



**PERIODIZING THE '80s:
"THE DIFFERENTIAL OF
HISTORY" IN NICHOLSON
BAKER'S *THE MEZZANINE***

Graham Thompson

Several recent books on the 1980s suggest it has accumulated the credentials necessary to become an object of study in the same way as preceding decades.¹ The story of the decade, however, remains stubbornly fixed in a position first suggested by Gary Wills even before the decade's end. For Wills, it was Ronald Reagan, "the great American synecdoche" (1), who defined the decade no less than he defined the post-World War II period. As if he was an inevitable outcome, Wills argues that Reagan "gives our history the continuity of a celluloid Mobius strip. We ride its curves backward and forward at the same time, and he is always there. There is an endlessness of surface that becomes a kind of depth, a self-reflecting omnipresence in the cultural processing of Americans over the second half of the twentieth century" (371). Taking its cue from Wills, the 1980s remains Reagan's decade in recent accounts; if anything, Reagan assumes even greater prominence. And, in Sean Wilentz's survey of American history in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the decade breaks its banks sufficiently for Wilentz to fashion "The Age of Reagan." In Wilentz's narrative of the "trends and events of the era" (1), Reagan knits together the various threads to provide form and shape to history.

The problem dramatized by Wilentz and the recent revisiting of the 1980s is symptomatic of a problem to which periodizing urges are more generally prone. It is a problem with two distinct but interdependent elements. The first is implicit in Wills's reliance on a figure of speech—synecdoche—to describe Reagan. It is language, and language as it becomes narrative, that must do the job not just of mediating and substantiating cultural and historical knowledge but of condensing that knowledge into manageable form. The second element works in a similar way, although not on the level of language, but on the level of what Wilentz refers to as "trends and events," the interpretation of which likewise relies on a process of selection and condensation. Events in themselves certainly merit attention—whether an election campaign, a scandal, a crisis, a policy decision, or a confrontation. One can think of instances of each of these as necessary to any understanding of the 1980s. However, in the broader process of reading cultural change, the tendency to see the event as not only the driver of history and culture but also as the object of one's critical engagement with that history and culture leads to a model of periodizing in which the linguistic processes at work in synecdochic, or metonymic, condensation are replicated at the level of culture. So, a series of events from whatever period one wants to define are strung together in a narrative whose purpose is to explain or describe a period such that time or history is treated as a series of contiguous events leading to periodizing narratives that are structured metonymically. The meaning of a particular period proceeds from understanding the relationships between contiguous events, usually arranged temporally, and each of the events is made significant because it is also metonymically part of, or associated with, the larger entity—the decade, or period, or era—being evoked. Thus Gil Troy's *Morning in America* parcels up the 1980s into a chapter for each year, with each chapter shaped around a discrete event with a distinct geographical setting. From 1980 through 1990, via Cleveland, Los Angeles, Brooklyn, and Boston (among others), the decade—not to mention the nation—is defined. But in his treatment of Roman Jakobson's linguistic understanding of metaphor and metonymy, David Lodge makes one striking point relevant to periodization: metonymy, according to Lodge, a linguistic figure that substitutes terms based on contiguity, also works linguistically only by way of deletion (73–77). To go back to the point above—that linguistic processes are replicated at the level of culture—just as the metonymic figure deletes words, so cultural periodization, which relies on events, works all too fluently by way of deletion. And it works imperfectly as a result. The 1980s, which emerges from the available political and cultural histories, is a decade whose character, while not unconvincing, is dominated by certain events and figures.

Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*, written and published during the 1980s first as pieces in the *New Yorker* and then as a novel, offers a very different version of periodization. With its jokey, enthusiastic tone and the playfulness of its formal features, *The Mezzanine* does not offer the kind of zeitgeist fiction that was produced by a cohort of writers emerging in the mid-to-late 1980s and which included Bret Easton Ellis, Lynne Tillman, Jay McInerney, and Susanna Moore. In a mode that emphasized the human effects of disquiet and alienation, these writers attempted to both diagnose and capture the impact of contemporary consumer culture. Such is *The Mezzanine's* emphasis on the temporal, however, that it fashions a theory of periodization that abandons "trends and events" and attempts to capture the way that decades are experienced constantly in medias res.² One example illustrates the book's method. Driving along the highway several years after the lunchtime escalator journey that is the focus of the novel, Howie finds himself paying close attention to a green garbage truck in front of him, particularly the patches of rust that are actively bubbling away despite attempts to cover them up with layers of paint. As Howie pulls out from behind the truck, the green of the garbage truck immediately in front of him is replaced by the patch of blue sky in the distance and he notices that the "combination of the freshness of the recent paint and the hidden weatheredness of rust . . . looked crisply beautiful." This sensation is created by the "clean-background trick," something Howie discovered as a child: "when I was little I used to be very interested in the fact that anything, no matter how rough, rusted, dirty, or otherwise discredited it was, looked good if you set it down on a stretch of white cloth, or any clean background" (Baker, *Mezzanine* 38). But while reveling in the sensation of this detailed observation as the garbage truck comes into sharper focus, Howie is also troubled by the recollection. His pleasure, he says, is no longer situated in childhood but "at age thirty . . . right now" (38–39), and he tries to affirm his contemporary adult pleasures as precisely that, rather than remnants of a childhood to which he looks back nostalgically. Protesting against the assumption that "only children had the capacity for wonderment" (40), he determines that "from now on I wouldn't get that faraway look when describing things that excited me now, regardless of whether they had first been childhood enthusiasms or not" (39).

This passage is indicative of a more widespread impulse in Baker's novel to shift engagement with the details of the material world consistently onto the axis of temporality. By making a visual experience the occasion for a meditation on a temporal phenomenon Baker draws attention directly to the object as it is positioned in time. Clearly influenced by Proust, the novel is much less concerned, however, with deep memory than texture and detail—bubbling

rust—and an incremental understanding of connectedness that can only be appreciated if time is virtually stalled, or at least reduced to such slow motion that it may be recorded with a forensic attention to granular structure:

Gas pumps, ice cube trays, transit buses, or milk containers, have undergone disorienting changes, and the only way that we can understand the proportion and range and effect of those changes, which constitute the often undocumented daily texture of our lives (a rough, gravelly texture, like the shoulder of a road, which normally passes too fast for microscopy), is to sample early images of the objects in whatever form they take in kid-memory—and once you invoke those kid-memories, you have to live with their constant tendency to screw up your fragmentary historiography with violas of lost emotion. (41)

For Howie the object is not a means to recover an earlier time; "kid-memory" is, instead, a trigger that helps to slow the passage of time in order to facilitate a closer examination of texture. It is a starting point for understanding the object, its passage through culture, and one's interactions with it, all of which have to withstand the interference of first encounters. While *The Mezzanine* steadfastly refuses to deal with broader events from the 1980s, it is precisely the emphasis on the slowing or the stalling of time, the detail, and the connectedness between moments and the implications of this for understanding how time passes and how culture is experienced temporally, that makes the novel such a sensitive and cerebral meditation on periodization.

Such concerns have not been lost on writers of fiction working long before Baker. Tolstoy in *War and Peace* was certainly aware of something similar: "Absolute continuity of motion is not comprehensible to the human mind. Laws of motion of any kind become comprehensible to man only when he examines arbitrarily selected elements of that motion" (879). Notwithstanding the suggestion here that this situation cannot be changed, Tolstoy also outlined a method that would at least go some way toward addressing the problems resulting from reliance on such "arbitrarily selected elements." "Only," Tolstoy suggested, "by taking infinitesimally small units for observation (the differential of history, that is, the individual tendencies of men) and attaining to the art of integrating them (that is, finding the sum of these infinitesimals) can we hope to arrive at the laws of history" (880). The length of *War and Peace* is testament to Tolstoy's efforts to achieve such integration. My purpose here, however, is not to retell an alternative 1980s with deleted details restored, which is beyond the scope of this essay. Rather, while the

possibility of integration remains questionable as an aim in itself—and I will return to Tolstoy's use of the word "integrating" later—what this essay addresses is the way that fiction writers themselves produce narratives of periodization that question the way history is imagined and represented. In particular, it takes Tolstoy's understanding of "the differential of history" and examines the way in which Baker's *The Mezzanine* formulates a narrative with a double purpose: not only does it offer a very particular version of experiencing the 1980s, but at the same time it also relates a theory of experiencing history more generally. It is completely at odds with both the event-driven narratives discussed above and an essay published just a few years before *The Mezzanine*—Fredric Jameson's "Periodizing the 60s."

Jameson's essay tries to recover the concept of periodization from "an older organic history which sought 'expressive' unification through analogies and homologies between widely distinct levels of social life." Jameson's attempted recovery of periodization occurs, then, not by thinking about the affinity between forms on different levels—philosophy, politics, cultural production, economics—but instead by focusing on "significant homologies between the *breaks* in those forms and their development" in order to address "the rhythm and dynamics of the fundamental situation in which those very different levels develop according to their own internal laws" (179). Jameson's "gamble" is to attempt not a representation of history but "rather to produce the *concept* of history" (180). This "gamble," for all its subtle and novel readings of the sixties, and its unearthing of "a common diachronic rhythm or 'genetic code'" (201), is still reliant on the event. Although conceptualized as a break, it still acts as a pivotal and determining moment. Jameson's breaks, circa 1967 and circa 1973, are indeed only visible because of the way in which they reveal themselves through events: the Chilean coup, the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam, and the oil crisis of 1973, for instance.

Neither can Jameson resist an organic attempt to oversee the sixties, although organic here becomes a "unified field theory." Ultimately, Jameson argues, "The simplest yet most universal formulation of the period as a whole remains the widely shared feeling that in the 60s, for a time, everything was possible: that this period, in other words, was a moment of a universal liberation, a global unbinding of energies" (207). Ultimately, though, what loosens the foundations of Jameson's "*concept* of history" and its conclusions is not so much the validity of method and content—there is much that is convincing in Jameson's essay, particularly his determination to force a global context onto the understanding of American (and other national) politics and culture—but the essay's denouement, where the investment in futurity discloses what I suggest is Jameson's polemical purpose

in writing the essay: not a periodization of the 1960s at all, but a periodization of the 1980s that is entirely speculative. Thus Jameson envisages the break of 1973–1974 as "a moment of the onset of a worldwide economic crisis, whose dynamic is still with us today" (205) and predicts that the 1980s will be marked "by an effort, on a world scale, to proletarianize all the unbound social forces which gave the 60s their energy" (208) so that "'traditional' Marxism . . . must necessarily come true again" (209). While not being concerned with whether hindsight would ratify this speculation or not (although I suspect not), what Jameson fulfills in his essay, despite his admission that "a whole range of varied responses and creative innovations" are possible in a given period, is a dogged attention to "a common objective situation" and a "situation's structural limits," which mean that "the 60s had to happen the way it did" (178).³

Well, maybe it did, but this does not obviate two questions. First, just exactly what did happen? And second, does this stop actors in the drama wishing things had happened otherwise? With no answers to these kinds of questions, Jameson's diagnosis of the past and his prediction of the future become understandable in terms of what Eve Sedgwick has described as "paranoid reading." Sedgwick has in mind a mode of thinking that, she argues, took root in the 1980s and has since become standardized in a variety of critical methodologies—New Historicism, Marxist criticism, deconstruction, and feminist and queer theory—and whose imperative is exposure and the revealing of systemic oppression. Hand in hand with this approach has gone "a concomitant privileging of the concept of paranoia" (5). Sedgwick does not offer paranoia as a medical diagnosis here but as a means of articulating certain habits of critical practice. So pervasive are these habits, she suggests, that "paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry, rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds" (6). Sedgwick also notes that paranoia has a "complex relation to temporality that burrows both backward and forward: because there must be no bad surprises, and because to learn of the possibility of a bad surprise would itself constitute a bad surprise, paranoia requires that bad news be always already known" (10). Hence Wills's metaphor of the Möbius strip to imagine Reagan's inevitability and Jameson's imagining of the future as a structural continuation of a past and present economic crisis in which an outcome "must necessarily come true again." The point is not that these structural continuities are illusory but that to determine an outcome presupposes a certain critical relationship to knowledge, especially once such an approach becomes so dominant. Potentially, Sedgwick suggests, the preeminence of such critical practices "may have made

it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller" (4).

Sedgwick's skepticism about the "infinitely doable and teachable protocols of unveiling" (21) is balanced by a sense of a reparative impulse in the writer, reader, and critic who, while aware that surprises may be terrible, also recognize that they can be good too and that this knowledge may alter not just one's sense that "the future may be different from the past" (24) but that "the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did" (25). Jameson's assumption that the past "had to happen the way it did" is, in this formulation, opened up to contingencies of experience that prioritize not simply the facts or events of history but what Sedgwick calls "the fragments and part-objects" (24) that are crucial to the way those facts and events are experienced and mediated. While Sedgwick is particularly interested in the ramifications of the notion of the reparative for queer reading, her distinction between a paranoid reading practice linked to inevitability and an alternate mode "that can attune it exquisitely to a heartbeat of contingency" (25) has consequences for reading a novelist like Baker who constantly transforms the material of the mundane—both objects and experiences—to the plane of the surprising and the pleasurable, not to say the celebratory and jubilant. That the bubbling rust on a garbage truck can move Howie to defend a pleasure that is both unexpected—for narrator and reader—and that leads to a sense of the dislocated connection of past and present, childhood and adulthood, suggests a novel uncomfortable with the kind of regularity and repetitiveness that, Sedgwick argues, "takes its shape from a generational narrative" (26). The inverse of a generational narrative, indeed almost the inverse of a linear narrative of any kind, *The Mezzanine* undermines all kinds of other temporal classifications in its stalled form. It is the temporal frame of Sedgwick's "heartbeat" in which Baker is interested and in the possibilities that can be nurtured in this infinitesimal temporal unit. If Baker gives his narrator the capacity to halt time in his later novel, *The Fermata*, in *The Mezzanine* he begins to address the miniaturization of time and the way in which time and history are stitched together.

As an alternative to Jameson's break, Baker offers the perforation. In one of the novel's many digressive footnotes, prompted by his observation of a toilet roll holder, Howie pays homage to this "deliberate punctuated weakening of paper and cardboard so that it will tear along an intended path." Not only is this technical innovation ubiquitous—Howie's list of uses includes ice cream cartons, reply coupons in magazines, bill stubs, sheets of postage stamps, paper towels, rolls of plastic bags in the supermarket, and file-folder

labels—but, more importantly for Howie, it is also "a staggering conception." Thinking about perforation forces Howie to distinguish it from the events of history one watches on the television news, very often at the expense of the "far more immediate developments" that do not get rewarded with national holidays or scholarly attention but that nevertheless affect the way one experiences and mediates one's own life and its contexts: "The lines dividing one year from another in your past are perforated, and the mental sensation of detaching a period of your life for closer scrutiny resembles the reluctant guided tearing of a perforated seam" (74). Once again, Howie projects the details of the material world onto the axis of temporality but is concerned that while his education taught him about "the Indians of New York state, about the making of the Erie Canal, about Harriet Tubman and George Washington Carver and Susan B. Anthony" (75), it taught him nothing about how perforation is achieved. At points like this the novel is not only signaling the incompatibility between an event-driven understanding of history, a history of pivotal moments and breaks, and the intangible experience of one's everyday experience, but also asking just how fiction might better articulate that "absolute continuity of motion" of which Tolstoy wrote and how a sense of continuity might be restored to those differential moments of experience or memory. Perforation is so significant because it is both a connector and a separator; Baker's novel precisely addresses issues of connection and separation at the level of form and metaphor.

For Ross Chambers, the metaphorical purpose of perforation in *The Mezzanine* is to figure "the effect of 'split,' or continuity/discontinuity" (796) that is part and parcel of a novel that "substitutes for the principle of narrative, which inevitably tends toward closure, the principle of meditative genres of thought and writing, which is the idea that one thing leads, not to an end, but to another" (766). The novel's "descriptivitis" (772), its constant digressions, often through footnotes, and the general clogging or stalling, similarly work to emphasize continuity and connectedness, as does the escalator journey, the novel's framing experience. The escalator is a device that combines smoothness of movement with graduated steps, such that one can either ride the escalator or walk up or down it; the escalator is itself a perforated apparatus whose importance, Chambers argues, resides in the way it suggests "that there is a continuity between mediation as the vehicle of a smooth ride from point to point and mediation as the instrument of an explosion of linearity" (774). Echoing Tolstoy, Chambers points to the way that neither the eye nor language can translate continual experience other than differentially, and suggests that the implication of Howie's veneration of perforation—"Perforation! Shout it out!" (74)—and its unnoticed

ubiquity is "that we live in a culture of mediated connectedness that is 'structured' (i.e. unstructured) like a list, or a set (a list) of lists, while our attention is illegitimately solicited by, and given to, the constructions of narrative history" (796). The lists that populate *The Mezzanine*—the uses for perforation, the major advances in Howie's life, the number of times per year that certain thoughts occur to him, among many others—are for Chambers the way in which the novel structures itself "loosely, in the extenuated manner of the paradigmatic dimension, rather than tightly or syntagmatically (or metonymically), in the linear fashion of story structure or logical argument." While it might seem that items in lists are selected on the basis of metonymic contiguity, Chambers argues that metaphor is the principle of lists because "the metaphoric continuity/discontinuity underlies the associative structure of the paradigmatic, which is why no inventory of paradigmatic relations can be securely closed" (776).

As an antidote, then, to the kind of metonymic deletion that would winnow out seemingly irrelevant details, *The Mezzanine* instead proliferates the inexhaustibly connected infinitesimals of Howie's experience. This proliferation is achieved in *The Mezzanine* by way of a constant interchange between iteration and accumulation. As the novel opens, this process is suggested immediately. Howie identifies a temporally resonant motif that once more seems to operate first of all at the level of the visual. This is the optical illusion of movement that, but for almost imperceptible signs, appears to be motionless. Watching the sunlight hit the escalator, Howie remarks how it adds "long glossy highlights to each of the black rubber handrails which wavered slightly as the handrails slid on their tracks, like the radians of black luster that ride the undulating outer edge of an LP." The just perceptible "wavering" and "undulating" of the handrail and LP prompt the novel's first footnote, in which Howie declares: "I love the constancy of shine on the edges of moving objects. Even propellers or desk fans will glint steadily in certain places in the grayness of their rotation; the curve of each fan blade picks up the light for an instant on its circuit and then hands it off to its successor" (3). The fact that it is the "constancy" that Howie loves, rather than just the shine itself, in this wonderfully slowed-down image of time as a baton race with an infinite number of legs each of which is only of infinitesimal duration, suggests how *The Mezzanine* imagines how dazzling effects are produced only through repetition and accumulation. Only by performing the same movement repeatedly over time do these objects—the escalator handrail, the LP, and the fan—generate their appeal for Howie.

In these instances, iteration has a relationship with time that suggests an unvarying movement being carried out successively. The

constancy of the shine Howie enjoys relies on each blade of the fan being in the same position as its predecessor and each blade replacing its predecessor after exactly the same amount of time in order to duplicate the angle of light on metal. But Baker's understanding of iteration is complicated by his first description of the escalators. They are, Howie says, "the freestanding kind: a pair of integral signs swooping upward between the two floors they served without struts or piers to bear any intermediate weight" (3). Not only are they perforated, but the escalators also perforate two floors just as does the mezzanine floor where Howie works. But even more importantly, the escalators are envisaged here as mathematical symbols—integral signs—the exercise of which in differential and integral calculus serves exactly the purpose of measuring the infinitesimals out of which change and movement are made. It is this mathematical sense of integration to which Tolstoy was referring. He envisaged "taking infinitesimally small units for observation . . . and attaining to the art of integrating them" where the accumulation of detail would help one to "arrive at the laws of history." Baker's goals are much more modest and even antithetical to Tolstoy's. Baker is not interested in laws of history but a microscopy that would proliferate the thoughts, motivations, and experiences out of which that history is formed. And if his understanding of iteration is complicated by the operations of an accretive calculus of infinitesimals, then so is his understanding of integration and differentiation complicated by the importance of iteration, which does not weigh nearly as heavily in Tolstoy's literary project. It is precisely the combination of the escalator's circular structure and its metaphoric resonance that make it the central object in *The Mezzanine*. Even the physical nature of the escalator's regularity is not secure since "the handrail progressed upward on its track at an imperceptibly slower speed than the steps did" meaning Howie has to reposition his hand in front of him. "It was strange to think," he says, "that because of the difference in speeds, these escalator steps must periodically lap the handrail that accompanied them" (100). This lack of synchronization between handrail and steps make the escalator itself, even without the experiences that Howie has while riding it, an object of iterative movement that is marked by continual variation.

The type of iteration in which Baker is interested here is different from that explored by Gerard Genette in his study of Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. For Genette, the repetition of events is grounded on "a mental construction, which eliminates from each occurrence everything belonging to it that is peculiar to itself, in order to preserve only what it shares with all the others of the same class." This abstraction based on deletion—or "elimination"—allows "events

considered only in terms of their resemblance" to be classified as "identical events" or "the recurrence of the same event." Baker is not content with abstraction of this kind and seeks to reinsert all those pieces of information that make a particular occurrence "peculiar to itself" (113). It is the accumulation of information in the course of repetitive movement or action and the fact that each iteration has its own peculiarities, which preoccupies Baker. He demonstrates his unwillingness to delete information and his compulsion to isolate and amplify it by employing a narrative form that radically reapportions the ratio between length of narrative and story.

The tension between iteration and variation, repetition and incremental addition, becomes a feature of many of the episodes that make up *The Mezzanine*. The products that so preoccupy Howie do so precisely because of his iterative relationship with them. That both his shoelaces snap within a day of each other leads Howie to consider that his "shoe-tying routine was so unvarying and robotic that over those hundreds of mornings I had inflicted identical levels of wear on both laces. The near simultaneity was very exciting—it made the variables of private life seem suddenly graspable and law-abiding" (15). On further consideration, however, he thinks that rather than his tying habits it is "walking flexion" (26), that results in the simultaneity of snapping and, as if to perpetually delay the possibility of an appropriate law, he suggests that it "was conceivable, though scary to imagine, that the pull-fray model and the walk-flex model mingled their coefficients so subtly that human agency would never accurately apportion cause" (28). So much for law-abiding habits. This conundrum is never solved for Howie; he is only content at the end of the novel when he finds an article in *World Textile Abstracts* by a Polish scientist who is in the process of building machines in order "to get some subtler idea of the forces at work" (133). Shoelaces in this scenario are things with which Howie daily interacts, and which are also, whether it is due to "pull-fray" or "walking flexion," objects whose granular structure changes daily. That the result of this change is a major event—snapping—seems much less important to Howie than the opportunity it provides for accumulating the details and regularity of his experiences with the shoelaces. They are, after all, the object of the first three major advances in his life: "1. shoe-tying 2. pulling up on Xs 3. steadying hand against sneaker when tying" (16), as well as "the first adult machines we are given to master" (17).⁴

Other objects are also given movement as Howie shifts his spatial and biographical interaction with them onto a temporal plane by retelling product histories. The long footnote during which he relates his "disbelief the first time a straw rose up from my can of soda and hung out over the table" is primarily concerned with the shift from

paper to plastic straws "circa 1970 or so" (4), the better bubble-absorbing properties of paper over plastic that made the old straw stay in place, and the complicating parallel novelty of the slosh cap whose cross in the middle "had been the source of some unhappiness in the age of paper straws, because the cross was often so tight that the paper straw would crumple when you tried to push it through" (5). These dilemmas impact not only restaurant chains but also the small restaurants and smaller sub shops that are only offered the plastic straw by distributors. Howie also relates the transition from tape dispensers to Post-it notes (13–14), changes in stapler design (14–15), the end of home-delivered milk facilitated by the cardboard milk carton with its superior, "peaked roof" pouring design (41–43), the relative merits of paper towel dispensers and hot-air machines in the hand-drying market (87–91), and the history of the ice-cube tray (45) and Jiffy Pop, "one of the outstanding instances of human ingenuity" and whose inventor and patents Howie tracks down (107). In all of these items Howie finds the entanglement of repeated usage and unforeseen "gesticulative adaptation": the sugar packet manufacturer who could never have known that "people would take to flapping the packet back and forth to centrifuge its contents to the bottom, so they could handily tear off the top," or the inventor of the windshield wiper who would never have guessed that wipers "would serve as handy places to leave advertising flyers." These are the points where "convenience has given rise to ballet," Howie says, and the cumulative effects of such processes and iterative accretions lead him to conclude that "An unpretentious technical invention—the straw, the sugar packet, the pencil, the windshield wiper—has been ornamented by a mute folklore of behavioral inventions, unregistered, adopted and fine-tuned without comment or thought" (95).

Many of the items out of which this ballet of convenience is composed are housed in the CVS store that Howie visits during his lunch break. Here Howie feels himself closer to the "center of life" than he would in restaurants, national parks, airports, research triangles, the lobbies of office buildings, or banks. While those places "are the novels of the period," he says, "CVS is its diary" (116). The distinction between novel and diary here can be understood in light of the diary's repetitive qualities and the perforating effect that dates have on narrative, whereas novels allow the opportunity for a much more fluid and unregulated temporal structure. It is also the size of events that demarcates the two forms and "all the miniature histories of miscellanea" (116) that interest Howie are not the stuff—at least not on their own—of novelistic discourse. It is this valorizing of the CVS store that instigates a much more explicit engagement with periodicity toward the end of the book. After the trip to the store, where he

calculates that "the differential in checkout speeds between a fast, smart ringer-upper and a slow, dumb one was three transactions to one, such was the variation in human abilities and native intelligence" (117), Howie spends time reading a Penguin Classic edition of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*. This leads not just to Howie tiring of Aurelius's "unrelenting and morbid self-denial" (124), but more suggestively to a series of thoughts about Penguin books that culminate in an attempt to measure the iterative landscape of his thoughts: "All of these particular Penguin-related observations had different cycles of recurrence and therefore microscopic differences of weight in my personality—and it seemed to me then that we needed a measure of the *periodicity* of regularly returning thoughts, expressed as, say, the number of times a certain thought pops into your head every year" (126). Such a list Howie meticulously compiles, and he suggests that this list, in allowing access to "relative frequency of his thoughts over time," might "prove to be more revealing than any statement of beliefs he might offer, or even than a frozen section of available, potential thoughts" (127). He goes on to think about "the periodicity of conversation, on the phone and in person" and "periodicities superimposed on the plane of conversation" that had differing cycles: "Nationwide fifteen-year cycles of journalistic excitement about one issue or another; generational corrections and pendular overreactions; and, above these, the periodicity of libraries and Penguin Classics, slower still, resurgencies and subsidings of interest in some avenue of inquiry or style of thinking from one century to the next, restatings of mislaid truths in new vernaculars" (130).

There is a sense here that not only does time move asynchronously on different planes, much like the handrail and the steps of the escalator, but that, also like the escalator, periodicity is reliant on repetition, on "cycles" and "restatings." These repetitions do not simply replay the past but add a level of newness such that "your original shampoo pantheon, or toothpaste or vending machine or magazine or car or felt-tip pantheon, becomes infiltrated by novelty, and you may find yourself losing your points of reference" (115). Howie's narrative of accumulated iterative fascination tries to hold this fear of built-in obsolescence at bay. While he posits that, at least theoretically, he may one day have collected enough thoughts and memories of "the miniature histories of miscellanea" to be left "saturated, listless, unable to entertain a single new enthusiasm" (116), this day has not yet arrived, and it is delayed precisely because of the stalling effect of the narrative. The combination of iteration and accumulation in *The Mezzanine* has the effect of slowing down history at multiple levels: a novel that covers only a lunch break, composed of blocks of pages that detail the most familiar of objects, punctuated by

footnotes whose digressions amplify the importance of those objects. The reader is confronted with unusual time-management dilemmas: whether to read the footnote that appears half way through a sentence before finishing the sentence, or backtracking once the sentence is finished, or skipping the footnotes entirely despite Howie's warning that footnotes are "the finer-suckered surfaces that allow tentacular paragraphs to hold fast" (123). Like the Zeno's paradox experience of sweeping, which leaves "those ruler-edged gray lines of superfine residue, one after another, diminishing in thickness toward invisibility, but never disappearing, as you back up the dustpan" (21), the stalling of time under iteration and the proliferation and accumulation of information and memory that accrues simultaneously always leaves a residue on which Howie might choose to narrate and that might modify and refine one's understanding of his character and the world he inhabits. For Howie, this is a situation that would be infinitely multiplied if taken to the level of cultural generalization or summation: "People seemed so alike when you imagined their daily schedules . . . yet if you imagined a detailed thought-frequency chart compiled for each of them, and you tried comparing one with another, you would feel suddenly as if you were comparing beings as different from each other as an extension cord and a grape-leaf roll" (129).

In his review of a book on Wikipedia for the *New York Review of Books* in 2008, Baker revisits some of the key elements present in his first novel. Excited by the web encyclopedia—"It's fact-encirclingly huge, and it's idiosyncratic, careful, messy, funny, shocking, and full of simmering controversies—and it's free, and it's fast" ("Charms" 6)—Baker is particularly interested in its accretive and participatory qualities. He relates how many articles have been imported from other sources and highlights one such article on Pierre Varignon taken from W. W. Rouse Ball's 1908 *Short Account of the History of Mathematics*. The article "is now three times longer, barnacled with interesting additions," one of which is to describe Varignon as "the earliest and most powerful advocate in France of the use of differential calculus" rather than "the earliest and strongest French advocate of differential calculus." Baker also admits that he "did a few things to the article on periodization" after altering an article on the fruit cobbler ("Charms" 6).⁵ If these moments say something about Baker's continued interest both in the mathematical understanding of time and space and in periodization, which I have argued so intimately structure *The Mezzanine*, then it is the more substantive argument of Baker's review that brings me back to the issues with which I started: the problems of periodizing through trends and events and a paranoid critical mode closed to what Sedgwick called the "heart-beat of contingency" (25). What most irks Baker at the point when

he is writing his review is the growing willingness among Wikipedia administrators to delete articles. Baker makes it his "mission" to save articles by adding important information and signs up to the Article Rescue Squadron ("Charms" 6), complaining that a "lot of good work—verifiable, informative, brain-leapingly strange—is being cast out of this paperless, infinitely expandable accordion folder" (10). Just as in his essay "Discards," and later in *Double Fold*, he defended library card catalogues against their digitization and destruction in the 1980s and 1990s because they held "the irreplaceable intelligence of the librarians who worked on them" ("Discards" 86), so his anti-deletionist position on Wikipedia is predicated on the notion that not only is it impossible to know what knowledge and information will be useful or relevant in the future, but also that it might possibly be the contingent ephemera of a library card or the "barnacled" supplements to Wikipedia ("Charms" 6), and so we better be careful what, if anything, is deleted. "Someone recently proposed a Wikimorgue," Baker concludes his review, "a bin of broken dreams where all rejects could still be read, as long as they weren't libelous or otherwise illegal. Like other middens, it would have much to tell us over time. We could call it the Deletopedia" (10).

The unwillingness to delete or discard these contingencies of thought, of experience, of "engrams" or memory traces (*Mezzanine* 16), is a central feature of Baker's understanding of the period in *The Mezzanine*. Deleting such contingencies would break the chain of connection or perforation. Even in altogether more public and historical territory in *Human Smoke*—a narrative that pieces together the buildup to, and early years of, World War II—Baker chooses to construct his narrative around particular dates and from newspapers, diaries, and memos in order, he says, to help him "understand the grain of events better than secondary sources" allow (473). Such an antipathy to deletion, which resonates in *The Mezzanine* through the stalling process figured through iteration and accumulation, suggests a novel and a writer imagining a different conception of periodizing than the one that relies on the metonymic stringing together of trends and events. Constantly digressing to the detail or the "grain" of events, the "barnacled" additions, and the contingencies of those "heartbeat" moments, Baker returns the deleted content that Lodge suggests is lost in metonymic linguistic construction and which I suggested is also lost at the level of metonymic cultural periodization. *The Mezzanine* constantly asks its readers not only how the detail, the moment, the memory, might alter their understanding of the general—how different, for instance, the 1980s might look were our understanding of it confined to a spreadsheet of its actors' thought frequencies—but also how the elongated narrative attention to this temporal realm gradually, haltingly, spreads time to infinite proportions.

Calculus and its understanding of infinitesimals was the way in which Newton and Leibniz tried to answer Zeno. Rather than solving problems, however, calculus only stored up new ones. As David Foster Wallace said, "Infinitesimals were horseshit, and everybody knew they were horseshit" (qtd. in Crain). Deleted from Caleb Crain's interview with Wallace as it first appeared in *The Boston Globe* in 2003, these words shed an interesting light on Tolstoy's aim of "finding the sum of these infinitesimals" in *War and Peace*. By the time Tolstoy was writing, infinitesimals had given way to limits in mathematical calculus and it seems fitting that the problem of infinity, "the great albatross for math" according to Wallace, would become the object of study for Georg Cantor whose great uncle taught Tolstoy law at Kazan University (Wallace 170). Cantor's set theory offered the scary—to some—possibility that infinity, previously an abstract concept, was a provable reality. If this world is one within which David Foster Wallace's writing might be understood, then Baker is charting similar territory. Baker's attention to the infinitesimal is performed not in order to achieve some final result or integration, for *The Mezzanine* is an anticalculus novel. While the escalators may look like a pair of integral signs, they do not achieve the purpose of integration since they are deceptively and endlessly iterative where each iteration is not simply a repetition resembling the previous one but a moment of accretion or accumulation, where, as Chambers suggests, "one thing leads, not to an end, but to another" (766).

While it might seem paradoxical that a book published in the 1980s tells us very little about the 1980s in terms of Wills's narrative of "Reagan's America," it is only a paradox when the urge for relevance, and for an event-driven narrative that thinks in paranoid terms of a prewritten past, present, and future stands as the dominant mode of engagement with culture. In Sedgwick's terms, only a paranoid critic could be sure what information or knowledge about the past is relevant to the present, and only a paranoid critic would claim to know what information or knowledge about the present will be relevant to either that present or the future. Rather than answering a more straightforward periodizing narrative by producing a fuller picture, *The Mezzanine's* narrative casts doubt on the very process of periodizing by way of metonymy and synecdoche. As such, it is a temporal riposte to the periodizing urge of the "trends and events" narrative that produces Reagan's America; instead, *The Mezzanine* asks us what a contingent, improvised, digressive, irrelevant version of the 1980s might read like.

Notes

1. See, for example, John Ehrman, Gil Troy, and Philip Jenkins.
2. Reactions to *The Mezzanine* have emphasized Baker's gymnastic facility with syntax and his skills as a miniaturist of the visual and spatial. This is evident in Brad Leithauser's review for *The New York Review of Books* in which he wrote of Baker's "keen-eyed attention . . . to the mechanical marvels of modern life" that populate his "splendidly unpeopled architecture" (15). Arthur Saltzman describes the novel's narrator, Howie, as inhabiting "an insistently significant universe whose subtle matrices rustle at the touch of investigation to reveal a plan that is intricate and everywhere available" (427), while Philip Simmons argues that the novel dramatizes a world in which "the conventional distinction between 'surface' and 'depth' no longer holds" and "the desire for historical narrative manifests itself in rapt attention to the minutiae of the consumer's life" (610). In addition to the other works cited below, *The Mezzanine* has attracted little other attention, although for a perspective from design history see Jeffrey L. Meikle.
3. Jameson also wrote that "period concepts finally correspond to no realities whatsoever, and . . . whether they are formulated in terms of generational logic, or by the names of reigning monarchs, or according to some other category or typological and classificatory system, the collective reality of the multitudinous lives encompassed by such terms is unthinkable." See Jameson's "Nostalgia for the Present." For more about the contradictory nature of Jameson's thinking on periodization, see Lawrence Besserman.
4. I have written elsewhere about the "social energy" Howie claims is the reason the shoelaces snap. See Graham Thompson.
5. Baker's additions highlight the different planes of periodization, from nation to individual, and "often unsystematized" nature of their interaction. The changes made by Baker to the existing entry on Periodization can be found here: <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Periodization&diff=prev&oldid=185459847>. A list of all Baker's contributions to Wikipedia can be found here: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:Contributions/Wageless>.

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