



Martina Süßenguth

A Poet of the Eye

The Role of Art in Paul Auster's Works

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Martina Süßenguth, December 2013

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1 Introduction

1.1 Initial Remarks

Paul Auster is often heralded as one of the most important writers of postmodern American fiction, and, indeed, there are numerous postmodern literary strategies evident in his works such as intertextuality, pastiche, self-referentiality and metalinguistic games. While not denying the influence of postmodern thinking and writing on Auster's oeuvre, this study exposes his critical attitude towards postmodernism by examining the formerly widely neglected connection between his novels and various forms of art. Auster displays his familiarity with art history and aesthetics throughout his oeuvre, with most of his novels including references and allusions to art – paintings, photographs, movies¹ – or, in the case of *The Invention of Solitude*, showing actual photographs. Included in Auster's novels are several kinds of genre-crossing art projects and a collaboration with performance artist Sophie Calle which resulted from his incorporation of her art work into his novel *Leviathan*.

The analysis of the various functions of the visual arts leads to a more refined view of Auster's narrative style, which often stands in contrast to postmodern narrative techniques. One tenet of postmodernism with which Auster does not comply is the denial of meaningful unifying narration. While Auster agrees with his contemporaries insofar as he postulates a fragmented and arbitrary view of reality, he repeatedly tries

1 Three movies have propelled Auster to a mass audience, the critically acclaimed *Smoke*, for which he wrote the screenplay, *Blue in the Face*, and *Lulu on the Bridge* which he both wrote and co-directed.

to overcome this crisis of orientation by means of creative processes and aesthetic experiences. At the core of this way of coping with crisis lies the idea of art as experience as postulated by John Dewey. Especially Auster's premise that a work of art becomes real through the interaction with the onlooker, is akin to Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics. Art in Auster's novels is presented as offering a decisive element in the quest for meaning, a quest that has become more strenuous and difficult due to the disarray reflected in postmodern perceptions of life. As a result, Auster's protagonists are not directed towards a causally founded metanarrative, but with an interpretation of reality that leaves room for the idiosyncrasies and contingencies of experience.

The question whether or not Auster manages to find a solution to the paradoxical situation of postmodern literature is of great concern to this study. I will explore, whether Auster's combination of strategies, akin to Dadaist painters, conceptualist artists, and traditional story-tellers, creates an art-form that relates back to Samuel Beckett's notion: „What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be a *new form*, and that this form will be of such a type that it *admits the chaos* and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else [...]. To find a *form that accommodates the mess*, that is the task of the artist now.“² Auster adjusts his writing to the task at hand and comes up with a form of writing “that accommodates the mess.” Accordingly, he uses postmodern elements because he lives in a postmodern environment, not because his questions are postmodern in nature.

There are some central topics which Auster treats in an ever-changing and mesmerizing way in his fiction. Critics have singled out such topics as formation of identity,³ postmodern playfulness,⁴ crisis,⁵ questions of

2 Samuel Beckett cited in Auster, *An Art of Hunger*, p. 19

3 Ilana Shiloh, *Paul Auster and the Postmodern Quest: On the Road to Nowhere* (Lang, New York, Washington, Bern, Boston, Frankfurt am Main, 2003)

4 Martin Klepper, *Pynchon, Auster, DeLillo: Die amerikanische Postmoderne zwischen Spiel und Rekonstruktion* (Nordamerikastudien, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York, 1996)

5 Carsten Springer, *Crises: The Works of Paul Auster*, (Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 2000)

authority,⁶ deconstruction of literary genres,⁷ and overcoming of borders.⁸ ‘Art’, however, is not merely a ‘leitmotif’ reflecting one of these topics, but, as I will argue, the underlying principle which enables Auster’s protagonists to cope with fragmentation and disarray in the postmodern living situation.

One of the main aspects of this process of coping is directly connected to the title of this study: *A Poet of the Eye*. It is exactly this connection between vision and linguistic expression that leads to the central aspect of the role of experience Auster assigns to the creation of art.

Paul Auster started out as a poet, and the images in the poems he wrote between 1971 and 1978 provide the blueprint for his entire oeuvre. His poems were printed in small presses, and he barely managed to support himself and his family with translations of French texts. During that time, Auster filled numerous notebooks with prose, but he kept his writing efforts to himself because he was not satisfied with the results.⁹ Auster’s poems, which have earned him little recognition, were “very dense [...] coiled in on themselves like fists”¹⁰ concise in utterance and of cryptic density.

It was the experience of a different art form, theatrical dance, in December of 1978 that changed his writing and made it more transparent. Auster recalled: „Something happened, and a whole world of possibilities suddenly opened up to me. I think it was the absolute fluidity of what I was seeing, the continual motion of the dancers as they moved around the floor. It filled me with immense happiness.”¹¹ The next day he started writing *White Spaces* (1978),¹² a work of transition, which Auster describes as “an

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- 6 Aliko Varvogli, *The World that is the Book: Paul Auster’s Fiction* (Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2001)
 - 7 Dennis Barone (ed.), *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1995)
 - 8 Helmi Nyström, *Three Sides of the Wall – Obstacles and Border States in Paul Auster’s Novel* (ethesis.helsinki.fi.)
 - 9 “I wrote hundreds and hundreds of pages, I filled up dozens of notebooks. It’s just that I wasn’t satisfied with it, and I never showed it to anyone.” Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, p. 291
 - 10 Interview with Joseph Mallia in Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, pp. 264–265
 - 11 Ibid, 294–95
 - 12 Published in *Disappearances: Selected Poems* (Overlook Press, New York, 1988)

attempt on my part to translate the experience of that dance performance into words. It was a liberation for me, a tremendous letting go, and I look back on it now as the bridge between writing poetry and writing prose.”¹³

Thus, the short text *White Spaces* signifies the process of transformation in Auster's writing between poetry and prose. However, the themes, metaphors, and questions of his poems reverberate throughout his oeuvre. His poems provide the bare bones of his novels and films, and potent visual images in his poetry flicker up in his novels as well. In his own words: “The world enters us through our eyes, but we cannot make sense of it until it descends into our mouths.”¹⁴ The characters in Auster's fiction mainly perceive the world through their eyes, but the ordering of chaotic visual data happens solely through language. Quite remarkably it is a blind man who teaches the protagonist of *Moon Palace* the most valuable lessons of how to perceive the world and to make things appear in his mind's eye by describing them precisely. Again and again, Auster refers to his ideal of a transparent language and a writing that would be as lucid as possible. In this light, therefore, his fiction can be seen as an act of “image-ing.”

There is yet another striking parallel between Auster's views on aesthetic experience and John Dewey's concepts as postulated in *Art as Experience*. The world Dewey starts out with as a base for his philosophy and also ends with, is the world we all know. It is a world of everyday experiences, of common things. Dewey's philosophy is based less on the tradition of Western philosophy than on an empiricism based on the experience of the world and not on pure reasoning. While his philosophy contains arguments, for philosophy is after all the art of arguing, it is not founded on a world that has been created by arguments.

Equally, Auster's quest as a writer is not to write books based on literature (with the possible exception of *Squeeze Play* [1984] which Auster wrote in imitation of other detective fiction). Auster's novels certainly contain arguments, ideas, and references to other books, and since the experiences of the postmodern subject in a disjointed world call for methods of dislocation, intertextualization, hybridization etc., all of these occur in Auster's novels. Consequently, critics have often claimed that Auster writes ‘intertextual’ novels. Quite possibly, as I will argue in the third chapter, he also creates ‘intertextual’ art forms in his writings.

13 Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, p. 295

14 Auster, *Moon Palace*, p. 122

Ordinarily, an intertextual novel attempts to integrate itself into a world of quotes and becomes part of the textual system. The system of texts is as unstable and variable as language itself.¹⁵ It aims at a mimetic representation of a fragmented world, an aim which offers many textual possibilities, but which is also very problematic. The textual possibilities arise from the fact that such a representation is based on the oxymoronic assumption that the world is unattainable, and yet at the same time the author tries to portray that unattainability mimetically by writing fragmented texts.

1.2 Structure

Although my focus in this thesis will be on *Moon Palace* – for reasons further explained in 2.1 – my approach to Auster’s fiction will be to look at his work in its entirety. This procedure is suggested by the nature of Auster’s work itself. The author has claimed that each of his books are single variations on the main themes of his life and are “connected by their common source, by the preoccupations they share.”¹⁶ Despite the diversity of Auster’s oeuvre, spanning novels, poetry, critical essays, movie scripts, movies, art projects, and translations, there are underlying themes and connections between the separate parts.

The first chapter is designed to shed light on Auster’s various uses of the term “art”, its implications, and the requirements that are indispensable for the creative process. Auster also uses the term ‘art’ in the context of “art of writing,” “art of hunger,” “art of story-telling,” and “art of forming an identity.” Thus, I will venture to untangle the density of uses of the term ‘art’ and to find an underlying principle for the use of artistic activity in Auster’s oeuvre. Various aspects of modern and postmodern identity formation through art and the role of the quest as part of the artistic struggle will be looked at in order to lay the groundwork for a more in-depth scrutiny of Auster’s work itself.

15 Jakubzik argues that the perfect novel would be a grammar book in: Heiko Jakubzik, *Paul Auster und die Klassiker der American Renaissance*, p. 349

16 “Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory” in Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, p. 289

The starting point for chapter 2 was my observation that in *Moon Palace*, Auster takes his reader on a 'tour de force' through American art history from its beginnings to Pop Art and Minimal Art of the sixties in which the novel is situated. He not only introduces different painters and their artwork, but also philosophical and psychological theories and their practical implications.

Although *Moon Palace* easily lends itself to interpretations based on theories of Derrida and Baudrillard, I will argue that other sources, namely John Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics and Schopenhauer's asceticism, are crucial for Marco Stanley Fogg's development. How these concepts lead and misguide the protagonist and how he finally manages to reach the brink of adulthood through his own aesthetic experiences will also be explored. It may be feasible to use John Dewey's aesthetics as an interpretative framework for Auster's entire oeuvre, but the book most obviously based on the value of experience, especially *Art as Experience*, is *Moon Palace*.

The focus in the third chapter will be on Auster's preoccupation with the extent of the ambiguity and uncertainty of contemporary life in the novel *The Music of Chance*. Issues of chance and determinism and the role of coincidence in the creative process will be looked at thoroughly in this section which focuses on Auster's most overt homage to chaos theory. Mainly "a book about walls and slavery and freedom,"¹⁷ it presents a meditation on the nature of chance, the possibility for genuine liberty, and escape from determinism. The crux of the narration appears to revolve around the recognition that if chance is excluded from the creative process and art is a product of utmost control, oppression and terror are close at hand. Whereas questions of how to cope with contingency and unlimited freedom seem to be decisive for the plot in *The Music of Chance*, *In the Country of Last Things* starts at a point where everything has already been ruined by an attitude of "anything goes" and all appears to be irretrievably lost.

Chapter 4 concentrates on Auster's dystopia *In the Country of Last Things*, "a novel about making sense of the postmodern urban environment,"¹⁸ in which he most poignantly conjures up a world of dissemination and fragmentation. Anything can happen at any time,

17 Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, p. 319

18 Tim Woods, "Looking for Signs in the Air": Urban Space and the Postmodern in *The Country of Last Things*" (In: Barone, ed, 1995, p. 107–128) p. 120

thus nothing can be predicted and change becomes the only constant. In this absolute chaos, the heroine, Anna Blume, adapts to the continuously changing conditions by using various methods characteristic of twentieth century art. Like her original creator Kurt Schwitters, Blume uses garbage, broken things and other found objects to create a new kind of sculpture. She succeeds in doing so by zeroing in on broken objects and imagines them to be a new, whole object. Blume thus accepts chaos as an undeniable factor in life and uses techniques of pastiche, collage, and self-narration to reflect it. Moreover, she manages to survive in a hostile environment by establishing artificial family ties. I will explore how these survival strategies are juxtaposed to traditional images of artistic creation in isolation.

The main purpose of chapter 5, is to substantiate my claim that art in Paul Auster's fiction is not a finished product to be admired in a museum, but rather a way of living, an ongoing process that opens itself to various influences and impressions. Auster's ventures into film work and his collaboration with Sophie Calle show his broad interest in different art forms. Underlying this is his unwavering interest in questions of authorship and the constitution of identity through the narrative process. By reversing the role of fictional character and author, Sophie Calle ventured into a playful collaboration with Paul Auster. In his 1992 book, *Leviathan*, Auster created a character by the name of Maria Turner who was a thinly veiled double of Sophie Calle. Auster described several of her compulsive rituals and invented some projects which could have been hers. Sophie Calle responded to her fictional caricature by imitating Maria and using Auster's fictional blueprints to carry out those projects in reality. In their joint publication *Double Game*, Sophie Calle demonstrates what it looks like when fiction becomes reality and one lives a novel "to the letter."¹⁹

Throughout my analysis, I will attempt to trace the motifs, patterns, and insinuations emerging from Auster's poetics. The interpretive framework for this analysis is thus derived from a variety of sources. Theories of art and aesthetic concerns are interpretive instruments which will aid the examination. Another major hermeneutic tool concerns theories of the fragmented, postmodern self and of the artist's attempt to cope with this condition.

19 Auster/Sophie Calle, *Double Game*, p. 21

1.3 Overview of Auster Criticism

Generally speaking, Auster criticism is still a relatively young discipline.²⁰ Academic literary criticism on Auster's works can be divided into three phases. The first phase was strongly dominated by post-structuralist theory and, in particular, Alison Russell's influential article "Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy*: Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Fiction." Most articles of the early 90s centered on questions of logocentrism and deconstruction within *The New York Trilogy*. The second stage started with the publication of Marc Chénétier's book *Auster as "the Wizard of Odds: Moon Palace* in 1996. It presented the first study on works other than *The New York Trilogy* by Paul Auster. Questions of identity are most prevalent in the works of the late 90s. The third stage opened a wider variety of interpretation as questions of religion, transcendentalism, or the American Dream were taken into consideration, in addition to others that used poststructuralist theory as the accepted theoretical framework for interpretation.

In 1994, Dennis Barone published the first volume of articles on Paul Auster in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. Most of these articles were rather short and limited in their scope of interpretation. A year later, however, he edited another volume, *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, containing longer and more well sourced articles on various aspects of Auster's oeuvre. Most of the articles concentrate on *The New York Trilogy* and its positioning within the genre of anti-detective fiction.

The basic vantage point of poststructuralist theory continues to be prevalent in all five dissertations published on Auster in the United States between 1993 and 1997.²¹ They all focus on *The New York Trilogy* and relate deconstruction of genre conventions to works of other authors.

20 Cf. Springer, *Crises: The Works of Paul Auster*, p. 5

21 Oscar de Los Santos, *The Concealed Dialectic: Existentialism and (Inter-) Subjectivity in the Postmodern Novel* (PhD. Thesis, Ohio State U, 1993 DAI No.: 9325387); Terri Jane Hennings, *Writing Against Aesthetic Ideology*, Tom Sharpe's *The Great Pursuit* and Paul Auster's *City of Glass*) Ph.D. Thesis, Univ. of Minn., 1995 DAI No.: DA9612967; Daniel Punday, *Temporary Landscapes: Postmodern Narrative, Deconstruction, and the Reinvention of Form* (PhD. Thesis, Penn. State Univ., 1995); Laura Ann Barrett, *Frames of Reference: Fictional Photographs in American Literature* (Ph.D. thesis, SUNY at Stony Brook, 1997, DAI: AAC 9736500); Stanley Dewayne Orr, *It Was Not Midnight, It Was Not Raining: Anti-Detection, Anti-Noir, and the Nostalgia for Alienation* (Ph.D. Thesis, UCLA 1997. DAI AAC 9803560)

Anne M. Holzapfel's thesis: *The New York Trilogy: Whodunit?: Tracking the Structure of Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Novels*²² (Frankfurt: Lang: 1996) is exemplary of the first phase of Auster criticism up until the middle of the 90s. She focusses solely on *The New York Trilogy* and on its situatedness in the genre of anti-detective fiction. It is a detailed study which also contains a concise summary of the history of detective fiction, but it provides no new interpretation of Auster's novels.

The second phase of Auster criticism started with the publication of Marc Chénétier's book: *Paul Auster as the Wizard of Odds: Moon Palace*. It presents the first book-length study on a single book of Paul Auster so far. Chénétier provides a rich and profound attempt to single out Auster's key motifs in *Moon Palace* and he relates them back to other works by Auster. However, he does not interpret the immense number of observations and inter-textual references, leaving it to the reader to draw his or her own conclusions.

After that, the panopticum of Auster criticism opened up and other novels were considered worthy of consideration. Most studies that followed looked at Auster's oeuvre more openly and included other works apart from *The New York Trilogy*. The basic assumption, however, that Auster was first and foremost a postmodernist, remained untouched.

Martin Klepper's study *Pynchon, Auster, DeLillo: Die amerikanische Postmoderne zwischen Spiel und Rekonstruktion* also positions Auster next to Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo in the context of literary history. Klepper's main focus is on *The New York Trilogy*, but he also looks at *Moon Palace*, and *Leviathan*. Klepper focuses on elements of doubling, repetition, ontological instability, and contingencies. Art and the artistic process are mentioned briefly²³ on page 293–294, but there is no special emphasis put on those aspects for his interpretation of *Moon Palace*.

Bernd Herzogenrath's study *An Art of Desire. Reading Paul Auster*, was the first book-length study solely devoted to Auster's oeuvre as a whole. From the viewpoint of poststructuralist theory, Herzogenrath further promotes the established assumption that the novels that followed the *New York Trilogy* should also be explored in relation to the rewriting and deconstruction of genre conventions. He interprets *In the Country*

22 Anne Holzapfel, *The New York Trilogy: Whodunit?: Tracking the Structure of Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Novels*, (Frankfurt: Lang, 1996)

23 Klepper, *Pynchon, Auster, DeLillo: Die amerikanische Postmoderne zwischen Spiel und Rekonstruktion*, pp.292–4

of *Last Things* as a deconstruction of the dystopia, *Moon Palace* of the picaresque and *The Music of Chance* of the 'road movie'. The wealth of insights and connotations in his analysis are directly linked to Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridaean deconstruction. Despite the title, *An Art of Desire*, Herzogenrath does not view 'art' as anything but one of many manifestations of desire. He mentions 'art' in the interpretation of *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance*, and *In the Country of Last Things*, but only insofar as it is connected to Lacan's concept of desire. With its strict adherence to former modes of interpretation, but with its focus on a broader scope of texts, his study marks the end of the second phase of Auster criticism.

Carsten Springer was the first to seriously question former Auster criticism and to look for a different mode of interpretation in his Ph.D. thesis *Crises – The works of Paul Auster*. Instead of taking as his 'starting point theoretical material'²⁴ he looks for a thematic unity in Auster's work itself. He also traces the delineation of an overall theme of identity crisis in Auster's oeuvre starting with the early poems of the seventies to the movies of the late nineties in the light of crises. Springer extracts creativity as one of the issues that are related to the protagonist's crisis. However, he does not single out creativity or art as a pivotal factor in Auster's literary progression from 'deconstruction to reconstruction'.²⁵

One more study that looks at Auster from the aspect of a thematic unity is Beate Hötger's *Identität im filmischen Werk von Paul Auster* mainly dealing with Auster's films. By comparing various modes of identity formation in his films she extracts identity as the main motif. In passing, Hötger also deals with photographs in Auster's fiction and his collaboration with Sophie Calle.

Another recent addition is „*As strange as the World*“ – *Annäherungen an das Werk des Erzählers und Filmemachers Paul Auster*. It is divided into three parts: Methaphysic and Mythos, City and Space, and Image und Subject. Although some articles center around the familiar issues of identity and authorship, most authors show a wider and more detailed scope of issues. For instance, Auster's Jewish background, the American Dream, the religious motif of the Fall, and the borders between dreams and reality are examined.

24 Springer, *Crises: The Works of Paul Auster*, p. 9

25 Ibid, 217

Änne Troester's Ph.D. thesis *A Momentary Stay against Confusion: Selfhood and Authorship in the Work of Paul Auster*, (2003) investigates issues of authorship, the self and others, memory, and many other seemingly canonical topics, but she does so from a different perspective. She approaches Auster's work as a whole to provide extensive readings of the texts under the two main headings of 'Selfhood' and 'Authorship.' She also mentions Auster's and Sophie Calle's collaboration which resulted in *Double Game* and points out the connections of authorship and disintegration of authority.

In his dissertation *Paul Auster und die Klassiker der American Renaissance* (2007), Jakubzik's tries to untangle Auster's connection to the transcendentalists' writings as well as to Lacan's psychoanalysis. Due to the strictly philosophical framework of his dissertation, art is not an issue in his interpretation.

One of the most recent studies on Auster is Brendan Martin's *Paul Auster's Postmodernity* published in 2007. At first glance it seems to return to the second stage of Auster criticism since it looks at different novels but all in light of postmodern questions. Among other issues, he examines "Writing," "Self-Invention," "Dislocation," "Indeterminacy," and "Authorship" among other issues. However, Martin comes to the conclusion that Auster's writings 'comprise an amalgamation of modernism and postmodernism, yet cannot merely be circumscribed by the remit of any one particular movement.'²⁶ He does not single out art as relevant to Auster's peculiar hybrid of modernism and the postmodern.

Wolfgang Hallet's remarkable study *Paul Auster: Moon Palace* (2008) has already attained its fourth edition. Written as a textbook for university students to optimize exam preparation, it goes to great lengths to examine *Moon Palace* from every possible angle of postmodern contextualization, narratological concepts, and meta-aesthetical functions. The fourth chapter, "Visual Cultures Staged and Remediated" focuses on visual and aesthetic aspects of *Moon Palace* and the fifth chapter also stresses the vital role of visual images in the novel. Consequently, Hallet also considers "the pivotal role of looking and seeing"²⁷ as vital for the novel. Several examples of visual images and ekphrasis make it "particularly evident that an interpretation of *Moon Palace* cannot do without insights and concepts

26 Brendan Martin, *Paul Auster's Postmodernity*, p. 33

27 Wolfgang Hallet, *Paul Auster: Moon Palace*, p. 111

that emerged in the interdisciplinary field of visual culture studies [...]”²⁸ This shows that scholars are broadening their theoretical framework to encompass the importance of art in Auster's oeuvre.

However, the only article to foreground art in Auster's fiction is a short text written for an English teacher's convention by Helga Korff: “Art in *Moon Palace*: Zur Rolle der Kunst und des künstlerischen Prozesses.” Due to the brief format of merely eight pages including photographs and illustrations, it cannot provide a deep insight into the role of art in *Moon Palace*. However, it serves as a useful introduction into the connections of American art of the 19th century and the novel.

Thus, the present thesis attempts to fill the obvious gap in American Studies and to open up interpretation of Paul Auster's works further. It is a study of the connection of art and life with the goal of finding a thematic unity of the artistic component in Auster's oeuvre. Taking as its starting point not post-structuralist theory but Auster's works themselves it intends to highlight an aspect that has formerly been neglected and to help to position him anew.

My work aims to show that while identity may be the main issue Auster deals with, art is his toolbox for working on that issue. Referring back to Michelangelo's notion that the artwork is already inherent in the block of wood and the artist's task is to chisel away the surplus to make the piece of art shown, I argue that in Auster's novels it is through art that the individual in a postmodern environment can chisel away the surplus material and create his own identity.²⁹ If the world is in fragments and everything seems to be running down, a creative process is needed to pick up the pieces and create new archipelagoes of matter. In this sense, the acceptance of one's own ‘patchwork identity’³⁰ is the most suitable method to cope with the postmodern living situation.

1.4 Auster in the Postmodern Context

Starting with Alison Russell's influential essay “Deconstructing the New York Trilogy: Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Fiction”, most articles on his

28 Ibid,112

29 Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 132

30 Cf. chapter 4.5

work concentrate on certain aspects like deconstruction of literary genres, intertextuality, fragmentation, identity crises, and questions of authorship. Up until today, Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, and Lacan are the sources cited most often in Auster criticism. As Troester poignantly states: “Many critics have noted Auster’s situatedness in a postmodern context,” and there is no need to “repeat what they say.”³¹ The voices of critics and academics to this point could be summarized with the following hypothesis: “in its highlighting of the questions of origins, subjectivity, language and their complex interplay, Auster’s poetics share a great deal with [...] Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory of the subject and Derrida’s critique of representation and his deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence.”³²

Overall, there is a prevailing opinion, that the mixing of genres “places Auster’s literary productions squarely within the pomo camp [...]”. Auster’s books flaunt a fan of issues and textual strategies we’ve come to associate with postmodern logic (intertextuality, critique of origins, mis-en-abyme structures, to name just a few).³³ Auster has been called “the darling of the French school of inter-textuality,” “the Wizard of Odds” and was attributed to use the “full panoply of postmodern techniques: defamiliarization, self-reflexiveness, irony, metalinguistic play.”³⁴

Auster’s first literary success, the *New York Trilogy*, has been scrutinized as a prime example of a metaphysical mystery novel, or else anti-detective fiction, since it apparently fulfills all the criteria of this postmodern genre. There is no crime, or even a case; there is only a fake detective who bases his work on detective novels he has read. Instead of a solution at the end, the reader is left with the statement that whether or not the story means anything, is not for the story to tell. It is a detective story that subverts its own premises, such as the notion of the readability of the world and a logical relation between clues and intention. Overall it seems to share Thomas Pynchon’s notion (exemplified by his 1966 novel *The Crying of Lot 49*) that every answer is just a step further into an endless proliferation of questions.

31 Troester, *A Momentary Stay against Confusion*, p. iv

32 Stanley Corngold, *The Fate of the Self: German Writers and French Theory* (London University Press, Durham, 1994), p. 2

33 Chris Tysh, “From one Mirror to Another: The Rhetoric of Disaffiliation on *City of Glass*,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 14:1 (Spring 1994), p. 46

34 William Dow, “Paul Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude*: Glimmers in a Reach to Authenticity,” *Critique* 39:3 (Spring 1998), p. 277

Ever since *City of Glass*, Auster's novels were judged along the same lines. Questions like if it is a successful deconstruction of the Utopia in case of *Country of Last Things*, of the Bildungsroman in *Moon Palace*, or of the road movie in *The Music of Chance* were foregrounded. When Auster presented a linear storyline like in the *Music of Chance*, it was considered a flaw, when he used colloquial language like in *Mr. Vertigo* it was said that it lacked sophistication.

Apparently Auster uses different genres and furnishes them with a certain twist. The reader is led to believe that he is on familiar terrain, but the twist deprives the model of all certainties. Thus, each genre undermines its own conventions. Auster uses those conventions to get "to another place, another place altogether."³⁵ Biographical details paramount in his work, but "the self whose name appears on the cover of books – is finally not the same self who writes the book."³⁶

Most of Auster's books could be utilized to exemplify Baudrillard's concepts, yet Auster is not a euphoric consumer of these views; "instead, he critically reveals the way in which simulation, hyperreality, and circulation can curtail communication by questioning, as Linda Hutcheon wrote at the end of *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 'what "real" can mean and how we can know it.'³⁷ According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction, is about "issues such as those of narrative form, of intertextuality, of strategies of representation, of the role of language, of the relation between historical facts and experimental events, and, in general, of the epistemological and ontological consequences of the act of rendering problematic that which was once taken for granted by historiography – and literature."³⁸

Certainly, Paul Auster's fiction includes those issues as well, but neither is it solely fiction of 'decentered ahistorical pastiche,' (Irwin 118)³⁹ nor the writing of nihilism and gloom. "At bottom," Auster explains, "I think my work has come out of a position of intense personal despair, a very deep nihilism and hopelessness about the world, the fact or our

35 "Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory" in Auster: *The Art of Hunger* p. 261

36 Ibid, 293

37 Barone, "Introduction: Auster and the Postmodern Novel", p. 9

38 Linda Hutcheon, cited in: Barone, "Introduction: Auster and the Postmodern Novel", p. 22

39 Ibid, 12

own transience and mortality, the inadequacy of language, the isolation of one person from another. And yet, at the same time, I've wanted to express the beauty and extraordinary happiness of feeling yourself alive, of breathing in the air, the joy of being alive in your own skin."⁴⁰ Thus, I would agree with Barone who summarises Paul Auster's work as "a unique and important synthesis of postmodern concerns, premodern questions, and a sufficient realism,"⁴¹ and who states that "to read his fiction merely as illustrations for a particular definition of the postmodern is to severely limit it, and which definition one begins with will make all the difference in how one reads his work."⁴²

Keeping this in mind, I will focus in the following section on Auster's conviction that "[t]here is no reality that can be posited without the simultaneous effort to penetrate it, and the work of art as an ongoing process bears witness to this desire."⁴³ In Auster's work, this effort to penetrate reality is often presented as a quest. As we will see in the next section, the quest can be seen as an archetypal search for a true identity which is connected to the becoming of an artist in many of Auster's novels.

1.4.1 The Motif of the Quest as Part of the Artistic Struggle

The characters in Auster's novels are all, although in different ways, involved in some kind of quest, psychologically, intellectually, or ontologically. The most salient characteristics of Auster's protagonists are loss and fragmentation, absence and loneliness, and to overcome the misery of their human condition, they set out on a quest whether it be a search for a missing father, their own identity, or for human connections. As Troester points out: "[I]t is a pattern that Auster has established over almost twenty years of novel-writing, in which characters are jolted out of dead routines by rogue telephone calls or the news that a father or a friend

40 Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, p. 302

41 Barone, "Introduction: Auster and the Postmodern Novel", p. 22

42 Ibid, 6

43 Auster: *The Art of Hunger*, p. 88-9