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Decoding Alienation: Semiotics and Consumerist Modernity in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*

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Abstract: Consumer culture, with its relentless emphasis on individualism and material possession, systematically erodes communal bonds, replacing authentic selfhood with identities constructed through consumption. These dynamic fosters a profound sense of alienation, a defining condition of modernity, particularly within urban landscapes where consumerist rituals dominate daily life. Paul Auster's *City of Glass* first deciphers the alienating semiotics of food and drink, a critique that is then internalized and radicalized across *The New York Trilogy*, through the consumption of narrative in *Ghosts* and of another's identity in *The Locked Room*, ultimately demonstrating that in late capitalism, the consuming self becomes the final, unfilled commodity. Employing Roland Barthes's semiotics to decipher the latent myths of consumer behavior, this study radicalizes its analysis through Jean Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreal, arguing that in a progressive consumer society, such mythologized signs detach from all referents to create a simulated reality where the simulacrum of satisfaction substitutes for authentic need. New York, a labyrinth of empty signs, emerges as a microcosm where consumerist promises dissolve into fragmentation. By interrogating semiotics, urban space, and late capitalism, this research implies how Auster's narrative exposes the hollowness of consumer culture, offering a critique of alienation that echoes beyond the text.

Keywords: Alienation; Consumerism; Modernity; Semiotics; Urban Space.

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1. Introduction

Modernity, fabricated by industrialization and urbanization, is intrinsically linked to consumerism, reshaping lifestyles and the quality of life. To analyze the resulting alienation in American culture, this study turns to a typical literary text as a source for decoding its underlying consumerist codes. Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* serves this purpose, illuminating how consumerism functions as a sign system that produces thoughtful social and psychological dislocation.

Paul Benjamin Auster, an American novelist, bases many of his fictional characters and some incidents in his books on real life, resulting in a later effect of deceptive realism in his novels. He lives and works in Brooklyn, New York, a location that has greatly influenced much of his work. Ramon Espejo, in "Coping with the Postmodern: Paul Auster's New York Trilogy" (2013), quoted Wendy Steiner's positing of second-generation postmodernism, where the experimental, the realist, and the autobiographical are mixed, and we can include Auster (148). He believes that Auster neither fully rejects nor embraces anything but is always seeking and experimenting.

The present article delves into the effects of consumerism in modern American culture, signifying alienation, focusing on contemporary lifestyles. Building on Roland Barthes' semiology to explore the signs of consumerism and their impacts on individual interactions. Barthes paved the way to highlight polysemy in languages to analyze these signs, which are vital for cultural understanding. He seeks to inspire creativity through concepts like denotation, connotation, and myth, where myth is treated as a language itself. The emphasis is on a shared human experience in a system reflecting cultural codes. The critique was further radicalized by Jean Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreal, which reveals a simulated reality constructed by such signs. This logic of consumption escalates in *Ghosts*, through the surveillance of narrative, and in *The Locked Room (LR)*, through the appropriation of another's identity.

To achieve these objectives, the research will address the following questions: 1) How does Auster's novel employ semiotics to reflect alienation related to consumerism in a modern city? 2) What roles do cultural myths and symbols play in constructing the narrative's meaning? By answering these questions, this article aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of American sociological myths and the interactions of myths to form a socio-cultural study. While previous studies have explored Auster's postmodernism, few have examined how Barthes' theory of semiotics apply to consumerism and its signified as alienation in *City of Glass (CG)*.

2. Literature Review

Auster's *City of Glass*, one of the stories from the *New York Trilogy*, is a prominent work of postmodern literature that has been introduced through central themes such as identity and the fragmented self, language and meaning, the search for meaning and its futility, urban alienation and solitude, reality versus fiction, and the role of chance. For years, his fiction has been explored from multiple viewpoints. Various methods and techniques have been employed to analyze and comprehend the hidden dimensions of his writings.

Ahmadgoli and Abd AL Hussein Hassan in "Identity, Chance, and Incredulity of Postmodern Metafiction in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*" (2020) state that the labyrinth concept in Paul Auster's fiction represents identity crises and confusion. Trapped in a labyrinth symbolizes the struggle to escape chaotic realities while exploring both personal and cultural identity through intertextuality. Auster's works serve as a historiographical exploration of his characters' lives, incorporating cultural myths and histories into literary narratives. He questions the authenticity of objective facts by intertwining history and fiction, suggesting multiple narrative possibilities. Language acts as an arbitrary force, disrupting the direct link between signifier and signified. Although events unfold by chance, protagonists apply rational thinking to navigate challenges and uncover connections, resembling a complex interplay of language and intertextuality.

Sarah Yoon, in "Revisiting New York as an Existential Metaphor in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*" (2018), describes New York as a politicized labyrinth of contested historical spaces, where life for both central and marginal residents remain static. She believes Auster demonstrates New York as "an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps" that reduces him to "a seeing eye" (42). The city becomes a fragmented landscape of overlooked symbols that serve as the unexamined backstage for social conflicts. It ultimately emerges as an eternal, paradoxical zone of uncertainty, simultaneously decaying and renewing through the anonymous cycles of its inhabitants.

Daniela Rogobete in "Invisible Selves between Narrative Spaces and Physical Places in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*" (2016) situates Paul Auster's work at the intersection of modernism and postmodernism, blending absurdism, existentialism, and literary critique. She argues that at the heart of Auster's "fragmentary and alienating" imaginative realm is a continuous quest for identity (36). This quest challenges the hero with his environment, his language, and the deceptive truth he seeks. Consequently, identity in his novels reveals a flowing, fragmented essence, often marked by a sense of inadequacy and defeat.

Emma Nilsson in "I'm still here. Sort of" (2007) argues that in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, identity is not inherent but constructed through external forces like language, culture, and randomness. She demonstrates that language is vital, shaping characters' qualities and making humans "prisoners of language" (21). Cultural codes further mold identities to align with societal norms. Ultimately, she concludes that no authentic or original identity exists, a point evidenced in the characters' own conversations.

B. X. Zhu in "A Study of Paul Auster's Novels from The Perspective of Consumer Culture Criticism" (2024) examines Auster's novels through Baudrillard's theory and consumer culture criticism, revealing how characters navigate a materialistic society. Their choices, whether positive or negative, encase the human condition within American post-modernity. The study highlights why characters' spiritual resistance fails in a crisis-stricken reality. It concludes that Auster's work artistically critiques the inadequacies of postmodern culture, expressing deep concern for contemporary spiritual struggles and advocating for change.

Hasine Sen Karadeniz in "Demystifying the Sublime City in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*" (2018) explores the concept of the urban sublime, focusing on its unique characteristics in the U.S. context. He examines the interplay between the urban sublime, technological sublime, and consumer sublime, highlighting how the city's architecture and technology serve capitalist interests. He critiques Auster's portrayal of a dystopian urban landscape dominated by waste, shifting the sublime's focus from grandeur to degradation. It emphasizes the theme of falling, presenting the city as a dangerous space that evokes terror, a singular emotion associated with the sublime.

McCarthy in "Entering the Labyrinth': Walking the streets of New York in Paul Auster's *City of Glass* and Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*" (2019) argues that walking through New York in *City of Glass* is an act of spatial confinement, not freedom. Unlike vehicles, which are trapped by the framework, walking allows for minor deviations within the rigid layout but ultimately restricts the walker from leaving its consumerist logic. This acceptance of the city's structure, McCarthy contends, is a form of confinement that dictates a belief system on the character. This process ultimately leads to the walker's psychological breakdown.

Francois Hugonnier in "Speaking the Unspeakable: Auster's Semiotics World" (2021) states that Auster's novels, especially *The New York Trilogy*, depict characters trapped where writing displaces speech, highlighting language's limits. His career-long pursuit has been to break these linguistic and perspectival barriers. By focusing on identity, literature, and heritage, his works reflect these foundational struggles and his techniques for transcending expressive constraints. Ultimately, Auster expands language's power by testing its boundaries, using innovative narrative styles to articulate the inexpressible, particularly in his post-9/11 literature.

Javiera Sánchez Olavarría, in "The Multiple Urban Subject in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*" (2013), explores the conflict between perception and reality in Auster's novel, where Quinn's self-view clashes with the actual world due to his existential denial. It examines this tension as reflecting both postmodern instability and a modernist ruining unity within Quinn's character. Quinn thus represents the struggle against change, caught between fragmented experience and a desire for stable meaning.

As defined above, most research focuses on identity in Paul Auster's works, but there is limited discussion on the semiotic significance of consumerism and its results. This research aims to explore socio-cultural codes related to consumerism within New York as a modern urban environment to highlight alienation by applying Barthes' semiotic perspective to reveal these components in the literary piece. It challenges components of alienation in American individuals from a socio-cultural viewpoint.

3. Theoretical Framework

Culture manifests in various facets of life, from clothing and food to language and thought, creating a commonality in thought and behavior that facilitates community living. As a relative phenomenon, culture varies across communities and is transmitted across generations, embedded in the norms of daily life, often without conscious realization.

Barthes' ideological and mechanical languages, which outline the signs present in every person's life, are essential for understanding each culture. His approach can be utilized in any society with various perspectives, emphasizing the reader's active participation in constructing a narrative based on hints in the text. He endeavors to create fresh and inventive situations for his users and stimulate their creativity by providing denotation, connotation, and myth. He, in his *Mythologies* (1991), states that "myth is a language" (9). He adds that "every myth consists of its history and its geography; each is the sign of the other: a myth ripens because it spreads" (151).

In *S/Z* (1974), Barthes argues that in classic literature, the meanings of statements are established as an origin where the identity of the speaker can be recognized,

Either a consciousness (of a character, of the author) or a culture (the anonymous is still an origin, a voice: the voice we find, for example, in the gnomic code); however, it may happen that in the classical, always haunted by the appropriation of speech, the voice gets lost, as though it had leaked out through a hole in the discourse (41-42).

Barthes claims that semiology seeks to encompass any sign system, regardless of its nature and boundaries; this includes images, gestures, musical notes, objects, and their intricate associations that make up the essence of ritual, convention, or public amusement: these represent, if not languages, at least systems of meaning. He asserts that in contemporary social life, there exist numerous expansive systems of signs beyond human language. In *Elements of Semiology* (1986), he asserts that semiology reveals itself in systems with sociological importance where humans again engage with language.

By engaging with non-linguistic elements, semiology is essential to identify language as an element, medium or signified. This type of language is a second-order one that. Concerning the food system as another signifying system, Barthes argues that every menu exemplifies a connection between language and speech, relating to a structure that is simultaneously national or original and social; however, this structure is variably filled depending on dates and users.

In various semiological frameworks, languages emerge from a deciding group, making signs arbitrary and identifiable, akin to constructed languages. Users engage with these languages to extract meaning. In the domain of sign classification, Barthes notes that they appear in different types of words that possess a deep history, leading to ambiguity. He states that,

The sign is placed in a series of terms that have affinities and similarities with it: signal, index, icon, symbol, allegory, are the chief rivals of sign...they all necessarily refer us to a relation between two relata. This feature cannot therefore be used to distinguish any of the terms in the series; to find a variation in meaning, we shall have to resort to other features, which will be expressed here in the form of alternative (presence/ absence) (35-36).

For groups of objects, there exists a status of systems that allows them to navigate the language that retrieves their signifiers and refers to signifieds. Ultimately, they seem to understand that the systems of images and objects lack any meaning that isn't defined, and the realm of signifieds is closely connected to that language. He posited that a sign comprises a signifier and a signified, with signifiers representing expression and signifieds representing content. He associates these with form and substance, focusing on lexical elements. The form can be analyzed through linguistics, while the substance requires extralinguistic considerations. In sum, through the chart below, Barthes establishes a logical relationship between the elements:

1. signifier	2. signified	
3. sign I. SIGNIFIER		II. SIGNIFIED (langue)
III. SIGN		(myth)

Table 1. The Chain of Signifiers and Signifieds¹

Henceforth, myth appropriates this complete sign from the linguistic level and empties it of its original, full meaning. The sign becomes merely the signifier of a new, mythical system. This form is then filled with a new, often ideological, signified provided by the myth. The union of these two produces the mythical sign, which functions as the naturalized, innocent message that myth conveys and turns it into the carrier of a secondary, cultural meaning, thereby masking its own historical and probable nature behind an appearance of inevitability.

While Barthes provides the tools to decode how cultural myths naturalize historical constructions, Jean Baudrillard, in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), argues that in progressive consumer societies, the distinction between reality and the model collapses thoroughly. We enter the state of hyperreality, where simulations, or simulacra, which are copies without originals, become more real and powerful than the reality they point to represent. He states the sign no longer masks a deeper truth; it masks the "absence of any profound reality" (6). In hyperreality, the map antedates the territory.

4. Analysis

4.1. Consumerism and Alienation

In *City of Glass*, alienation through the lens of consumerism in a modern city, and the destabilization of identity, are going to be explored. In this regard, Barthes' semiology presents us with the signifiers that are New York and living there while facing consumerism. The narrative begins with Auster's portrayal of New York: "New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps" (4). New York, as a metropolitan area, represents contemporary human experiences and signs of technological items "occupying the greater part of the station's east wall, was the Kodak display photograph, with its bright, unearthly colors" (CG 51). It also, highlights modern cultural codes, such as restaurants with simple and processed foods signify consumerism,

It was his job to make the food, which consisted mainly of gristle- studded hamburger patties, bland sandwiches with pale tomatoes and wilted lettuce, milkshakes, egg creams, and buns. To his right, ensconced behind the cash register, was the boss, a small balding man with curly hair and a concentration camp number tattooed on his forearm, lording it over his domain of cigarettes, pipes, and cigars. He sat there impassively, reading the night-owl edition of the next morning's Daily News. (CG 36-37)

Utilizing Barthes' cultural semiotics and sociology, the foods signify the consumerist culture and mechanized existence prevalent in the modern city. These foods, which appear simple on the surface, indicate a lifestyle devoid of emotional connection or profound significance. In this regard, in the modern consumerist culture, processed foods are quick and accessible but with a lack of originality, pleasure, and variety, serving individuals superficially. They afford as a myth that naturalizes the values of speed, convenience, and disposability within consumer capitalism. The feeling of no understanding and no connection is the signified there: "For several years Quinn had been having the same conversation with this man, whose name he did not know ... They were both Mets fans, and the hopelessness of that passion had created a bond between them" (CG 37). The use of food as symbols of consumerism by the characters in the novel indicates that contemporary individuals are moving away from authentic life experiences, becoming increasingly engaged in artificial and superficial interactions and reflects signifieds in this section.

Consequently, as Jean Baudrillard argues, what is consumed is not the object but "the idea of the relation" (*The Consumer Society* 193), rendering the meal a signifier for absent connection and the city itself a system of empty signs. He means the processed food is a signifier for a lifestyle devoid of emotional connection. Additionally, beverages such as coffee and alcohol in *The Locked Room* are portrayed as means of escaping the psychological pressures of life in a stressful and competitive city,

The place was almost deserted at that hour. At the back table sat two old men in shabby clothes, one very fat and the other very thin, intently studying the racing forms. Two empty coffee cups sat on the table between them. In the foreground, facing the magazine rack, a young student stood with an open magazine in his hands, staring at a picture of a naked woman (CG 37).

Coffee, recognized in many cultures as a stimulant, serves here as a sign of perseverance in a stressful urban environment. This beverage signifies the desire to maintain energy amid modern pressures: "The greatest danger, therefore, was in eating too much. If he took in more than he should, his appetite for the next meal increased, and thus, more food was needed to satisfy him. His ambition was to eat as little as possible, and in this way to stave off his hunger" (CG 112). It illustrates controlling one's desires, confronting escalating cravings, and reducing dependence on consumption. This imagery symbolizes a form of self-awareness and resistance to the consumerist system that perpetually urges individuals to amplify their needs.

As historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch notes, coffee historically emerged as "the drink of sobriety...and social concentration" (*Tastes of Paradise* 62), making it the ideal stimulant for the calculated risk of studying racing forms. This aligns with sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's view of liquid modernity, where systemic pressures are met with consumer "tools" designed to manage the anxiety they produce (*Liquid Modernity* 145). Accordingly, by reducing his eating, Quinn endeavors to distance himself from the vicious cycle of consumption and liberate himself from the mounting pressures and endless desires.

Quinn's attempt to reduce consumption acts as a personal resistance against a consumerist myth that equates fulfillment with obtainment. This highlights a societal paradox where constant consumption pressure transforms genuine needs into symbols, trapping individuals in a cycle of unmet desire and dissatisfaction. His internal struggle between the innate need to consume and the effort to resist it captures the typical human conflict within a consumer-driven society.

Baudrillard's hyperreality reveals the diner's coffee as a simulacrum, a fake stimulant designed to manage anxiety within the simulated city. Quinn's attempt to control hunger is not true resistance but a performative, simulated rebellion that supports his place in the system of manufactured desires. Therefore, the scene portrays a hyperreal regulation of need, where both consumption and abstinence are mere performances within a reality where authentic desire has been replaced by the endless circulation of its signs.

The present passage outlines the progression of the consumer critique in *The New York Trilogy*. While the first novel critiques the consumption of objects, the second radicalizes this by depicting the consumption of narrative and surveillance. Blue consumes Black's life as text, a process culminating in the realization that his report is a self-referential document about his own watching. From Baudrillard's perspective, this creates a hyperreal round where Blue and Black are pure simulacra, empty signs observing each other in a closed system. The search for truth thus consumes the seeker, leaving only the empty trace of the vain investigation.

4.2. *Living in New York and Signs of Alienation*

According to Barthes's mythical analysis, urban spaces function as signs of social conditions. In Auster's *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*, the cold, soulless architecture and futile streets of New York and Brooklyn are not neutral backdrops but active forces that restrain personality and signify a profound absence of human warmth. These environments inherently isolate individuals, reflecting and inflaming the emotional and social alienation at the core of the modern urban crisis. Quinn articulates: "On his best days, he

could bring the outside in and thus usurp the sovereignty of inwardness. By flooding himself with externals...Wandering, therefore, was a form of mindlessness" (CG 61). This circumstance can be observed in *Ghosts*, which demonstrates the Brooklyn Bridge as a borderline between two opposite rooms, a silent, fixed image that divides rather than connects. This awkward space becomes a signifier of claustrophobic surveillance and the reduction of life to symbolic acts.

In Auster's *Trilogy*, the metropolitan landscapes of New York and Brooklyn are vigorous signifiers of contemporary social and mental states. They demonstrate a chaotic, perpetually shifting environment that actively hinder the protagonists' attempts to achieve a stable sense of self, leading to their psychological disintegration: "They have trapped Blue into doing nothing, into being so inactive as to reduce his life to almost no life at all... He feels like a man who has been condemned to sit in a room" (CG 266). This depiction of instability and identity crisis is a direct commentary on the alienating conditions produced by modernity itself. As Quinn walks along the streets, the narrator describes there: "Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again. (CG 4). His walking is the physical enactment of his psychic disintegration. As Norman Finkelstein argues, his aimless movement through New York is "an exercise in self-annihilation," a deliberate strategy to become "an instrument of pure perception" ("In the Realm of the Naked Eye" 45). This condition signifies a type of escape from duties and the tough truths of existence, achieved by wandering and accepting purposelessness.

However, this directionless motion and internal peace indicate a withdrawal from oneself and the world. This inconsistency in personal experiences highlights that, regardless of how much one tries to escape thoughts and mental complexities, one ultimately faces sensations of being adrift and hollow. This scenario represents the breakdown of contemporary cultural myths, wherein people are expected to seek social achievements and progress, but they struggle with an identity crisis and disconnect from their authentic selves.

Applying Barthes's semiology, Quinn's life in New York symbolizes a modernity defined by alienation. Despite being surrounded by others, he exists in a state of profound isolation, highlighting the separation of individuals as a core social characteristic. This depicted alienation mirrors a pervasive sociocultural reality, particularly in the contemporary workplace, where the continuous search for identity and belonging remains unfulfilled: "I have come to New York because it is the most forlorn of places,

the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere; the disarray is universal ... The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole city is a junk heap" (CG 77). As William G. Little explains, this depiction presents New York as a "dystopia of signification", an accumulation of broken signs that no longer sustain stable meaning (147). The characteristics of this city mirror the struggles of personal and societal identity in today's world, where individuals continually seek self-discovery but never achieve a consistent and legitimate identity: "The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal ... I find the streets an endless source of material, an inexhaustible storehouse of shattered things" (78). This space, rife with fragility and trash as signifiers, is characterized by an absence of fixed or permanent elements. Such self-searching is considered a signifier, resulting from the anarchy and struggles present in the city.

While Barthes analyzes how the city's myths are constructed to appear natural, Baudrillard would argue that this process is complete: The city in Auster's text functions as what Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* would call a hyperreal simulation, where "the map precedes the territory" (1). Quinn's "nowhere" and Blue's claustrophobic surveillance occur within this pre-coded model of alienation, not an authentic urban space. Consequently, the "broken signs" they encounter are not merely symbols of social ruin but simulacra that are "true" in a system where the original reality of connection and meaning has vanished, masking "the fact that there is none" (1). Their identity crisis is thus the inevitable condition of subjects produced by a simulated environment.

The minimalist setting of *Ghosts*, confined largely to two facing apartments, transforms the space into a broad stage. As Aliko Varvogli argues, the novella presents "surveillance as a self-consuming act of reading" where "the detective's report inevitably becomes autobiography" (*The World That Is the Book* 75). Blue recognizes a world of empty signifiers, like the color-coded names, that refer to no stable identity. His surveillance, intended as an escape, becomes a self-consuming act where he must consume Black's texts, leading to the realization that his report on Black is actually a report on himself. This collapse of observer and observed dissolves his subjective identity, proving the detective myth to be a closed, self-referential system.

In *The Locked Room*, the narrator's quest for Fanshawe turns New York into a palimpsest of signs and absences. As Aliko Varvogli in *The world that is the book* (2001) remarks, the city becomes a text "upon which Fanshawe's absence is the only legible text" (101), a space where the narrator's consumption of his friend's writings and wife becomes "the ultimate consumerist act... to fill a void in the self" (104). This futile search is structured by misleading signifiers, where Fanshawe is "nowhere and everywhere at

once" (TLR 287). Berndt Clavier in Paul Auster's postmodernity (2009) explains this as a quintessentially postmodern quest, where the missing person is a "simulacrum," and the frantic chase through the city is "a performance within a hyperreal cityscape" leading only to a void (112, 114). Thus, New York itself becomes a signifier of deletion, mirroring Quinn's experience of becoming nowhere. Regarding Baudrillard's view, Fanshawe is the ultimate simulacrum, a signifier with no original referent, and the narrator's distressed consumption of his writings and life is a hyperreal performance within a city that is itself a map erasing its own territory, leading to the unfilled that simulation both conceals and constitutes

In this unpredictable setting, people thus interact with their environment not to find identity or emotional ties but instead are more frequently exposed to psychological and alienation. Consequently, in this examination, the main characters represent estrangement and uncertainty as signified. These locations, lacking integrity and coherence, become places of loss, failure, and ruin, where both the surroundings and their residents encounter disintegration and downfall.

5. Discussion

The contradictions of the consumerist world, particularly the gap between the exterior and the interior, are distinctly visible in this text. Consumer society promises well-being and happiness through consumption, yet, in practice, this consumption leads to alienation, confusion, and isolation of the individual. In a world where individuals are engaged in the reproduction of consumer cultural symbols instead of living in reality, no authentic connection is established between the self and the external world. Thus, Auster in *City of Glass* illustrates how consumerism and living in New York alienate Quinn from the true meaning of life and trap them in a state of mental confusion and isolation. It is also internalized and radicalized in *Ghosts* through the consumption of surveillance and narrative, and in *The Locked Room* through the consumption of another's identity. These escalations reflect Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality, where consumer signs become simulacra detached from authentic needs, demonstrating that the self becomes the final, hollow commodity. However, this study highlights how semiology deepens our understanding of literary consumerism, offering of framework for analyzing other urban narratives in modern fiction. Quinn's alienation in this novel and his challenges are considered a microcosm that can be expanded to a wider field in America as a macrocosm. Future studies could explore semiotics in other postmodern urban novels, or compare Auster's representation of New York with other literary depictions. The table below represents the key concepts of the present study.

Living in New York: (a Modern Urban Space) (Signifier)	Individual's Disconnection, Wandering around the City (Signified)	
Existing Fast-Food Restaurants and Modern signs of Modern life (Signifier)/ (Sign)		No Feeling, Disoriented people, Not Enjoying Deeply, Temporary Relations, Superficial Life (Signified)
Culture of Consumerism (Signifier)/(Sign)		Anonymity, Losing Self (Signified)
Psychological Disorder (Alienation)		

Table 2. The Chain of Signifiers and Signifieds in Quinn's Character

The model traces a semiotic chain from the concrete to the pathological. First, life in New York signifies disconnection and wandering, in which this reality is then mythologized into the naturalized culture of consumerism, defined by shallowness and transient signs like fast food. Eventually, this consumerist myth itself becomes the signifier for the ultimate consequence: a psychological state of alienation where the self is demolished.

The application of Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality has been critical in advancing this analysis, revealing that the city is not just a space of alienating signs but a simulated environment where the very distinction between reality and model has collapsed. Consequently, the protagonists' crises are ontological, not merely psychological; they are produced by and lost within a system of simulacra. This synthesis of semiotic and postmodern theory ultimately considers Auster's work as a critical mirror to our own moment, where the consumption of hyperreal signifiers defines contemporary identity.

6. Conclusion

The practice of consumerism identified in *The New York Trilogy* generalizes as a central theme in Paul Auster's later fiction. In his novels like *The Music of Chance* (1990), *Leviathan* (1992), and *The Book of Illusions* (2002), characters attempt to construct identity or escape trauma through the consumption of experiences, narratives, or art, but these acts lead only to entrapment, alienation, and further self-erasure. Across his work, Auster consistently demonstrates that in late capitalist society, consumption is a doomed strategy for achieving a stable self, inevitably distinguishing of the very identity it seeks to declare.

This pattern generalizes to the genre of postmodern novels, particularly the work of Don DeLillo, notably *White Noise*, and Bret Easton Ellis, including *American Psycho*, where consumer culture is illustrated not merely as a backdrop but as an active, totalizing system that produces a specific form of alienated subjectivity. In these works, as in Auster's, the protagonist's attempt to find meaning or self through consumption results in a thoughtful ontological crisis, revealing the self as a hollow construct of the very market forces it seeks to navigate.

A clear general pattern emerges from this study, applicable to reading novels in the postmodern metaphysical detective genre. The pattern includes a tripartite collapse: (1) the collapse of the urban sign-system, where the city transforms into a labyrinth of empty, self-referential signs; (2) the collapse of the investigative quest, where the rational search for an external truth fallen into a self-reflexive, circular, and ultimately worthless performance; and (3) the consequent collapse of the detective's subjectivity, where the stable, observing "I" is dissolved, consumed, or rewritten by the process of investigation. To apply this framework, one analyzes any detective or quest narrative by interrogating how its setting functions as a semiotic field, how its plot deconstructs the myth of solvable order, and how its protagonist's identity unravels—revealing the genre as a critical supply for exposing the alienation, consumerist logic, and ontological instability of contemporary experience.

This study can be continued by applying its established theoretical framework to a broader postmodern and global anti-detective fiction. Such an expansion would likely decode a central dialectic within the genre: although these novels universally deconstruct the myth of rational order, their specific critiques are culturally coded. One would discover how the empty signifiers of the city differ between, for example, Don DeLillo's consumerist America, Haruki Murakami's magical-realist Tokyo, or Roberto Bolaño's apocalyptic Latin America, each locale producing an explicit form of alienated consciousness. Furthermore, applying this lens to emerging digital detective or algorithmic noir narratives could announce how the classic labyrinth of streets has evolved into the data labyrinth of the 21st century, uncovering how contemporary anxieties about surveillance, big data, and virtual identity are now graded through the deconstructed detective plot, pushing the genre's critique into new technological fields through adaptations in cinema, television, and interactive media to confirm how visual and narrative mediums transform the critique of consumerism and subjectivity.

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Notes

¹Adapted from Barthes (*Mythologies*, 1957) and de Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics*, 1916)