

Synthetics, Surveillance and Sarsaparilla: Patrick White and the New Gossip Economy

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This essay proposes a new model for reading Patrick White's novels of the 1960s in their treatment of the tensions between the rights of individuals and their relation to groups or 'the group', charting the circulations of exclusion and inclusion inherent within this dynamic. Specifically, I reframe White's exploration of a suburban gossip economy via its perceived implication through modern American technologies that threaten human agency. This essay examines the growth of this threat and White's treatment of this theme over the course of two novels, *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and *The Solid Mandala* (1966) and then briefly concludes to explore the culmination of these developments via an analysis of *The Vivisector* (1970). I argue that these works are connected both implicitly and explicitly by a preoccupation of postwar American literary fiction: the experience of the individual loner whose identity lies in peril at the hands of a collective narrow-minded consciousness. In this essay I demonstrate how collective will is enforced in these works through the symbiotic relationship that exists between a suburban surveillance culture enabled by Cold War synthetic technologies and its relation to gossiping intelligence networks. I then investigate the ramifications of this symbiosis for the individual subject in Patrick White's work.

The style of the prose in these novels is obviously steeped in European traditions. The themes, focus and tone however reflect the contextual concerns of the Cold War period and an anti-suburban and paranoid tradition that is clearly linked to American writing. White's connection and relationship to this aspect of US culture and fiction is apparent and explicit. As David Marr notes (370) White directly drew upon the American mass media and its suburbs to help inform his work in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961); the characters Mrs Flack and Mrs Jolley were inspired by an American news report White had observed, in which two respected Philadelphian housewives had poisoned their husbands to death (Marr 370). White also continually commented in his career upon his disdain for the "Americanization" of Australia, while still appreciating and advocating the works of American authors such as Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, and John Updike, admiring their talent for dissecting their own consumer driven society ("Patrick White Letters" 358, "Patrick White Speaks" 77-85, Marr 501-504). Akin to these authors, White reveals a concern with the individual at risk of subjugation by external communal sources over which he or she has no control. White distinguishes himself from many of the American authors with the direction and nature this threat takes, in that within the Sarsaparilla novels the risk to the self is specifically located as moving outward, from the urban interior into the native bushland, rather than inward towards the city.

In *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Solid Mandala* (1966) the growing spread of the postwar suburban sprawl, coupled with the pervasive nature of mass American culture,

threatens individuals with its unstoppable momentum. This momentum is most powerfully portrayed in the novels through the foreboding omni-presence of an all-consuming synthesis that merges people with man-made materials, overriding subjectivity. This essay first considers *Riders in the Chariot*, where I argue White deploys the synthetic matter of his time as a means for exploring the synthesis of human connections formed by social organization. In *The Solid Mandala* this theme is further developed upon through the novel's reference to the proliferation of American brand names and signs of mass consumerism. These tropes of modern suburban supremacy dominate the scenery to become an unquestioned aspect of the Australian vernacular, with brands such as Woolworth's, Cyclax, and Speedex appearing frequently in the text to replace natural, organically grown entities such as Allwright's general store (White 52-53, 59, 296). In *The Solid Mandala* White is less subtle about the propagation of American style organizations in Australian culture than in *Riders in the Chariot*. Whereas in *Riders in the Chariot* membership of such groups is generally implied by actions and speech, in *The Solid Mandala* groups and brand names are now given specific titles and allocated definitive space, loudly proclaimed to have overtaken the Australian landscape. Early in the novel the main protagonists, the Brown Brothers, step out into an ominous suburban universe populated by things and objects far removed from their previous childhood experience:

The Brothers Brown had almost emerged...into the world in which people lived...families in advertised clothes, who belonged to Fellowships, and attended Lodges, and were not afraid of electrical gadgets (White 30).

This scene speaks to the sign-posts persistently provided by White in the novel linking organizations and modern technology, to signify a conspiratorial relationship exists between "Lodges" and "gadgets" that pose distinctively inter-related hazards to the individual.

In *The Solid Mandala*, White's major protagonists are for the most part oblivious to the infringement of suburbia upon their personal freedom. One half of White's twin brothers duo, Arthur, is unaware of the manager of Woolworth's "synthetic smile", preferring instead to take a mental inventory of the products housed within the supermarket giant, while ignoring the insincerity of the people working within it (White 54-55). In comparison, Arthur's brother Waldo relates to the new suburbia from a shifting position of love and hate. Unlike Miss Hare in *Riders in the Chariot*, Waldo is aware of suburbia's threat to his autonomy but cannot bring himself to proclaim modernity completely "bad!" as he is intrinsically aware of modern technology's dominant claims to authority in his reality: "he would never have admitted in public, he would never have rejected any usable evidence of human progress" (White 59).

In *The Solid Mandala*, as in *Riders in the Chariot*, the reign of suburbia maintains the first and the final word, yet the process of melding the human to the synthetic is even more pervasive and disturbing. Those characters that adhere to and espouse the new suburban doctrine exist in a kind of cartoonish simulacrum, unable to differentiate between reality and the artificial universe surrounding them. Unashamedly immersing

themselves in the surveillance media culture created by television and revelling in the artificial synthesis between body and machine this culture provides, the blind masses in *The Solid Mandala* perceive this simulation as a preferable and more deeply felt experience to that of their own lives. In the opening pages of the novel Mrs Dun, one of White's typically bigoted doyennes of suburban gossip, lives her life through the newspapers by forever repeating stories she has read about horrible crimes or gossip scandals (White 16 - 21). Described as having a mind like a "box", Mrs Dun sucks "warm air, past her plastic gums" as she expresses her constant dread at being murdered (White 16-21).

In the closing pages of the novel, aptly entitled, "Mrs Poulter and the Zeitgeist", synthetic materials, as metonomized by plastic, gather an oppressive force that White relates via a damning depiction of the most ubiquitous product of the synthetic age: the television. White portrays through the character of Mrs Poulter that an addiction to 'the box' has become a modern-day degenerative disease, as the deluded housewife continually interprets and perverts reality through her memory of twisted media images. Mrs Poulter recognizes her good fortune and ability to "keep up with the times" through her purchase of "plastic awnings", and can only relate to her experience of discovering Waldo's dead body through her recollection of televisual images of warfare (White 295). Through the medium of Mrs Poulter the novel exposes a mindset so far removed from reality and the community that it prefers the artificial company of the television to genuine human interaction. This is demonstrated in Mrs Poulter's anticipation at inundating her living room with gruesome images that make her feel connected to 'the real':

You couldn't complain. Not with the electric frying-pan...And the telly. If she didn't have any friends she yarned with over fences, in buses, or the street, she didn't need any. She had the telly...waiting most of all for the *real* programmes, when they let off one of the bombs or an aeroplane caught on fire...or those guerrillas they'd collared, of course they were only Orientals, once it showed you the bodies they'd shot. The news made the rubber eat into her, she would hear herself wheeze, the news items so real, you only sometimes overheard the squeals of a stuck and bleeding pig...

All the while they was firing on a mob of squealing Orientals, in Singapore, or some such place.

You wouldn't believe.

Mrs Poulter sat and hiccupped for a misborn child and a plastic doll writhing on a square of gelatine (White 299).

The text here makes explicit the impact of a generic, globalized synthetic surveillance culture upon a specific localized community. As the American invention of the mass invention beams sordid images of (most likely) American wars into Mrs Poulter's lounge room and mind, it rapidly replaces the genuine local tragedy and reality of Waldo's death and Mrs Poulter's own past, fusing real-life events with hyperbole and sensationalist melodrama. Here the human subject is overwhelmed by a cacophony of noise and sensations relaying the transmission of the masses, standing little chance of retaining

individual identity or maintaining a semblance of reality in the wake of such all encompassing sameness and ubiquity.

Timothy Melley has proposed the fear of the individual under siege from external forces is common to Cold War literature, expressed frequently as a kind of “agency panic” that is represented primarily in postwar American fiction via two main forms: characters’ reveal paranoid problematizations of object-subject relations and exhibit this fixation through fears of being monitored; and characters act in hostile response to the direct or indirect threats posed to their individualism by the rapid expansion and invasiveness of new commodities. Melley argues:

For these writers...the idea of social control conjures up an empire of conspiracy, a vision of the world in which individuals are forever manipulated by secret agents, hidden persuaders, and malevolent organizations. Paranoia and anxiety about human agency...are all part of the paradox in which a supposedly individualist culture conserves its individualism by continually imagining it to be in imminent peril (6).

These preoccupations and anxieties, and the very terms of their representation, are taken up in Patrick White’s Sarsaparilla novels, most dominantly in *Riders in the Chariot*, which persistently interrogates the theme of paranoia and “agency panic”. These novels invoke similar threats to the individual as commonly found in the writing of White’s American literary contemporaries, notably Philip Roth and Saul Bellow. In White, as in Roth, and other Cold War authors, it is not just the obvious threat posed by mass governmental organisations such as the CIA that provokes anxiety, but also the surveillance systems employed within families, households and local suburban communities that contribute to paranoia. This paranoia is linked to fears of the rapid spread of suburbia, trends of mass consumption and the danger posed by invasive material matter, working alongside the existence of localized socio-bureaucratic organizations such as clubs, lodges, and church groups.

Riders in the Chariot explores the threat to agency posed by these organizations in the form of gossip and the surveillance culture intrinsic in the making of small town mentality. The novel rehearses how the exclusive memberships of groups alienate dissidents, and charts the individual’s experience of the growth of commerce and commodity consumption as well as the problematic function inherent within paranoid conceptions of object-subject relations. The novel engages with American culture and literature as it probes the concept of the threat posed by an invasive materiality and of how synthetic matter itself, alongside the growth of suburbia diminishes and jeopardizes subjectivity and human agency. White investigates and develops upon the theme of how suburban organizations reflect and enforce the paranoid inclinations of their national governing political institutions.

This paranoid formulation regarding invasive government and technology’s impact upon the suburban has been taken up by cultural studies theorist Claire Birchall, who identifies information as the most significant asset pursued by private and public

institutions in the last century, resulting in a globalized “new gossip economy” (94). Birchall argues that in the new gossip economy a premium has been placed on the obtaining of knowledge over more traditional primary-based resources, directly enabled by the rapid acceleration of mass media technology, an event which “contracted the world to village size” (94). Many theorists of American culture have documented the rise of an ever pervasive mass media in the twentieth century that evolved alongside the growth of intelligence and “knowledge networks”, often founded on and directed by an imperative to keep the government and supposedly the public ‘informed’ in the name of serving the “national interest” (Birchall, Damousi, Melley). Much of this phenomenon stemmed from post World War II events, defined and driven by the rhetoric of Cold War politics and the supposed ‘need to know’ political agenda, justifying the inspection of even the most trivial and illicit information about the citizenry in the name of serving the ‘greater good’, namely protecting the western world from communism.

As Stephen Fenichell argues in *Plastic: The Making of a Synthetic Century* (1999) this ever-intrusive surveillance machine could not have been achieved without the invention of plastics and synthetics, materials developed symbiotically in relation to the growth of intelligence systems. He defines the information age as ‘the Age of Plastic’:

Our post-industrial epoch frequently goes by the handle Information Age. But it could just as easily have been called the Plastic Age. Plastic provides us with the material prerequisite for information storage and retrieval, both analogue and digital. From photographic film to audio – and videotape, from computer discs to CD-ROMs and CDs, plastic not only imitates natural materials, it allows us to recreate an entirely new world of the visual and aural imagination and record it for instant replay, as well as for posterity (1996, 5).

Enabled by these new synthetic materials, the omnipresent interference of governmental and corporate groups into the individual’s most private affairs has helped to contribute to the growing literary expression of “agency panic”, a theme White frequently takes up in his 1960s novels.

In *Riders in the Chariot*, “agency panic” revolves around suburban and domestic dynamics, presented through the characters’ own constant self-surveillance. This “self-surveillance” appears to become frequently activated in order to endure an era often portrayed as monumentally insistent on mass conformity, homogeneity, uniformity and monoculturalism (Damousi 273-275, Bolton 122-125). The absorption of Cold War rhetoric into White’s own writing is evident in the major protagonists’ persistent fears of speaking out or being forced to speak, of feeling constant “panic”, having to “hide”, the constant need for “discretion” and “disguises”, expressed phobias of being found out or overheard, or of being too closely watched from windows by prying “eyes” and from people lurking behind doors (White 7, 49, 76, 86-88, 108, 121, 255, 279, 294, 427, 471, 516). The terms “evidence”, “suspect”, “conspiracy”, “trial”, “judgement” and “condemnation” recur throughout the novel, evoking a constant sense of being monitored and regulated, seeming to allude to Cold War events such as McCarthyism

(White 117, 201-202, 273, 377, 386, 536). In *Riders in the Chariot* seemingly innocuous suburban dramas repeatedly reveal complex conspiracies at work that threaten individual autonomy. There is veiled suspicion on the part of Miss Hare towards “officials” and “official” positions of “trust”; even the “official road” she refuses to travel along comes to represent the encroachment of suburban values and its bureaucratic apparatus onto her beloved Xanadu (7-14). Miss Hare reveals anxiety that socio-bureaucratic bodies interfere too prominently in her private affairs when she walks down the bushy track that has been renamed an “avenue” by the Council, and at the same time it is noted in the text she had “reached the age where neighbours were always on the lookout for strokes” (7-14).

Miss Hare is the most paranoid of all of White’s Sarsaparilla protagonists regarding synthetics, and embodies most actively the fear of threat to human agency posed by a menacing suburban infrastructure empowered by new technology and the expanding socio-political interests of ‘the group’. Miss Hare refers to Mrs Jolley as being ‘under the influence’ of Mrs Flack, so that Mrs Jolley cannot be considered “an active agent”, invoking a sentiment expressed earlier that Mrs Flack’s presence can be felt “under the beds”, reminding one of the famous slogan “reds under the beds” (93). Mrs Flack, the ultimate high priestess and purveyor of plastics and synthetic materials, appears to permeate the “porous” stone at Xanadu with her essence; it is suggested Xanadu’s natural porosity, as opposed to plastic’s impenetrability, is its obvious undoing (99). Miss Hare feels Mrs Flack’s presence everywhere within her home, and soon after this incident hysterically rants about the ‘evil’ qualities of plastic to Mrs. Jolley: “Plastic is bad, Bad!” (103). Both women are depicted by Miss Hare as “links” in an evil surveillance “chain”, harking back to Cold War tropes of “domino effects” and ‘daisy chains’, implying the individual’s impotence in the face of greater technologically enabled systems and organized collectives (397).

One effective method for protecting one’s self from gossip and surveillance in *Riders in the Chariot* is to become an active participant in the performance of community, to be “seen” to be contributing to one’s neighbourhood in acceptable patriotic and nationalistic forms. These accepted forms consist of embodying the good consumer citizen by presenting oneself as a mass convert to suburban development and consumption, joining local suburban organizations with a strong “community service” ethos such as the ladies auxiliary, or, if one is male, possessing a masculine array of like-minded identical “mates” (74-75, 532).

The theme of belonging and the desire to find protection through submission to a group is investigated by a slew of American novels from the same period, such as in Philip Roth’s *Letting Go* (1960). Roth (a writer White openly admired) explores the traditionally American themes of loyalty, patriotism, consumerism and belonging, depicting how those entitled to the status and privilege of ‘American’ in *Letting Go* are predominantly those possessing membership to strictly regulated groups such as the DAR, the girl guides, the YMCA, and the Masons (Roth 1961 26-27, 209). This motif appears and develops its own forms in White, where suburbanites belong to Fellowships and Mother’s Unions and contribute to bake sales in order to demonstrate

their devotion to “duty” and the community (“Riders in the Chariot” 74). In *Letting Go*, suburbia has encroached upon the inner city and deprived it of its haphazard charm, depleting the urban of its chaotic rebelliousness and instead replacing it with a fickle, derivative genericness. Roth’s suburbanized New York is home to upwardly mobile couples who fill their apartments with “blond Swedish chairs ” and “Scandinavian... coffee tables”, that decorate with “pastel shades” (also notoriously repulsive to White), “potted avocados” and display their clichéd family photographs of annual trips to Florida in “conspicuous” places (1960 180-181, 414-420). In Roth, as in White, plastic perverts reality, replacing genuine human experiences and traditions with the new and the false: “...she knocked on wood; that is, she looked for wood and found Formica” (Roth 417).

White’s depiction of the suburbs is revealingly distinct from Roth’s here, in that White interrogates the theme of suburbia as a threat moving outwards, decimating the creativity found within nature, while Roth reveals a fear of the suburban encroaching inward to destroy the chaotic and urban. White’s treatment of the anti-suburban tradition is specific in this regard as he explores the threat suburbia poses in its outward urge to destroy the organic unpredictability and artistry of nature, replacing it with superficiality and emptiness. For both authors however the emphasis on the suburban remains united by the same criticism: to belong to an ‘appropriate’ organization and to display one’s material proofs of belonging is definitive evidence of a character’s nationalism and successful assimilation into the community, but this comes at the higher and irretrievable cost of the loss of individuality and uniqueness.

The attack upon individual identity by interfering larger organizations during the Cold War has been commented upon by numerous cultural historians (Bolton, Damousi, Meikle, Rolfe). These writers have documented how the 1950s and 1960s in the United States, and to a slightly lesser extent in Australia, was dominated by sweeping political paranoia that led to onus of proof laws motivated by panic about communism and ‘subversion’, and how ‘good citizen’ drives encouraged ‘integration’ and the abandonment of selfhood to common values . In both nations, continuing obscenity and censorship trials, overt and covert investigations of suspected communists, fears for public “security” and the seemingly unstoppable ‘invasion from within’ encouraged a form of “mass hysteria” fixated upon “containment” (Bolton 80-81, Clarke 140-147). White’s defence of Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) in the obscenity trials against that book highlight the often draconian efforts in this country to ban and contain that which was greatly feared as invading the nation and ‘contaminating’ impressionable minds (Marr 501-504). White often expressed in public an obvious disdain for the paranoid hysteria that appeared to drive these efforts, and some of this disdain clearly drives many of the themes within his fiction (Marr 501-504, “Patrick White’s Letters” 358).

Suburbia in both America and Australia in the 1960s reflected similar responses to “invasion hysteria”, exposing a paranoid phobia of the ‘spreading’ of “infection”. Public health initiatives often reinforced this paranoia in their eager endorsement of suburbia as a method for controlling contamination, as it was believed “germs would

not find their hosts in too close proximity to each other” and thus people would find the “protection” they craved in these newly developed housing estates (Dingle 190). Australia closely followed the United States model of suburbanization in this era, famously referred to by Robin Boyd in *The Australian Ugliness* (1960) as “Austerica”, a “country of many colourful, patterned plastic veneers” (1, 64). Fittingly then in an era of anxiety over ‘epidemics’ and the need for “containment”, the Cold War found perfect synthetic correlations to make corporeal its paranoid essence in the advent of modern household plastics, most effectively realized in the Tupperware container.

Plastics such as Tupperware, as Fenichell argues, were synecdochic to the prevalent paranoid community fears of the time:

All Tupper containers had to be “burped” like a baby, so forming the patented “airtight, liquid-tight” hermetic Tupperware seal.

T

upper had keyed into the collective unconscious injection-moulding a baby-boom product par excellence: supremely safe, posing no threat whatever... On a more subliminal level, at a time when fallout shelters and missile silos were being hermetically sealed off from the tainted air around them, Tupperware vigilantly protected vulnerable leftover food from all external threat. Banishing germs... or more metaphorically – mad Russkies hurling hydrogen bombs (Fenichell 1996, 233).

Thomas Pynchon famously taps into the satirization of Tupperware as a harbinger of doom in *The Crying of Lot 49*, with the opening line “One summer afternoon Mrs Oedipa Mass came home from a Tupperware party...” (1). Pynchon’s referencing Tupperware in a novel dominated by paranoia, agency panic and conspiracy theory is a perfectly fitting association, as, according to Alison Clarke, the Tupperware party and the fervid acceptance and consumption of plastics in the home was a phenomenon directed by ‘spreading the word’ which tapped into consumer tastes that played upon Americans’ paranoid desires to ‘belong’ (3-10). As noted by Clarke, Earl Tupper, the creator of the product, conceived of Tupperware as more than a simple consumer item; he conceived of himself as a “super-coordinator” “Tupperizing” the world (3-10). For Tupper and other big name plastics manufacturers of the time, along with their many consumer converts, purchasing the new synthetics and applying them to the domestic sphere was a means of dispersing a particular patriotic ideology; one prominent American preacher of the 1950s even went so far as to praise Tupperware as a “bulwark against Communism” (Clarke 3).

Containers and containment as metaphor and motif recur frequently in *Riders in the Chariot*, and also appear throughout much of White’s fiction, essays and lectures. Repeated reference is made to lids, “boxes”, being sealed in or screwed in to brick buildings or coffins, and, in his public denunciations of American inflected Australian television programs, White constantly referred to television as “the blight of the box” (“Patrick White Speaks” 23-77, “Riders in the Chariot” 58, 75-77, 615, “The Solid Mandala” 38, 55, 58, 295). Containers for White always operate negatively, as limiting structures that threaten agency and individuality. In *Riders in the Chariot* this paranoid

formulation is frequently associated with and realized through social groups bonded by gossip. Gossip is the weapon of choice in the novel for discrediting and alienating those who subvert the dominant communal objective. Characters that refuse to gossip, or refuse to engage in and contribute to intelligence groups, are singled out for attack. The postmistress Mrs Sugden is condemned for her discretion, because she is not one “to talk” and the laundress Mrs Godbold is also reviled by others due to her refusal to reveal information (White 7, 82-85, 276). Himmelfarb is hated and feared not only for his Jewishness, his customs and external appearance, but most primarily for his lack of “mates” and his unconventional commitment to an individualistic philosophy that his co-workers find highly suspicious (263, 532-535). Himmelfarb’s resistance to ‘mateship’ and to abiding by the operations of assimilation render him a “contemptible object”, suggesting genuine humanity and autonomy will be eventually replaced by the machinery of the group (526).

In White’s Sarsaparilla novels, the suburban worship of “plastic” and brick “boxes” creates subjects and objects that are interchangeable and reversible; objects come to be inscribed with human qualities while human beings are transformed into ‘objects’: Miss Hare is described as an object, Himmelfarb is “the contemptible object”, machines and synthetic materials are often shown to reveal a greater emotional output or express greater agency than the people who worship them; the “fangs of the road metal” eat into the soles of Mrs Jolley’s shoes, Harry Rosetree “staggers the machines” with his laughter and the labourers in the assembly line at Himmelfarb’s workplace are drowned out by the “emotional jamboree of machinery” as it conveys “hatred” and glugs “with an oily guile” (White 259, 526). Plastic is ascribed the most malevolent of properties, inducing the most anxiety: Mrs Flack “lashes” the Orange Triumphs with her plastic hose, the staring housewives of Sarsaparilla display their “plastic teeth” and Blue, as he assaults Himmelfarb is described as the pure embodiment of plastic itself:

...never more plastic than now, Blue was glittering with sweat. Several of the young girls and married women consigned their souls willingly to the bonfire as they surrendered themselves to his image (460).

Here we see blatant surrender to the constellation of synthetic forces reach its climax, where the synthesis of human matter and artificial material achieve an ultimate completion.

The concept of human bodies overtaken by synthetic materials in the advent of the information age is argued by Mark Seltzer to be one of the defining tropes of the twentieth century. Seltzer asserts that:

In the information society...nothing could be less certain than the line between bodies of information and other kinds of bodies...the yielding of identity to identification proceeds by way of an utter absorption in technologies of reflection, reduplication and simulation (17-20).

In *Riders in the Chariot* plastic is the ultimate simulation, asserting itself upon the body and mind and coming to replace human agency and individual thought by working its

will through gossip and intelligence gathering. Gossipmongers are the most obvious examples in the Sarsaparilla novels for representing the new voracious ‘consumer citizens’ who have abandoned themselves “to the bonfire” of modern technology. A scene in which Mrs Flack and Mrs Jolley are gossiping in Mrs Flack’s living room echoes this loss of agency:

The catalyst of sympathy seemed to destroy the envelopes of personality, leaving the two essential beings free to merge and float. Thought must have played little part in any state so passive, so directionless...As they continued sitting, the two women would drench the room with the moth-colours of their one mind...This could have been the perfect communion of souls, if, at the same time, it had not suggested perfect collusion.

Mrs Jolley was usually the first to return. Certain images would refurbish the swept chamber of her mind. There was, for instance – she loved it best of all – the pastel blue plastic dressing table set in Mrs Flack’s second bedroom (94).

This scene of false communion reflects the loss of autonomy required to successfully adapt to the rigid requirements of Australian postwar group combinations, revealing the difficulties inherent in retaining subjectivity while navigating a path through technologically inflected reality. As intelligence tools record passively without discernment, so too are Mrs Flack and Mrs Jolley limited in their judgement. Their capacity for evaluation is minor and impaired. They resemble surveillance cameras that passively record, mere mindless objects that are inscribed upon and bereft of creative thinking.

For White, as for Roth, synthetics and suburbia spreads like a virus and only the subversive ‘outsider’ appears to be initially immune. Located within this theme there lies a significant contradiction regarding metaphors of containment. Fears of communism and Cold War tropes of invasion are turned on their head in White and Roth and consequently inverted to become fears of a suburban dominating force that thwarts agency. The conservative elite’s fear of outsiders, homosexuals and communists swarming the nation transforms into the intellectual’s fear of the inability to contain a synthetic culture that threatens individuality and artistic integrity. In *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Solid Mandala* few appear to be impervious to synthetic culture’s virulent strain, for, unlike the natural perishable materials of Xanadu and the vulnerable flesh bodies of Himmelfarb, Alf Dubbo or Waldo, synthetics seem immortal and are the ultimate simulation, replacing the need for genuine interaction or connections. As Mrs Flack suggests to Mrs Jolley, seemingly unaware of the apocalyptic threat to life plastic poses, ‘what is born of fire cannot be burnt’ (546-547). Plastic may melt, reverting to its initial liquid form, but it cannot ever be entirely destroyed.

In *Riders in the Chariot*, suburbia’s most nefarious agent plastic appears then to be feared most primarily for its unstoppable myriad of applications. The new synthetic technology’s alibility to metamorphosis into and impersonate other materials, its fluidity of movement, akin to the newfound postwar suburban movement, makes it the

ultimate overt and covert enemy. *The Solid Mandala* expands on this theme to imply that the new suburban technologies have been so successful in their thorough domination of the population that by now their dreadful ubiquity goes without saying. White's subsequent novel, *The Vivisector* (1970) serves as an endpoint to these developments, offering a small glimmer of hope for its protagonist through its realization of the creator-artist as a self-contained unit able to rise above his inauthentic environment and create absolute art. In this novel, individual freedom of expression becomes attainable for those whose autonomy and agency is not informed by external technological forces or the need for inclusion within a group. In *The Vivisector*, the artist Hurtle Duffield shapes reality as he sees fit, for, unlike his artistic counterpart Alf Dubbo in *Riders in the Chariot*, Hurtle finds release through his own reality, free of an overwhelming desire to belong or the deafening sound of intrusive machines.

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