of the environment in a flux of communication: the speech of U.S.A. Thus, *JR* is an example of what Stefano Ercolino calls “dissonant chorality” (Ercolino 2012, 246), where the narration of the novel is consistently done by a plurality of voices and no single voice could be characterized as the protagonist or of more importance to the narrative than another.

In his book on postmodern American literature, critic Larry McCaffery includes a brief entry on William Gaddis, and writes about *JR* that in the book “[c]haracters are identifiable by speech patterns, linguistics tricks, coughs, stutters, smells, clothing” (McCaffery 1986, 375). This is the premise for identifying the speaker at any given moment in the novel. As no direct indication is given from outside the dialogue, the reader has to assume the task of interpreting and tracking who is speaking, with whom and who else is present in the scene. Speech patterns, expressions and other linguistic features, as I show later, are key in this process, but McCaffery also lists material features, such as clothing and smells. What he refers to are the occasions of descriptive prose which connect dialogue scenes. While I argue about their use and meaning in chapters five, here it suffices to mention that they often depict material agents which guide focalization and the reader’s attention. For example, when

characters are exploring a seemingly abandoned house with a flashlight, the beam guides both the reader and the characters: “—A place for a little fancy screwing...the light swept over the tumbled bed,” (*JR*, 141). Here the light is a material agent which enables humans (again both the characters and the reader) to see what is present in the environment. However, often this guidance is subtler than the symbolic gaze of the light beam. Because of its ambiguities, any reader of *JR* is likely at one point or another to confuse speakers, locations and connections with each other. However, this does not suggest that there exists an absolute correct reading of *JR*. In the following section, I argue that *JR* is best understood through this readerly confusion.

### **3.1. Immersive Reading and Impersonal Feeling**

I argue that confusion on behalf of the reader is central to experiencing *JR*. I base this argument in my own process of reading *JR* multiple times using two different strategies. I want to show that while a detail-oriented reading is not an impossible task, the novel encourages and benefits greatly from a more affective and immersed approach. In my initial reading, I approached *JR* like I would a realist novel where I, as a reader, could expect to make sense of traditional key aspects such as plot, theme and central characters. I attempted to track and memorize every detail, character, pattern of speech and conversational turn. I traced repeated phrases and other identificatory features of the voices and used explicit references to character names in dialogue to anchor one voice and turn to one character and then infer and count the other voices present in the scene if no other indication of who was speaking was given in the narration. As a result, notes and lines accumulated in the margins of the book and reading became a slow and laborious task. I believe something akin to this strategy is what resulted in Jonathan Franzen abandoning the novel on page 469 out of 726 pages. In my first attempt, I abandoned *JR* after 200 pages. However, I believe there are at least two possible means of overcoming this difficulty.

The first strategy is to read *JR* collaboratively. This is what #OccupyGaddis sought to do. Here no individual reader is responsible for every detail. Instead, through co-operation, communication and multiple readings (better yet, multiple voices) a kind of collective mastery of *JR* can be achieved.

However, for the individual reader this can be an implausible method, especially since the project and the hashtag are now defunct. Therefore, I suggest a second strategy: reading by immersion.

In my second attempt at the novel, I abandoned the previous organized strategy and kept reading at a phase I imaged as similar to the speech of the characters. For example, if a character was agitated on the phone, I read their lines faster than a character who was carefully orating a corporate presentation and trying to ensure that everyone present understood their words. I found that *JR* benefits greatly from reading it out loud as it enables the reader to experience more closely Gaddis' rendition of human speech. Bast refers to this when Stella asks him about writing musical compositions. Bast responds that "you don't really know till you hear it performed," (*JR*, 371). Like a musical composition, *JR* becomes alive when it is performed and heard. When read this way, *JR* engulfs the reader into its flux of voices and the noise of contemporary city life is rendered in a unique way. It is also a more accessible approach to readers previously unfamiliar with Gaddis or with experimental fiction. However, even this strategy may not be initially successful. At first, I found the voices abrasive and the constant sense of being lost in the text discouraging and alienating. Yet, this is a meaningful effect. In terms of readerly response, it acclimates the reader to the reality of contemporary life and life in a city like New York and forces the reader to orient themselves to the rhythm of the text. For me, the alienation eventually gave way to cohabitation. Jack Gibbs refers to this effect when he advises Bast in making a musical: "All those God damned bystanders there's your chorus" (*JR*, 398). Gibbs implies that the chorus, the part of the song that is arguably one of the most important as it is repeated, should be constructed of the voices of the bystanders. When applied to the novel itself, this statement suggests the primacy of the voices of *JR* and their repetition, which leads to readerly immersion.

Throughout my second reading, I was rarely sure of who was speaking, to whom and about what, but this did not reduce the effect of the book in any way. Instead, I learned to listen to the speech of the U.S.A. (to echo John Dos Passos' remark). This strategy also builds tolerance on behalf of the reader towards insecurity and ambiguity; qualities that are essential tools when

analyzing, for example, postmodern literature. This is the *JR* I want to showcase: not an exhaustively mapped text, but a self-generating system comprised of many readings, voices and affective responses; *JR* as an experience. This opens up the possibility of considering *JR* as a text of resistance toward traditional notions of the role of the reader. Here the reader has to actively work to construct their narrative of *JR* and no absolute and rigid notion of a correct reading exists. Relations between characters and events, causes and effects and sequences of the plot appear differently to every reader. If Tom LeClair proclaimed that *JR* is “out of authorial control, somehow self-generating” (LeClair 1989, 88), then it is also out of control for the reader. However, what the reader can control is their approach to *JR*.

The immersive strategy is supported by Rachel Greenwald Smith’s idea of impersonal feelings (Smith 2015, 2). Smith argues that, in the neoliberal age, emotions are considered as privatized; that they are owned and controlled by the person experiencing them despite that they “circulate outside the self” and are “augmented by connections with others” (ibid.). Emotions are learned from others, shared and reflected, and they are contingent on one’s social and cultural conditions. Further, as is argued by scholars like Sara Ahmed, emotions play a key role in politics and in shaping public policy, discourse and spaces. For example, according to Ahmed, fear as an emotion restricts some bodies’ ability to move in spaces and amplifies others’. This enables the emotion of fear to act as a determinant in forming territories that belong to certain bodies and not to others (Ahmed 2004, 70). For these reasons, emotions cannot be viewed merely as private property, but instead their social, cultural and political nature has to be recognized.

Gaining emotional experiences and relating to others (to people in the world as well as literary characters) is key to the neoliberal idea of perennial self-improvement, networking and growth in the name of enriching the competitive individual agent in the societal marketplace. Smith writes: “Neoliberalism’s emphasis on the necessity of personal initiative, along with its pathologizing structures of dependence, calls upon subjects to see themselves as entrepreneurial actors in a competitive system,” (Smith 2015, 2). While the current neoliberal system puts much of its emphasis on individual competition—

to the extent that corporations are considered individuals in U.S. federal law (NPR 2017)—this hyperindividualized competition has to be eschewed in favor of responding to the concerns of material ecocriticism and global collective crises such as climate change and inequality. I argue that *JR*, through my immersive reading, exemplifies a potentiality for change.

### **3.2. Reading as an Ecological Gesture**

In order to move away from this notion of competition to a more co-operative and interdependent model, Smith suggests what she terms impersonal feelings, which highlight relations and interconnectedness between the experiencer, other humans and non-humans and the environment (Smith 2015, 24). Note that Smith does not suppose a hierarchical position between humans, non-humans and the environment; instead emphasizing that impersonal feelings challenge the primacy of the self. According to her, impersonal feelings are affective responses which lie outside the familiar range of emotions. Therefore, they destabilize existing categories, and as a result, the reader (Smith 2015, 20). In other words, Smith is suggesting that when readers espouse so-called private emotions and the ability to relate to a character's emotions as the mark of a novel's success (often referred to in reviews with terms like "relatable," "warm" or "heartfelt,") they are in fact reproducing the neoliberal process of market ideology bleeding into other areas of life that are not instantly recognized as sites of ideology. These kinds of readerly responses that are centered around evaluating and experiencing the novel within the already-established and familiar neoliberal "private" emotions only serve the project of totalizing neoliberalism.

Private emotions also can be argued to acclimate readers towards viewing complex, challenging and unfamiliar fiction as flawed merely because it does not adhere to the established social and personal experience of relatability. This point is enforced by the largely negative early reviews that Gaddis' work received and the lack of recognition and readership in post-war United States. Further, it potentially also characterizes author Jonathan Franzen's response to Gaddis' work that I mentioned earlier. He felt that he could have "a personal relationship" (Franzen 2002, 6) with *The Recognitions*, which is directly related to this idea of reader response. It was only the more alien *JR* that Franzen could

not have a relationship with. As a result, he struggled with the book and determined it to be a failure. Smith (2015, 25) argues that highlighting affective responses that challenge the neoliberal idea of emotions as property and force the reader to experience outside the established categories acts as a catalyst for new orientations and attitudes towards other humans, non-humans and the environment. This is a functionally ecological stance and one that my second approach to *JR* reproduces.

In my second reading, I was both immersed in and alienated by *JR*. I had no easily accessible vocabulary for the feelings of discombobulation and disorientation. This is not only due to the form of the novel, but its characterization. For the methodical reader, the characters of *JR* can appear what is commonly referred to as flat or one-dimensional. However, as Smith argues, these characters vibrate along the formal surfaces of narrative and prosaic tensions (Smith 2015, 12) because they cycle in and out in the flux of the novel, interrupting and disrupting each other. Their presence, ephemeral as it may be, suggests vast scope and complexity of city life which is contrasted with the inability of any individual (in this case the reader) to become familiar or otherwise move beyond a surface-level contact with all of the lives that pass them by in places like city streets, corporate buildings and parks. This means that the reader is placed alongside the characters in a scene of interconnectedness where fleeting moments of recognition are favored over deep emotional representation. This is an impersonal feeling, a form of affect, which functions as a way of rejecting neoliberal privatized, or in Smith's terms, personal, emotions. What this process does is situate the reader in a way that makes them receptive to "cold" emotion. Yet, as Smith writes: "what feels cold is, instead, a feeling produced from the very act of withdrawing, in very specific ways, from the project of representing and transmitting easily recognizable sentiments," (Smith 2015, 18). While this is a worthwhile project in and of itself, the reorientation also serves to open the way for experiencing ecology through affect. This process of reorientation may not be immediate. This was my second attempt but acclimating myself to the rhythms of the prose and the rapid, unpredictable and occasionally unnoticed changes in focalization required a certain amount of unpleasant reading.

The following quote functions as an example of *JR*'s prosaic rhythm. Jack Gibbs, Coach Vogel, principal Whiteback, Vern and principal Dan DiCephalis are talking about how to organize and manage *JR*'s elementary school:

- why we call it corporate democracy isn't it class...
- There did you hear that? Corporate democracy did you hear that Gibbs This share in America it's my company they just bought a share in my company, I didn't get where I am slopping paint on the floor and cutting off my ear either runs this school system along corporate lines Whiteback you'd have these strike threats complains over harassment[sic] cleared up in no time, you'd...
- Yes well of course Vern ahm, I don't think Vern would...
- That's why they're whining about isn't it Dan? This harassment?
- The, the yes the directives the forms, the rules, regulations, guidelines...
- Start an investigation find out who's behind it the..
- The harassment?
- No behind the complaints, the...
- And of course we all get them from the state and the state gets them from the federal education office in...
- The complaints?
- No the directives that is to say guidelines... (*JR*, 49).

The first line is a voice from a television or a radio infiltrating the conversation, which has taken place before the sequence I quote here and which continues after it. Lines end in ellipsis as voices are disrupted by others speaking over them. This is true even for the television as Vogel immediately reacts to it. Discontinuation, incoherence, oblique syntax and lack of punctuation permeate the passage. There is no direct mention from the narrator of who is speaking, and instead, the reader has to know that Whiteback usually includes "ahm" as hedging, DiCephalis espouses conservative and neoliberal views and Gibbs uses the phrase "God damn" as filler even though this does not happen in the passage. Furthermore, if no character identifies themselves in their speech through their idiosyncratic tendencies, then the reader is forced to count the turns between the speakers. This is a brief quote of a conversation where other characters and voices from outside appear and disappear, but it is also one that is located in a clearly delineated room, where every person making an entrance has to be identified to the others in some manner.



This scene differs radically from scenes taking place in streets or other open spaces where the focalization appears more chaotic:

—I'll see you Terry...and she settled back appearing to seek a gap between trouser seats and shifting bulks from cloth coat sales across the aisle to where arms folded over the tie's bold check he say eyes fixed above her on a car card burgeoning the Statue of Liberty garnished with appropriate verse and the train stopped, and started, stopped, as though exchanging refuse from one teeming shore to carry to the next.

—Watch out you stupid fuck you.

—Watch the doors there...

—Is this Penn Station?

—Who you calling stupid you dumb fuck, you want me to bust your fucking ass?

—Let them out there, let them out---resonant, unrelated syllables blared from a loudspeaker, purse clutched her glance over a shoulder swept ahead ready when he turned square in his path steadied against a vending machine.

#### THE LORD'S PRAYER

Use it as a

Lucky Charm Medal

25c

OUT OF ORDER scrawled across it —sorry...he caught her elbow, —are you all right?

—I think I hurt my ankle, they're like animals I swear.

—Can't get you a lucky charm how about a drink...elbows found ribs and shoulders back— place is like the dawn of the world here, this way... countless hands and unattached eyes, faces looking in different directions rolled newspapers clutched and their wives' umbrellas...(JR, 161).

Here DiCephalis and his wife Ann are on a crowded train from Penn Station in Manhattan to Massapequa, NY. The quote features disrupted conversation, descriptive prose, voices from other passengers who are never heard from again, a loudspeaker and, echoing the television from the previous example, a sign on a vending machine is recorded and given literal visibility in the text. Although here the environmental voice disrupts the narrator instead of dialogue between characters. These two examples constitute an accurate sample of the kinds of disorientation *JR* invokes in the reader. The immersive reader is situated into the flux of the novel because of its disorientation and externality. The people speaking the lines “Watch out you stupid fuck you” and “Is this Penn Station?”

are only heard from in these lines, but they are present in the world. They contribute to the scene of a crowded train station during a weekday rush hour.

What Smith calls for when she argues that these are characters that appear in the surfaces of prosaic tensions is recognizing the way they are present and the whole of their existence is implied despite not being given further representation:

Because it does not emanate out of a clearly defined person, [the characters'] vitality appears to be generated mechanically, like electricity. Yet, [...] this sense of liveliness can be understood to index a different form of literary affect --- not the representation of an individual character's feelings but a tonal intensity that emerges from the tensions generated out of the association of narrative elements in the prose. This affective charge comes at the expense of character depth, but it indicated the amplification of a general affectivity that relies on externalization rather than internalization (Smith 2015, 12).

These moments of surface-level contact with persons in the text are enough for the reader to feel this cold affective connection, either consciously or unconsciously. In this scene, the narratorial voice is lost in the crowd to such an extent that it cannot record in the text any more than a few meaningful lines of dialogue, filtered from the innumerable data present in the chaotic scene. The reader feels lost in the same manner. In scenes like this, I found myself unintentionally increasing my reading speed in order to emulate this sense of fast-paced and overlapping dialogue action. In these passages, the immediacy of the prosaic rhythm and tensions force the reader to feel the world of the novel. This is the basis for understanding *JR*'s ecology through impersonal affect.

Impersonal feelings helped me analyze my experience of *JR*. More importantly, they highlighted a new aspect of *JR*'s ecology which relates closely to the formal and thematic ecological concerns the novel has and which I analyze later in this thesis. Here, I want to show how in immersive reading *JR* becomes an ecological text in terms of readerly experience. This happens by way of impersonal affects. Smith writes: "Affects, then, are essentially the conscious registration of ecological situatedness – if, by "ecological," we mean the interconnection of living and nonliving things" (Smith 2015, 96). Because *JR* confuses the reader and suffuses them into the interconnectedness of the novel

(the flux, the voices, the complex structure and other features I have mentioned earlier), the immersed reader is again reoriented, this time towards tracing the unseen and previously (under neoliberalism) unfelt connections between humans, non-humans and matter.

The emotional responses produced by these impersonal affects are anything but private property. Impersonal affects are created in social situations and they represent new emotional experiences that highlight situatedness and connectedness in ways that cannot be articulated with the familiar neoliberal vocabulary of emotions, such as affection, sadness or confusion. In my final quote from her, Smith makes this connection between impersonal affect's ecology and material agency explicit:

This capacity for nonsubjects to exert agency, however, is often elided in contemporary criticism precisely as a result of the tendency to privilege the notion of the autonomous individual. If affects are the consciousness of the impact of human and nonhuman factors on individuals, then they can also be understood to be evidence of the presence of distributive agency (Smith 2015, 96).

I return to *JR*'s material agency in a later chapter, but here it suffices to say that because *JR* is felt impersonally, it enables the immersed reader to become part of its affective ecological whole which implies the presence of non-human agency, or, "distributive agency" as Smith, borrowing from Jane Bennett, calls it (Smith 2015, 96). Surface contact between characters and the reader, the confusion relating to the structure of the novel and the material agencies that guide the novel and make up its central ecocritical paradigm all relate closely to this experience of impersonal readerly experience which, as Smith (ibid.) claims, leads to considerations of distributive agency in the world. This is a unique characteristic which passed unrealized in my initial reading of *JR* where instead of cohabitation, I sought mastery of the text. Listening to the speech of the U.S.A. became, when experienced through the impersonal affect, feeling the world of the U.S.A.

Feeling the world of connections is anathema to neoliberal competition. This is one of the ways in which *JR* suggests a move away from the established contemporary regime. As Kyle Bladow notes: "Postmodernism

readily depicts the fragmentation or dissolution of self as an enfeebling loss, but it can also be generative and powerful,” (Bladow 2015, 35). We need not become powerless ersatz “individuals” in a chaotic world of no fixed centers and endlessly proliferating relations. Instead, we can use this fragmentation to construct a new non-competitive ecological and political discourse. Bladow refers here to a speech given by Judith Butler at an Occupy Wall Street protest (the movement to which *JR* was connected through #OccupyGaddis as I mentioned in section 2.2.) where Butler does not refer to the audience as Americans, individuals or any other readily available category but instead talks about “bodies coming together” (ibid.). In my previous example from *JR* it is precisely body parts that are used as representations of human action: elbows, faces, shoulders, hands and eyes. No other descriptors are given. This use of bodies and their parts instead of names or other more recognizable features is present throughout *JR*, such as in the train station scene I quoted above. The following examples showcase this even further. In the scene where Jack Cates leaves his office and walks into the work space full of people, he is described by way of his shoes instead of the whole person: “his own black shoes parted to tread by a turn a breast, a face, Heiress in Bomb Plot, Andros viewed over tawny buttocks” (*JR*, 437). Jack Gibbs is described in a similar manner when he is rummaging through garbage in his house: “foot tapped foot on Thomas Register as he dug for matches” (*JR*, 581). Therefore, the “bodies coming together” is already happening in the novel. It is important to note that in my immersive reading *JR* became a text of resistance and empowerment through its disorientation and complex structure. These are characteristics that, as Bladow notes, are often used in postmodernism to highlight a kind of “loss”, but here they achieve the opposite: an impersonal feeling of connection as ecology. I return to *JR*’s empowered postmodernism and the political possibilities *JR*’s ecology suggests in chapter 5.4. As I have analyzed in this chapter the structure and reading experience of *JR*, my focus in the next is the thematic content of the novel.

## 4. Conceptualizing *JR*: Postmodernism, Capitalism and the Systems Novel

In this chapter, I connect *JR* with Ihab Hassan's (1993) idea of postmodernism as indeterminance, Jameson's (1991) idea of postmodernism as a continuation of the capitalist project and Tom LeClair's (1989) concept of the systems novel. In *JR*, market capitalism is out of control. This is reflected in the structure of the novel as the seemingly self-generating text appears to only grow in mass and complexity. *JR* features little descriptive prose, character introductions or signposted conversation. Instead, it is mostly comprised of unattributed dialogue and free-play of voices, focalization and syntax, what Tom LeClair calls "the illusion of unmediated speech" (LeClair 1989, 90). This illusion is what the reader encounters as the apparent verisimilitude of *JR*'s speech creates the effect of listening to actual speech in the process of reading. This readerly immersion into the voices of *JR* is important for overcoming the difficulty of the text itself as I argued in the previous chapter.

The descriptive prose always takes the present tense and serves to link different scenes of dialogue together. This creates an effect of constant flow between dialogue and descriptive prose whereby it appears that text is almost creating itself. Tom LeClair referred to this tendency of *JR* as its autopoiesis (LeClair 1989, 93). The text is out of control for the author, the narrator and the reader; it is a self-generating system. It builds on top of itself and grows itself through itself, acting as a metaphor for the axiomatic constant growth of capitalism. Further, *JR* reproduces all of the linguistic filler present in spoken discourse. These include phenomena like hedging, repetition and ellipses. Occasionally, voices from outside the currently focalized dialogue disrupt the text: noises from the street, commercials on television or a public announcement over a loudspeaker. Moreover, the novel features characters talking over the phone, but only one character has their voice recorded in the text, the other being represented by breaks and ellipses. These features situate *JR* firmly within postmodern literature which emphasizes fragmentation, disunity and experimentation.

## 4.1. Postmodernism and Indeterminacy

Brian McHale builds his definition of postmodernism on top of the Lyotardian notion of incredulity toward metanarratives (McHale 1992, 20). He argues that incredulity is in itself a metanarrative—a concept that postmodern philosophy often challenges—and thus instead of a unified theory of postmodernism, a variety of differing explanations should be concocted to emulate the ambiguity of the concept. Ihab Hassan defines the tendency of postmodernism to be comprised of two non-dialectical tendencies: indeterminacy and immanence. He refers to these by the term “indeterminacy” (Hassan 1993, 152). According to him, indeterminacy is a “complex referent” which is delineated by the following concepts: “ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation,” all of which are aimed at “unmaking [...] the entire real of discourse in the West” (Hassan 1993, 153). In other words, various kinds of disintegration form the ever-shifting core of postmodern literature. This disintegration is not employed for its own sake, but to critically interrogate the indeterminacy present in the world. Hassan aims his indeterminacy towards dismantling the established discourse in favor of highlighting previously marginalized viewpoints and emphasizing the sensitivity to ambiguity that is required not only in reading postmodern literature but acting in the world.

Immanency, in contrast, refers to “the capacity of the mind to generalize itself in symbols, intervene more and more into nature, act upon itself through its own abstractions and so become, increasingly, im-mediately [sic], its own environment” (Hassan 1993, 153). Immanency is the constant process of realizing indeterminacy in the world: how individuals perceive themselves, others and their environment in accordance with the referent of indeterminacy and how they think, act and orient themselves according to it. It follows from this that postmodern literature is that which displays the tendency of indeterminacy. This double function is present in *JR* in both its structure and content.

Indeterminacy in *JR* is used to construct the world of the novel. In *JR*, the world is comprised of fragmentary voices, each representing some agent or subject, human or non-human. The reader is never presented with an accurate or coherent picture of any character, situation or event. Instead there is

implication, deduction and guesswork. Even aspects central to the plot can reach the reader vicariously. For example, JR Corporation's effort to drill oil leads to environmental issues and extensive litigation, which are some of the most important factors leading to the corporation's bankruptcy. The information about the company accidentally drilling on the land of a Native American reservation is given in the following manner during a phone call between Edward Bast and an investor. Only Bast's voice is recorded in the text: "Well of course the brewery is on a river but I don't know where it is in relation to these Ace mining claims or the Alberta and...what? You meant to tell me about what Indian reservation right in between what... No listen I don't...I said no!" (*JR*, 381). It is never explicitly stated what the voice on the other line says, and therefore ambiguity is introduced. Jack Gibbs refers to this ambiguity by saying: "listen whole God damned problem read Wiener on communication, more complicated the message more God damned chance for errors, take a few years of marriage such a God damned complex of messages going both ways can't get a God damned thing across," (*JR*, 403). This passage illustrates the complexity of *JR*'s indeterminacy. On a textual level repetition, omission, unorthodox syntax and disruption work in tandem with the constant question of who is speaking to situate the reader in world of vocal disunity.

According to Hassan, the novel's indeterminacies are "uncertain diffractions" which "make for vast dispersals," (Hassan 1993, 153). In other words, acting indeterminacy in the world is referred to as immanence, where the mind is dispersed in the environment and both become one in a semiotic sense. Hassan characterizes immanence as "diffusion, dissemination, pulsion, interplay, communication, interdependence, which all derive from the emergence of human beings as language animals (*ibid.*). This means that the indeterminacies of human thought are acted out in the world, a process in which the world is realized as possessing those same characteristics of indeterminacy. In *JR*, characters are one with the environment they occupy, and material agents such as light, waste and objects in the world direct the novel as much as human agents. The world is constructed by text (or in this case speech), but the world also constructs those who are speaking. Moreover, the binary of human and non-human is dissolved in the novel because they both communicate and act in the world. This systematic

interdependence is reflected in the autopoietic structure of the novel as 726 pages of continuous text with no breaks, sections or chapters. The reader is required to dissolve in this continuous indeterminance. However, Hassan's indeterminance is not the only concept of postmodernism which applies to *JR*. The subjects of *JR* are varied, but capitalism is the central prism through which everything else is refracted.

## 4.2. Postmodernism and Capitalism

Fredric Jameson established the connection between capitalism and postmodernism in his famous book *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). His claim was that capitalism and postmodernism are inherently linked within the realm of the market as objects of cultural production become commodities. Just like *JR*, Jameson argues that the market is inextricable from the rest of reality:

[T]he ideology of market is unfortunately not some supplementary ideational or representational luxury or embellishment that can be removed from the economic problem and then sent over to some cultural or superstructural morgue, to be dissected by specialists over there. It is somehow generated by the thing itself, as its objectively necessary afterimage; somehow both dimensions must be registered together, in their identity as well as in their difference (Jameson 1991, 260).

In other words, neoliberal ideology of the market is linked to cultural production and they cannot be separated. Instead, the ideology becomes the dominant mode of discourse according to which everything else is defined. Art, religion, social situations, personal life and other aspects not immediately identified as relating to the market have to be registered together with it as parts of the capitalist totalization of contemporary life.

Sarah Brouillette (2014) claims that writers and other artists are implicated in this linking of art and the market especially as autonomous workers in a creative economy that serves neoliberal goals. When viewed as singular artists working within the established idea of the therapeutic self and ideas of creativity, self-discovery and self-expression, artists form a creative economy that contributes to neoliberal modes of thought and market function. She writes:



Embrace of the primacy of the therapeutic self, motivated by nonmaterial or postmaterialist goals and committed to constant indeterminacy and self-evolution, converges with the neoliberal image of the flexible creative worker whose career is her primary site of self-discovery (Brouillette 2014, 14).

When viewed as individuals pursuing their self-realization through work—i.e. creating value—in the neoliberal marketplace, literature and other cultural forms only serve the project of neoliberalism. Brouillette argues that even the writer distancing themselves from the instrumental uses of literature as commodity and a participant in the creative economy is, in a sense, contributing to neoliberalism as readers also want to highlight the “immaterial goods like self-knowledge, authenticity, originality, and happiness” (Brouillette 2014, 14), which makes literature marketable and thus promotes the neoliberal idea of perennial self-improvement I mentioned at the end of chapter 3.1.

Through its experimentation, *JR* critiques the dominant ideology and, suggests a way forward. The central cause for *JR*'s resistance to neoliberalism is identified by Angela Allan as follows:

Under neoliberalism [...] anything and everything could be alchemized into capital, evidenced by the fact that *JR*'s eponymous 11-year-old arch capitalist amasses and loses a vast financial fortune built from a single share of common stock and a pile of junk mail. Turned over to the market, art and culture lose any semblance of their once privileged status. With nothing valued for its own sake, everything becomes a potential work of art within the market, and—as Rosenberg laments—“everyone becomes an artist.” But this perceived lack of resistance to the market has resulted in a kind of ambivalence about the *aesthetic* value of postmodernism and its study. In other words, *postmodernism ostensibly signaled the defeat of all other forms of valuation except for the economic* [my emphasis]. (Allan 2015, 220)

In essence, *JR* functions as a parody of the Jamesonian view of postmodernism; its indeterminacy and excess. Jack Gibbs asks a corporate executive called Hyde where does one get art, and Hyde answers: “You get it where you get anything you buy it,” (*JR*, 48). This is the commodification of the cultural object, and individuals are ineluctably controlled by the same process as DiCephalis affirms when he continues: “Corporate democracy did you hear that Gibbs? This share

in America it's my company they just bought a share in my company, I didn't get where I am slopping paint on the floor and cutting my ear" (*JR*, 49). Hyde implies that the Jamesonian process has been so complete as to render art and everything else that's not inherently market-related as part of the ideological process. Shares and profit are the measure of value and "slopping paint" is not a rejection of contemporary society, but an affirmation of the neoliberal tendency of commodification. Here Hyde and DiCephalis are reproducing what the economist Anwar Shaikh termed the "centrality of the profit motive" (Shaikh 2016, 6). According to Shaikh, it is the drive for profit that enables phenomena like "the regulation of investment, economic growth, employment, business cycles, and even inflation" (*ibid.*). These issues are inseparable from other aspects of life in the neoliberal moment, and therefore profit becomes the guiding principle of life. As Shaikh puts it: "Profit drives capitalism" (Shaikh 2016, 206). Yet, art does not create value to the same extent as the world of business and therefore it is relegated to the margin. DiCephalis did not get where he is by painting and suffering for his art (severing his ear like Vincent van Gogh). He got where he is by engaging with the stock market.

Despite recognizing the ubiquitous reach of the market, *JR* resists the dominant ideology. Angela Allan again writes:

*JR* articulates what exactly that alternative [to the Jamesonian process] is: the reconstruction of a social economy as the foundation for understanding—and creating—non-financial forms of value.<sup>62</sup> Art may no longer be thought of as entirely autonomous from the market, but it also articulates the limits of the market's reach to transform everything into financial capital," (Allan 2015, 237).

The "limits of the market's reach" is best exemplified in the novel by Edward Bast. Bast in his struggle between art and commodity, between writing advertisement jingles and a complicated symphony, is the symbol for what Allan calls the "ambivalence of aesthetic value" as he is for the majority of the novel unable to resist laboring for Typhoon International and producing commodified art. His character also stands for the modernist binary of high and low culture which is dismantled in postmodernism just as Bast manages to, in a way, combine the two halves of his existence. Bast does not complete his symphony in the novel, but

he is last seeing in the novel walking away from a telephone booth (*JR*, 726), leaving the line dangling in the air with JR on the line suggesting a new enterprise after the purchase of the JR Corporation. In the end, then, Bast represents a resistance to neoliberal capitalism: the willingness to walk away from profit and monetary value in pursuit of other aims. This affirmation of the non-commodification of art implies a more far-reaching resistance to the capitalist system in *JR*. I return to this final scene of the novel and Bast's anti-capitalist qualities in the final chapter.

I argue that *JR* presents a critique of capitalist society both in its content and its structure. The noise, flux and destruction caused by the capitalist system is analyzed at length in the novel, but I argue that *JR* also suggests a potential way forward. The key paradigm to understanding *JR*, as I argue in this thesis, is viewing both the novel and our society through the systems that comprise both of them. The destructive power of the capitalist system has been thoroughly dissected elsewhere, but a systems theoretical—material ecocritical reading of *JR* not only reveals the unique nature of *JR*'s depiction and critique but affirms the possibility of a new conception of human and non-human natures and systems. Runaway capitalism, as Gaddis termed it, is shown as a destructive failure, but, in my reading, new facets of the novel emerge which show that *JR* manages to “articulate the limits of the market's reach” in the words of Angela Allen (2015, 237). Moreover, *JR* is local in its depiction, but global in its implications. The systems of contemporary life—work, capital, social norms—are here investigated through the lenses of the U.S., New York and Wall Street but are present nearly everywhere. In the next section, I show how *JR* links to these systems.

### **4.3. The Systems Novel**

In this section, I situate *JR* within systems theory using the idea of the systems novel and in the following subsection, I discuss systems theory's relation to ecocriticism. The systems novel is a concept introduced by the critic Tom LeClair (1989). A systems novel is one that engages with the various systems, wholes and processes described in systems theory and attempts to render them in fiction. According to LeClair, systems novels emphasize excess and detail as key

components in depicting and analyzing the systems that govern and dictate contemporary life (LeClair 1989, 20). They are closely related by way of their scope to maximalist literature and Gaddis's idea that when considering one idea in depth, "ramifications proliferate" (LeClair 2008, 21). Drawing on a variety of systems theorists such as Ludvig von Bertalanffy, Anthony Wilden and F. Kenneth Berrien, LeClair argues that systems novels embody a process-oriented approach. Essentially, they use literary and rhetorical devices to guide the reader in a mass of information, the aim of which is to represent the informational flux of the world.

The systems novel is one that recreates the operationally closed systems which function in coordination with each other, forming wholes-within-wholes (LeClair 1989, 9). These systems range from the local (e.g. the school in *JR*) to the planetary (e.g. the entire techno-ecological system of the earth). Other examples of the systems LeClair mentions in his book are causality (LeClair 1989, 70), theater (LeClair 1989, 111) and the sciences (LeClair 1989, 150). The borders of individual closed systems in the wholes-within-wholes palimpsest can be difficult to discern. I return to this interconnectedness in chapter 5.2 when I discuss Jane Bennett's material vitalism and assemblages, but here it suffices to say that representing this difficulty is one of the aims of the systems novel. Central to the systems novel is to maneuver the constant interactional flux which takes place between and within these systems. LeClair claims that because no text realistically incorporates all of the information in the world, the systems novel functions through reference and synecdoche, where smaller representations stand for larger constructs (LeClair 1989, 18-9). For example, the novel's use of the words Wall Street and "the market" (*JR*, 197) refer to the entire system of stock exchange and its fluctuations which is the means by which stock companies operate and the self-generating circulation of financial capital globally, but only the local representation is evoked.

As LeClair's concept is mainly concerned with large and complex systems, it risks overgeneralizing, through an attempt at interrogating global causes and effects, the important local details and features that depend on the local material and other conditions that make for a particular appearance or representation of a systematic whole. LeClair recognizes this danger that is

inherent in any “totalizing discourse” (LeClair 1989, 13), but argues that systems theory and the systems novel provides

a conception of the Earth that could anchor a sophisticated global critique of existing economic and political institutions; [...] a means of teaching humility to would-be masters and of reducing the appeal of bourgeois individualism; [...] and an imagination of the future in which our children and grandchildren could live within the planet’s carrying capacity (ibid.).

“Masters” here refers to LeClair’s own term of mastery as the tendency to control and exploit humans, non-humans and the environment. For LeClair, the fiction of the systems novel, enables the reader to see and feel (as I analyzed earlier) the global implications of local events and entities which functions as the basis for meaningful critiques of contemporary institutions such as neoliberal capitalism, human-centered environmentalism and individualism. Therefore, the systems novel is an ecological category, in that it emphasizes the vital and complex relations between humans, non-humans and the environment.

LeClair establishes a literary history of the systems novel, beginning with Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) and ending with Ursula K. LeGuin’s *Always Coming Home* (1987). The other novels he includes in his category are Joseph Heller’s *Something Happened* (1974), Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* (1977), Joseph McElroy’s *Women and Men* (1987) and John Barth’s *LETTERS* (1979). In the middle of this trajectory, William Gaddis’ *JR* is discussed as an example of the recursion of the systems novel paradigm. These are all lengthy and complex novels. *JR* contains a wealth of, to use LeClair’s word, data, about stocks, taxation and other topics related to the economy. However, other systems novels might feature similar amounts of data concerning mathematics and physics (*Gravity’s Rainbow*), U.S. history and politics (*The Public Burning*) or all of the aforementioned (*Women and Men*). The central idea is to use this data to navigate and portray systematic wholes, such as the circulation of capital, science or political processes. In *JR*, characters talk about economics, tax policy and state and federal financial regulation at length, but no narrator or any other voice ever clearly explains to the reader the meaning, context and consequences of the data at hand. Instead, the characters speak to

other characters who already know the subject and their relation to it. This shows that systems novels can be overwhelmingly detail-oriented and unfriendly toward the reader (as I discussed in section 3.2.) but this also reflects the ambiguous, distant and mediated nature of systematic whole to the individual person in daily life. Overcoming this distance is critical to understanding the world and gaining a less myopic perspective. From this premise, I next discuss how *JR* brings into view the material ecology of contemporary life.

LeClair's discussion functions as a useful beginning from which to connect *JR* more deeply into systems theory and material ecocriticism. LeClair (1989, 91-2) sees *JR* as an example of the self-generative qualities of capitalist systems and frames the novel as a critique of their eventual entropic collapse. The systems within *JR* operate out of homeostasis, i. e. imbalance. Imbalance between different subsystems affects the entire conglomerate of systems. This is why the systematic whole collapses: entropy increases and eventually destroys the systems (LeClair 1989, 101). This can be seen as one of the ways in which *JR* presents its critique of American capitalism; the unbridled freedom of JR Corporation leads to various kinds of criminality and mismanagement—kinds of metaphorical entropy—which collapses the entire system, leading to the downfall of the company and to global recession. However, I argue that the systems novel as an analytical tool, provides a means of examining *JR*'s material ecology more deeply. In this view, the novel presents the environment and capitalism not as separate systems in a negative interaction where one is eventually depleted, but as parts of a larger systemic palimpsest. This is most visible in the way natural and man-made systems overlap and interact in the novel.

Analyzing the link between *JR* and systems theory, LeClair argued that *JR* contributes an understanding of the economic systems that govern contemporary life. He writes: "Gaddis's novel [...] makes clear that the art of excess is an art of economy, about how best to live within and manage the resources of our home, whether that home is Gaia, the suburbs, or the city" (LeClair 1989, 104). This is among the key questions *JR* poses: the management of resources and the porosity of the border between environment and lived space. Concern for the environment in a capitalist system has usually been directed at the issues of pollution, waste and exploitation of the environment. Examples of

this in postwar American fiction include Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1998) and *White Noise* (1985).

In his novels, DeLillo examines waste as an aberration and an outgrowth of capitalism (and unbridled corporate freedom in particular) which not only consumes all other concerns, but also comes to function as a symbol of the breakdown of the rigid border between where we live and where nature exists. In *JR*, this border does not exist. Here waste is not an aberration, but a representation of the amalgamation of human and non-human agents. Natures and cultures share the same spatial-systematic existence and capitalism is a representation of entropy within the system: that, which drives it to malfunction throughout *JR*. As Jack Gibbs proclaims when talking about money: "what America is all about, waste disposal and all," (*JR*, 27). LeClair's research is the main bridge between *JR* and systems theory. In the following chapter I introduce the concept of material ecocriticism, and connect it to systems theory and *JR*.

## 5. Material Ecocriticism

In this chapter I introduce material ecocriticism, connect it with the idea of autopoietic systems and discuss the body as a material agent in *JR*. What can be characterized as postmodern American literature has exhibited material ecocritical concerns before Gaddis and *JR*. Arguably, the ecological dimension of this literature has been gone relatively unnoticed. In his dissertation, Robert Oran Kennedy acknowledges that despite a wealth of academic research surrounding American postmodernism, ecocritical concerns have been overlooked in favor of other approaches (Kennedy 2015, 1). According to Kennedy, ecocriticism needs to engage with every critical conversation (ibid.).

While ecocritical research on postmodern American literature is arguably scarce, the field itself is a rich canvas: Marguerite Young's *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* (1967), William T. Vollmann's *You Bright and Risen Angels* (1988) and Vanessa Place's *La Medusa* (2008) are just some examples of postmodern novels that highlight material concerns. At the beginning of the introduction I discussed a quote from Joseph McElroy's *Women and Men* and emphasized the connection of materialist and ecocritical ideas between McElroy's novel and *JR*. Thomas Pynchon's famous 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow* was published two years before *JR*, but both the novel and Pynchon's oeuvre in general garnered more critical and public attention than Gaddis and *JR*. Tom LeClair (1989, 36) notes that *Gravity's Rainbow* is often considered one of the most important novels in contemporary American fiction and places it first in his trajectory of the history of the systems novel and argues it to be the genesis of all subsequent systems novels and the issues they discuss. Anticipating Jane Bennett's material vitalism, *Gravity's Rainbow* ends with the following song, which Pynchon dates to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and attributes to the Puritan forebears of the protagonist Tyrone Slothrop:

There is a Hand to turn the time,  
Though thy Glass today be run,  
Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low  
Find the last poor Pret'rite one...  
Till the Riders sleep by ev'ry road,  
All through our crippled Zone,



With a face on every mountainside,  
And a Soul in every stone...  
(Pynchon 1973 [2013], 902).

Here the last two lines project human agency and subjectivity to “every mountainside” and “every stone.” They have “a face” and “a Soul” and are therefore anthropomorphized. This is directly related to material ecocriticism’s ideas and shows that *JR* is not alone in its formulation of a new materiality, although *Gravity’s Rainbow* differs radically from *JR* in many ways. There are other aspects of *Gravity’s Rainbow* which highlight the novel’s material concerns, but I argue that this stanza concluding the novel functions as an invitation to consider material concerns in later American postmodern literature more widely.

In this thesis I analyze how material agents and the systems comprised of these agents are depicted in *JR* and what they signify in the novel. From an ecocritical perspective, the study of material and non-human agents is best exemplified by a critical approach called material ecocriticism. In their seminal book on material ecocriticism, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann define the premise of the idea as follows:

The conceptual argument of [m]aterial [e]cocriticism is simple in its outlines: the world’s material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be “read” and interpreted as forming narratives, stories. Developing in bodily forms and in discursive formulations, and arising in coevolutionary landscapes of natures and signs, the stories of matter are everywhere: in the air we breathe, the food we eat, in the things and beings of this world, within and beyond the human realm. All matter, in other words, is a “storied matter.” It is a material “mesh” of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 2)

In other words, material ecocriticism is the study of how narratives appear and signify in non-human and human agents and how matter becomes a site of communication. This extends the notion of the communicating and acting subject from humans to materials, which fulfills Ihab Hassan’s definition of indeterminance “unmaking” the established discourse.

Iovino and Oppermann also write: “The idea that all material life experience is implicated in creative expressions contriving a creative ontology is a reworking of ecological postmodernism’s emphasis on material processes

intersecting with human systems, producing epistemic configurations of life, discourses, texts, and narratives” (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 21). They propose reframing the discussion about what in the world signifies and communicates. In their view, matter is “storied” and has a role in the global networks of “human and nonhuman players.” I want to emphasize this idea of human and nonhuman players being caught in networks of forces that “produce undeniable signifying forces,” an idea that closely resembles systems theory. These forces are present in everything that surrounds and constitutes the lives of individuals and societies. As Jack Gibbs proclaims: “They let the God damn outside world in” (*JR*, 116). In *JR*, the outside world invades the inside world in many ways. Waste is found in lived spaces, light directs the attention of the characters, overgrown trees and other flora dilapidate houses. More importantly, the outside world of matter and nature is shown to have an internal life, an agency of its own which is critical in shaping human and non-human systems. I want to identify these systems in *JR*, and then show what they signify in terms of narrative and literary meaning. Since material ecocriticism focuses on the ways in which human and non-human natures have agency and meaning, an analysis of these natures in *JR* is needed. In this chapter, I discern the relationship between human and non-human nature in *JR* and analyze it as an emergent reality of the systems that govern the novel as a whole.

In a sense, material ecocriticism represents a radical departure from previously held notions of subjectivity. This is useful for analyzing *JR*, since it too is a radical departure from the more often-encountered forms of the novel. I want to emphasize that material ecocriticism does not posit human and non-human agency as equivalent. They differ from each other, but the essential idea is to view them as part of the same epistemological and ontological process of signification, communication and action. In *JR*, the characters are unknowingly affected by matter and, in turn, affect matter unwittingly. Therefore, the question of who or what is affecting whom or what becomes important. Oppermann characterizes the difference between material and human agency as follows:

Everything in the physical environment enacts a complex dynamic between social subjects and material processes not reducible to a subject-object binary. Although the human agency is radically different from material agency, they significantly entail each other in

an intersubjective way. It is in this sense that the concept of narrative agency becomes paradigmatic to material ecocriticism, always instigating entangled relations that are often conflictual but always already rich with interpenetration of various beings, discourses, meanings, and materiality (Oppermann 2014, 32).

Oppermann claims that even though human and non-human agency differ, they are entangled and contingent on each other. They both create meanings in the world. Material agency differs radically from human agency: matter cannot communicate verbally, act morally or have a conception of a self, for instance. Oppermann argues that despite this radical difference and conceptual gulf between the two, it is wrong to dispense of material agency in favor of human primacy.

Oppermann invokes the concept of narrative agency as a means of categorizing the work of human and non-human agency. Narrative agency refers to the capability of communication and the ability to signal meaning in the world. Oppermann continues:

As a result, all material life experience is implicated in creative expressions contriving a creative ontology. Storied matter, thus, is inseparable from the storied human in existential ways, producing epistemic configurations of life, discourses, texts, and narratives with ethico-political meanings. In this conjecture, material ecocriticism seeks to analyze meanings and agency disseminated across this storied world, across the stories of material flows, substances, and forces that form a web of entangled relations with the human reality (Oppermann 2014, 32).

“Storied matter” is another way of referring to the aforementioned qualities of communication. For Oppermann, the world is “a creative ontology,” in which humans and matter are storied and material ecocriticism deals with the process of interpreting these stories and their implications for individuals, societies, politics, ethics and other aspects of life.

Similarly, Rita Felski (2015) claims that works of art, such as *JR* as a novel, are by their material nature connected to the matter that surrounds them. Felski states that

[w]orks of art, by default, are linked to other texts, objects, people, and institutions in relations of dependency, involvement, and

interaction. They are enlisted, entangled, engaged, embattled, embroiled, and embedded (Felski 2015, 11).

By arguing that texts, objects, people and institutions exist in complex networks, or what Oppermann calls “a web”, Felski reinforces the idea of a constant process of material interaction. Interpretation, communication and other processes happen not just in the minds of humans, but within the networks where agency is dispersed. Participants in the network are “enlisted, entangled, engaged, embattled, embroiled, and embedded” (ibid.), rather than clearly delineated and static. These connections enable works of art and other storied matter to signify and communicate beyond their immediate proximity. Describing the qualities of these participants in light of actor-network theory, Felski articulates the way in which the networked existence enables material agency: “actors only become actors via their relations with other phenomena as mediators and translators linked in extended constellations of cause and effect” (Felski 2015, 164). It is important to note that Felski’s argument corresponds with Karen Barad’s view of phenomena as the “primary ontological unit”, as I mentioned in the introduction (Barad 2007, 141). Thus, works of art, texts, people and objects become agentic through their material engagement with the other participants in the network or the creative ontology of material ecocriticism; the “web of entangled relations” (Oppermann 2014, 32).

Creative ontology is essentially a monist approach, a new materialist view which combines the matter that comprises humans with the matter that comprises all other beings and materials in the world. Bergthaller reinforces this point by positing that “phenomena such as selfhood, intentionality, and agency are assumed to emanate from the same “stuff that everything else is made of” (Bergthaller 2014, 45). This monist connection is the central thread of material ecocriticism. Subjectivity is distributed (unevenly and with different characteristics as is evidenced by that differences between the human and the non-human capabilities discussed above) throughout the creative ontology.

It is important to note that Oppermann does not imply that storied matter is merely humans projecting their own ideas, selves and other processes onto matter and making it communicate through anthropomorphizing it. Instead,

a touch of anthropomorphism can be used to uncover the creative ontology which would otherwise go unnoticed (Bennett 2010, 99). Gaddis uses this touch in *JR* to facilitate the depiction of storied matter throughout the novel.

For example, when Coach Vogel is talking about love and his unreciprocated affection towards Amy Joubert he says that “without friction there is nothing but rags and bone,” (*JR*, 464). Rags and bone refer to an inanimate and isolated existence, and friction is that which gives it inertia; feeling, life and the ability to act. I argue that Vogel’s friction represents material creativity because in the same paragraph he mentions that “blood spoke in [Amy Joubert’s] cheeks” (*ibid*). Friction, then, is the blood speaking; the material reality behind human perception which takes part in constructing reality. The blood “speaking” is an anthropomorphized representation of the material assemblage(s) that blood can be a part of. Blood circulates in the body with relative autonomy, functioning without cognitive human action. Thus, it is a representation of material flow within the assemblage of the thinking and feeling body.

Further, this view of “the blood speaking” in Joubert’s cheeks is for Vogel a profound moment of realization. He says: “One moment of happiness, the Russian said? One for the road and then blow winds and crack your cheeks, why is that not enough to last the whole of a man’s life...?” (*ibid.*). Vogel alludes to a scene in William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* where the titular character is beset by a storm on a heath and gives a monologue:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!  
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
Till you have drench’d our steeples, drown’d the cocks!  
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,  
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,  
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,  
Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ the world!  
Crack nature’s moulds, all germens spill at once  
That make ingrateful man!  
(Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act III. Scene II).

In this famous monologue, Lear also anthropomorphizes the storm raging around him: the winds “crack” their “cheeks” (Vogel repeats this reference to the cheek), he orders the storm to “rage” and calls thunder “thought-executing”, giving it the capability of human cognition and the power to act upon the world in a fashion

similar to his as a human. This allusion solidifies *JR*'s call for surface-level anthropomorphizing which enables seeing Oppermann's creative materiality as a fundamental element in humans and the environment. In Vogel's speech the materiality is presented alongside human drama and emotion, which implies that materiality is present even in those aspects of life that are often considered exclusive to humans.

## 5.1. Material Ecocriticism and Systems Theory

As a prelude to my discussion of autopoiesis and material agency in *JR*, I show how *JR* invites the reader to consider its operationally closed systems through the subtle use of two metaphors of circularity, both relating to music and the character of the composer Edward Bast: Richard Wagner's *The Ring of Nibelung* and the player piano roll. The first is present in a scene in the beginning of the novel where Bast is directing the students in a production of Richard Wagner's opera *Rheingold*, which is one part of *The Ring of Nibelung* (1848-74) cycle of musical dramas. Bast not only conducts the school production of the *Rheingold*, he also dreams of making a musical piece of his own akin to that of Wagner's. He describes his ethos by saying that making an opera is about making the audience suspend their belief, "like that E flat chord that opens the Rhinegold goes on and on it goes on for a hundred and thirty-six bars until the idea that everything's happening under water is more real than sitting in a hot plush seat with tight shoes on and..." (*JR*, 111). The *Rheingold* is mentioned at various points in the novel as a leitmotif that is recalled at different intervals. The use of the opera evokes in the reader an image of a ring and a cycle. This represents the reader being submerged in *JR*, and more precisely, in the closed systems the novel employs.

The second example is the piano roll. It is mentioned that Bast's family owns or used to own a company which manufactured piano rolls. According to Wikipedia, a piano roll "is a music storage medium used to operate a player piano, piano player or reproducing piano. A piano roll is a continuous roll of paper with perforations (holes) punched into it," (Wikipedia 2018). I draw specific attention to the use of the word "continuous" to describe the roll itself, a

word that can also be applied to the dialogic structure of *JR*, with sequences of descriptive prose acting as the perforations. Further, these rolls are used to operate a player piano, a self-playing instrument which recalls LeClair's characterization of *JR*, that the book "is out of authorial control, somehow self-generating" (LeClair 1989, 88). Moreover, the continuous roll and the player piano are a metaphor for the structure of autopoietic systems themselves and their ability, in a sense, to "play" themselves.

The systems of *JR*—nervous systems, the city, traffic, the stock market, art circulating as a commodity, the circulation of capital, legislation, the political process and so on—are circumscribed by the novel's use of entropy. The concept itself is referred to early on by Jack Gibbs when he is in the middle of a science lesson:

[H]as it ever occurred to any of you that all this is simply one grand misunderstanding? Since you're not here to learn, anything, but to be taught so you can pass these tests, knowledge has to be organized so it can be taught, and it has to be reduced to information so it can be organized do you follow that? In other words this leads you to assume that organization is an inherent property of the knowledge itself, and that disorder and chaos are simply irrelevant forces that threaten it from outside. In fact it's exactly the opposite. Order is a simply a thin, perilous condition we try to impose on the basic reality of chaos..."(*JR*, 20).

Here Gibbs is not only offering an indictment of the U.S. educational system but is also referring to how "knowledge" has to be arranged by arbitrary means in order to be conveyed, and this, according to him, leads to the erroneous conception of imposing a façade of order on top of an inherently chaotic process. He thinks that chaos is the underlying reality of life and that humans are inherently incapable of dealing with chaos and have to impose some structure upon it in order to perceive it. Later in the lesson, Gibbs has a student spell the word "entropy" on the blackboard which implies that he discusses the topic in more detail, but the focalization moves on to follow Dan DiCephalis crossing a nearby parking lot (*JR*, 21). However, as the word "entropy" becomes etched on the blackboard, it also becomes a central metaphor of the novel's arguably chaotic structure. From this it becomes apparent that Gibbs argues entropy to be the

underlining principle of the systems that comprise the world; the reason why the systems of contemporary life are out of control and failing in his view.

This science lesson scene takes place at the very beginning of the novel and thus invites the reader to consider the entropy of *JR*; all the agents, human and non-human, that disrupt and forcibly alter systems and material assemblages throughout the novel and drive them to malfunction or failure. This is the theme of failure that is present throughout Gaddis' literary career reproduced in *JR*. Gibbs believes that all systems tend toward failure and disintegration and the imposed façade of order and control (e.g. knowledge as information, art as commodity, communication as noise) prevents any meaningful action against the eventual failure. Significantly, Gibbs extends his metaphor of entropy far beyond its usefulness. The basic reality behind the "thin, perilous condition" of order might appear chaotic to humans, but material agency experiences and produces it vastly differently. Gibbs is challenged by the material agencies of the novel, which he fails to recognize and which call for embracing the apparent disorder.

There are many examples of Gibbs' entropy in the novel, some literal and some metaphorical. The literal includes waste in unexpected places (such as human feces in Bast's old piano; *JR*, 141) and dilapidation and decay (such as the abandoned house and the washing machine in the churchyard). The metaphorical includes disrupted and omitted dialogue, the JR Corporation's downfall due to its rapid growth and increasing complexity (perilous business ventures, problems with the law, tax avoidance and other issues) and Rachel Greenwald Smith's cold surface characters. However, from the point of view of material ecology and creative ontology, these features are not chaotic agents of eventual failure, but expressions of the new properties emerging from the interaction between and within material assemblages and autopoietic systems. Jack Gibbs fails to recognize these and consequently refers to them as "chaos" (*JR*, 20). This way of analyzing *JR*'s entropy demonstrates that the novel is not merely a lament for the chaos and destruction of capitalism toward humans, non-humans and the environment, but an expression of radical creative imagination. Material ecology and creative ontology exist in the gaps of Gibbs' view of chaos; behind the veneer of apparent order. In *JR*, material ecology and autopoietic systems interact in unique ways, but although material ecocriticism is closely



related to systems theory from the beginning, further work is needed to bridge the gap between the two.

Hannes Bergthaller (2014, 43) proposes Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems and the idea of the autopoietic system as a potential bridge over the gap between material ecocriticism and systems theory. In essence, an autopoietic system is one that is self-determinate, refers to itself and reproduces itself. As Bergthaller explains: "Self-referentiality means that the system, as long as it persists, can refer to its environment only by simultaneously referring to itself, that is, by regenerating its own constitutive elements and thus continuing its autopoiesis," (ibid.). However, despite being closed systems by way of self-reference, they are open to the environment and control and are controlled by other systems (Luhmann 1995, 34-8). As the world consists of these autopoietic systems working in with and within each other, some key connecting tissue must function as a link between them and the beings that live in the world and are situated within these systems. According to Luhmann, this tissue is communication (ibid.). Communication here refers not only to speech, but non-verbal interaction as well. The ways in which human beings can communicate outside of spoken or written language are innumerable, but, as is essential to material ecocriticism, communication must be extended to cover also non-human agents; their communication with each other and with humans.

Since in *JR* the world is comprised of various kinds of communication, of humans and matter affecting each other, no single individual can observe and react to all of these affective experiences. Instead, as Bergthaller argues by paraphrasing Luhmann, the individual is one of the semantic patterns created by this communication. He writes: "[the individual] is a semantic schema by which communication observes human minds, providing them with a stable 'address,' thereby reducing environmental complexity [...] (it is difficult to imagine how a conversation could attain any sort of coherency if every change in the minds and bodies of its participants would directly register in communication)," (Bergthaller 2014, 48). This means that communication enables individuals to discern themselves from others and the environment and make a selective process of consciously or unconsciously deciding what to "use" of the communicative data flux. In *JR* human speech is ineluctably privileged over material voices since they constitute the vast majority of the novel's actual text.

However, it is precisely by looking at the gaps in the dialogue, the sequences of descriptive prose and the way in which the dialogue is embedded in the flowing text that reveals the interconnectedness of humans and matter and the illusion of human communication as privileged and primary.

Bergthaller notes that the idea of the self or the individual is not exclusive to human agency. He writes the following about extending communicative cognition to the non-human realm:

The theory of autopoiesis does not consider cognition as the exclusive province of human beings, but conceives of it as an emergent property pervading the whole biosphere. However, it provides a more specific account of the formal structure that allows particular types of material assemblages—namely, living things—to acquire autonomy, to persist through time, and to elaborate a “self” distinct from their environments (Bergthaller 2014, 45).

Here Bergthaller makes a distinction between living things, which have what he calls autonomy and non-living things—i.e. the environment—which are excluded from this category. According to Bergthaller, it is only living things within material assemblages that can function as autopoietic systems. The enmeshment between humans and non-humans as communicative cognitive agencies embedded in the material environment stems from the understanding that they all consist of the same material reality. Bergthaller writes:

[Autopoiesis] is monist in the sense that phenomena such as selfhood, intentionality, and agency are assumed to emanate from the same “stuff” that everything else is made of and do not require a dualism of substances for their explanation. (Bergthaller 2014, 44).

Bergthaller argues that the proliferation of material connections offered by Bennett and other new materialists is vital to understanding the world but, as agency is not distributed evenly in material assemblages, it is only the living parts of those assemblages that can function as autopoietic systems. He uses the example of an ant hill that can correct itself with pheromone trails if the path between the ant hill and its food source is disrupted. However, while aviation engineers and the planes they design and construct are parts of larger assemblages which involve everything from the food of the engineer to minerals, design software and so on, airplanes themselves as parts of the assemblages

cannot correct themselves, i.e. produce and reproduce autonomously. They are non-living and therefore not autopoietic (Bergthaller 2014, 40-5). Bergthaller proposes autopoiesis as the purview of cognizing being and their interactions not in order to limit the proliferation of connections, but to present a more coherent onto-ethical new materialist program for presenting critiques of contemporary issues such as climate change. However, even though non-living things may not display selfhood and autonomy, they are capable of agentic communication, action and creation of emergent properties, which are key aspects of material ecocriticism.

Communication is the quintessential element that comprises *JR*. Human voices are the obvious mode of communication, but I argue that material voices arise from the text in various ways and communication is an important aspect of material agency. I refer to them as voices, but more often than not, they are non-verbal or non-semiotic messages and actions which transfer meaning either autonomously or by way of human anthropomorphizing of material voices. As the majority of the text of *JR* is human dialogue, the main component of communication in *JR* is human communication. However, human voices are embedded inextricably into the background of material voices.

In an effort to foreground this material background, I turn to Jane Bennett's (2010) idea of material vitalism, which enables me to arrive at two points: First, to show the assemblage-like relationship between humans and matter, and secondly, to frame my discussion of material voices in *JR*. It is important to note that since *JR* depicts New York of the 1970s, it takes as its subject a vast city of millions of people and innumerable material agents. The complexity of city scenes is contrasted with the relatively calmer scenes in the smaller town of Massapequa, New York and other spaces outside of central New York, such as the dilapidated building Edward Bast and Stella Angel explore in the example used in subsection 2.3. This suggests that the whole formed by human and material agents becomes more complex with the increase of the number of agents. By itself, any spoken line or any depicted material agency in *JR* is understandable; it becomes disorienting only in relation to others and the wholes they form. Bergthaller relates this increase of complexity to technology and assemblages:

Human collectives have seen an exponential rise in complexity over the past ten thousand years, whereas the individual units of which they seem to be composed have changed very little. What has allowed for this increase of social complexity is not a corresponding increase in the complexity of individual humans, but an ever-expanding assemblage of technologies that have made it possible to aggregate the activities of ever-larger numbers of people (Bergthaller 2014, 41),

*JR* displays this increase in complexity mainly with its constant interjections of television, radio, newspapers, loudspeakers and other technological voices into the text. Aggregation is key to describing *JR*'s agencies. When technologies function in Deleuzian assemblages alongside other agents, the complexity of material ecocriticism's worldview becomes apparent.

## **5.2. Material Assemblages and Autopoietic Systems**

Jane Bennett defines assemblages as groups of material agents. She writes: "Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. [They] are living throbbing confederations [...] not governed by any central head," (Bennett 2010, 24). She goes on to explain that assemblages create emergent properties, meaning that they produce some new effects, products or relations in the world. She also notes that different agents within assemblages can have varying intensities and features, meaning that they are not comprised of a single unitary force, but are instead open-ended collectives with unique agencies (ibid.). Bennett uses the electric power grid as an example of an assemblage (ibid.). Within the assemblage of the power grid, there are electrons, electromagnetic forces, wind, trees, water, generators, humans operating power plants and neoliberal capitalist ideology driving competition in the electricity market. When the power grid fails, as it did in the blackout experienced in the United States and Canada in 2003, Bennett argues that the blackout is an emergent property of this particular assemblage and no single agent within it can be held responsible. Instead, responsibility and agency are scattered in various intensities across the entire assemblage (Bennett 2010, 28). The power grid is but one example of an assemblage; there are innumerable others in the world. What they do as conceptual tools in this thesis is they enable

me to interrogate the various material agencies in *JR* and show how matter functions alongside human action.

I use Bennett's idea of the assemblage to depict material agency in *JR*, but I also argue that these assemblages are structured on the macro level within and between autopoietic systems with communication as the central tissue connecting humans and non-humans to each other and these governing structures. The way this three-level structure manifests in *JR* is best clarified by the following example. The JR Corporation is an autopoietic system; as a corporation it balances along the twin axis of expense versus income, with the ultimate aim of profit and growth. Employees, capital and other resources circulate within the corporation (i. e. the system), representing its autopoiesis. However, these agents come into contact with phenomena, objects and other material and immaterial factors outside of their particular system. The corporation affects and is affected by these contacts outside of itself. Autopoietic systems are situated within a web of material relations in the world, and the causes and effects of its contacts can be difficult to discern, as is evidenced by how the corporation unintentionally bankrupts a fictional African state which leads to violent revolution there. Yet, this information never reaches JR or Bast (*JR*, 709). The JR Corporation operates within multiple assemblages (oil drills, timber trade and other ventures) as an intangible participant, akin to the role of the market in Bennett's example of the power grid. JR even refers to this role by saying "I mean if we put a hundred thousand like a million dollars in this here drilling exploration did we invent we get to take off eighty percent for these intangible drilling costs?" (*JR*, 470). Here the intangible represents all of the material and human resources that comprise the actual assemblage of an oil drill (workers, infrastructure, land rights, rock, soil and so on; things that eventually disrupt JR's drilling efforts in the novel, much like the failing components of the power plant in Bennett's example of the 2003 blackout). However, to JR and the market forces behind the power plant, they are only intangible costs, which represents not only the difficulty of grasping whatever assemblies one is a part of, but the also the neoliberal tendency wherein material reality (the actual existing agents of the assemblage) are obscured in favor of the constructed reality of market ideology, the intangible agents of the assemblage.

The preference for intangibility is further solidified when Davidoff is explaining the stock market to JR's class and uses manufacturing and selling baskets as an example: "You may have a tough time finding somebody that wants to buy exactly your kind of baskets. But if you own stock in a company that makes basket, you can sell it in a minute. There's always a buyer waiting somewhere [...] somebody you don't know and never even have to see (*JR*, 84). JR takes this lesson to heart and repeats it when he is trying to convince Bast to join his enterprise and him being a child does not matter: "only in the mail and the telephone because that's how they do it nobody has to see anybody (*JR*, 172). Here JR becomes the embodiment for the capitalist preference of intangible agents over matter.

Gaddis employs this tendency to prefer intangible agents over material ones in order to critique it in a scene where Bast is walking in the rain. It is important to note that Bast is JR's closest associate and business partner and he at various points in the novel acts as a vicarious presence for JR because JR, as a child, cannot conduct direct business meetings with adults. Therefore, he both physically and metaphorically stands for JR. Here he is on a rainy street: "[S]plashing wet surfaces in reflections suborned the reality of streets and distance. –Can't hardly see where you're going, he said never stopping," (*JR*, 145). For Bast, here in the material assemblage of rain and being situated in it, is incapable of seeing reality, and instead sees only glistening surfaces and reflections, a constructed and mediated realism. This does not cause him to stop moving and consider his surroundings, which would mean refraining from corporate activity and disrupting the flow of capital. It is all he sees and he cannot stop to resist it. Rather, he can only move along with it.

These are the ways in which material agencies are depicted in *JR*: matter acting in and as assemblages, directing narrative focalization and character action and representing systematic wholes, often through synecdoche or a similar process of metaphorical reference. They also disrupt and complement human voices and make human utterances sensible only by way of reference to a material object which reveals its agentic nature in communication.

When talking about fitting a student surveillance system into the school budget, Whiteback states that "[n]ow you take some of these youngsters, maybe the equipment can respond but they can't, not fair to shortchange them

because of that is it? Bring in these appliances where a washing machine's a responsive environment [sic]..." (JR, 224). Whiteback thinks that it does not matter what the students are taught with because they are incapable of responding to it. He suggests in jest a washing machine as a teaching apparatus or "a responsive environment" because, as he says later: "we key the human being to [...] key the individual to the technology" (ibid.). In other words, for the people in charge in JR, it doesn't matter what the technology is or what its effects are as long as it functions as intended, i. e. creates value (in this case by increasing the effectivity of teaching and decreasing costs). Whiteback talks about adjusting people to the technology at hand, so he understands the material reality where humans are embedded in material connections to some extent. However, Gaddis ridicules Whiteback's tendency to place the ability to create value above all other concerns by making Whiteback incapable of rendering the word "environment."

Later, that same rhetorical washing machine, now materialized, is found abandoned and decaying in a churchyard:

—No... the curtain quivered, —all I see is the sun that makes a haze, and the grass looking wet...and the curtain fell still on the soaking lawns where apples laced in the grass hard as stones snared in seaweed imperiled passage toward the road stretching slick as a breakwater before the burst of the siren toward the highway, swept up the rutted shoulders flowing with rivulets into the flattened weeds *forming a pool round the extinct washing machine gone to earth in the sanctuary of Primitive Baptist Church where woodbine renewed its attack on the locusts in the next lot* [my emphasis], penetrating to the mangled saplings and torn trunks at the forward edge of the battleline fronting a hill of mud naked but for the protruding legs of a chair and the fluke of a toilet seat pointing on toward Burgyone Street where the sky opened wide for the siren's shriek that would have flung birds broadcast in the air when there were limbs to fling them from, now merely added a note of cheer to White Christmas already spilling from the back, of adventure to the elderly venturing from curbs and indoor hostages to Alaska Our Wilderness Friend alike, even of fugitive relief from hopeless combat (JR, 235-36).

I quote the entire passage of descriptive prose in order to contextualize the mention of the washing machine. Here the technology of the washing machine is "extinct" and "gone to earth." It functions as a symbol for the capitalist systems of technological development and its emergent property, technological waste. It signifies the waste, excess and disruption (in LeClair's terms it is the homeostasis

of the system that is disrupted here) caused by the collision of different material assemblages and systematic wholes. In this case all of the material agents that were required in the manufacturing of the washing machine are contrasted with the decay of the scene, which shows how the systems of technological development, corporate capital and consumer culture function as a whole-within-whole to first produce, then consume and finally abandon the washing machine. The washing machine is embedded into the flow of water and woodbine but not completely: it stands out because of its technological form. Thus, it is contrasted with the flow of the passage where focalization glides onward, but the machine stays still and decays.

The quoted passage also exhibits many of the material agencies I mentioned above. The curtain “quivers” after a human speaks and “falls still” on the scene outside of the window. Therefore, the curtain responds to human speech by directing both the gaze of the narration and the character to the outside world. This process of responding happens constantly, for example when Hyde, Whiteback and DiCephalis talk and a television is on in the background:

—Yes, this strike talk, threat that is to say, Dan was going to feel his wife’s ahm, feel her out on this teacher strike threat activationwise that is to...

——to remember his famous line on politics. If they don’t own you, they can’t trust you...

A bell sounded silencing motion where anything moved, hurling motionlessness into activity, books gathered at a sweep, papers to the floor, a glove through the air (*JR*, 183).

Here the television responds to Whiteback, a wealthy person in power trying to contain a worker’s strike that he perceives as a threat. The bell’s response accomplishes two tasks: First, it reinforces the point provided by the television about the nature of politics for the reader by “silencing motion”—i.e. ending the discussion—and it also moves the focus of the narration to a lesson given by Jack Gibbs. Occasionally, the communicative qualities of matter are invoked directly. This happens, for instance, when Edward Bast walks into a room where his aunts Julia and Anne are talking and implies that he wants to know what they are talking about without speaking the words: “only the wallpaper’s patient design responded



to his obedient query, glancing from habit to an unfaded square of wall where no mirror had hung for some years (*JR*, 67). The wallpaper is described as “responding” to Bast’s stare, as Julia and Anne remain silent. Here matter, in this case the wallpaper, implies the absentness of a mirror that used to be present, meaning that the wallpaper, by its material form and being visible, communicates a sense of change, dilapidation and solitude. This reciprocal interaction between human, non-human and material voices is present throughout *JR*.

The ellipsis in the earlier passage is the moment when the human gaze (which is briefly but critically guided by the curtain) is extended to the focalization and the narration moves like a gaze past what the human can see from the window, depicting various material assemblages, such as a siren, a church and water and where the structure of a single run-on sentence represents the connections and causalities between these material agencies. The material agencies cannot be fully grasped by the human gaze, because all that Anne Bast, who’s voice is heard in the passage, sees is the sun and the grass. Therefore, the material entities are forced to reveal their agentic nature in this passage by themselves.

The interconnectedness of material agents is why each material entity in the passage enables the one succeeding it. Apples “hard as stones snared in seaweed” block the passage to the road, which then “stretches slick as a breakwater” before a siren (ostensibly from a police car driving on the aforementioned road) sweeps up “the rutted shoulders flowing with rivulets into the flattened weeds” which then create a pool around the washing machine and so on throughout the passage. Further, living and non-living matter, such as locusts and woodbine and a chair and a toilet seat are all embedded into the same flow, but their agentic qualities are different. This reflects what Jane Bennett mentioned about various actors in different assemblages having unequal agentic power within the assemblage (Bennett 2010, 24). The washing machine only sits there, but locusts “renew their attack” and a siren interferes with people singing the popular holiday song *White Christmas*. The siren is what returns the human element to the passage. Depending on the observer it “adds a note” of “cheer”, “adventure” or “fugitive relief.” After the depiction of material agencies, they are again connected with human agency but again in an unseen way. Just as the opening gaze cannot see beyond the sun and the grass, the humans cannot see

the siren. Yet, the sound is anthropomorphized into moments of cheer, adventure and relief.

Here is again the touch of anthropomorphism that Bennett (2010, 99) advocates as an interface for dealing with material agency, which can be otherwise challenging to recognize and decipher for humans. But as the passage shows, material agency happens irrespective of whether humans are there to experience or take part in it. The ellipsis in the passage is a moment of changing narrative focus, but it also represents the connection between human and material agency. The human voice is almost seamlessly embedded into the web of material agencies; the turn-taking between human and material voice is indicated only with minimal disruption of textual flow, i.e. only the two ellipses after Anne Bast's lines.

### **5.3 The Body's Material Agency**

The moment of disruption I discussed in the previous subsection that occurs both in the passage and between the perceiving body and the material voices is key in the autopoietical representation of affective, conative and cognitive bodies in human-matter relations. Bergthaller writes that

events external to [the nervous system of complex organisms] are translated into the radically reductive code of electrochemical impulses, and the system responds to changes in the environment only by the further processing of such impulses. Nowhere is the system in "direct" contact with its environment. Warmth, light, or smell never "enter" the nervous system—they are internal reconstructions of external events (Bergthaller 2014, 44).

In other words, Bergthaller argues that while bodies are the porous interfaces that make contact with the external (thus actually making ambiguous the border between internal and external as things do enter the body and the body excretes things into the world), the nervous system is an operationally closed autopoietical system as it only functions along and responds with its own impulses; it interprets external inputs through internal constructions. This gap between the external input and the internal interpretation and construction is central to understanding the body as representationally autopoietical.

The gap between the external input and the internal representation is also present in the passage as the moment of ellipsis. The closed system of human perception is made open to material agency through the little crack of seeing “the sun that makes a haze and the grass looking wet.” These are anthropomorphized (“looking”, “making a haze”) reconstructions of material communication. The sight and warmth of the sun do enter the body but are only reconstructed within the impulses the system refers to. What the passage does is extend this moment of experience and reconstruction to matter as the narration moves beyond the gaze of the human agent. Just as the human sees the sun making a haze, so do the other material agents in the passage reproduce similar (anthropomorphized) processes of agency and communication even when they lie beyond the human’s gaze. Appropriately, the moment of transition is signaled by a material agent: “the curtain fell still.”

The transitory experience of material agency with regard to human perception continues throughout *JR*. It is closely related to the use of human body parts as synecdoche for humans themselves or their various actions, tendencies or attributes, an example of which I discussed in subsection 2.4. A similar break, like the one between the human gaze and the material world, a borderland where the two are both connected and disconnected as the gaze cannot recognize material agency without material agency itself, exists between the body and the body part. In the view proposed by material ecocriticism, the body is a material agent similarly comprised of matter as are non-human and environmental agents. Therefore, when referring to a single part of the body as a representation for the entire agentic whole, a gap between the whole of the body and the material reality of a single part is implied and, at the same time, reached over. In other words, the whole of the experiencing and acting body is comprised of material parts, which themselves are material and agentic.

In *JR* the reference to a body part instead of a person’s name or some other characteristic or attribute when describing an action in the world, serves to highlight this aspect of materiality and agency as being distributed across the body. Just like the creative ontology exists outside of the human gaze and has to be made visible by anthropomorphizing, the agency of the parts of the body is made visible through their use as synecdoche for the body entire. This gesture recalls Judith Butler’s speech of resistance in the Occupy Wall Street

protest that I mentioned earlier. She refers to “bodies coming together” and acting in the world, not individuals, consumers or any other more familiar and colloquially denotated category (Bladow 2015, 35). In this sense, *JR* uses the material agency of bodies to resist the homogenizing and reductive categories and ways of conceiving subjectivity that neoliberal capitalism entails. The individual and the consumer are central to the neoliberal vocabulary and here *JR* shows the limits inherent in such rigid categories as they cannot fully realize the material agency of the bodies they aim to capture.

The break between the part of the body and the body as a whole when referring to an action (in some form or another; a whole body is not needed for existing in the world but a confederacy of at least some parts is usually considered necessary) is where *JR* suggests that the creative material ontology exists (among other places I discern in this thesis). For example, when “elbows found backs” in the example discussed in chapter 3.1., a specific action of people butting their elbows into the backs of others while trying to embark and disembark on a busy train station, the signifiers of the “elbow” and the “back” act in reference not only to the human subjects in the scene but the very elbows and backs themselves. Often in *JR*, the break between the body and a part of it is recorded in the text. For example, when characters shake hands: “he stepped back for the gloved hand to brush the other’s tapered fingers” (*JR*, 347) or when Edward Bast is composing: “his face drew closer down lips parted, meeting, parting on bleats of sound gone in mere breath and the pen stopped as toes approached the score” (*JR*, 551). Here the hand brushes, the face draws closer, the lips part and the toes approach.

Instead of describing character action in a more human-centered manner, parts of bodies are used to imply all of the agency present in the scene. The body parts require a certain agency to “drive” them, and this is the site of the breakdown in material terms. The signifier implies the existence of this three-fold signified; the elbow itself, the body entire and the consciousness that drives the action but is, crucially, enabled by the materiality of the other two and itself (nerves, muscles, cells, atoms and so on). The breakdown of the signifier and the signified is also what Hassan sees as one of the sites of indeterminance where the indeterminacy and creative materiality of the mind is extended into the environment in a semiotic sense, as I discussed in chapter 4.1. In other words,

the “material gap” in *JR* exposes a site of connection between human and non-human agency as it is where the border between the two becomes porous and indefinable and relations are prioritized over individuals. However, this gap is present outside of descriptions of bodily agency or human perception. It is present everywhere in the text.

*JR*'s creative ontology is exposed by the material gap. Human interference is removed or only implied as the material interface itself is the point of reference and thus it gains a certain independent or un-anthropomorphized agency. For example, “the newspaper streamers passed in a flourish,” (*JR*, 423), “the door clattered, closed, silent for a moment before the receiver came down, the dial spun” (*JR*, 346) and “an empty coffee cup drummer by a finger sporting a cat’s eye ring” (*JR*, 251). The material object—even the part of the body, the finger—is referred to directly; it appears removed from the human interaction that enables or facilitates material function in these examples. This calls into question the causality between human and material agency as they become entwined rather than clearly causal or hierarchical. The removal occurs even in the realm of human communication when sounds are described as objects: “Syllables resonant and unrelated fused arrivals and departures on the loudspeaker” (*JR*, 190). Here the human voice is given a material reality and the human agency is relegated to the background, just as the voice on the speaker system appears distant to those who hear it, in this case in a train station. Yet, these syllables act in the world by announcing arrivals and departures. The syllables themselves are created by a body, but their agency is separate. The material gap is again demonstrated and reached over as it is the syllables themselves that are the points of reference, instead of some other expression that would emphasize the body that speaks them. This is one of the ways in which *JR* challenges the primacy of human experience and agency. The novel suggests that material agency becomes removed from human causality when it acts upon and in the world.

#### **5.4. Creative Ontology as Resistance**

*JR* features three scenes where Edward Bast is seen composing his dream opera. Within the scope of this thesis, I have chosen one for close reading, but they all adhere to a similar structure and share the same idea that I now discuss. The scenes highlight material agency to such a degree that the human agent is nearly dissolved in the flow:

—timely food tips, brought to you by...

Over cartons and lampshades the mop flew to lodge behind Appleton's and he hitched himself back to the edge of the plateau steadying one foot on Won't Burn, Smoke or Smell, looking into it, digging among undeveloped film rolls, string, an odd glove, defunct cigarette lighters, coming up with a straw beach slipper he fitted descending, paused again to brush another layer of dirt down his front before he sat on the sofa's edge staring down at a fresh lined page, up at the ceiling, at the Baldung, at 24-7 Oz Pkgs Flavored Loops, appearing to listen as shreds of sound escaped sporadic partings of his lips, scribbling a clef, notes, a word, a curve, still reaching fresh pages as light chilled the skewed leaves of the blind, lapsed motionless as it warmed the punctured shade and finally cast it into shadow, coming to abruptly and through to the torrent at the sink with the slap, slap of the straw slipper back to set the cup dangling the teabag string on Moody's and reach a shaper pencil, a fresh page, pages as shadows rose, crossed, fell, hunched as though listening to bring sounds into being, up in a sudden turn that might have been a pose for the mirrorless wall as though holding them off.

—time to join the biggest savings bank fam... (*JR*, 286).

I quote the passage in its entirety to show its characteristic flow and to justify my discussion of it as a scene of material situatedness. As Bergthaller (2014, 44) argued that the nervous system is an autopoietic, operationally closed system, here the material agencies in the room circulate, communicate and act upon the it in a multitude of ways. The paragraph is comprised of a single sentence, contained by material voices intruding from a television or a radio, which implies a sense of urgency and speed, as if Bast is composing his opera as a part of the material assemblages present in the room; dirt, books, teabags, light, pages, slippers and so on. This idea is reinforced by how the material gap between the body and its parts is again invoked as "shreds of sound escaped sporadic partings of his lips". The sounds escape into the world much the like syllables of the train station speakers, separate from Bast and the lips.

In chapter 3, I discussed a scene where the light from a flashlight guides the characters. Light is anthropomorphized and referred to as a kind of signal or guide throughout the novel, but in an early passage, it is presented alongside distinctly anti-capitalist concerns: “until the light changed and released [schoolchildren] across Broadway [...] the lively dominion seething within, buffeted by the anxiety of lifetimes’ savings adrift in windbreakers and flowered hats” (*JR*, 81). Here a traffic light guides JR’s class to Broadway, where the dominant characteristic of the pedestrians is that they have put their savings in expensive clothing. Collective anxiety over the capitalist system permeates the scene, and it is the light that initially enables this observation to be made. Therefore, light in *JR* possess a material agency that enables many other material voices, which are themselves key in *JR*’s resistance to capitalism because they challenge many of its most important principles, such as the primacy of the human experience. In the earlier quote sunlight as a material agent directs the reader and Bast to notice the passing of time: “light chilled the skewed leaves of the blind, lapsed motionless as it warmed the punctured shade and finally cast it into shadow (*JR*, 286). Light is signaling and amplifying all other material voices in the scene to both Bast and the reader.

The ambiguity of the passage’s end fuses Bast and the matter that surrounds him into a single, flux-like assemblage. On an initial reading, it could be argued that it is Bast who hunches, listens and poses, but the ambiguity of the prose opens the possibility that it could also be the pages or the shadows themselves. This is possible as references to matter imbue them with an independent agency, as I discussed in the previous paragraph. Here the human is so deeply situated into the material reality that the borders between different agencies and entities become unclear.

Jane Bennett (2010, 24) noted that participants in assemblages have various intensities and capabilities to act. She also claimed that individual intention when acting as a part of an assemblage can be secondary to the mosaic-like agency of the assemblage (Bennett 2010, 37) and that occasionally the “grand agency of humans” can be superceded by the “small agency of the lowly worms” (Bennett 2010, 98), “worms” here referring to an example she discussed in that section, but can be extended to cover many of the other “smaller”, unnoticed agencies. This passage shows how difficult discerning the

borders of assemblages is and how agency as a collective characteristic is dispersed throughout them. In the passage matter such as light, pages and lips have arguably more “intense”, to use Bennett’s term, qualities than others, such as the sofa, the film rolls or the glove which signify with their presence and situate Bast and his surroundings but are given no more agency than that. Yet, they are vital in directing and affecting both Bast and the other non-human presences in the passage.

It is important to note that Bast as an artist is a functionally anti-capitalist character struggling with the neoliberal commodification of art and the pervasiveness of the market ideology, as I discussed in chapter 4.2. While noting that the human is made part of its material reality and interconnectedness of both agencies is displayed in the passage is central, it is also important to recognize what this signifies. Bast, through his engagement with a non-commodified, exterior-to-capitalism work of art manages to contact a possible mode of resistance to the dominant ideology. The autopoietic system of the nervous system adapts throughout the passage as it is guided and affected by material assemblages. In a sense, material agency and the communicative creative ontology suggested by material ecocriticism is made equal with intentional human agency in the flux of this scene. Therefore, matter becomes fused with Bast’s process of artistic creation. In the end of the novel, Bast resolves to finish composing his opera instead of working for a wage and engaging with the emerging neoliberal economy. This suggests that recognizing, highlighting and incorporating material voices and creative ontology into human processes such as art, politics, business and so on necessarily guides us away from neoliberal capitalism and into a more ecological view of co-operation and cohabitation. This is because, as is visible in this passage and in the other examples quoted throughout this thesis, human agency cannot be separated from material realities and the creative ontology that surrounds it, they are constantly forming and re-forming themselves.

While *JR* as a postmodern novel highlights questions of complexity, fragmentation and distance, these gestures towards considering the ecological as agentic make way for new conceptions of social, economic and political organization. As I discussed in chapter 3.2. with the example from Judith Butler’s speech where the audience was referred to as bodies, these new conceptions



can include material considerations in various forms: for instance, the body, non-human nature and material objects or environments. For Kyle Bladow, an empowered postmodernism emerges from these considerations:

Endless deferment, change, and interpenetrated being doesn't signal the fracturing of some preexisting whole, but instead the enactment of the ongoing becoming of the world. We are not lost in fragmentation, but more connected and enmeshed in the world, responsive to it and responsible toward it, as it (Bladow 2015, 30).

Bladow emphasizes the same ecological orientation that permeates *JR*. The material and human voices of *JR* signal what Bladow calls “the ongoing becoming of the world” as new phenomena constantly emerge from the interaction and interconnection between humans, non-human nature and matter. The characters of *JR* can appear “lost” to the reader but are instead “connected and enmeshed” to each other and the matter in the novel, as is evidenced by the many examples I've discussed in this thesis.

As JR himself appears mostly only as a disconnected voice to his employees, business partners and other, and he is never described in the same material way as other characters such as Bast and Gibbs are, he cannot formulate a statement of resistance. He immediately pursues another business venture after his company's purchase, but Bast refuses to cooperate (*JR*, 726). This is another way in which *JR* suggests that its depiction of matter includes an anti-capitalist component and leads to Bladow's “ongoing becoming” (2015, 30). Ironically, but befitting the character, the last words spoken by JR that are also the last words of the novel are heard through a telephone. At the end of the novel, JR occupies two positions: on the one hand, he is an almost completely disembodied voice while, on the other hand, he never realizes the resistance to neoliberal capitalism that the novel's material concerns suggest. This is exemplified by how he still speaks the same way about business even after his corporation's downfall: “Lie about taxes cheat on the federal budget [...] let the interest rates triple on top of that and they'll plant you a tree on the Perdinalies hand you a world bank [...] while she sits in her four dollar a week room in Davenport and counts her tips” (*JR*, 683). He acknowledges the various problems of capitalism, but still strives to profit in this political and economic situation that he knows to be flawed. Therefore, JR's double position becomes a parody of his

fascination with the intangible materiality that I discussed in chapter 5.1. Bast's voice in the conversation is recorded more directly as he is a materially situated self as I described above. JR remains contained to the phone left dangling in the air while Bast walks away.

Bladow's formulation and *JR*'s embodiment of it are in opposition to individualist neoliberalism described in chapter 4.2 and its project of perennial self-improvement as a method of enriching the self and thus reinforcing the totalization of market ideology in life described at the end of chapter 3.1. In an attempt to conceive ways of moving away from the importance of the neoliberal project of the self in literature, Sarah Brouillette proposes highlighting “[emphases] on an aesthetic practice driven not by the solo author's self-definition and self-validation but rather by a constant unraveling of the ideal of her self's priority and sufficiency” (Brouillette 2014, 26). The unravelling of the self's priority and sufficiency in *JR* has been analyzed throughout this thesis on many levels: on the structural level, as an aesthetic practice as Brouillette calls it, the voices of the narrator(s), the passers-by and the characters form an assemblage from which no self manages to emerge cohesive and hierarchically above others. Further, the relationship between matter and humans is such that no self is independent and individualistic like neoliberal ideas tend to emphasize, but is instead materially, socially and communicatively constantly constructed and negotiated.

Matter as a creative ontology permeates *JR* and attending to this aspect reveals that *JR*'s resistance to the dominant ideology extends beyond any simple notion of human exploitation of nature under capitalism or capitalism's alienation of the individual from what is traditionally thought of as the environment or nature. These are criticisms that are often levied against capitalism and other aspects of contemporary life. However, *JR* posits matter as a significant determinant in human action and suggests that it cannot be ignored in favor of establishing a false idea of the autonomous and hierarchically primary human being. Since matter acts both in and out of assemblages, with or without human attention or cooperation and enables and defines bodies, spaces and ideas, it cannot be excluded from political and ethical considerations. Having Bast forfeit his role in the business world and leaving JR still in it, *JR* proposes that including the creative ontology leads to a rejection of neoliberal capitalism and the primacy

of the self. Social and ecological situatedness is favored instead; a dispersal of self and enmeshment with the environment.

When DiCephalis, Gibbs and a few corporate representatives are monitoring through a surveillance system a social studies class given by Amy Joubert, they talk about the new methods of teaching: “—We’re yes we’re trying something new here, combining the studio lesson with the classroom portion” and “—The youngsters themselves become part of the teaching process for a truly meaningful learning experience utilizing the ahm, the youngsters themselves...” (*JR*, 45). These comments are made by DiCephalis about Joubert’s class, where the content she is teaching is hinted by the following lines spoken by her and her through the monitoring system: “—someone to tell us what we mean by our share in America...?”, “—and that’s the difference between our country and Russia isn’t it class” and “—and that’s what owning a share in a corporation means too doesn’t it, the right to vote just like being an Am...” (*ibid.*). These statements imply that she is teaching a class that emphasizes capitalism’s role in American life and its supposedly democratic and egalitarian nature. The school’s management wants to create “a truly meaningful learning experience” by “utilizing” the students themselves; their bodies. The aim, therefore, is to create a new learning environment that uses the body and is beneficial to the dominant ideology.

However, Gibbs disagrees with the embodied teaching method and has written a quote from Empedocles on a wall, the meaning of which he tries to explain to one of the corporate representatives after they inquire about it. He says: “—When limbs and parts of bodies were wandering around everywhere separately heads without necks, arms without shoulders, unattached eyes looking for foreheads...” (*JR*, 45). This directly invokes the material gap, the break between the body and the body part I discussed earlier in this chapter. It is presented in the context of resistance to corporate ideology and methods of control, which reinforces its anti-capitalist tendency. Furthermore, Gibbs ridicules the person asking about the quote by saying “[n]ever read it? In the second generation these parts are joining up by chance. Form creatures with countless hands, faces looking in different directions (*ibid.*). Gibbs argues that what this process is trying to contain is the power of bodies coming together and acting out

their material agency. This is precisely what Judith Butler accomplishes in their speech at the Occupy protest.

It is important to note that Butler's speech was given using a method known as the human microphone, where the crowd amplifies the voice of the speaker instead of a PA system by repeating their words (Wikipedia, 2019). This is already the creature that Gibbs refers to in the previous passage, the material bodies working together that individualist neoliberal capitalism, as symbolized by the corporate representatives, attempts to contain. The crowd are the "countless hands" and the "faces looking in different directions". In their speech, Butler states the following:

It matters that as bodies we arrive together in public, that we are assembling in public; we are coming together as bodies in alliance in the street and in the square. As bodies we suffer, we require shelter and food, and as bodies we require one another and desire one another. So this is a politics of the public body, the requirements of the body, its movement and voice. We would not be here if elected officials were representing the popular will. We stand apart from the electoral process and its complicities with exploitation. We sit and stand and move and speak, as we can, as the popular will, the one that electoral democracy has forgotten and abandoned. But we are here, and remain here, enacting the phrase, "we the people" (Butler in *The Funambulist*, 2011).

Butler claims that the aim of the protest is to show dissatisfaction with capitalism and corporate democracy that are exploitative, corrupted and intermingled. Butler here refers to a "politics of the public body", which emphasizes the material nature of humans and, by extension, the interrelatedness of the human, the non-human and the material. Gibbs is invoking the same materiality of resistance as Butler. The revolutionary potential of this creative ontology is anathema to neoliberal capitalism and this is acknowledged in *JR*. Dan DiCephalis' wife Ann says to him that "you're afraid of everything aren't you, afraid of life, living, anything that lives and grows..." (*JR*, 54). I argue that DiCephalis is afraid because these phenomena remind him of the material bodies that are to be controlled instead of highlighted, and the material connections that need to be ignored in favor of what they see as intangible assets that are in reality parts of material assemblages and highly dependent on material relations. This is the kind of social and ecological situatedness and dispersal of self as political resistance that *JR* gestures toward

both in its structure and content. As Judith Butler writes later about the Occupy crowds: “The assembly is already speaking before it utters any words” (Butler 2015, 156). By their presence and visibility, on the material Wall Street in New York City and the fictional in *JR*, matter, material assemblages and ecological connections make their voices heard.

## 6. Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued for *JR* as a text of resistance and radical creativity. It is a unique text in American postmodernism, and its experimental structure is inseparable from its thematic concerns, as I have demonstrated. As a reading experience it situates the reader into its world, a depiction of the New York City and some of its surrounding areas in the early 1970s. By way of immersion, it highlights feeling as integral part of recognizing the ways in which human agency and existence is linked with matter. The noise, flux and excess of the text are an invitation to either be overwhelmed by the detail, or to reject the idea of mastery of the text and simply feel its flow.

The immersive approach, however, does not come at the detriment of attending to *JR*'s thematic concerns; its politics, economics and philosophies. I have used Edward Bast and his development in the novel from a advertisement jingle composer to an aspiring serious artist as an anti-capitalist stance, a rejection of the Jamesonian process of totalizing market value in all aspects of life. However, the novel's resistance also extends to challenging the capitalist idea of the hierarchical primacy of human experience by showing how embedded into material relations humans are. As Karen Barad (2007, 393) noted, this proximity entails ecological responsibility, which again entails the impossibility of perennial growth and profit that are central to neoliberal capitalism.

Oppermann and Iovino's (2014) idea of the creative ontology of matter helps to show how *JR* achieves the dismantling of human exceptionalism and competitive individualism. In the novel, humans are directed and enabled by material agencies acting in assemblies and interaction with autopoietic systems. However, it advocates for a dispersal of self in the environment by invoking what I referred to as the material gap, the borderland between human and material voice. This is particularly evident in *JR*'s use of body parts as metonymy for human action and thought. My analysis shows how this gap is an ecological gesture that reveals the extent to which humans are comprised of matter and how matter functions both in and around us.

In the introduction I defined two of the key terms of this thesis: neoliberalism and agency. David Harvey (2005) claimed that neoliberalism's importance lies in how it has established its view of individualism and competition as the default view that permeates contemporary society. Karen Barad's (2007) notion of agency challenges this view as it sees human agency as part of a larger ongoing becoming of intra-activity in the world; a non-competitive orientation toward social and ecological connection. In the second chapter I discussed William Gaddis' career, relationship with American literature and *JR*'s relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly with reference to the 2008 recession and the Occupy protest movement. In chapter three, I used my experience with the novel and Rachel Greenwald Smith's idea of impersonal feelings as ecological gestures to analyze *JR*'s unique structure and its significance as an ecological text. In chapter four, I conceptualized *JR* through Fredric Jameson's (1991) idea of postmodernism as the proliferation of market ideology, Ihab Hassan's (1993) idea of indeterminance and Tom LeClair's (1989) category of the systems novel. In the final chapter, I introduced material ecocriticism and Niklas Luhmann's theory of autopoietic systems and analyzed how *JR* depicts them and their relationship. I used Jane Bennett's material assemblages to depict how *JR* employs matter within the confines of the novel's unusual flow-like structure. Finally, I argued that the body as a site of material agency is one of the most radical ways in which *JR* realizes its material and ecological potential. I then linked these ideas with distinctly anti-capitalist notions: Kyle Bladow's (2015) empowered postmodernism and Judith Butler's (2011, 2015) view of bodies as resistance.

In this thesis I have shown how *JR* displays a radical creative ontology both textually and in terms of readerly response that inevitably implies a resistance to the basic tenets of neoliberalism and suggests an ecological view that includes affirmation of the role of matter in the environment, human affairs and conceptions of self and others. This study has been by no means exhaustive. *JR* is a long, rich and challenging text which constantly opens itself to new interpretations. For instance, one area of future study that would highlight *JR*'s unique structure could be analyzing the novel as a network of literature, social media and readerly responses as is exemplified by the #OccupyGaddis project I discussed in chapter 2.1. In my thesis, I have chosen to highlight the significance

of readerly response, the novel's unique and experimental nature, its material assemblages, autopoietic systems and bodies. It is a novel that is deeply embedded in the conditions of its creation: the New York of the 1970s. Yet, it is arguably even more relevant now not only as a diagnosis of the conditions that lead to neoliberalism but also as a novel that suggests ways forward for us as readers 40 years after its publication.



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## **Finnish Summary:**

### **Johdanto**

Tämä pro gradu -tutkielma tarkastelee William Gaddisin teosta *JR* (1975) näkökulmasta, joka yhdistelee ekokriittikiä ja järjestelmäteoriaa. Keskeistä on osoittaa *JR*:n olevan relevantti ja innovatiivinen näkemys ihmisen ja luonnon suhteesta uusliberalistisen kapitalismin aikana. *JR* voidaan nähdä kapitalismin yltäkylläisyyden ja esteettömän yksilönvapauden kritiikkinä, mutta tässä pro graduussa se näyttäytyy myös tekstinä, joka esittää kehollisuutta ja aineellisia yhteyksiä painottavan vaihtoehdon yksilökeskeiselle uusliberalismille. Näitä temaattisia kysymyksiä ei voi erottaa romaanin kokeellisesta rakenteesta ja tästä syystä lukukokemus itsessään muuttuu ekologiseksi eleeksi. Pro gradu osoittaa, että *JR*:in ekologinen antikapitalismi ei rajoitu vain ihmisen tuhoavan vaikutuksen kuvaamiseksi, vaan se kyseenalaistaa koko uusliberalistisen maailmankuvan perustavanlaatuiset oletukset. Keskeistä on kilpailun ja yksilön sijaan nähdä ihmiset toisiinsa ja ympäristöön erottamattomasti linkittyneinä toimijoina. *JR*:n rakenne tukee tätä käsitystä, sillä se koostuu pääasiassa dialogista, jota rytmittävät satunnaiset deskriptiivisen proosan sekvenssit. Dialogi esitetään usein ilman suoraa viittausta puhujaan eli puhujan identiteetin selvittäminen jää lukijan harteille. Kuvaileva proosa puolestaan usein välttää viittaamista ihmisiin heidän nimillään ja keskittyy enemmän kuvaamaan objekteja, ympäristöä ja muita materiaalisia toimijoita. *JR*:n ekologinen näkemys on vastakohta sille uusliberalismille, jonka David Harvey (2005) artikuloi. Hänen mukaansa uusliberalismin lähtökohdat ovat yksilö, kilpailu ja jatkuva kasvu (joka ei rajoitu vain talouteen, vaan kattaa myös sosiaalisia, yksilöllisiä ja muita tarpeita ja haluja), joista on viime vuosikymmenien aikana tullut monessa maassa ja kulttuurissa itsestäänselvyyksiä. Tämä pro gradu ehdottaa, että ekologis-järjestelmäteoreettisessa analyysissä *JR* purkaa nämä lähtökohdat ja rakentaa tilalle materialistisia yhteyksiä painottavaa maailmankuvaa.

### **William Gaddis ja *JR***

William Gaddis (1922-1998) oli amerikkalainen kirjailija, joka julkaisi ensimmäisen teoksensa *The Recognitions* vuonna 1955. Gaddisia voidaan pitää yhtenä varhaisimmista amerikkalaisen postmodernin kirjallisuuden edustajista. Vaikka Gaddis ei uransa aikana saanut osakseen huomattavaa kaupallista suosiota, Steven Moore (2017) huomauttaa että hänellä on ollut suuri vaikutus aikalaikirjailijoihinsa, kuten Thomas Pynchoniin ja William H. Gassiin. Gaddis löydettiin uudelleen vuoden 2008 globaalien talouslaman ja sitä seuranneen yhtä lailla globaalien Occupy-protestiliikkeen aikana. Occupyn keskeinen ajatus oli riistokapitalismin, korruption ja suurten korporatioiden näkyvä vastustus, ja Gaddisin tuotannosta etenkin *JR* nousi tässä yhteydessä tärkeäksi teokseksi sen antikapitalistisista teemoista johtuen. Yksi esimerkki tästä on #OccupyGaddis-projekti, jossa romaania luettiin kollektiivisesti Twitterissä ja muissa sosiaalisissa medioissa. Philip Mileticin (2016, 168) mukaan #OccupyGaddisin käyttäjät eivät niinkään puhuneet itse romaanin eri puolista, vaan lukijat käyttivät tekstiä puhuakseen Yhdysvaltojen vuoden 2012 presidentinvaaleista. *JR* on siis edelleen monella tapaa relevantti teos ja sen kokeellinen rakenne mahdollistaa yhä uusia lukutapoja.

*JR* rakentuu sen päähenkilön, 11-vuotiaan JR Vansantin ympärille. Romaanin juoni on kerrottu välillisesti ja fragmentaarisesti, mikä tekee siitä erittäin haastavan ja monitulkintaisen. Yksi kirjan hahmoista, opettaja Jack Gibbs, viittaa tähän seikkaan toteamalla, että mitään juonta ei tarvita (*JR*, 399). Koska juonen täydellinen selitys ei ole mielekästä *JR*:ista puhuttaessa, tässä pro gradussa esitellään vain keskeisimpien hahmojen kehityskaaret. JR Vansant on teoksen alussa luokkaretkellä New Yorkin Wall Streetillä, ja oppii siellä pörssin ja osakemarkkinoiden periaatteita. Hän perustaa oman yrityksensä, kasvattaa siitä globaalien suurkorporaation ja ajaa sen konkurssiin noin kuukauden ajanjakson aikana. Romaanin viimeisellä sivulla JR ehdottaa uutta liikeideaa Edward Bastille, joka ei vastaa JR:lle vaan kävelee pois. Edward Bast on säveltäjä, joka joutuu tasapainottelemaan epätydyttävän päivätyön ja unelmiensa sinfonian säveltämisen välillä. Hän myös auttaa JR:ia ja toimii tämän sijaisena liiketapaamisissa, sillä hän on yksi niistä harvoista, jotka tietävät, että JR on lapsi. Bast on myös mukana selvittämässä hänen isänsä kuoleman jälkeen perheen yhteisen yrityksen kohtaloa. Teoksen lopussa hän luopuu osakkuudestaan



perheyrytyksessä, kieltäytyy JR:in tarjouksesta ja kävelee pois tarkoituksenaan säveltää sinfonia. Jack Gibbs puolestaan on luonnontieteidenopettaja JR:n koulussa, ja hänellä on suhde yhteiskuntaopinopettaja Amy Joubertin kanssa. Gibbsin ja Joubertin suhde sekä heidän osallisuutensa Wall Streetin yritys- ja osakemaailmaan muodostavan *JR*:in toisen fokuksen Bastin ja JR Vansantin tarinoiden lisäksi. Suuri osa romaanista kuvaa muita ihmisiä, juonia ja satunnaisia kohtaamisia.

Tässä pro gradussa painotetaan *JR*:in kokeellista muotoa lukukokemuksen näkökulmasta. Olennaista on nähdä kuinka immersion kautta koettuna teksti suuntaa lukijan tuntemaan hämmennystä, eksyneisyyttä ja yhteyttä niihin ihmisiin, ympäristöihin ja ilmiöihin, jotka määrällään, fragmentaarisuudellaan ja nopeudellaan hukuttavat lukijan tekstin lukemattomiin ääniin. Rachel Smith (2015) väittää että esimerkiksi hämmennys, eksyneisyys ja hukkuminen ovat tunteita ja affektiivisia responsseja, jotka sijaitsevat perinteisten ja helposti tunnistettavien tunnereaktioiden ulkopuolella. Nämä responssit auttavat orientoimaan lukijaa kohti ekologista lukutapaa, joka painottaa materiaalista yhteyttä muihin ihmisiin, ei-inhimillisiin olioihin ja ympäristöön. Pro gradu ehdottaa, että näiden affektien kautta tulkittuna *JR*:n rakenteen mahdollistama lukukokemus tukee sen materialistis-ekokriittistä viestiä.

## ***JR* järjestelmäromaanina ja kapitalismin kritiikkinä**

Kapitalismi on yksi *JR*:n keskeisimmistä teemoista. Fredric Jameson (1991) väitti, että kapitalismi ja postmodernismi linkittyvät yhteen kulttuurituotannon objekteina markkinataloudessa. Angela Allan (2015) jatkaa toteamalla, että jamesonilaisessa postmodernismissä taloudellinen arvo nähdään ylivertaisena muihin arvoihin nähden. Tämä ajatus näkyy *JR*:issa kaikkialla, mutta etenkin yritysmaailman ihmisten kuten Hyden, DiCephaliksen ja Catesin puheissa. Allan (2015) painottaa että *JR*:issa sellainen taide, joka ei tähtää taloudelliseen hyötyyn, muodostaa markkinatalouden vallan rajan. Pro gradu käyttää tästä esimerkkinä Edward Bastin hahmoa, joka romaanin lopussa luopuu työstään ja perinnöstään ja omistaa itsensä säveltämiselle. Tämä markkinatalouden rajallisuuden tunnistaminen vihjaa lukijan kohti *JR*:n muita antikapitalistisia

tendenssejä, jotka tulevat esiin pro gradun ekokriittisessä ja järjestelmäteoreettisessa analyysissä.

Tom LeClair (1989) näki *JR*:n olevan ns. ”järjestelmäromaanin”, eli romaanin, joka painottaa informaation eksessiivisyyttä yrittäessään tutkia niitä järjestelmiä ja prosesseja, jotka määrittävät nykyaikaista elämää. LeClairin mukaan nämä järjestelmät ovat usein operationaalisesti suljettuja, eli ne ottavat vastaan ulkoisia ärsykeitä, mutta tulkitsevat niitä ja toimivat omien impulssiensa pohjalta. Ne myös toimivat koordinoitusti toistensa kanssa, muodostaen järjestelmällisiä kokonaisuuksia. Esimerkkejä tällaisista järjestelmistä *JR*:issa ovat *JR*:n koulu Massapequassa, New Yorkissa, *JR*:n yritys JR Corporation ja maapallo teknologis–ekologisena kokonaisuutena. Järjestelmäromaanille olennaista on navigoida sitä informaatiotulvaa, joka on läsnä näiden järjestelmien väleissä ja ulkopuolilla. *JR*:issa informaatiotulva näkyy pääasiassa dialogissa, joka sisältää paljon puhetta esimerkiksi verotuksesta, lainsäädännöstä ja rahasta. Lopuksi LeClair yhdistää järjestelmäromaanin kategorian ekokriittiseen ajatteluun, sillä hän painottaa, että niiden tekemän tutkimuksen ja kuvauksen tarkoituksena on ohjata kohti vastuullisempaa ja oikeudenmukaisempaa näkemystä ihmisen ja ympäristön suhteesta (LeClair 1989, 13). LeClairin mukaan kysymys siitä, miten maapallon resurssit hyödynnetään ja jaetaan, on järjestelmäromaanin keskeisin kysymys, ja *JR*:in representaatio riistokapitalistisesta Wall Streetistä voidaan nähdä entrooppisena agenttina järjestelmien kokonaisuudessa, jota se jatkuvasti tuhoaa. Tämä tulkinta ei kuitenkaan ota huomioon *JR*:n järjestelmäteoreettisen aspektin suhdetta materialistiseen ekokritiikkiin.

## **Materialistinen ekokritiikki ja itsesäätelevät järjestelmät**

Serpil Oppermann ja Serenella Iovino (2014) määrittelevät materialistisen ekokritiikin lähtökohdaksi sen, että maailma koostuu toimijuuden verkostoista, joissa ihmiset, objektit ja muu materia kommunikoivat, merkitsevät ja luovat narratiiveja. Tässä dynamiikassa ei ole selvää jakoa subjektin ja objektin välillä, vaan inhimillinen ja materiaallinen toimijuus toimivat intersubjektiivisesti ja korostavat verkostojen monimuotoisuutta (Oppermann 2014, 32). Materialistisen

ekokritiikin prosessissa tulkitaan näiden verkostojen kommunikaation ja narratiivien toimintaa ja merkitystä. *JR*:issa materiaaliset agentit ovat jatkuvassa fokuksessa ja usein niitä antropomorfoidaan eli niille annetaan jokin inhimillinen aspekti, joka auttaa sekä lukijaa että romaanin hahmoja tunnistamaan sen materiaalisen toimijuuden, joka saattaisi muuten jäädä huomiotta (Bennett 2010, 99).

Tässä pro gradussa viitataan Hannes Bergthalleriin (2014, 43), joka käyttää Niklas Luhmannin (1984) teoriaa autopoieettisista eli itsenäisistä tai itsesäätelevistä järjestelmistä siltana materialistisen ekokritiikin ja järjestelmäteorian välillä. Autopoieettiset järjestelmät ovat jatkuvassa kanssakäymisessä materiaalisten toimijoiden kanssa ja kommunikaatio kaikissa muodoissaan on niiden keskeisin yhteys. Bergthallerin mukaan yksilö on tässä suhteessa kommunikaation luoma semanttinen kokonaisuus, joka on osa ympäristöään, mutta kykenee myös toimimaan siinä ja tulkitsemaan sitä. Tämä kuva vastaan *JR*:n ihmiskuvaa, jossa ihmisäänet puhuvat ja kehot toimivat, mutta ne ovat erottamattomasti kiinni materiaalisissa yhteyksissään, jotka jatkuvasti ohjaavat ja määrittelevät niitä.

Pro gradu väittää, että itsesäätelevät järjestelmät ovat romaanissa jatkuvassa kanssakäymisessä materiaalisten sommitelmien kanssa. Jane Bennett määrittelee sommitelman materiaalisten agenttien muodostamaksi kokonaisuudeksi, joka on dynaaminen ja luo kehkeytymässä olevia ilmiöitä ja olioita. Toimijuus itsessään on jakautunut epätasaisesti sommitelman sisällä, sillä esimerkiksi markkinatalouden intresseillä saattaa olla laajempi kapasiteetti toimia kuin yksittäisellä tietokoneella. Molempia, ja montaa muuta toimijaa, kuitenkin tarvitaan esimerkiksi JR Corporationin muodostamassa sommitelmassa. Pro gradu osoittaa, että Bennettin sommitelmat kuvaavat maailman materiaalista toimijuutta, mutta ne sijoittuvat itsesäätelevien kokonaisuuksien sisään ja väleihin. Esimerkkinä tästä on JR Corporation, joka on itsesäätelevä järjestelmä, mutta se on jatkuvassa kontaktissa sommitelmien kanssa, jossa molemmat muokkautuvat ja sopeutuvat. Sommitelmien ruumiittomat osat, kuten talouskasvu tai poliittiset ideologiat, saavat etusijan ympäristöllisten toimijoiden sijaan, sillä JR ja muut yritysvaikuttajat painottavat niitä haittavaikutuksista ja yhteyksien

tuhoamisesta välittämättä (*JR*, 470). Tämä preferenssi on osa *JR*:n kapitalismikritiikkiä.

Materiaalisten yhteyksien ja sijoittuneisuuden tiedostaminen osoittautuu *JR*:n vaihtoehdoksi kapitalismin yksilöä ja ympäristöä riistävälle praktiikalle. Tämä näkyy dialogin ja materiaan keskittyvän deskriptiivisen proosan suhteessa, mutta myös *JR*:n tavassa käyttää kehoja ja kehon osia viittauksen kohteena henkilön nimen tai muun tunnistettavan seikan sijaan. Keho on *JR*:issa myös itsesäätelyn ja materiaalisten sommitelmien kohtaupaikka, sillä Bergthallerin (2014, 44) mukaan ihmisen hermosto on itsesäätelvä järjestelmä. Kehon osien käyttäminen metaforana ja viittauksen kohteena antaa niille tietyn toimijuuden, joka korostaa ihmiskehon materiaalista toimijuutta ja yhteyttä materialistisen ekokritiikin näkemykseen maailmasta toimijuuden verkostona. Kehon materialistista toimijuutta vahvistaa se, että se mainitaan usein romaanissa muiden antikapitalististen ajatusten yhteydessä. Judith Butler (2015) korostaa kehollisuuden ja materiaalisuuden vastustusta uusliberaalille kapitalismille ja *JR* toistaa tätä tematiikkaa jatkuvasti. Yhteyksien ja keskinäisen riippuvuuden korostaminen yksilön yliveraisuuden, jatkuvan kasvun ja kilpailun sijaan on *JR*:n ekologian ja uusliberalismin kritiikin keskiössä. Materiaalisten toimijoiden, itsesäätelvien järjestelmien, kehollisuuden ja ekologisesti merkittävän rakenteen ja lukukokemuksen korostamisen kautta *JR* näyttäytyy pro gradussa tekstinä, joka ehdottaa radikaalia yksilön ja yhteisön uudelleenajattelua.