Pynchon’s fiction embodies, not only America’s unchecked energy and history’s senseless acceleration, but the acceleration produced by a new communications technology. In the period following World War II, television, Xerox, new printing techniques, electronic circuitry, computers, and satellites were conveying such an overload of information that no single view could contain them. The mass media expanded and consolidated. The speed of communication, the quantity of information, and the power of the mass media extended the range of probability, destroyed the boundaries between fact and fiction, and leveled hierarchies of meaning and value. During the sixties we could watch the president of the United States being shot in a Dallas motorcade and then see it replayed in slow motion, stop motion, now from the high angle of a rooftop, now in extreme closeup—TV producers exploiting all the techniques that make baseball more interesting to watch in the living room than the stadium, and including the ads for Alka Seltzer and Ban deodorant. Before this vision faded from our minds, we could see Kennedy’s assassin being killed “live” during a news conference. In a few years, after a spy story or a western, we would see a Vietnamese soldier being executed for the benefit of the NBC news cameras, and the picture would come to us through the same kind of satellite that would bring us the weather report. This was the decade that Americans shot civilians as well as soldiers in the name of pacification, and uprooted villages and devastated the countryside to preserve Vietnamese freedom. Young people grew all their hair out and wore flowery costumes to challenge America’s puritanic values and the violence inherent in its dominant masculinity—only for long hair to become fashionable and for tie-dye tee-shirts to sell in expensive boutiques and the Sears catalogue. This was the period that cul-
minated in an illegal plot organized by the Department of Justice as well as the CIA, employing a group of agents who bungled a break-in, one wearing an ill-fitting red wig, and where the president of the United States, who had always looked the part, emerged as the villain in what would have been a second-rate novel were it not so poorly conceived that it could never have sold.

History was becoming a spectacle, with many acts engaging our attention simultaneously. It was difficult to tell whether the acts were actual or fictional, products of objective reporting or public relations, first- or third-rate showmanship, paranoid or truly mythic fantasies. It is just such a kaleidoscopic spectacle that Robert Coover invites us to attend in *The Public Burning*, as he looks back at the period that encompasses postwar American history.

The stage is set. Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, having been convicted on slim evidence of conspiring to steal atomic secrets and denied their final appeal by the Supreme Court, are about to be executed—on Times Square, which in its own way is "an American holy place long associated with festivals of rebirth." An actual set is built at the intersection of Broadway and Seventh Avenue, an exact reproduction of the Death House at Sing Sing: "walls whitewashed and glaring lit, furnished simply with the old oaken electric chair, cables and heating pipes, a fire extinguisher, a mop and bucket for cleaning up the involuntary evacuations of the victims, and a trolley for carting the corpses off. The switch is visible through an open door, stage right, illuminated by a hanging spot" (4). The production is presided over by Cecil B. De Mille—with the assistance of Sol Hurok, Dan Topping, Bernard Baruch, the Atomic Energy Commission, Betty Crocker, Conrad Hilton, Sam Goldwyn, Walt Disney, Ed Sullivan, the director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, various chiefs of staff, the Sing Sing warden, the Holy Six, and many more. Every important figure in the free world will take part in the show. The area will be jammed for miles around. Mayor Impellitteri will sign a law permitting the sale of liquor in public theaters, and the whole of Times Square will be declared one; paper cups and ice will be dropped by helicopter, and whiskey will flow in through a kind of bucket brigade. An old panhandler will be set up with drinks faster than he can toss them down; he'll feel like the Bank of America, his pockets so heavy he can hardly move.

In the meantime, Uncle Sam is on the move—rescuing Czech refugee Jaroslav Lukas from his Russian kidnappers, rounding
up the hundred escaped North Korean prisoners, shoring up the defense lines above the Hwachon Reservoir, infecting Albert Einstein with the flu, packing off the heaviest Berlin airlift of the year. "His eyes burning fiercely like Mandrake the Magician's, a transfiguring glory in his bosom and a wad of chaw in his jowls, he reaches up and out, seeming to stretch and grow, and with a smile of Christian charity lets fly the Pow'r that hath made and preserv'd us a Union: 'Whoopee-ti-yi-yo! its yore misfortune, little dogies, and none o' my own!' he booms from above, and—ka-BLAM!—decimates a whole paddyful of contentious gooks" (64).

And Richard Nixon, sleepless, unshaven (and looking like his own caricature), disheveled (with a broken fly-zipper), reads through the Rosenberg transcripts and FBI files for a clue, a plan, a chance to fulfill whatever destiny Uncle Sam has urged upon him at the Burning Tree golf course. He presses through traffic jams, against crowds, against good judgment, against all odds for a confrontation with Ethel Rosenberg just minutes before the execution is to take place.

Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* is as packed with authentic detail and authentic possibilities as *Gravity's Rainbow*. It too expresses America's original and uncontrollable energy. As Uncle Sam says to Nixon: "The earth belongs to the livin', boy, not to cold pickles! You can't tame what don't stand still and nothin' in this universe does! Einstein put his finger on it a long time ago—oh, he's gone off the deep end lately, I know, but listen, he knew what America was all about: don't let the grass grow under your feet! saddle up, keep movin', anything can happen!" (205). Like *Gravity's Rainbow*, it evokes the sensation of directionless and undirected motion through the very dynamic of its plot—through what happens next.

Anything can happen—which is an expression of America's boundless optimism and readiness for action. When Nixon steps off the train at Sing Sing, a false mustache pasted to his unshaven face and looking as improbable as Gorden Liddy would look with his red Watergate wig, he feels like "one of those beardy desperados arriving at a dusty Hollywood cowtown for the final showdown" (359). Suppressing his exhaustion, doubts, and self-consciousness, he is quickened by the experience of crisis: "There were no scripts, no necessary patterns, no final scenes, there was just action, and then more action! Maybe in Russia History had a plot because one was being laid on, but not here—that was what freedom was all about! It was what Uncle Sam had been trying to
tell me: *Act—act in the living present!* I’d been sitting around waiting for the sudden inspiration, the stroke of luck, the chance encounter, forgetting everything that life had taught me. . . . I had to get up off my ass and *move*” (362). But *The Public Burning* is not only about movement, it is all motion. The plot drives toward a climax that neither Nixon nor the reader can anticipate. It encompasses what seems like all that happened in 1953 and foreshadows what will happen at the end of Nixon’s career, but it moves through them at a breathless pace, quickened by slapstick scenes, montage, and intercutting, and climaxes in a devastating apotheosis.

The major dynamic of intercutting is achieved by the alteration of narrators. In one chapter we glimpse the broad perspective: the narrator, omniscient and detached, but speaking in the present tense like a hyped-up commentator in the *March of Time*, leaps from place to place and tells us what is happening on every front. In another chapter we hear Richard Nixon speaking in the past tense in the voice that narrated *Six Crises*; having learned confidence, coolness, and courage, he tells us what happened with an ambiguous sincerity that reflects his shallowness and opportunism, his innocence and awkwardness, his self-consciousness and isolation. Indeed, it is Coover’s achievement to create a Richard Nixon who is at once blind and sensitive, a man of courage and a schlemiel, a caricature and a believable character, contemptible and yet sympathetic. Our equilibrium is continually upset by shifting from the present to the past, from the broad to the narrow, from one facet of Nixon’s perspective to another.

The plot line, then—which shows Nixon driven by ambition and a sense of manifest destiny and racing against time toward some unknown goal—is impelled by the intercutting, as in D. W. Griffith’s last-minute rescues. But the action is halted three times for a variety of intermezzos: “The War between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness,” where Eisenhower’s speech taken verbatim from his public papers is reprinted in poetic stanzas to focus the inanities; “The Clemency Appeals: A Dramatic Dialogue by Ethel Rosenberg and Dwight Eisenhower,” where the President never addresses the Prisoner or even acknowledges her presence as she tries to reach him; and “Human Dignity Is Not for Sale: A Last-Act Sing-Sing Opera by Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.” The intermezzos, especially as they stand out typographically in the text, may remind us of the kind of set pieces Bertolt Brecht intruded into his dramas for their alienation effect. They
do draw us out of the drama, which, given its fantastic nature and contemptible hero, we are surprised to discover has drawn us in. But they do not, like Brecht's intrusions, cause us to step back and take stock of the social reality that the drama parodies. Quite the contrary, they compel us to recognize the spectacle as including historical reality, the factitious reality of mass media and pop culture, a mythic nightmare, and a comic text—all inseparable.

The Public Burning is a kaleidoscopic spectacle with many acts, some occurring simultaneously, some succeeding one another with senseless momentum, seen now from afar, now from close up, a spectacle that draws us in as it draws us away, and that includes actual facts, parodied facts, fantasized projections, and its own artifice as part of the total reality. In reading it we are like the man emerging from the Trans-Lux three-dimensional production, “still somewhat possessed by the images of famous historical persons going up in flames, their waxy faces melting horrifically, their stiffened bodies crashing forward into his lap”—and having forgotten to remove his 3-D glasses. “He has had no difficulty in bringing the two film images together in the theater, and in fact he still has an ache in his forehead and the back of his neck from trying not to flinch when the fellow with the bat and ball started whacking the thing right between his eyes, but now, tumbling along out here on the street, he seems to see two separate and unassimilable pictures, each curiously colored. Everything is flat, distances are deceptive, and he keeps crashing into people, getting angry wary stares in reply” (283-84). But by the time he gets to Times Square, “he is no longer surprised by these ocular reversals, in fact he is very clear-headed, which is the main cause of his panic. It strikes him that he is perhaps the only sane man left on the face of the earth” (287).

The Public Burning is like Robert Altman's wide-screen spectacles Nashville and Buffalo Bill and the Indians. Like Coover, Altman focuses on spectacles that have mythic reverberations in America, and that are displays of ultimate showmanship. Nashville focuses on the “Grand Old Opry.” It is about the showmanship of country-western performers that masks the emptiness of their lives, and sometimes their music (the unevenness of the music is not a flaw in the film). It is also about the power they exercise over Middle America, and the inclusion of a presidential campaign within the country-western spectacle adds a frightening dimension. Buffalo Bill and the Indians is about the showmanship of a figure who was never more than a character in a
Wild West show, who in fact was the invention of a pulp writer and a public relations man, and who as a prototype for the western hero exercised such power over the American imagination. It is also about the American Indian, who has been known only in terms of his performance in the westerns that Buffalo Bill's show inspired.

But Altman does not only focus on spectacle, he conveys the sensation of spectacle directly. He fills the wide screen and keeps a variety of events in focus. There is no center, everything is happening at once. We are engaged by any number of events simultaneously and try to follow the dialogue amid a welter of movement and noise. Nor is there any depth. Everything is there, the background as important as the foreground. And we can never get beyond the performers—well-known performers acting as themselves or as other characters but unable to escape the roles by which they are known; Paul Newman playing Buffalo Bill with depthless blue eyes surprises us with his acting ability but never ceases to be Paul Newman. Most important, the very depthlessness and dimension of the wide screen is always a part of our consciousness. As a result, we experience the sensation of motion—not through the movement of the camera eye, shifting perspectives, montage collisions, radical discontinuities, or senseless transformations—but through attending to the kaleidoscopic spectacle on the surface of the wide screen. Our equilibrium is continually upset as we shift our attention—and with it our critical judgment.

The novel cannot attain anything like the simultaneity of film; one event must succeed another. Nonetheless, Coover does effect something like Altman's cinematic spectacle by stretching the screen of our imagination, filling it with characters and events, and then cutting back and forth among them fast enough to keep them all fresh if not present while denying us any center of focus. His first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists*, engages and disturbs us for just this reason. Chapter one opens with a wide view of West Condon; the narrative eye moves quickly from point to point, sketching in the general outlines of the mining town and then filling it with characters. In the first ten pages we are introduced to the newspaper editor, his assistant, the coffee shop waitress, Os- ford Clemens, Pooch Minicucci, Angelo Moroni, Vince Bonali, Giovanni Bruno, Preacher Collins, Toni Rosselli, Mike Strelchuk, Joe Castiglioni, Ben Wosznik, and Eddie Wilson. Some of these characters speak only a few lines or engage in only a bit of action,
but others are physically described and even given a past. We know from the prologue, which dramatized "The Sacrifice," that Giovanni Bruno will become the Brunist Prophet, but he plays a minor role in the first chapter, occupies only a small space on the wide screen of our imagination, as it fills up—like Altman's—in a manner that prevents us from distinguishing major from minor. Then, after we are taken into the mine and begin to form a coherent picture, there is a sudden shift. Chapter two opens with a rapid series of close-up fragments, focusing now here, now there, now on a character we know, now on someone new, now picking up what may be description or unattributed dialogue, and printed in a way that brings the text itself into our consciousness:

There was light and post drill leaped smashed the
turned over whole goddamn car kicking
felt it in his ears, grabbed his bucket, and turned from the face, but then the second
"Hank! Hank Harlowe! I cain't see nothin'! Hank!"
Vince Bonali knew what it was and knew they had to get out. He told Duncan to keep the boys from jumping the gun and went for the phone in saw it coming and crouched but it
"Wet a rag there! Git it on your face!"
seemed like it bounced right off the
Red Baxter's crew had hardly begun loading the first car when the power went off. Supposed the ventilator fan had stopped working, because the phone
"Jesus! Jesus! Help me! Oh dear God!"
came to still holding the shovel but his looked like a locomotive coming (40)

Then the pace of the cutting slows, but not too much, as we are taken from one section of the mine to another, from one miner's consciousness to another, now coming up to hear the reports coming in, now catching a glimpse of what turns out to be a basketball game in the high school gym, now focusing on two of the miner's children necking in an old car. Strelchuk sees "Joe Castiglione with a piece of timber stove clean through him and Tuck Filbert smack up against the roof, his head upsidedown." He finds Preacher Collins with his leg pinned under a dislodged timber. "He didn't know what he was going to do. Collins' whole leg must have been no more than a quarter-inch thick from the knee down. Terror gripped Strelchuk and made him shake." Then a short break in the text and: "Thrust up by a whistle burst, lifted by the taut jack of forced silence, the ball leans over its zenith, sinks briefly, then
springs from a finger's jar toward the Tucker City basket, into the hands of a black-jerseyed West Condoner. A roar. A bounce. A pass. Gyrating patterns as fingers trace spiraling fences around the black-trunked bodies. Drive. Retreat. Pass. Jump. Shot.” Then another break, and: “Parked in an unlit corner of the lot outside the West Condon High School auditorium, the two receive the Word: She is spreadin' her wings for a journey. . . . Their bodies formed a convoluted ‘X,’ the figure of a Greek psi, he seated, boy’s unchastised legs pushed forward under the dash, she curled across his lap and facing him.” And then down into the mine again, where Eddie Wilson prays “into the radiant cloud for deliverance from despair” (43-44).

The Origin of the Brunists focuses on a spectacle of a religious cult forming in a small mining town, with all the histrionic elements magnified in the mass media, and it effects the sensation of spectacle in our reading experience. Even before the spectacle of the mine disaster, in the novel’s prologue, we are presented with the spectacle of a sacrifice that will occur later: the Brunists, clad in their white tunics, are returning from the Mount of Redemption, where they have made preparations for tomorrow’s event—the end of the world. They encounter a line of cars, the militant Common Sense Committee. Suddenly, amid the blazing headlights and crashing fenders, Marcella Bruno is seen lying in the ditch, her face serene but her small body grotesquely twisted in its white tunic. The novel reaches its climax the next day on the Mount of Redemption, as the Brunists await the end of the world, Marcella’s dead body in a fresh white tunic, too big for her, laid out on a lawn chair, a silver candelabra at her head, crowds milling around eating peanuts and cotton candy, reporters popping flashbulbs, helicopters circling overhead, a TV outfit at work, the whole event being described over a loudspeaker.

Between the spectacle of the sacrifice and the spectacular carnival, which culminates in an apocalyptic melee that would have been beyond Nathanael West’s wildest dreams, we are taken back in time. We are shown the mine disaster and the forming of the cult as well as its opposing faction, and we are engaged in the story from the viewpoints of innumerable characters from every class of society and every persuasion. Indeed, the picture we form of West Condon and the origin of the Brunists continues to widen—to the point where every character is both a significant participant and a minor, even comic, actor. As a result, Coover goes beyond Altman to expand our sympathies while at the same
time sharpening our judgments and leaving us with a sense of sheer breadth.

*The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* is also filled with an enormous cast of characters. We come to know Henry, his friend Lou, his occasional lover Hettie, his boss Zifferblatt, and more than seventy players in his league plus the commissioners and managers. Once again Coover focuses on a spectacle of showmanship with mythic reverberations in America. “There were things about the games I liked,” Henry tells us. “The crowds, for example. I felt like I was part of something there, you know, like in church, except it was more *real* than any church, and I joined in the score-keeping, the hollering, the eating of hot dogs and drinking of Cokes and beer, and for a while I even had the funny idea that ball stadiums and not European churches were the real American holy places” (166). His second novel, though, may seem more sharply focused than the first because it is narrated until the final chapter from the viewpoint of the proprietor of the Universal Baseball Association. But the spectacle includes more than the league that Henry creates and the games that he imagines with the aid of his records, dice, and charts. That is, it includes more than the breadth of Henry’s vision and the events of his life. It includes the forming of the Universal Baseball Association. And this forming includes the creation of a history, governed by choice as well as chance, a history where the past continually grounds the present, where the present includes what happens in Henry’s mind as well as what happens in his actual life as an accountant, where the present is continually turning into a future, and where the ultimate present includes our reading of the novel. Our sense of spectacle, then, is both wide and long—spatial and temporal. It comes, not from witnessing innumerable events from various perspectives as in *The Origin of the Brunists* and *The Public Burning*, but from our being engaged in the perspective of the character who creates the spectacle like a god, witnesses it like a spectator, participates in it like a vulnerable player, and finally leaves us without his presence but with his consciousness as it brings the past into the ongoing present.

Henry Waugh is an accountant, keeping the records of an anonymous firm in a nondescript office, but every night he goes home with his delicatessen sandwiches and beer to his Universal Baseball Association. The game he has created is regulated by three dice that advance the players in fifty-six possible ways, a Stress Chart to trigger more spectacular events when he rolls
triple ones or sixes, and a Chart of Extraordinary Occurences when he rolls the triple twice in a row. But the choices are also governed by the players’ records, which help him decide who will be on the starting line-up, who will substitute for whom, who will go in to pitch. The dice and charts, then, provide only the mechanics. The records provide the limits and possibilities, and the names provide the real drama. "You roll, Player A gets a hit or he doesn’t, gets his man out or he doesn’t. Sounds simple. But call Player A ‘Sycamore Flynn’ or ‘Melbourne Trench’ and something starts to happen. He shrinks or grows, stretches out or puts on muscle" (47).

Henry has been playing the game and keeping the records for fifty-six seasons, and during the past two months he has been playing so intensely that he has been speeding up time; the seasons are getting shorter and shorter. As the novel opens, Damon Rutherford, son of the all-time great Brock Rutherford, is pitching a no-hitter, a perfect game. To celebrate, Henry goes to Jake’s bar; it is really Pete’s but he calls him Jake—a long-standing but one-sided joke, Pete looking like the second baseman in Henry’s league, who years back began running a bar near his team’s ballpark. After a good many drinks, he brings home an old friend, a hearty but aging B-girl. As he brings her into his apartment, he brings her into the world of the ballpark: “Hettie Irden stood at the plate, first woman ballplayer in league history, tightening and relaxing her grip on the bat . . . ”(27).

The comic montage of action and wordplay may be seen as issuing from Henry’s drunken confusion, just as the whole novel could be seen as Henry’s losing control of reality and becoming lost in the world of his fantasies. But such a reading fails to account for the novel’s widening dimension. In the scene with Hettie, the spectacle, and our perspective, is widening to include the reality of Henry’s life and the reality of his fantasies. Indeed, the novel as a whole embodies two spectacles—or two acts within a larger, ongoing spectacle—and as spectators we continually turn from one to the other and occasionally grasp the spectacle as a whole. One act is a mythic American tragedy, like that dramatized by such writers as Melville in “Bartleby the Scrivener,” Dreiser in An American Tragedy, and Arthur Miller in Death of a Salesman. It is the tragedy of the little man overcome by the reality of urban America and the fantasies generated by the American dream. The other act is the spectacle of baseball, which has become part of the American mythic consciousness, and which masks American
reality in the guise of an American dream. The spectacle as a whole is governed by the League's proprietor, who is at once its creator and its victim.

Henry, an accountant by trade and inclination, has a passion for order, which draws him to baseball. "American baseball, by luck, trial, and error, and since the famous playing rules council of 1889, had struck on an almost perfect balance between offense and defense, and it was that balance, in fact, that and the accountability—the beauty of the records system which found a place to keep forever each least action—that had led Henry to baseball as his final great project" (19). But things fall apart. The center cannot hold when Damon Rutherford, now at bat—young, handsome, popular, self-assured, with two world's records riding on the game—is killed by the accident or malevolence of Jock Casey's "bean ball." Henry had seen the possibility on the Chart of Extraordinary Occurences. One chance out of 216. But the possibility becomes a reality, and the reality comes to include both the world of the ballpark and the world of Henry's daily life. Everything in the League goes awry. Chancellor McCaffree feels that it is "out of our hands, some built-in flaw or gap which doesn't allow us to cope with it. . . . It would almost be better for the whole league if the players were all incompetent or irrational" (149). If Henry himself had not known better, "he'd suspect the dice of malevolence rather than mere mindlessness" (152). When Hettie discovers that what keeps Henry busy every night is just a game, she opens her baggy jaws and whoops; her laughter tears clean through him (174). Good-natured Lou, trying to assuage what he thinks is Henry's loss of a friend or relative, joins in the game, but he lacks the patience and cannot take it seriously. He chooses players without regard for their histories and without thought to the future innings. He disrupts the game by describing a movie about a bee-girl (a transformed queen bee) while asking Henry from time to time about his B-girl. Then he spills his beer over all the records. And now, with Lou gone and the game in a shambles, Henry contributes to the disorder by imposing himself, and his own order, into the game. He changes the dice, giving York and Wilson back-to-back homers, setting the odds against the team responsible for Damon Rutherford's death, and moving the game over to the Extraordinary Occurrence Chart. It is "as easy as that." But it is not that easy to go all the way, for now Jock Casey is on the mound, and Henry has the chance to even the score with the player who killed Damon Rutherford. "If you killed
that boy out there, then you couldn’t quit . . . you’d be hung up for good” (201). Henry tries to sleep, but he sees them waiting for him out on the field. He sets out three sixes, Royce Ingram kills Jock Casey with a line drive, and the epic era of the Universal Baseball Association comes to an end.

Barney Bancroft will write the new league history. “It was all there . . . in the records, but now it needed a new ordering, perspective, personal vision, the disclosure of pattern, because he’d discovered—who had discovered? Barney maybe—yes Barney Bancroft had discovered that perfection wasn’t a thing, a closed moment, a static fact, but process, yes, and the process was transformation” (211-12). Henry gives way to Barney Bancroft, and he will soon disappear from the novel. Henry’s account of the Universal Baseball Association gives way—is transformed into—Bancroft’s “compact league history,” which, as we immediately leap into the next century, becomes an ancient and sacred text, already giving way to interpretation and cynicism. But we must remember that Barney Bancroft is Henry’s creation, as is the transformed league that continues in time. And if the time through which it continues is not real, it is as Henry says “significant time” (217).

Its significance is underscored by the fact that the last chapter—no longer focusing on Henry but possibly on the product of his consciousness—is narrated in the present tense. It is now a hundred years since Damon and Casey were killed, and we are witnessing the ritual reenactment of the two games that ushered in the new era. We are also engaged in a moment in history—the novel’s only pure present—that joins the old with the new, the past with the future, what happened with what might happen. That is, we are engaged in the very historicity of the present. The old world has been transformed by the players, who are divided into Damonites and Caseyites, two cults that have long since drifted from their original values, and have even given rise to the belief that Damon and Casey may never have existed, that they were only myths. The new players are rookies, descendents of the original players, who take on the original roles. But according to the rules, no one can play his progenitor, so Melbourne Trench’s great-great-great grandson is playing Hardy Ingram’s great-great-great grandfather, the man who killed Jock Casey. And Hardy Ingram is playing Damon Rutherford. Damon Rutherford had no descendents but his spirit fills the ball park. No one knows who is playing mad Jock Casey. So the spectacle is confused: the
transformation from past to future is being kept alive in the present. We must keep track—create our own ordering—or try to keep track of who is playing whom. No one knows what is going to happen—whether Casey will be a Damon again, whether Ingram will kill Casey again, whether the ritual will be real or just a game. It is important that we are confused, for as the novel moves from the past to the present tense, from Henry’s account to an unmediated narrative, we participate in the confusion we had attributed to Henry. And it is important that in the end the game is just beginning, for the process is still in process, history is still being made, the spectacle is still alternating between the game and life and includes the very text of the novel. Paul Trench—playing Hardy Ingram, having originated in the mind of Henry Waugh and existing only in the novel whose pages we feel to be diminishing—wants to quit. He wonders why he keeps going: “The game? Life? Could you separate them?” (238).

In The Origin of the Brunists Coover fills the screen of our imagination and widens it by presenting a historical spectacle from the viewpoints of so many characters that we lose our center of focus and cannot tell the significant participants from the minor, even comic, actors. In The Universal Baseball Association, he widens the screen of our imagination by picturing the spectacles of an American Tragedy, a mythic baseball league, and a myth of creation. He also lengthens what we envision in time by engaging us in the league’s history, in the very process that joins—at every point in the spectacle—the past to the present as it thrusts into the future. As Coover emphasizes in the novel’s epigraph from Kant’s Critique of Judgment, “It is here not at all requisite to prove that such an intellectus archetypus is possible, but only that we are led to the Idea of it” (my emphasis). As we are led to it, the possibility enters into the reality of a continuing present, which includes what happened or may have happened, what is happening or could be happening, and what may come.

Again Coover forces so much into the screen of our imagination that we lose our center of focus; in this case it is not only the enormous cast of characters and events but the breadth of a triple spectacle and the length of its duration. We also begin to lose our sense of boundaries—of where the screen actually ends. We cannot tell the game from life, the reality of the complex American myth. Nor, given the shift in the final chapter from the narrative past to the narrative present, do we have a temporal center—can we tell the reality of the past from the reality of the present or the
reality of the future. And to this range of possible realities we must add the reality of the novel itself. Although the final chapter may be the product of Henry’s consciousness—after all, every character and the ultimate event derived from what Henry created—we are left with the presence of the narrator who has silently mediated what Henry saw and thought. Henry is absent from the text, and, as we attend to the voice of the storyteller, we sense the possibility—the reality—of Henry’s being his creation.

After *The Universal Baseball Association* and before *The Public Burning*, Coover experimented with a series of stories in *Prick-songs and Descants* that explicitly compel us to attend to the reality of the story as story. One of the most remarkable stories is “The Babysitter,” which not only denies us a center, destroys spatial and temporal boundaries, and confuses realities, but brings real and imagined events occurring in different places into the ongoing reality of the printed text. If this domestic spectacle is limited in scope and duration, it does include the mass media myths of popular culture. And if it is played out on what is more like a television screen than the wide screen of a movie theater the channels shift continually and arbitrarily to increase its range and add to the kaleidoscopic movements.

At 7:40 the babysitter arrives at the Tuckers and waits for them to finish dressing. Harry thinks, or perhaps sings, “That’s My Desire,” smiles toothily, pulls on his shorts, rubs his balding head, and gives his hips a slap. Jack thinks about his girlfriend babysitting at the Tuckers and drifts toward the drugstore. The babysitter catches a glimpse of Mr. Tucker hurrying out of the bathroom in his underwear. Bitsy and Jimmy, scheming at the kitchen table, picture “Her tummy. Under her arms. And her feet. Those are the best places” (207). Harry “catches a glimpse of the gentle shadows amid her thighs, as she curls her legs up under her.” Or perhaps it’s not Harry but the babysitter imagining how she’d entice him. “He stares hard at her. He has packed a lot of meaning into that stare, but she’s not even looking. She’s popping her gum and watching television. She’s sitting right there, inches away, soft, fragrant, and ready: but what’s his next move. He [but suddenly we discover that we have been in Jack’s mind, all the way across town] notices his buddy Mark in the drugstore, playing the pinball machine, and joins him. ‘Hey, this mama’s cold, Jack baby! She needs your touch!’ ” (208). Now Mark joins in the chase that bounds from one character’s viewpoint to another’s and from one level of reality to another—from what seems to happen to
what may be a character's fantasy-wish or fantasy-fear that he or she is chasing or being chased, catching or being caught, sometimes with hilarious consequences, sometimes with nightmare violence, sometimes the same event being replayed within the frame of another character's vantage and in a different key, sometimes an element of one character's fantasy or reality entering into another's as when Mark lifts the babysitter's skirt to see the big pair of men's shorts that she had tried on before taking a bath or imagined she did, continually being intercut with chase scenes from the western, murder mystery, and love story that alternate on the television screen in the living room, and continually alerting us to the playfulness of their creator, the narrator who develops the story as if he were switching TV channels at random.

Actually, "The Babysitter" has a simple, linear plot line that includes two subplot lines. The major plot line follows the babysitter from the time she arrives at the Tuckers' until they return. The minor plot lines follow Harry and Dolly to the party and Jack and Mark as they play pinball, call the babysitter, and perhaps go to see her. The linearity is underscored by continual time references: 7:40, 8:00, 8:30, 9:00, and finally, to our surprise after so much has happened, 10:00. But imposed upon the linear plot line is a series of alternating frames, each of which encloses us within the real or imagined perspective of a different character, and sometimes of the narrator himself, who is capable of intercutting—within a sequence of wild chases, comic seductions, and violent rapes in the Tucker living room and bathtub—a scene at the party where Dolly, having loosened her girdle for a few deep breaths and unable to pull it back up, is helped back into it by the other guests who must first lubricate her with melted butter. As a result of the shifting frames, the story is impelled through space and time in innumerable directions; and though we are impelled along the linear plot line, we are also impelled, when the perspective shifts mid-paragraph, to read back, or think back, and fill in the frame with different characters.

I use the term frames not just figuratively to suggest the shifting frames of reference that fracture the story's plot line but to describe the printed text, which becomes part of the reading experience. It is composed of short, discrete, frame-like blocks (from two to fifteen lines each), separated by three heavy dots. Each block literally frames an event or part of an event in its present tense. We are impelled to read across the dots as if they were ellipses, standing for what is left out and ensuring continuity through time
and space. But we discover that the dots are not signs of continuity, that the pronoun now stands for a different person, that we are no longer in the same place, that we have been impelled into another present moment. We can never get beyond the present, beyond the frame—which includes what seems to happen, what seems to be imagined, and what may be created arbitrarily by the narrator. Each of these events is equally there, and hence, equally real. And the reality includes the event of the telling of the story and the event of its being shaped into a series of printed, framing blocks of text. Everything is brought onto the same level—indeed, onto the surface. We are impelled back and forth across the surface of the text. We can never get beneath it to discern what we have been accustomed to consider levels of meaning, nor can we get beyond the frame or surface to locate the narrator or his intention.

Coover does not continue in the same direction in The Public Burning, his most ambitious work to date and a major novel of the 1970s, where he returned to a wide-screen vision of American history. But his experimentation did add to the range of narrative techniques that impel the kaleidoscopic spectacle. He does intercut reality, fantasy, and myth to expand the range and increase the momentum of Nixon's senseless chase, and he does engage us in the reality of the text in his intermezzos. Moreover, his experiment with the dynamic potential of his medium may have contributed to a deepened awareness of America's misdirected energy and complex superficiality and, hence, to his vision of American reality of a pop nightmare spectacle. For if "The Babysitter" is playful, it also reveals the latent violence in our middle-class culture. Its importance derives from the realization of this violence in a form that brings everything into its own level, onto its dynamic and random surface. And it may be considered within an important if minor body of what Raymond Federman calls "surfiction," which presses the novel in motion to a limit and provides a vantage from which we can view its development.