"The Irreducible Complexity of the Analog World": Nodes, Networks, and Actants in Contemporary American Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Using Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory as an interpretative framework, this paper discusses Daniel Suarez’s *Daemon* (2006) and Richard Powers’ *Gain* (1998) as two contemporary novels that attempt to represent (and ultimately map) a world governed by social/technological/economic networks. Both texts investigate what happens to our notions of agency and self-determinacy when characters and environments are conceptualized as distributed processes of interconnectivity and recursiveness. Whereas *Daemon* largely relies on particularized and psychologically coherent characters who have to navigate a networked world in which a decentralized computer system begins to take over the United States, *Gain* pushes the network trope even further by suggesting that the individual itself (both as a social and as a narrative construction) is actually a complex network and that fiction must respond to this paradigm by reevaluating both realistic and postmodern modes of representation.

From *The Terminator* (1984) to *The Matrix* (1999), from *Tron* (1982) to *War Games* (1983), from *Neuromancer* (1984) to *The Difference Engine* (1990), from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) to *Eagle Eye* (2008), science fiction narratives on the page and on the screen abound with networks that cross the mythical threshold of complexity, develop self-awareness, and then typically decide that the human species is an enemy which either needs to be enslaved or eradicated. As with many science fiction tropes, the concept of the self-aware network that threatens human existence can be easily linked to current cultural anxieties. The most obvious reading of this theme would tie it to the fear of rampant technology and a Luddite suspicion that the black-boxed machines with which we surround ourselves are already too complex and too intricate to be understood by most of us. At the same time, the blurry boundary between a deterministic machine and a self-aware entity that features so prominently in science fiction texts could also indicate a profound discomfort with the mechanical vision of the human mind which informs much of contemporary neurology. In the last three decades, scientific discussions of the self have gradually moved away from the field of psychology into the field of neuroscience, which predominantly focuses on the material brain. Whereas psychology is a top-down approach that attempts to understand the mind by looking at its most complex functions, neuroscience is a bottom-up approach that understands the mind as an emergent product of its organic components, thus offering a decidedly mechanistic understanding of human consciousness. The neurologist and science writer Michael S. Gazzaniga accordingly concludes, “Today the mind sciences are the province of evolutionary biologists, cognitive scientists, neuroscientists, psychophysicists, linguists, computer scientists—you
name it" (xi). Conceiving of a network that develops self-awareness can therefore also be interpreted as a means of coming to terms with the notion that we, too, are nothing but synaptic networks, that our minds merely consist of distributed and layered processes that create the illusion of a coherent consciousness. Thus the trope of the self-aware network in science fiction narratives not only inscribes agency into machines but also complicates the notion of human agency per se by questioning whether a mind that is produced by distributed and networked processes can provide a stable and autonomous self. Posthuman theorists and critics such as Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Steve Nicols similarly suggest that the Cartesian and liberal humanist conceptualizations of subjectivity which separate body and self, process and entity, can no longer be maintained in a world where information technologies form almost seamless extensions of the self. Centralized notions of subjectivity are hence challenged both from the inside (i.e., the self as a neurological network) and from the outside (i.e., the self as part of a technological network).

A recent interesting contribution to the concept of aggressive computer networks is Daniel Suarez’s debut novel *Daemon* (2006). Although the novel references the well-established science fiction trope of the computer that attempts to take over the world, the text also marks a departure from the original concept, since the network in the novel never gains consciousness or self-determined agency; it is therefore not self-aware even though it is operating with what seems to be a coherent agenda. Rather than presupposing that a network that crosses the threshold of complexity is basically indistinguishable from an entity, *Daemon* implements a more process-orientated notion of networks and agency. The plot of the novel revolves around the eccentric software billionaire and game designer Matthew Sobol, who posthumously brings about the socio-economic collapse of the United States by exploiting the most fundamental principles of the type of network theories proposed by Albert-László Barabási or M. E. J. Newman in which aggregate linear interactions eventually produce an astonishing degree of complexity. The terminally ill Sobol creates Daemon—a computer program that runs unnoticed in the background of a system—which is activated once news of Sobol’s death from brain cancer hits the Internet. The software that has scouted the web for such a news item then executes a series of algorithms and begins to infiltrate the financial structures of thousands of companies, using spy-bots and Trojan horses to shift around large amounts of money, transferring it to various individuals whose online data profiles match a specific set of parameters. Via pre-recorded messages, Sobol encourages these individuals to form a revolutionary underground movement that is supposed to unshackle the United States from the grip of corporate capitalism. Through a complex design of incentives, punishments, and feedback loops, the Daemon recruits legions of geeks, hackers, and criminals for a decentralized guerrilla network and treats these human actors as another part of the code through which it operates. Thus while the Daemon is a technological creation, much of the work is carried out by actual human beings—eagerly doing their part to change the world according to Sobol’s anarchist vision. Connected via the so-called Darknet (i.e. the non-commercial anti-internet of the novel), these human followers form a rhizomatic counter-culture across virtual
and geographical distances, operating like terrorist cells which have no immediate knowledge of each other but whose actions are integrated into a larger revolutionary scheme. It is important to stress that Sobol’s consciousness is neither preserved in the Daemon nor does the Daemon itself act as a self-aware entity; likewise, agency and purpose neither reside in the software nor in the individuals who make up its human proxies. The peculiar conceit of Suarez’s novel is to externalize the concept of the malevolent computer network and to map it onto the entirety of the U.S. The network in *Daemon* is not an entity that exists within the U.S. but a process that is distributed across the entire continent (and eventually the global internet) which involves a multitude of actants; hence the Daemon cannot be defeated by the mere pulling of a plug. The software literally treats the U.S. as a massive multiplayer online game—comparable to *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life*—in which human beings voluntarily act as None-Player-Characters (NPCs) carrying out the orders of the Daemon without knowing the full extent of the plot. In video games, NPCs usually behave according to a set of parameters that are triggered by the actions of the player. If, for example, the player’s avatar crosses a virtual line or the player presses a specific button, the linear response protocols of a NPC springs into action. In a similar fashion, the events in the world of Suarez’s novel (e.g., the passing of Sobol) set off certain predetermined responses from the Daemon that in turn initiate a new set of actions executed by real-life agents. The network is thus emergent, and it self-organizes through feedback loops. In spite of the novel’s unabashed pulp character, involving unmanned sword-wielding motorcycles, car chases, and massive explosions, questions of agency, determinacy, and free-will become central themes of the text. In fact, the 2010 sequel to the story is aptly titled *Freedom™*, already indicating that the novel investigates the possibilities and limitations of agency in a corporatized world. Whereas the megalomaniacal A.I.s of other science fiction narratives tend to be expressions of technophobe suspicions, *Daemon* focuses in much more detail on the sociology of networks and on the relationship between larger social structures and the individuals who make up these structures. After all, the network in *Daemon* exists in the virtual world of cyberspace as well as in the material world of the protagonists. Like the cyborgs of Donna Haraway’s material-semiotics, people, machinery, and code become nodes in a network that is both conceptual and material. And since the Darknet is equally made out of human and non-human actors whose roles are defined in purely relational terms, it could also be argued that the Darknet represents Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) in action. ANT famously insists on the agency of non-human entities, albeit not in the sense that they constitute a substitute for human actors:

ANT is not the empty claim that objects do things “instead” of human actors: it simply says that no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored, even though it might mean letting elements in which, for lack of a better term, we would call non-humans. (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 72)

Latour coins the term “actant” in order to designate a non-human entity that is able to modify other entities without necessarily having to inscribe anthropomorphized intention to this entity: actants “are simply different ways to make
actors do things, the diversity of which is fully deployed without having to sort in advance the “true” agencies from the “false” ones and without having to assume that they are all translatable in the repetitive idiom of the social” (55). In Suarez’s novel the eponymous Daemon would be such an actant.

Additionally, ANT postulates that the social is not a domain but a web of dynamic connections: “This is the reason why I am going to define the social not as a special domain, a specific realm, or a particular sort of thing, but only as a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling” (Latour, Reassembling the Social 7). In Daemon, these social dynamics become especially evident in a setpiece involving the construction of a home-made cyber-weapon. The software Daemon guides a dozen individual characters to specific GPS coordinates in a shopping mall where they have to hand a piece of technical equipment that they have previously assembled to a complete stranger who then adds his or her own component to the construction and afterwards passes it on to the next person involved in the scheme. Each independent amateur engineer receives virtual credit points for their actions, points that can then be traded in for money, goods, or services on the Darknet. As the item gradually moves from person to person across the mall, it eventually becomes a device to target the servers of a corporation located in the mall. While each assembler contributes to the final cyber-attack and the entire effort is a tightly choreographed sequence, there is not a single individual solely responsible for the ultimate outcome:

[T]he kid imagined the tactical assembly now underway; like swarming nanobots amid the mass of shoppers, the Daemon’s distributed assembly plant ran half a dozen independent lines, with no individual having knowledge of anything more than the few seconds in front of them and the mechanics of the single assembly for which they’d be responsible. The parts arrived in place at the moment they were required, the voice vectoring them into a collision course. Assemblers came and went, passing the assembly on to the next worker in the chain after confirming completion of their step. Redundancy gave high probability that sufficient parts were to arrive on station at the appropriate moment, and that waylaid assemblers could be quickly replaced. What he didn’t know was what they were building. He wondered if he’d ever know. (345)

This scene particularizes the intertwining of human and non-human agency as well as of social and technological networks as depicted in the novel. It also evokes Latour’s discussion of the debate over gun control in the U.S., epitomized by the opposing slogans “Guns kill people” vs. “Guns do not kill people, people kill people.” According to Latour, it is neither guns nor people alone who kill people but the hybrid gun/person that consists of “collective[s] defined as an exchange of human and non-human properties inside a corporate body” (Pandora’s Hope 193). Social associations and human/non-human hybrids are also integral aspects of the Darknet: Sobol does not control the network since he is dead; the Daemon itself does not possess intentionality, only pre-programmed responses; and the human participants in the network do not act like independent entities but merely follow the orders of the Daemon. Yet a sense of agency, coherence, and purpose emerges from the interaction of these components.

As a piece of genre fiction, Daemon is firmly grounded in the narrative conventions of mimetic realism. Although the novel portrays a hyperlinked world in
which self and other, man and machine, code and material form a synaptic lace-work; its characters remain psychologically comprehensible and autonomous entities whose actions are ultimately presented as self-determined. Thus, while the content of Daemon explores a radically networked world, its narrative relies on the causative plots and particularized characters of nineteenth-century realism. Although Daemon is a surprisingly complex fictional response to the prevalence of social and computerized networks in our world, the novel nevertheless remains stuck in one-directional linearity. Expanding on the ideas and concepts developed in Daemon, I would like to focus on Richard Powers’ sixth novel, Gain (1998),¹ as a text that actually investigates how the concept of the network as the underlying principle of our social reality must affect literary representations of subjectivity rather than merely describing human actors in a network.

Networks feature prominently in Powers’s fiction: they manifest themselves in the isomorphic conceit of Baroque music, genetics, and computer code in The Gold Bug Variations (1991), in the selfaware neural net at the center of Galatea 2.2 (1995), in the relativistic spatial and temporal fabric that weaves together the stories of the characters in The Time of Our Singing (2003), as well as in the almost Emersonian vision of a densely connected ecosphere that dominates The Echo Maker (2006). Indeed, Powers has frequently investigated the importance of distributed processes for our understanding of the human condition. Here Powers concurs with recent developments in the social and the natural sciences that hail networks as a corrective to the reductionist paradigms of the twentieth century. Especially in the natural sciences, reductionism has produced a staggering amount of hyper-specialized sub-disciplines and it has become increasingly difficult to integrate the myriad of pieces of specialized knowledge into a coherent whole. Indeed, the natural sciences seem to have arrived at a point already prophesized by the metaphysical poets who remained distrustful of the emergence of Baconian science in the seventeenth century: “'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone” (212), John Donne lamented in 1611. Albert-László Barabási, one of the most popular proponents of network theory, argues in more contemporary terms:

Now we are close to knowing just about everything there is to know about the pieces. But we are as far as we have ever been from understanding nature as a whole. Indeed, the reassembly turned out to be much harder than scientists anticipated. The reason is simple: Riding reductionism, we run into the hard wall of complexity. (6)

This turn toward a more holistic and integrated understanding of nature might be a relatively new trend in the context of the natural sciences. Literature and literary studies, however, have always adhered to an anti-reductionist program, in spite of the attempts of the New Critics and their various successors to apply reductionist principles to literary analyses. However, even the New Critics propagated the organic unity of a literary text, thereby acknowledging that literature cannot convincingly be analyzed reductively. Latour also emphasizes the power of fiction when it comes to tracing social networks:

¹ The subsequent reading of the novel is in parts based on chapter eight from my study Propositions about Life: Reengaging Literature and Science.
Because they deal with fiction, literary theorists have been much freer in the enquiries about figuration than any social scientist, especially when they have used semiotics or the various narrative sciences. [...] This is why ANT has borrowed from narrative theories, not all of their arguments and jargon to be sure, but their freedom of movement. [...] It is not that sociology is fiction or because literary theorists would know more than sociologists, but because the diversity of the worlds of fiction invented on paper allow enquirers to gain as much pliability and range as those they have to study in the real world. (Reassembling the Social 54-55)

Along similar lines, Powers argues that the natural sciences might actually profit from a more literary approach to their objects of inquiry because fiction is inherently capable of mapping complex systems:

More recently, even those gauges of science that have depended most completely on reductionism [...] have, in acknowledging some of the limits to understanding complex systems entirely in terms of their isolated parts, turned to simulation and modelling as legitimate ways of coming to understand the whole in terms of the whole. Mindful of those developments, it’s tempting to suggest a closer kinship between empirical science and fiction making: both are systems of theory-making about the world, although on such different gauges that their methodologies necessarily vary profoundly. (“In the Lake House of Language” 456)

In at least two different contexts Latour has referred to Powers’ Gain as a text that productively resonates with his own sociology of networks since the novel illustrates the extent to which networks dominate our lives by suggesting that the contemporary individual indeed is a network rather than being a particularized entity in a network. Powers himself describes Gain as a ‘systems novel’ which assumes that the individual human cannot be adequately understood solely as an autonomous, self-expressing, self-reflecting entity, but must be seen as a node on an immensely complex network of economic, cultural, historical, and technological forces. As a result, fiction needs to reconnect representations of character to broader explorations of those selves’ rich and immense environments. (“Making the Rounds” 305)

Gain realizes this context-driven exploration of subjectivity through a complementary narrative structure consisting of two storylines that differ radically in scope and scale. One storyline of Gain is a domestic narrative that gives an intimate account of the last year in the life of Laura Bodey—a 42-year-old real estate agent and divorced mother of two teenaged children—who is diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The text describes in excruciating detail Laura’s cancer therapy sessions, her brave but futile attempts at stoicism in the face of her sickness, her protracted death, and the different ways in which her children, her obsessive but caring ex-husband, and her married lover cope with her dying. Laura also grows aware that her hometown, Lacewood, Illinois, seems to be afflicted by a cancer ‘epidemic’ that might have been caused by emissions from a local production facility. Therefore, she joins a class-action suit against the company that is eventually settled out of court shortly after Laura’s death.

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2 See Reassembling the Social 56, 145; “Powers of the Facsimile” 265.
Juxtaposed against this personal history of corporeal deterioration is the historical narrative of a corporate ascent: in a sweeping arc, *Gain* retraces the development of the fictional soap company Clare Inc. from its beginnings as a small family enterprise to its transformation into a multinational business conglomerate. The 170 years covered in the business history of Clare synecdochally represent the development of American business from its entrepreneurial phase to its dissemination into global networks. The storyline meticulously analyzes how businesses have gradually moved from the manufacturing of materials to the manufacturing of symbols, from a policy of meeting needs to a hyperreal ideology of “fitting the itch to the scratch” (*Gain* 326).

Charles B. Harris argues that the contrapuntal structure of *Gain* transforms its two otherwise mimetic-realistic narratives into a self-reflexive construct, for like a stereoscope that creates the illusion of three-dimensionality by contrasting a pair of two-dimensional images, *Gain* arranges its complementary storylines in a parallactic fashion. Due to the fact that the novel’s plots remain autonomous throughout the text and because of the absence of a textual subject which “struggles to interpret the complex interweavings of the novel’s multiple frames,” the “perspective necessary to tip the novel’s parallel frames into three-dimensional parallax must be supplied by the reader” (Harris 98-99). This strategy “nudges what appears to be Powers’s most straightforward realistic novel toward the status of Barthesian text” (99). In spite of their structural separation, the parallel plots of *Gain* are made to resonate with each other through analogies, metaphors, and conceits. By identifying these connective devices, the reader injects herself into the text and automatically maps Laura’s local narrative and Clare’s global history onto each other, even though both stories remain seemingly incongruent. The novel thus creates a meta-fictional third space that exists intradiegetically between the two fictional narratives and that also explicitly involves the reader in the creation of textual meaning.

The most apparent examples for the novel’s compositional technique are the polysemic allocations of the terms “growth” and “body” in *Gain*, which have a mainly denotative significance for Laura, whose body is literally consumed by metastatic growth, but which acquire more connotative meanings in the Clare storyline. As Laura’s physical body is disintegrating, Clare is transformed into “one composite body” (*Gain* 158) through the law of corporate personhood and soon after the company begins to adopt a cancerous economic strategy in which “growth was an end unto itself” (218). While it might be tempting to suggest an analogy between the corporate global network of Clare and Laura’s cancer that can also be described as a network of defunct cells spreading through her body, the novel actually pushes the analogy into a different direction by not only indicating parallels between corporate and cancerous growth but also between corporate networks and seemingly particularized psychological subjects: instead of exploiting the cancerous analogies for a monocausal polemic that portrays the dying woman as the innocent victim of corporate greed, *Gain* raises disconcerting questions about consumerist behaviors and personal responsibilities. Although there are indicators that Laura’s cancer might be linked to emissions from a local Clare production facility, these connections remain vague and are never entirely
verified. In fact, Laura herself continues to insist on the lack of an identifiable cause for her sickness by accepting that apparently “[l]ife causes cancer” (284). Eventually the question whether Clare can be held responsible for Laura’s sickness is supplanted by a much more elemental concern: in the climactic moment of the novel Laura realizes that “[e]very hour of her life depends on more corporations than she can count” (304), and thus it dawns on her that not only her death but also her entire life have been determined by the system epitomized by Clare Inc. In the course of the novel Laura therefore begins to understand that she is both a corporeal and an incorporated subject: “Life causes cancer” because her life and the possible cause of her cancer are synonymous. Laura is the quintessential late-capitalist consumerist subject whose entire life is utterly determined by corporations, and it is therefore virtually impossible to untangle the cancer from all the other corporatized (and often benign) aspects of her existence.

While the complementary structure of the novel initially suggests a binary tension between the historical and the domestic plot, the narrative realization avoids a dramatic confrontation of its two storylines and instead explores the aporetic dimensions of this juxtaposition. Powers describes this mode of writing that deliberately withholds a consolidation of its plots as a “discursive narrative,” which, according to him, might not have as much “emotive power” as a narration of “dramatic revelations” but nevertheless allows the author “to get more connection” (“The Last Generalist”). The “connection” Powers refers to is not the assumed emotional bond between the reader and the character but the connection between all the diegetic elements of the narrative that reveal the underlying continuities linking Laura and Clare. By trading in the emotional payoff that comes with a narrative focusing on the subjective experience of Laura for a narrative about the contextual constitution of subjectivity, Powers adopts a rather unconventional position for a contemporary novelist: In contrast to many postmodern writers who refuse to delineate social/historical/political/cultural contexts in a precise and specific manner—as this form of specificity could indicate the resurgence of the explanatory totality of master-narratives—Powers insists that this very context can be narrativized without necessarily assuming a totalizing perspective.

Postmodern fictions dealing with corporate consumer culture such as Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), William Gaddis’ *J.R.* (1975), Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985), or Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991) also describe late-capitalist consumerism as an abstract and all-encompassing system that shapes and determines the subject. However, in their novels, the system remains forever beyond the grasp of both the subject and the reader. The constituting context of subjectivity turns into a “postmodern sublime” that eludes representation in these texts. The only adequate response characters and readers can muster in the face of this conspiratorial vision is paranoia; the signs of the system are everywhere but they cannot be deciphered. The concluding pages of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* are exemplary of the way postmodern fiction usually conceptualizes large-scale networks as a sublime force that remains beyond the grasp of the characters and the narrator. When Oedipa Maas arrives at yet another false conclusion to her quest to unveil Tristero’s secret, she contemplates
the connection between herself, her hometown, San Narciso, and the alleged conspiracy that seems to govern her entire existence:

There was the true continuity, San Narciso had no boundaries. No one knew yet how to draw them. She had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America. [...] Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth. [...] Another mode of meaning behind the obvious one, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there was either some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia. (123-26)

Here Pynchon presents a web of connections, associations, and ramifications that either exists as the paranoid fantasy of Oedipa or as an actuality; however, any attempt to untangle the web is in itself a paranoid gesture—a paranoid gesture that in turn might be validated by the existence of an actual conspiracy. Either there is a conspiracy (i.e., an underlying system) or there is just an individual trying to make sense of things by imagining coherence. Usually, postmodern fiction invites this kind of ambiguity rather than resolving it. Gain, by contrast, actually attempts to trace the connection between the individual and the larger system rather than facilitating an epistemological crisis. Indeed, the novel describes the network of consumerist capitalism not only as a threat to individuality but also as its origin. This does not render the system any less harmful to the individual, but it enables Powers to emphasize the reciprocity of subject and system. Gain locates the “powers that be” not in the paranoid “Them” (with a capital “t”) but in the even more complicated “us.”

These reciprocities between systems and individuals, between constituting and destructive elements, find their most vivid concretization in the product that stands at the very beginning of Clare’s bicentennial history: soap. The manufacturing of soap consists of transformational processes, which result in a total reversal of opposites as waste fat is turned into a symbol for cleanliness. Hence “soap stood, a Janus-faced intermediary between seeming incompatibles, an interlocutor that managed to coax mutually hostile materials onto speaking terms” (Gain 46). Gain appropriates the chemical conversions that occur during the process of saponification as its governing structural metaphor. Since the disparate narratives of the novel mimic the antithetical qualities of soap, the text itself becomes an “intermediary between seeming incompatibles” (i.e., Laura and Clare Inc.). The novel thus requires the reader to deal with the “Janus-faced” conditions created by corporate businesses: “It made no difference whether this business gave her cancer. They have given her everything else. Taken her life and molded it in every way imaginable, plus six degrees beyond imagining. Changed her life so greatly that not even cancer can change it more than halfway back” (320).

When her sickness forces Laura to reevaluate the extent to which her persona is a result of the commodified lifestyles provided by Clare and its equivalents, she concludes that her house is, “[n]o longer a home” but a “place they have given her to inhabit,” a museum of brand names and corporate logos: “Floor by Germ-Guard. Windows by Cleer-Thru. Table by Colonial-Cote” (Gain 303). But
as Laura “vows a consumer boycott, a full spring cleaning,” in the course of which she wants to get rid of every Clare product that she can find in her house, she soon realizes that it is “hopeless,” because “where else can she live?” (303-04). The moment Laura understands that her cancer “was an inside job,” she arrives at a critical insight:

Who told them to make all these things? But she knows the answer to that one. They’ve counted every receipt, more carefully than she ever has. And wasn’t she born wanting what they were born wanting to give her? Every thought, every pleasure, freed up by these little simplicities, the most obvious of them already worlds beyond her competence. (304)

Finally, Laura admits to herself that “she cannot sue the company for raiding her house. She brought them in, by choice, tooted them in a shopping bag. And she’d do it all over again, given the choice. Would have to” (302). Like mutual parasites in each other’s host bodies, Clare and Laura are entangled in a symbiosis that is as vital as it is fatal. Laura’s consumption habits contribute to the creation of entities such as Clare while Clare’s products define large parts of Laura’s existence; in between these interactions, Laura’s life and Laura’s death are traced back to the same source. This absolute codependence between Clare and Laura is emphasized when Laura learns that the company that might be responsible for her cancer also manufactures some of the drugs administered during her chemotherapies (cf. 151). And even this reciprocity replicates itself almost ad infinitum, since the side effects of the chemotherapy are so severe that the “cure is even worse than the disease” (229). In an endless spiral of deterrence, the doctors “pump her with one drug to destroy and another to rebuild. Next she’ll take something to correct the Neupogen, and another to correct the correction” (229). Laura’s body is a map of the antithetical impacts Clare and the corporate businesses it represents have on her life. The destructive and the constructive forces are intertwined in a reciprocal dynamism that causes the binaries of sickness and therapy, benefit and cost, gain and loss to implode.

As a consequence of this mapping, Laura becomes increasingly less of a traditionally realistic character and more of a constructivist entity: the novel deliberately presents her as a node in a network at the cost of her psychological plasticity. By diffusing the mechanisms that make characters appear to be fully realized within a realistic text, Powers dilutes the reader’s emotive responses toward Laura. The constructivist strategy of the text seems to have confused some literary critics who complain about Laura’s ostensible lack of psychological depth. For example, in his review of the novel, John Updike dismisses Laura’s storyline as a “medical weepie” which does not refrain from including “standard sitcom features” in the characterization of its protagonists; according to Updike, Laura’s dying is merely “a study in chemistry” (319). Even various positive responses to the novel either concede that “Gain generally avoids the extended dramatic particularization associated with characterization in realistic fiction” (Harris 100), or compare Laura’s story to a “soap opera” (LeClair 34) and a “made-for-TV movie” (Scott 39). And indeed, Laura’s expository résumé reads like a definition of late-capitalist normativity: “She is the newest member of the Next Millennium Realty’s Million Dollar Movers Club. Her daughter has just turned seventeen, her
son is twelve and a half. Her ex-husband does development for Sawgak College. She sees a married man, quietly and infrequently” (Gain 9).

In contrast, I would like to suggest that Laura’s portrayal in Gain ultimately exposes the degree to which the creation of a believable and seemingly autonomous character depends on a reductionist approach to subjectivity. If a literary character becomes a network rather than merely being placed within a network, established notions of literary subjectivity must falter. In Suarez’s Daemon, psychologically coherent entities are placed in a network and then act as autonomous subjects that are connected to each other. Although the novel investigates how technological and social interconnectedness could put us closer to a posthuman condition in which Cartesian notions of subjectivity falter, the narrative strategies of the text still rely on the conventions of mimetic realism, thereby implicitly reaffirming an identitarian ontology. While Gain presents a less technologically advanced world that is not invested in debates about a potential posthuman condition, the novel’s strategies of characterization challenge the notion of particularized subjectivity. The issue is additionally complicated by the fact that Powers does not expose his character as a construct by utilizing the familiar tropes of postmodern metafiction and authorial interference. In fact, the source of some of the critical consternation regarding Laura derives from the fact that Laura’s storyline seems to adhere to realistic narrative conventions and merely fails to generate the expected emotional resonances. But Laura literally is only half of the story, and any assessment of her character must consider her corporate counterpart. The novel thus intertwines Clare and Laura to such an extent that any attempt to separate them and view them as connected yet autonomous entities would inevitably diminish their plasticity. As a node in a network, Laura’s character cannot be understood as a particularized subject or as a counterforce that can challenge the prevailing system: Laura is an embodiment of the system that Clare incorporates. The novel is therefore neither about Laura nor about Clare but about the hybrid Laura – Clare. This conflation of entities certainly evokes Latour’s proposition that neither weapons nor people kill people but the actant weapon/person; Laura – Clare is such an actant. In Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory, the actant is neither an actor who ‘acts’ nor a system that ‘behaves’ but a purely relational configuration, and it is exactly this relational configuration between Laura and Clare that Gain is most interested in.

Rather than being a more sophisticated version of a John Grisham courtroom thriller in which an evil corporation is finally brought to its knees by a righteous Every(wo)man, Gain attempts to trace the network Laura – Clare and to present the contemporary subject not as a particularized psychological entity but as a distributed process. Correspondingly, Latour argues that Gain, like most of Powers’ novels, is actually an investigation into the construction of subjectivity as well as into the representational strategies of literary realism. According to Latour, the novel is a
colors, clichés, allusions to other parts—it is thus a highly artificial achievement which can disappear any time. What, then, is more realistic? To act as if continuity of existence was an unproblematic given? Or to show that it can be a highly variable gradient, which can be intensified or attenuated as the story unfolds? For Powers, being is never a given, it always has a temporal character. ("Powers of the Facsimile" 266-67)

This “temporal character” of being manifests itself in a gradual shifting of narrative focalization: The entrepreneurial phase of Clare is described in vivid details with lively and idiosyncratic characters who are constantly developing rakish schemes and pull absurd business stunts to make their company ever more successful. This part of Clare’s history covers almost two-thirds of the novel, whereas everything that happens after the company’s incorporation goes by in a blur of elliptic shifts, growing dissemination, and insignificant characters who admit to themselves that they no longer have any control over the company at all. Simultaneously, the tone of Laura’s storyline becomes much less distanced and relies on an increasingly poetic and empathetic language. Clare’s incorporation makes the storyline of the company appear to be less “alive” while Laura’s dying actually puts her closer to living. The novel thus problematizes the “continuity of existence.”

Through the law of corporate personhood Clare eventually becomes “one composite body: a single, whole, and statutorily enabled person” (Gain 158). This corporate person is, of course, a legal fiction, a textual invention that simulates a coherent and stable subjectivity where one only finds disseminated processes of revenue-making. But—and this seems to be the central argument of Gain—Laura’s subjectivity is a very similar invention. Although the novel certainly stresses the absurdity of granting a corporation the status of a person and thus giving it personal rights without personal responsibilities, it also argues that considering the individual as anything but a distributed network is equally problematic. The novel’s constructivist attitude toward Laura does not make her any less real or reduce her to an empty signifier, but instead adds layers of realism to her character.

However, this is not the realism commonly associated with literary fiction. No matter how incoherent, provisional, stable, transitive, or deterministic the various constructions of subjectivity in literature might be, most fictions tend to regard the subject as the focal point of meaning that defines the parameters and the scope of literary representation. Whether in the form of a “realistic” character with a causative psychology or in the form of a postmodern protagonist whose textual constructedness becomes the central concern of the narrative, it is the individual and his or her limitations that usually shape literary texts. Alternative models of subjectivity that intend to tackle the issue quantitatively are typically regarded as belonging to the fields of sociology, history, biology, or even statistics. At best such accounts provide us with dense data structures about behavioral patterns, lifestyle choices, political preferences, or religious affiliations. They can even make inferences about what books we might like, as our purchases reveal certain inclinations and proximities; but they cannot possibly tell us how it feels to be a subject. One perceived advantage of literature has always been its ability to meet the subject on eye-level, to remake the world through the eyes of someone else. Gain revises this dichotomy between external/empiricist and internal/subjective accounts of the self by examining the formation of textual subjectivity through the lens of
a constructivist and relational realism as it is defined by Latour: “The more human-made images are generated, the more objectivity will be collected. In science there is no such a thing as ‘mere representation’” (“What is Iconoclash?” 21-22). Rather than diminishing Laura’s comparatively mundane story by contrasting it so directly with Clare’s epic narrative of corporate proliferation, the stereoscopic structure of *Gain* adds depth to Laura’s character; yet, this is not the characteristic depth of a specific psychology but the complexity of a dense network.

The hybridity of the actant Laura—Clare is specified through a variety of textual ready-mades that are scattered throughout the novel: scripts for TV spots, print-ads, promotional texts, warning labels, recipes, and quotes litter the text of *Gain* like free-floating signifiers that are wedged in between the two storylines and that do not belong clearly to either narrative strand. These fragments serve as mediators between Laura and Clare as these bits of corporate communication constitute a hybrid space in which Laura and Clare are equal occupants; they are the nodes that connect the two characters directly. Significantly, Clare insists on one of its slogans, which acquires a self-reflexive significance in the context of the novel: “Your life is chemistry. So is ours” (*Gain* 153).

The description of Laura’s death creates a similar hybrid space. The chapter begins as what appears to be a part of Clare’s macro-narrative. It retraces in impressive detail the globe-spanning industrial processes that go into the production of a disposable snapshot camera. It concludes, however, with a brief description of Laura’s hospital room where a nurse discards a forgotten single-use camera as she is cleaning out the room after the death of its occupant. While Laura’s death is thus depicted as something strikingly banal—an insignificant part of a daily cleaning routine—the assembling of the camera is celebrated as a complex global effort:

Camera in a pouch, the true multinational: trees from the Pacific Northwest and the southeastern coastal plain. Straw and recovered wood scrap from Canada. Synthetic adhesive from Korea. Bauxite from Australia, Jamaica, Guinea. Oil from the Gulf of Mexico or North Sea Brent Blend, turned to plastic in the Republic of China, before being shipped to its mortal enemies on the Mainland for molding. Cinnabar from Spain. Nickel and titanium from South Africa. Flash elements stamped in Malaysia, electronics in Singapore. Design and color transfers drawn up in New York. Assembled and shipped from that address in California by a merchant fleet beyond description, completing the most heavily choreographed conference in existence. (*Gain* 347-48)

With regard to Laura’s death, the single-use camera is an ambivalent symbol: on the one hand, it is tempting to read the fact that Laura’s passing is only related indirectly through the “birth” of a corporate product as the ultimate reduction of her character to a mass-manufactured object meant to be disposed of after its usage. On the other hand, the undeveloped images captured on the camera’s film present a touchingly ordinary snapshot exhibition of the last days in Laura’s life: “A girl sowing a garden. The Million Dollar Movers Club, dropping by with chocolate and flowers. A woman blowing out the candles on a cake, the IV just visible beneath the sleeve of her robe” (348). The disposable camera creates a concrete point of convergence between Clare Inc. and Laura, but it is already a consciously mediated convergence: Clare’s means and Laura’s end intersect through the medium of photography as the corporate technology of the camera is used to capture
the perspective of the individual subject. Laura’s perspective becomes materialized in a corporate artifact and for the only time in the novel, both storylines actually occupy the same narrative space. The camera, the reader comes to realize, is similar to the novel. Whereas Laura will never grasp the complex networks and processes unfolding behind the seemingly inconspicuous end product, Clare will never get to see the pictures taken during Laura’s dying days. It is only the reader who is aware of both contexts, the evolution of the camera and Laura’s death. Here Powers most clearly diverges from postmodern representations of corporate systems by giving the reader access to both the macro-perspective of the larger structure and the point of view of the individual who is entangled in this structure. Thus it is the task of the reader to evaluate the intersection of the novel’s dual narrative frames, to negotiate between Laura’s domestic microcosm and Clare’s economic macrocosm, to at last connect these two gauges. Hence the reader must become another node in the network of the novel and is forced into complicity. The reader recognizes connections and continuities between Laura and Clare that primarily exist on the intradiegetic level; the text thus shatters the semblance of a mimetic frame by ultimately becoming self-referential. Since the novel lacks an identifiable authorial voice that could make sense of these connections, the reader, like Pynchon’s Oedipa Maas, now has to deal with the “excluded middles” (*The Crying of Lot 49*) 125) opened by the text. This conjecture is furthermore underlined by the oddly reaffirming description of the camera as a “disposable miracle, no less than the least of us” (*Gain* 348). The celebration of both the wondrousness but also the frailty of life evokes some of the more transcendentalist passages in Walt Whitman’s poetry, which tend to juxtapose the transience of an individual life against the perpetual continuation of the life-force, finding solace not in a denial of mortality but in the self’s acceptance of an expansive vision of existence. Indeed, Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” serves as one of the few explicit intertexts in Laura’s storyline since Laura’s son has to prepare the poem for an English class. In the poem, the universe is described as a “simple, compact, well-join’d scheme” (line 7) in which the “certainty of others” (line 12) affirms the continuation of life beyond the span of a single lifetime. A similar vision is articulated on the final pages of the novel: “Life is so big, so blameless, so unexpected. Existence lies past price, beyond scarcity. It breaks the law of supply and demand. All things that fail to work will vanish, and life remains. Lovely lichen will manufacture soil on the sunroofs of the World Trade” (*Gain* 344).

Immediately before her death, Laura’s children Ellen and Tim comfort their mother with the promise “We’ll do it for you” (*Gain* 345), suggesting that life will continue even though this particular instance of life called Laura comes to an end. Against the global network of Clare Inc., Powers contrasts a vision of continuity and transcendental interconnectedness that once again evokes Whitman: “It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not; /I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence; /Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt” (lines 20-22). Concordantly, *Gain* does not close with
Laura’s death but with condensed words of the lives of Ellen and Tim after the death of their mother. While Ellen is able to beat cancer a few years later due to an early diagnosis based on her mother’s medical history, Tim becomes a computer programmer who eventually develops a software that can simulate the mechanisms of organic cells and provide the knowledge to repair them: “And no one needed to name the first cure that would roll off their production line” (Gain 355). In order to obtain the capital required to realize this breakthrough in cancer research, Tim suggests to his colleagues “that it might be time for the little group of them to incorporate” (355). Since the novel constantly emphasizes that gain cannot be isolated from its opposite, that “[s]omeone has to go down for anyone else to rise” (123-24), this ending offers a complicated moment of hope, closure, and foreshadowing: Gain ends with the creation of an aporia that might turn out to be both cure and disease. As the novel’s title already indicates, no concept or entity can be conceived without its opposite: The loss that Gain implies is present in the novel’s title, one starts to realize, exactly because it is so conspicuously absent.

Gain exposes the limitations of conventional renderings of subjectivity in contemporary literature by demonstrating what happens when institutional and individual entities are represented as mere particularities and not as interdependent processes: Laura is so concerned with the localness of her life that she does not recognize it as a part of a global system before it is too late. Clare Inc., on the other hand, focuses so radically on the proliferation of the larger corporate structure that it disconnects itself from the dimension of the localized and the embodied. It is only through the juxtaposition of Clare’s macrocosm and Laura’s microcosm that at least for the reader the continuity between these two scales is re-established. This juxtaposition is, of course, an alchemistic trick that only works its magic within the composed artificiality of a text. Hence the text of Gain becomes a “supreme connection machine” (“The Last Generalist”) that allows Powers to impose patterns on a world that might be far too complex to be grasped outside the symmetries of the artifice. In both legal and narrative terms, Clare’s body exists only on paper. But through the distanced and initially stereotypical portrayal of Laura, the reader also becomes aware that within the novel she, too, ultimately only exists on paper. Clare and Laura therefore meet through this ontological leveling as “characters” in a text at which point Powers’ novel drastically differs from a sociological account: coaxing these disparate perspectives onto speaking terms requires the mechanisms of narrativization as they can only be implemented within fiction. The photographs made with the disposable camera already indicate that entities like Laura and Clare can only connect through mediation. But unlike the photo, which only captures a brief and ultimately decontextualized moment in time, the novel can explicate contexts and connections. Therefore the two narratives of Gain are not at all concerned with incongruent realms of existence; they are mere retellings of the same story from different gauges. The novel underscores the impossibility of understanding subjectivity by confining it to a subject and for this reason the term “subject” can be interpreted in its dual sense: the subject of Gain is the Subject of Gain.

Latour argues that, “underneath the opposition between objects and subjects, there is the whirlwind of mediators” (We Have Never Been Modern 46).
And, indeed, the narrative of *Gain* is such a mediator that exposes the interconnectedness of the economic object Clare and the psychological/biological subject Laura. *Gain* demonstrates how the concept of the subject as a network rather than as an entity in literature can open up an “excluded middle” between the causative plots that govern much of realist fiction and the postmodern preoccupation with decentralized systems. Whereas realism relies on the problematic illusion of coherence and postmodernism frequently skirts from complexity into entropy, “network fictions” are capable of generating a significant degree of complexity through a set of relatively linear and deterministic factors. Thus the network as a structural metaphor and a conceptual trope in fiction allows for both, the cause-and-effect linearity of realism and the “writerly” dimension of postmodern literature. This hybridity once again evokes Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory, which is similarly located between realism and postmodernism, yet remains critical of both movements. According to Latour, hybrids—or “quasi-objects”, as he refers to them—can neither be grasped by scientific realists nor by postmodern relativists who insist that we are a “play of signifiers without signified” (64): “As soon as we are on the trail of some quasi-object, it appears to us sometimes as a thing, sometimes as a narrative, sometimes as a social bond, without ever being reduced to a mere being” (89). Thus, “to follow a quasi-object is to trace a network” (89).

The science-fiction narratives briefly discussed at the beginning of this essay usually rely on the trope of anthropomorphization in order to explore the significance of networks for our models of subjectivity: in many of these texts, the power-hungry computer networks behave like human beings to the point that they can actually be diagnosed as pathologically insane. Even a more idiosyncratic approach to the subject matter like Suarez’s *Daemon* still insists on the notion that people are nodes in a network rather than being networks themselves. Concordantly, these texts do not deal with quasi-objects but implement a rather traditional idea of subjectivity that follows an almost Cartesian logic. In fact, in most of these fictions the Cartesian mind/body dualism is the underwriting premise because the computer networks usually lack bodies or any other form of corporeality; this lack makes them incomplete and dangerous entities. Consciousness is thus understood to be a (neurological) network but the body remains fixed and stable in this vision. It is exactly this stability of the body that *Gain* contests by merging Laura’s biological body and Clare’s corporate body into a quasi-object. The stereoscopic narrative of the novel then functions like a contrast agent injected into the Clare/Laura super-organism in order to render the network visible. Powers suggests that the primary function of fiction is to, “refresh us to the irreducible complexity of the analog world, a complexity whose scale and heft we might always have underestimated, without the shortfalls of its ghostly imitations” (“Being and Seeming”). Fiction might indeed be the imperfect map that transforms the “irreducible complexity of the analog world” into an artifice of connections. Fiction can make connections visible because it is located somewhere between reductionism and complexity: fiction is more than a map and less than the territory. It is the hybrid space that allows for ambivalences and yet establishes continuities. After all, coaxing Clare’s and
Laura’s divergent perspectives onto speaking terms requires the mechanisms of narrativization as they can only be implemented within a novel. The novel weaves a network between Laura and Clare so densely that in the end the two narratives of Gain are not at all concerned with incongruent realms of existence; rather, they are mere retellings of the same story from different gauges. Evoking the epitomic cover art of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651), which depicts the sovereign as consisting of a multitude of individuals who constitute the “body politic,” *Gain* tells both the story of the collective (corporate) body and the story of one of the individuals from which the collective body is made. But in the novel even the corporeal body of the individual is not a singular entity but yet another network. Or as Latour postulates in his discussion of Hobbes’ allegory of civil collectivity: “Leviathan is a skein of networks” (*We Have Never Been Modern* 120). One might add: no less than the least of us.

**Works Cited**


