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Fragmented Histories: The Historiographic Metafiction of Walter Abish's "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity"

Parçalanmış Tarihler: Walter Abish'in "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" Eserinde Tarihyazımsal Üstkurmaca

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ABSTRACT

Walter Abish's "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" (1977) emerges as a significant narrative that intricately explores themes of memory, trauma, and the fragmentation of history, all articulated through the perspective of the character Jane. Jane's experiences within the narrative serve as a vital framework for interrogating the far-reaching themes inherent in historiographic metafiction, a defining characteristic of postmodern literature. This article examines Jane's journey as a reflection of the fragmented and subjective nature of historical representation, emphasizing how Abish critiques linear historical discourse while engaging with postmodernism's skepticism towards grand narratives. Through the employment of techniques such as narrative disjunction, unreliable memory, and the blending of fact with fiction, Abish uses Jane's fragmented narrative to examine the uncertainties surrounding historical representation and identity formation. This analysis situates these themes within the broader discourse of postmodern American fiction, demonstrating the ways in which Abish's work challenges conventional understandings of history and narrative.

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Introduction

Walter Abish's "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" (1977) offers a multilayered narrative set in the United States. The enigmatic protagonist, Jane, symbolizes the personal aspect of engaging with history, embodying the ordinary person who struggles to come to terms with a national past marked by deep trauma. The story revolves around Jane's attempts to reconcile her fragmented memories with the historical events she has lived through or inherited, such as wars, political unrest, and cultural upheaval. The story thus appears to be a good example of historiographic metafiction, where history is not presented as an objective truth but as a subjective and constructed narrative.

Historiographic metafiction, as Linda Hutcheon puts forward in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, challenges the idea that only history holds a claim to truth. It does so by questioning the foundation

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of this claim within historical writing and emphasizing that both history and fiction are forms of discourse. As human-made constructs and systems of meaning, they share a common basis for their truth claims, rooted in their constructed nature (p. 93). Postmodern theory puts emphasis on the fact that fiction does not serve as a mirror to reality but instead actively acknowledges its own artificiality. Rather than striving to represent an objective world, postmodern fiction foregrounds its constructed nature, often blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination. This self-awareness invites readers to question traditional notions of truth and authenticity, emphasizing that all narratives, whether fictional or factual, are shaped by subjective perspectives and cultural frameworks:

> Theorists of metafiction themselves argue that this fiction no longer attempts to mirror reality or to tell any truth about it… Fiction does not mirror reality; nor does it reproduce it. It cannot. There is no pretense of simplistic mimesis in historiographic metafiction. Instead, fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality, and both the construction and the need for it are what are foregrounded in the postmodernist novel. (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 40)

Abish's text situates Jane's personal history within the larger American context, showing how individual stories intersect with broader historical narratives. Through Jane's journey, Abish explores how history becomes mythologized and how personal memory frequently conflicts with the official narratives of history. This exploration highlights the inherent conflicts that arise when subjective experiences confront institutionalized accounts of history, highlighting the multiplicity of truths that coexist within the historical landscape. By portraying Jane's fragmented recollections and her struggles against the backdrop of larger historical forces, Abish not only critiques the notion of a singular historical truth but also illuminates the complexities of identity formation in a society shaped by diverse and often conflicting narratives. Thus, "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" becomes a powerful meditation on the intricate relationship between personal memory, historical representation, and the ongoing quest for meaning in a world marked by uncertainty.

"Ardor/Awe/Atrocity"

The text is made up of twenty-seven chapters, each titled with three unique words organized in alphabetical order. In the text, Walter Abish employs a distinctive method to restructure the narrative by deconstructing the traditional linear flow of the narrative. Through fragmentation, Abish unsettles the conventional order that can be found in multiple narratives, and instead he crafts an unconventional narrative flow. Abish introduces non-traditional frameworks to establish structure on the disorder he creates. His unique framing technique is evident through his organization of chapters in an alphabetical order, yet in a fragmented manner. Moreover, by including sequential superscripts in the chapter titles and highlighting particular words, he establishes an artificial sense of order. Thus, the alphabetical framework Abish employs in the story creates a sense of linearity that is disrupted by the fragmented narrative. Walter Abish, as Arias Misson Alain (1980) observes constructs a complex array of mechanisms involving "[c]ombinations, copulations, permutations, deletions, transferences, transgressions, substitutions, cross-references, doublings" and these intricately woven elements manifest as intellectual "puzzles - puzzles of sex, puzzles of minds, puzzles of death - and words and images, letters and numbers are the matter of a puzzle" (p. 115). Abish's work thus transforms language and imagery, as well as letters and numbers, into the fundamental building blocks of these multifaceted puzzles, blurring the boundaries between form and content in his exploration of these themes.

As mentioned above, Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction is crucial to understanding Abish's approach in "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity." In Hutcheon's view, historiographic

metafiction merges the historical and fictional, calling into question the truthfulness of both by exposing the process of narration itself (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 17). Abish's portrayal of Jane reflects this, as her story vacillates between what seems to be concrete memory and what turns out to be unreliable or fictive. Jane's personal history, set against the backdrop of modern U.S. events like the Vietnam War or the civil rights movement, becomes a microcosm for how national narratives are constructed and contested. Through Jane, Abish explores the intricacies of unreliable narration, a technique that gains prominence as Jane recalls specific incidents from her past - vivid, emotionally charged scenes that initially appear to be anchored in historical fact. Yet, as the narrative unfolds, these memories shift, with new details emerging or previous details contradicting themselves. This narrative instability mirrors the inherent unreliability of historical accounts, particularly those shaped and filtered through the lenses of personal or collective trauma. Jane's shifting memories, therefore, transcend the personal and act as a powerful metaphor for the unstable nature of historical truth itself. In doing so, Abish reflects how both memory and history are subjective, selective, and constantly in flux, questioning the very notion of an objective historical record.

Abish's exploration of the fluidity and subjectivity of memory and history resonates deeply with the core principles of postmodernism. By questioning the objectivity of historical records, postmodernism navigates a space that both acknowledges the power of historical narratives and simultaneously challenges their authority and permanence. Therefore, postmodernism, while resistant to any monolithic definition, is situated somewhere in between the reliance upon the history of narratives and the rejection of it. For an ideology that can be understood as, in Jean-Francois Lyotard's definition, "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv), postmodern authors still need these grand narratives to communicate their messages. Linda Hutcheon, in her essay "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History," calls attention to the postmodern turn of parodying metanarratives, an act that forces readers to "look again at the connections between art and the "world" (p. 25). For Hutcheon, the combination in postmodern texts of historiography and metafiction employs the uncanny (*das unheimlich*) in a most Freudian sense; while the historiography half "work[s] to familiarize the unfamiliar through (very familiar) narrative structures (as Hayden White has argued ["The Historical Text," pp. 49-50]), ... its metafictional self-reflexivity works to render problematic any such familiarization" (Hutcheon, p. 10). Through a blending of metanarrative parody, a term that Hutcheon uses interchangeably with pastiche and a multilevel, metafictional self-awareness, "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" openly declares itself, in Hutcheon's terms, for postmodernism. The story exposes not only the ways that expectations and presuppositions guide the reader's interpretive process, but it also integrates this process into the narrative itself, causing a self-reflexive doubling effect, illuminating a challenge to and for postmodernism at its core.

Set against the well-documented landscape of Southern California, "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" opens with the story of Jane, a woman travelling to Los Angeles, who is later revealed to be an aspiring actress. The narrative, deeply embedded in the iconic geography of Southern California, invokes both the historical allure of the California Dream - where individuals from across the globe flocked to seek their fortunes during the Gold Rush - and the modern Hollywood Dream, symbolized by the aspiring entertainers drawn to Hollywood in pursuit of fame and success in television and film. The significance of the U.S. as the setting for this narrative is central to its engagement with postmodernism. Far from portraying the United States as a monolithic or cohesive entity, the novel presents the nation as a fractured and multifaceted landscape, mirroring the disintegration of Jane's own memory. As Jane moves through various American locales, from the meticulously planned suburban neighborhoods to the decaying and dilapidated urban centers, each space operates as a symbolic representation of different facets of the country's historical and cultural identity. This geographical fragmentation underscores the thematic undercurrents of

postmodernism, particularly in its critique of grand narratives and its exploration of identity as something fragmented and elusive.

The narrative structure employed by Abish further amplifies this theme of fragmentation. Through a non-linear narrative, Jane's story unfolds in a manner that defies conventional temporal progression, frequently shifting between past and present without clear or discernible transitions. This disjointed structure is emblematic of the postmodern interrogation of memory and identity, where recollections are not experienced as a coherent or continuous stream but rather as a series of disjointed and often contradictory fragments, shaped by emotional resonance, trauma, and external events. Jane's fragmented movement across the American landscape parallels the fragmentation of her personal identity, as she struggles to make sense of her place both within her personal history and within the broader historical and cultural narratives of the nation: "I move through spaces I no longer recognize. The map has changed; the territory eludes me" (p. 107). In this sense, Jane's journey becomes a profound metaphor for the postmodern condition, characterized by the impossibility of fully understanding or reconciling one's place in history or within any stable, unified sense of self.

Walter Abish's "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" is a striking example of postmodern experimentation with narrative form, employing fragmentation as a central technique to both deconstruct and reconstruct the framework of what could otherwise be a conventional story. This deliberate fragmentation operates on multiple levels, from the structural to the linguistic, creating a text that defies traditional storytelling conventions. Structurally, the narrative is non-linear, disorienting the reader by avoiding clear chronological progression and instead jumping across time and space in a way that mirrors the disjointed nature of memory and perception. Linguistically, Abish plays with language itself, destabilizing meaning through repetition, contradiction, and ambiguity, further challenging the reader's ability to grasp a coherent, singular truth. This multi-layered fragmentation serves not only to complicate the reader's engagement with the text but also to invite active interpretation, prompting readers to piece together disparate elements in their own attempt to construct meaning. In doing so, Abish foregrounds the act of storytelling as inherently unstable and subjective, questioning the reliability of both narrative and language. Ultimately, this postmodern approach disrupts the boundaries between form and content, reflecting the novel's broader themes of fractured identity, history, and reality. As Arias Misson Alain (1980) argues, the deliberately constructed and artificial aesthetic of the puzzle immediately conveys its primary function as a language rooted in artifice. The distribution of letters and numbers throughout the text operates like a system of coordinates, organizing events, fragments of events, and aspects of characters who exist elsewhere. As readers engage in the process of deciphering and assembling the puzzle, they inadvertently become collaborators with Walter Abish in "fixing" or "framing" the characters, evoking criminal undertones, as these figures remain unaware of their manipulated circumstances. This positions the reader in a superior, detached vantage point above the characters. The author's - and by extension, the reader's - self-detachment through the medium's cold formalism is counterbalanced by a lingering, almost spectral presence, permeating the text through the interplay of letters and numbers, creating an omnipresent influence over the narrative's unfolding (p. 122). The narrative thus resists closure, deliberately withholding the sense of resolution that traditional storytelling often provides. Instead of guiding the reader toward a definitive conclusion or a neatly tied-up plot, "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" invites an open-ended experience in which meaning remains elusive.

Walter Abish's text mirrors a radical separation from literary conventions, challenging readers' expectations of a unified coherence. He dismantles traditional frameworks of plot and character and features the instability and arbitrariness of the text. Walter Abish, as Irving Malin (2017) observes, is a subversive writer who challenges traditional notions of plot and character, as he

focuses less on these conventional elements and more on the linguistic structures that contain them. His narratives feature characters who are barely recognizable and engage in implausible actions, positioning him as an "anti-realist" writer. Abish's works suggest that reality itself is as arbitrary and devoid of inherent meaning as art. Attempting to summarize the plot of any of his stories is futile, as the act of retelling inherently distorts the narrative. Such retellings flatten the nuanced effects of his writing, rendering them absurd, chaotic, or unintentionally humorous (pp. 112-3). In the story, the narrative plays with the reader's and also the character's expectations based on clichéd situations, the hitchhiker in the middle of nowhere who "might try to wrench open the car door" (p. 9), the disposing of cars off of cliffs (pp. 106-7), common bank-robberies (p. 107), and the aspiring actress led through a life of sex, violence, and, eventually, her own death, mirroring the highly fictionalized "Black Dahlia" case, all scenes strongly coded within popular culture. By using these familiar but seemingly "low-culture" references, Abish observes that just like cultural imperatives and appetites, the respective metanarratives change too; whatever people digest *en masse* is or will become its own grand narrative, engrained into the cultural psyche as reality or truth.

Mannix the background television show that dominates the minds of Abish's Southern Californian residents, parodies the episodic crime dramas that saturate the real-world television schedule; shows that constantly rework tried and true formulas and themes that work their way into the fabric of the cultural perspective. The unabashed references to typical and mass-produced television are a postmodern turn from intertextuality to what Hutcheon dubs "interdiscursivity," the willingness to "draw upon any signifying practices it can find operative in a society. It wants to challenge those discourses and yet to milk them for all they are worth" (p. 16). Yet for all the interdiscursive references and historically charged expectations, Abish concludes very little in the narrative. He is more concerned with drawing to the attention of the reader the fact that they expect and presuppose in the first place and that they understand by way of previous texts. By creating a working example of historiographic metafiction, Abish can highlight the ways in which expectations are guided by history and the consequences that those representations or misrepresentations have.

At its most mimetic, postmodernist fiction, as Brian McHale (1987) argues, reflects the intricacies of everyday existence in late capitalist societies, where reality is deeply infiltrated by the "micro-escapism" offered by television and cinema. A multiplicity of ontologies shaped by media-saturated daily life is exemplified in Walter Abish's "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity". In this work, the omnipresent television, functioning as a self-contained reality within the broader fictional world, further disrupts an already fragmented and unstable narrative reality, emphasizing the fluidity and disorientation characteristic of postmodern experience (p. 128). In the story, Abish is able to make a postmodern argument for fiction's explicit involvement in the interpretation and perceived meanings of experience. That is to say, through the metafictional mirroring of Jane's interpretive experiences with the reader's own and the act of reading itself, Abish challenges "both any naive realist concept of representation and any equally naive textualist or formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the world" (Hutcheon, p. 6). The character and setting of *Mannix*, for instance, the eponymous hero and fictional TV show that pervades the background of the story, becomes the representation of the "real" Southern California for its viewers. Whether he is or not, *Mannix* stands in as the everyman, uniting the disparate population into a common identity or "public," those "who never are and never can be united in an actual situation or organization" (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 60). Here Kierkegaard refers to the idea of public as an abstract and fragmented collective that lacks real unity or shared experience and thus it is an imagined construct that brings people together only superficially through the mediated representation of Mannix.

Similarly, but on a different level, the history of all narratives provides readers with the foreknowledge to make sense of any given text because, as Hutcheon argues, "a literary work can actually no longer be considered original; if it were, it could have no meaning for its reader. It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance" (p. 7). Abish, however, does not wish to colour all representations equally nor does he excuse the inequalities. The history of gendered representations is weighed down by patriarchy and that has great consequences for gender identity. While Mannix is the representation of an idealized male experience, the "entrée to wealth and power in L.A. and San Diego" (p. 102), Jane is led to "accept the inherent femininity of her situation" (p. 103), relegated to the "seat next to the driver" (p. 102), the place for the passive, sexualized woman, the position of collateral damage where a "bullet that narrowly missed *Mannix* and hit his friend instead is accepted, with resignation, with foreknowledge" (p. 103). Since "we can only "know" (as opposed to "experience") the world through our narratives (past and present)" (Hutcheon, p. 9), metafictional texts such as "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" make the reader conscious of what and how we "know," such as the highly unbalanced gender tropes, and calls for a retrofitting of new representations or at least the destabilizing of old ones.

By incorporating *Mannix* into the narrative in a fragmented way, Abish disrupts the traditional linearity and formulaic structure associated with the crime series. In *Mannix*, the plotlines typically follow a clear trajectory, centered around a detective who methodically solves cases and brings resolution to the mystery at hand. This predictable structure stands in stark contrast to the fragmented and unresolved nature of "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity," where the lack of narrative closure challenges the reader's expectations of resolution. In this sense, *Mannix* functions as more than just a cultural reference or backdrop; it becomes a symbol of the novel's fractured narrative form. The episodic, action-driven nature of *Mannix* - with each episode offering a self-contained story - reflects the fragmentation that Abish employs throughout the novel, but its clean-cut resolutions are subverted. Instead of providing narrative cohesion or a sense of order, *Mannix* is broken down and recontextualized, further emphasizing the disconnection within Abish's story. This deliberate fragmentation of *Mannix* mirrors the broader theme of disjointed realities, particularly in the hyper-real, media-saturated environment of Southern California. Popular culture, as represented by *Mannix*, becomes a reflection of the fragmented, often superficial nature of contemporary life, where linear narratives and clear-cut truths are often replaced by a patchwork of mediated experiences and distorted realities. Abish's use of *Mannix* serves to critique how these narratives of popular culture offer an illusion of coherence, yet in the context of "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity," they are exposed as inadequate in fully capturing the complexity and fragmentation of real-life experiences. By deconstructing this familiar cultural icon, Abish not only critiques the oversimplified narratives of popular media but also highlights the ways in which cultural products both shape and mirror the fragmented realities of postmodern existence. As noted by Irving Malin (2017), Abish in the story presents a striking depiction of Southern California, where the landscape merges with the image of the television detective *Mannix*. California, much like an "alphabetical Africa," appears as an imagined world constructed from tangible yet imagined elements. Each new development - whether a shopping center, airport, or office complex - expands the boundaries of plausibility. Abish suggests that Southern California is less a tangible reality and more a conceptual idea, embodying a belief in earthly perfection. Through the deliberate repetition of words and the use of numerical cues, he compels the reader to engage with the text innocently, emphasizing that the idea of "California," rather than its physical existence, permeates the narrative (p. 113).

The use of superscripts within the text represents another layer of artificial order. Abish, in "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity," is much more concerned with how we read than what we read. Likewise, he, as a postmodernist, is more engaged with how one writes than what one writes. Any discussion of "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" would be incomplete without a look at the structure and the numerical

system within. These superscripts, scattered throughout the chapters, create cross-references between words and ideas, linking disparate parts of the narrative in a manner reminiscent of footnotes. However, these connections are tenuous and often obscure, as the superscripts do not lead to explanatory notes but rather to other fragmented sections of the text. This technique reinforces the sense of fragmentation by suggesting connections that, upon closer inspection, do not resolve into a coherent whole. The reader is left to navigate a labyrinth of disconnected references, further emphasizing the fragmented nature of the narrative. "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity," as Brian Mchale argues, at first glance seems to follow the abecedary format, reminiscent of Sorrentino's "Splendide-Hôtel" or Gangemi's "Volcanoes from Puebla." Each of its twenty-six brief fragments is introduced by three words starting with the same letter, ranging from "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" to "You/Yelled/Youthfulness" and "Zoo/Zodiac/Zero." However, the resemblance to alphabetically structured texts ends here, as these headings do not serve as key-words and lack any coherent connection to the corresponding textual fragments; their juxtaposition appears entirely arbitrary. Additionally, each head-word is assigned a superscript number from 1 to 78 - for example, "Ardor[1]/Awe[2]/Atrocity[3]" and "Buoyant[4]/Bob[5]/Body[6]." Whenever these head-words appear in the text, they retain the same superscript number, creating a cross-referencing system that links each occurrence of a word in both the headings and the main text (p. 158).

In the text, the use of superscripts serves as a formal device that highlights the fragmented nature of the narrative, repeatedly interrupting the reader's immersion and directing attention to other, often disconnected fragments. These references, however, never coalesce into a coherent whole, leaving the reader to navigate a web of disjointed pieces without providing a unified or linear narrative. This technique mirrors the broader thematic structure of "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity," where the interplay between interruption and enhancement reflects the reader's overall experience of the story. Just as the superscripts disrupt the flow, the narrative itself resists straightforward interpretation or closure, constantly evading fixed meaning. However, rather than simply frustrating the reader, these interruptions also invite deeper engagement with the text. By pointing to other fragments, the superscripts encourage the reader to seek connections between disparate elements, prompting an active process of meaning-making. This deliberate fragmentation not only challenges the reader to interpret the narrative in non-linear ways but also reflects the postmodern aesthetic of destabilizing conventional structures of storytelling.

Abish, in the text, creates a narrative that is both resistant to easy interpretation and yet rich with interpretive possibilities, emphasizing the notion that meaning is always contingent, partial, and constructed through the reader's interaction with the text. The superscripts, therefore, become a meta-commentary on the act of reading itself, emphasizing that interpretation is never a straightforward process, but one marked by constant shifts, disruptions, and re-evaluations. The cross-referencing system employed in the text, as Brian McHale observes, serves no discernible functional purpose, other than to emphasize certain recurring verbal motifs. As a result, the reader's attention is repeatedly diverted from the narrative world to the level of linguistic construction, driven by what can only be described as an overtly purposeless and vacuous formalism. This disrupts the syntactical flow, destabilizing the depicted world, which continuously disintegrates and is reconstructed, only to disintegrate once more. The effect is one of flickering instability. The reader experiences a form of cognitive dissonance, their focus fractured between the ontological realm of the narrative and the linguistic mechanics. This ontological tension is compounded by the nature of the text's subject matter. The piece titled "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" depicts a woman's deepening entanglement in sadomasochistic sexual behavior, leading to her eventual demise. The juxtaposition of this highly charged sexual content with an indifferent and arbitrary formal structure generates a profound sense of disorientation, creating a strange and unsettling experience for the reader (p. 158).

The superscript numbers that attach to each alphabetized section heading bring attention to its rigid structure and resist any imaginative slumber that can grip a reader in a straight-forward narrative, fighting against becoming a Jane-like passenger, complicit in an unwanted "scenario" (p. 103). But the numbers have a referential quality as well. They appear to signal footnotes or endnotes without a reference attached. This mimics a textual reference without an encoded meaning, a signifier without a signified. The line "Without *Mannix*, Southern California would be bereft of the distinction between ardor, awe, and atrocity" (p.105) highlights the symbolic role the television series plays in the narrative's depiction of the region. On one level, this statement reflects the idea that *Mannix* - with its intense action, emotional highs, and violent events - embodies the heightened emotional states that characterize Southern California. In a place where image and reality constantly blur, *Mannix* provides a narrative framework that differentiates between these emotional extremes, even if only superficially. In this sense, *Mannix* provides a lens through which Southern California's emotional extremes can be understood and categorized. The television show offers a framework for interpreting the region's contradictions - its beauty and its brutality, its superficial glamor and its underlying violence. The show functions as a cultural anchor, allowing audiences to navigate and make sense of the disorienting, fragmented reality of Southern California. This allows Abish to disorient the reader, placing them in Jane's position, Jane who relies on Mannix's experiences "for guidance", who, when without television and without a frame of reference, like the unconnected footnote, sees "*zero*" on the TV or emptiness and absence (p. 104). In this way, the referents, such as the superscript numbers and Mannix, become a "hyperreality," "a copy or image without reference to an original" (Aylesworth). These copies or simulacrum over time are ingested and regurgitated, changed and unchanged, and become "more real than the real" (Baudrillard, p. 96). Abish translates this into his short story as a denial of the individual experience and the acceptance of metanarrative. While Jane experiences the "bleakest and most desolate part of the Mojave Desert" (p. 99) and the many shades of "whites" in her hotel rooms (p. 101), only the "magnificent colors" make it into her "detailed description" of Southern California (p. 100). These descriptions and those like it, compounded, make their way into the discourse and metanarratives of Southern California and are then reiterated, making them a "reality" for the masses. Abish finishes his short-story with the narrator, appearing in the final section "Zoo[76]/Zodiac[77]/Zero[78]," describing his latest book set in Southern California, "a place [he's] never visited" (p. 110). This final metafictional element highlights the ability of fiction authors to recreate scenes and settings based on a hyperreality and the danger therein. The narrator's admission of having never visited Southern California thus calls into question the authenticity of the entire narrative. If the narrator has no direct experience of the setting, then the portrayal of Southern California - which had been central to the story - becomes suspect. The region, already depicted as fragmented and artificial, is now revealed to be a fictional construction of the narrator's imagination, shaped by cultural stereotypes and media representations. The difference between how Jane really experiences Southern California and how she describes it shows the divide between history and reality. "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" like all good historiographic metafiction, is "overtly and resolutely historical-though, admittedly, in an ironic and problematic way that acknowledges that history is not the transparent record of any sure "truth" (Hutcheon, p. 10).

Central to Jane's narrative in "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" is the figure of the unreliable narrator, a device through which Walter Abish explores the complexities of memory, storytelling, and historical truth. Throughout the novel, Jane's recollections are riddled with contradictions, as she frequently questions her own memories, sometimes acknowledging the possibility that she is misremembering or even fabricating certain aspects of her past. This self-reflexivity is a hallmark of historiographic metafiction, a genre that foregrounds the act of narration itself to emphasize the inherent subjectivity and instability of historical accounts. By portraying Jane as an unreliable

narrator, Abish highlights the subjective nature of all narratives, especially those that claim to recount history. Jane's personal history is never fixed; it is a constantly shifting version of events, shaped by her fluctuating memory and perspective: "She lives in language and image. Her life passes from 'awe' to 'atrocity' by way of 'ardor'" (p. 106). This fluidity reflects a broader postmodern critique of the grand narratives of modernity, which purport to offer objective, universal truths about history. Abish, however, suggests that history is not a singular, coherent narrative but rather a collection of competing, often contradictory stories, each shaped by the individual perspectives of those who tell them. Jane's unreliable narration underscores this multiplicity, demonstrating that there is no single, authoritative version of history; instead, history is a contested space, where meaning is continually negotiated and reinterpreted. Through Jane, Abish challenges the reader to recognize the limitations of any attempt to fully capture historical truth, as every narrative is inevitably shaped by subjectivity, memory, and the act of storytelling itself.

What "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" accomplishes is that it magnifies, albeit through pastiche and parody, how people communicate and are communicated to through metanarratives, those experiences or views that have made their way into the historical, spatial, and cultural discourse. Abish does not set out to criticize the materials that are consumed from popular culture nor does he try to revolutionize the way texts are written or interpreted. Instead, Abish uses a multilevel, metafictional connection to ensure that his message is made loud and clear, *Mannix* representing the generalized Southern California experience, Jane and other Southern Californians understanding only things in their world that they have seen through his eyes, and the reader experiences a similar mirroring effect, being jarred to reality each time a signifier has no signified. These all speak to the ways in which we engage with and interpret texts. Like "the Southern Californian[7] [that] convert[s] the world around him into the flatness that resembles a movie screen" (p. 105), only that which we can recall in texts or discourses, and that includes history, can hold meaning. But, as Hutcheon argues, the aim of the postmodernist is not easy and is not straightforward copying; "any simple mimesis is replaced by a problematized and complex set of interrelations at the level of discourse-that is, at the level of the way we talk about experience, literary or historical, present or past" (p. 25). The postmodernist understands the ability of the metanarrative to form, pervade, and influence generations and cultures. The progressive postmodernist, like Abish, utilizes these metanarratives in order to challenge them, and, for the particularly negative ones, they must recreate them in order to begin to destroy them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Walter Abish's "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" offers a compelling examination of historiographic metafiction through the fragmented experiences of Jane, set against the backdrop of the United States. By utilizing narrative techniques such as fragmentation, unreliable narration, and intertextuality, Abish challenges the notion of historical objectivity, revealing history to be not a singular, definitive record but a subjective, constructed narrative. Jane's fractured recollections and self-reflexive storytelling expose the inherent instability of memory and the act of narration itself, reflecting the postmodern critique of grand narratives that claim to offer universal truths. Her journey, filled with contradictions and shifting perspectives, mirrors broader postmodern concerns surrounding identity, the fluidity of memory, and the inherent limitations of ever fully capturing or representing historical truth. Through Jane's fragmented narrative, Abish underscores the idea that history is not a static or fixed entity but rather a fluid, constantly evolving and contested terrain. The stories we tell about ourselves and our collective pasts are not objective truths but are shaped by individual perspectives, subjective interpretations, and cultural contexts. By foregrounding the act of narration itself, "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" emphasizes the constructed nature of all historical accounts, inviting readers to question the reliability of any narrative that

claims to represent the past. In doing so, Abish not only critiques traditional conceptions of history but also highlights the complex relationship between personal memory and broader historical events, suggesting that both are inevitably shaped by the stories we tell and the narratives we choose to construct. By reducing "things" to mere words and symbols, Walter Abish, as noted by Arias Misson Alain (1980), establishes a form of control over them, achieving this dominance through the intentional sacrifice of language's expressive or magical qualities. In relinquishing this expressive power, Abish paradoxically acquires an incantatory authority over the chaotic and unyielding nature of reality. Through the deconstruction of linguistic continuity into a fragmented array of letters and numbers, he performs an alchemical transformation of the distressing "everyday" world. By breaking this world down into its fundamental components, or "molecules," he opens up the potential for chemical recombination, as suggested by the interplay of letters and numbers. In Abish's work, the use of a degraded alphabet, coupled with the fragmented and alienating experience of extreme alienation - embodied in the doubling and disintegration of the self -serves not only as a critique of the contemporary condition but also hints at new possibilities and oppositions within it (p. 122).

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