'Scripted fantasies': writing the twenty-first century

Peter Childs

Published online: 31 Jan 2022.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH ARTICLE   ⓐ OPEN ACCESS   ⟳ Check for updates

'Scripted fantasies': writing the twenty-first century

Peter Childs

Newman University Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT
If fiction is seldom perceived to be a contemporary form oriented towards global, ecological, or nonhuman concerns, it documents and dramatises crises, particularly of identity, that demonstrate these contexts. The twenty-first century novel both reflects and seeks to influence ethical, philosophical and critical discussion while negotiating its status as a medium that gained a strong cultural foothold because it addressed the establishment and imposition of civilizational norms in human societies from the Enlightenment through to the twentieth century. This essay considers how novels have approached challenges to human and humanist centrality from a range of forces in the last twenty years as multiple debates have taken a nonhuman turn.

Introduction

By the third decade of the twenty-first century, the importance of the human is widely in question and I want in this essay to consider several ways in which fiction addresses the hitherto taken-for-granted centrality of human agency to the functioning of the world. This includes threats to the significance of the singular human, as well as to the group or species, that come from vast forces such as globalisation and mass migration, artificial intelligence and the ascension of the algorithm. I want to suggest that the contemporary novel, as a dramatic and narrative more than philosophical form, frequently evinces a continuing commitment to articulating how the human is impacted by, and processes, the often overwhelming events and exigencies of a world that is, from a human perspective, decentred.

I can start with an image of the human subject. In Rachel Cusk's recent trilogy, her narrator Faye encounters an assortment of people on her

CONTACT Peter Childs ✉ P.Childs@staff.newman.ac.uk

travels and describes their rich, rounded life-stories while remaining herself an enigma. The meaning of the title of the first novel, *Outline* (2014), is implied towards the book's close as the narrator, a writer, talks with one of the interlocutors whose stories, rather than her own, make up the novel:

> He was describing in other words, what she herself was not: in everything he said about himself, she found in her own nature a corresponding negative. This anti-description, for want of a better way of putting it, had made something clear to her by ways of exposition: while he talked she began to see herself as a shape, an outline, with all the detail filled in around it while the shape itself remained blank.[1]

Faye's narrative colours in a surrounding world, half-real and half-imagined, as she explicitly draws (on) the external environment and implicitly delineates the recording self, portraying a detailed external world and *describing* by default an inner apprehension – the internal life of the author, remaining contentless and blank within an outlined narratorial shape.

As Cusk's trilogy asserts, while narrated from a central consciousness, the novel specialises in speaking at that boundary between the empathising or comprehending subject and 'the other', human or nonhuman, melding a series of monologues into dramatic dialogue. And the sense of a rich or poor, enriched or impoverished, *space* precariously or uncertainly still somehow in the middle of numerous powerful narratives is also what contemporary fiction gives us repeatedly in its depictions of human consciousness processing global forces; yet, there is additionally a new problem facing the novelist at a contemporary crossroads. It is the problem of what to do with the mental and physical circumscriptions of individual and collective human beings at a time when, for example, as Shoshana Zuboff asserts, 'an information civilization shaped by surveillance capitalism and its new instumentarian power will thrive at the expense of human nature and will threaten to cost us our humanity.'[2] This may be thought of as one dimension, among many explored in this collection of essays, to 'the human question': the place of human meaning in the light of a decentralising of significance, which could be caused by many aspects to the nonhuman, but here is seen as due to surveillance capitalism in Zuboff's reading, or to global economic forces, mass migration, and climate change, as well as quickening technological, third industrial, and environmental factors.

1

Incursions of technology into debates over 'the human question' are perennial but noticeably accelerated in the twenty-first century. As might be expected, despite the longer history of electronic invention, both real and imagined technologies now figure prominently in much contemporary

fiction: the 'deep web' in Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013), wireless technology in Tom McCarthy's *C* (2010), cryogenic preservation in Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016), or Jennifer Egan's interest in the psychological effects of social media through Facebook in *Look at Me* (2001) and the tweeted spy serial in *Black Box* (2012). But it is beholden on such examinations of nonhuman machinery through a novelistic lens to consider the effects on what it is to be human. This contemplation might begin with the technological problem of what to do with the human body, which increasingly appears to be less fit for future purposes: for work, for health, for endurance, for fast or sophisticated forms of creation or analysis. Big science and the increasingly more efficient decision-making ability of algorithms erode perceptions of the influence that human beings have on the/ir world – creating an *unheimlich* humaness that is less enfranchised by contemporary realities than marginalised in ways that echo earlier alienations from land and labour, yet also hold the possibilities of reconciliation or reconnection to planetarity, to nature, and to other species.

The sense in fiction of a contemporary human decentring created by the nexus of consumerist values and influencing-culture in digital lives, where identity and image seem indistinguishable, is pointed up in the debut novel by Louise O'Neill, *Only Ever Yours* (2014), a social-media fuelled twenty-first century update of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) inspired by the commodification and reification that O'Neill saw while working for *Vogue*. In a European private school, cloned females are raised to be mates or nuns but they are all under pressure to be slim and attractive based on male ratings and rankings of female beauty. O'Neill seems to borrow, and not only in the title, from the blueprint of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Set like McEwan's more recent *Machines Like Me* (2019), in a speculative England, Ishiguro's narrative is also less a scientific than an existential experiment echoing his earlier concerns with identity, loss, and abandonment. Arguably best seen in its indebtedness to Kafka, the book is named for a fictional song that dwells in the memory of the narrator, a clone child called Kathy H., from her time at a secluded country-estate school orphanage. The cloned children do not know their intended use, which is to have their organs harvested for transplants, and Kathy dances to a song entitled 'Never Let Me Go' imagining its simple love lyric concerns a mother–child relationship, while the reader comes to think of it in the broader context of strong and weak (non)human bonds of dependency, reproduction, and kinship. One of the patrons of the school, Madame, later tells Kathy that it brought her to tears to see Kathy dance because the song evokes for her the cloned children's desire for humankind not to objectify, desert, and commodify them: not see them in terms of the alterity of subject-object relations.[3] It is as though Ishiguro is asserting that there is a significant harm in losing *organic* connection in this creation of orphans:

revealing through narration and interiority the emotional complexity that is most at threat from species divisions, re-envisaging aspects to the dystopian possibilities long envisaged in speculative fiction. Ishiguro typically asks not whether scientific technology threatens life, but whether humans do.

2

Not Dissimilarly to the perspective taken in Ishiguro's novel, for David Mitchell the greatest threat to species flourishing is a human will-to-subjugate that in the twenty-first century might only be more corrosive when allied to greater technological, economic, or political reach. For Mitchell, humans are voracious subjects feeding off others' lives in novels that recount the stories of individuals and groups who oppress in the interests of tribe, progress, survival, ideology, and/or self-advancement.

In texts such as *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and *The Bone Clocks* (2014) Mitchell's iterations of human predatory behaviour are transhistorical but principally concerned with forces manifested in contemporary exploitation. For this reason, Douglas Coupland sees Mitchell as a writer of a genre of 'translit novels' that 'cross history without being historical … span geography without changing psychic place'.[4] According to Coupland, 'translit collapses time and space as it seeks to generate narrative traction in the reader's mind. It inserts the contemporary reader into other locations and times, while leaving no doubt that its viewpoint is relentlessly modern and speaks entirely of our extreme present'.[5] Mitchell's work depicts a humanmade ecological crisis through adherence to a law of competitive survival driving parasitic exploitation of resources, whether environmental or human, resulting at worst in eco-disaster or at best in instrumental use of the human and nonhuman.

A writer with similar concerns over the rhetoric of power structures in shaping the future and in the politics of privilege is Mohsin Hamid. Unlike Mitchell's novels, Hamid's fictions do not explore a historical and universal impulse or resistance to exploitation but critique current media stances, political positions, and social attitudes that retard the envisioning of improved global conditions:

> Part of the great political crisis we face in the world today is a failure to imagine plausible desirable futures. We are surrounded by nostalgic visions, violently nostalgic visions. Fiction can imagine differently […]. We certainly need it now. Because if we can't imagine desirable futures for ourselves that stand a chance of actually coming to pass, our collective depression could well condemn humanity to a period of terrible savagery.[6]

Such political problems are underpinned by propaganda and suspicion, the characteristics Hamid's novels explore through ambiguity, second-person address, interpellation and cultural challenge.

For Hamid, the world is characterised by an increasingly antiquated but still potently perceived divide between East and West.[7] His fiction outlines contrasts and connections across the triangle of cities that he knows well, Lahore, London, and New York. The novels dramatise perspectives evident in his essays and non-fiction writings, such as that there is a right to migration, that there are unacknowledged but pronounced political similarities between Pakistan and America, that racism and fear of alterity sit alongside the rhetoric of freedom and the conceptual realignment of discourses prescribing what is perceived to be in the true. His storylines play with stereotypes: a 12-step guide to capitalist success and the American dream through a self-help manual on how to get rich in Pakistan, or a migrant prodigy's reluctant realisation of the fundamental limits to Western empathy in the light of 9/11. Hamid's novels operate by parallel and comparison, pointing up, in ways that would be recognisable to Fanon, both the neoimperial perpetuation of Orientalist hierarchies and the ways in which 'the West' continues to interpellate its Others, including those who seek to traverse its borders.

> I understand that people are afraid of migrants. If you're in a wealthy country, it's understandable that you might fear the arrival of lots of people from far away. But that fear is like racism: it's understandable, but it needs to be countered, diminished, resisted. People are going to move in vast numbers in the coming decades and centuries. Sea levels will rise, weather patterns will change, and billions will move. We need to figure out how to build a vision for this coming reality that isn't a disaster, that is humane and even inspiring.[8]

Importantly, Hamid's argument is couched in terms of nonhuman forces, contrasting with as well as complementing Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's socio-economic thesis that 'a spectre haunts the world and it is the spectre of migration'.[9] Both picture a disorienting world that has changed state from 'solid' into 'liquid', shaped by unpredictable swells of turbulence, transience, and impermanence that wash over the globe eroding human and nonhuman habitats, but both also argue for a positive vision to prevent disaster.

3

Another Contested and marginalised aspect to the contemporary is the spiritual or haunted aspect to human apprehension as a politico-economic concentration on physicality, constant mediation, and the processing of data has arguably backgrounded the aura attaching to metaphysical concerns from intuition to mysticism, individuation to instinct, transcendence to the

sublime, or haecceity to the irreproducibility of individual consciousness. By contrast, the contemporary novel, reflecting wider popular culture, remains intrigued by the spirit of the praeternatural and the inexplicable, even if the interest has taken an hauntological turn, connecting frequently to Victorian gothic. This too-little considered aspect to the nonhuman is evident in the writings of novelists who explore the uncanny and the spectral – as the twenty-first century is haunted by its past and its demons more than it is troubled to engage thoughtfully with, for example, unworldliness, the abject, or even religion. Consistently across his writings, John Burnside portrays humanity with abiding if suppressed metaphysical-ecological qualities, often characterised by dualities but most frequently revealed in relation to the natural world and animal pairings. This is intimated by his use of appearances, doubles, and alter egos and by his interrogation of the uneasy alliance between signifier and signified. As it does in the novels of Christopher Priest, imagery of intersected worlds and planes, of the insufficient correspondence between words and things, populates each book with a contrast between the reality principle of science and the aesthetic lure of imagination. In a poetics of ecology, Burnside's work repeatedly describes the pyrrhic victories of the rational stalked by primordial, pagan, or animalistic fears, suggesting we remain self-estranged in the primacy accorded human reason over affect, apprehension, and animality. An unusual example, set on an Arctic Island, is *A Summer of Drowning*, about a child who worries her classmates have been lured to their watery graves by a mythical creature called the huldra, but who is more troubled by her mother, famous for painting the equally bleak, equally beautiful landscapes that feed her eerie beliefs. Straddling natural and supernatural experience, Burnside's oeuvre asks the reader to recognise how '[w]e are secrets to ourselves' despite the comforting fictions overlaying everyday experience, pointing back to distant animal beginnings.[10]

Hilary Mantel is another contemporary writer whose work is suffused with hauntings, echoes, ghosts and the more-than-natural. Alongside the new atheist novel, more spiritually inclined writers like Burnside and Mantel are tangentially concerned with evolutionary psychology, with the preternatural apprehensions that shape the subconscious mind but which are ignored by contemporary media.[11] Not just in her overtly religious novels, like *Fludd*, Mantel's excess of intertextuality and use of self-quotation in, for example, *Wolf Hall,* also illustrates how her texts haunt themselves in a disturbing interweaving of déjà vu as well as how the structural fashioning of her work encourages proliferating spectral interventions. A novel of mediumship and trauma such as *Beyond Black* can be understood too through the prism of female gothic and haunting, where the 'ghosts' are less supernatural than the closeted, overlooked, buried and would-be forgotten traumas of childhood, manifesting as contact with the dead.[12] Such novels display a

scepticism of dominant epistemologies but also intimate the troubled mental landscape of the human in the contemporary, less preoccupied by religious doubt or existential threat, than by external pressures and internal demons, by a deterioration in mental health that rests on greater acknowledgement of the range of traumatic and alienated experience but accompany a rise in awareness of both social inequalities and the denial of innate needs.

Where organised religion appears to maintain currency is in both overt and clandestine power politics: in the formation and coercion of imagined communities as well as the ongoing contestation of neoliberal attempts to shape human access to authority according to divisions of gender, disability, ethnicity, and sexuality. When US vice-president Mike Pence visited Philadelphia on 23 July 2018, he was met by a wall of women clad in cloaks of red and topped with huge white bonnets obscuring their faces.[13] The clothing worn by Margaret Atwood's handmaids has been in evidence from Argentina to the US, the UK and Ireland, and surfaced as one of the most commanding symbols of feminist protest, in a subversive inversion of its association with the oppression of women (the novel depicts a patriarchal theocray in which fertile women are used to restock a population devastated by radiation and environmental pollution). Atwood's vision has been revisited in her own *The Testaments* but also in Naomi Alderman's 2016 dystopian superhero cum science-fiction novel *The Power*, which is premised on the development by young women of a suppressed ability to release electrical jolts from their fingers through a skein.[14] This physical superiority leads to a reversal of many of the dominant tropes of gender politics. Though a dystopian novel, it arguably offers a feminist parallel to the positive visions argued for by Mohsin and Hardt and Negri. Through the voices and perspectives of four disparate participants across the world, the narrative envisages an emergent force for global change through the establishment of a female cult which draws on Judeo-Christian precedent in the years running up to a gendered moment of revolutionary transformation that ultimately disavows the patriarchal excesses of human civilisation since the stone age. Though clearly comparable, Liz Jensen's 2009 *The Rapture* is a different kind of consideration of power and religion that follows the case of a wheelchair-bound paraplegic therapist assigned to a high-security psychiatric institution. She takes on a teenage patient who, having killed her evangelical mother, is now having precise visions of natural disasters, anticipating an apocalyptic end-of-days that parallels the rapture in Christian eschatology. Both novels draw on science fiction traditions but also inflect those with clear twenty-first century concerns in their portrayal of ecological disaster, gender politics, dis/ability, and religious rhetoric; yet their most significant human observations concern the relationship between power and normalised behaviour in a modern secular society where there is a 'shift in perspective from 'the human being as a soul' to 'the human being as an organism".[15] This shift

is pointed up by mass modification of thought and action through what Zuboff describes as instrumentarianism, 'replacing the engineering of souls with the engineering of behavior', where interpellation through religious doctrine morphs into the undermining of objectivity and subjectivity in fake news and the politics of post-truth, psychological profiling through the harvesting of personal data (e.g. the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal), the rise across social media of myriad covert as well as overt influencers, and the actuation and widespread proliferation of the means of micro-behavioural targeting.[16]

4

The above-mentioned term 'translit' was coined by Douglas Coupland to describe Hari Kunzru's novel *Gods without Men* (2011), another quasi-religious exploration which is equally concerned with human links to animal, supernatural, and mineral.[17] The novel connects form and content in a way that places irresolution and fragmentation at the centre of the narrative, admitting that rational behaviour is only one component of agency, which is also driven by fears, desires and aspirations. Kunzru proposes that

> *Gods without Men* is a book about God, the way that to be human is to find some liveable way of orienting yourself towards the unknown or the unknowable, whether you decide there is some sense of transcendental meaning or some sort of stable or theoretical story you want to tell, or whether you feel there is some sort of void you're in relation to. I'm interested in the way the structure of religious yearning and mystical experience is very constant, but the contents change. From that theme a certain form became an obvious way of proceeding: to make a lot of parallels; to tell the same story with different kinds of furniture; and to tell it in fragments.[18]

The narrative commences with a variant on the Native American myth of the coyote-figure, a trickster animal in folklore not unlike the Anancy spider in African mythology, who acts as a sly and deceiving half-animal, half-human anti-hero rebelling against social convention. In a prologue entitled 'In the time when the animals were men', the repeated death and birth of the coyote is introduced in the form of a fable (drawing on cultural stories from the Maidu coyote creation myth from north California), but Kunzru is particularly invoking Donna Haraway's use of the figure to indicate that which exceeds human control and denotes a communication across the division between 'nature' and 'culture', between the nonhuman and the human.[19] The cycle ends when coyote manages to 'cook' with crushed pseudoephedrine 'a hundred grams of pure crystal'.[20] This tale will reverberate with other story-strands later in the novel and the 'pure crystal' may also be any of a range of transformative powerful substances: alchemical treasure, alien property, New Age gemstone, or mescaline from the peyote cactus.

Kunzru says in interview: 'There's also the mythic dimension with the Coyote figure turning up as a character who may or may not be this gnarly meth-dealing human hippie, but may also be the embodiment of this mythic, motive principle.'[21] Drawing especially on icons of the late 1960s like Carlos Castenada and Jim Morrison alongside alien-visitation touchpoints such as George van Tassel, Raëlism, and Arthur C. Clarke, Kunzru collapses the categories of humans, animals, aliens, and gods as embodiments or manifestations in the story of an urge in the imagination to connect fragments into a hypernarrative, whether it be apophenic, theistic, panpsychic or cosmic. His anthropologists, shamans, hippies, and hedge fund managers, are drawn to the mythic as embodied by the coyote trickster figure: to the unknown and inexplicable, to the irrational noise in the signals of behaviour that are interpreted to yield predictive data for systems beyond conventional human understanding. To underscore the point, Kunzru has as the closest character to a protagonist the figure of Jaz, a behavioural finance economist who uses psychological theories to write code predicting stock market movements that seem illogical to his Wall Street colleagues.

Coupland's 'translit' label applies, to different degrees, to all of Kunzru's fiction, in which episodic threads of loosely connected narrative mostly run in parallel but cross or converge at times, creating a sense of a pattern that cannot be seen clearly but may be apprehended as collectively symptomatic of a global, often cross-temporal, force or a 'motive principle'.[22]

We can also note the prosthetic imbrication of technology and identity in Kunzru's novels. The most persistent themes in his work are those of interconnected lives and unstable identities. Far from a humanist self-identity through a fixed soul or character, there is the corporeal. Through the material body consciousness may be written and rewritten from multiple experiences and impulses, promising a spectral existence to individual *homo sapiens* still persistently moored in matter.

As such, Kunzru's novel holds digital communication as a means of resistance that over fifteen years later appears harder to perceive for the many even if it remains available to the few in the light of Zuboff's characterisation of the contemporary world, in which:

> 'instrumentation' refers to the puppet: the ubiquitous connected material architecture of sensate computation that renders, interprets, and actuates human experience. 'Instrumentalization' denotes the social relations that orient the puppet masters to human experience as surveillance capitalism wields the machines to transform us into means to others' market ends.[23]

Yet, a predictive example of Kunru's dissolution of identity through a larger lens occurs in Maggie Gee's *The Ice People*.[24] Gee's novel recounts one family's story from the late twentieth to the middle of the twenty-first century, from a growing threat of global warming to the dawning of a new

ice age. The Ice People are the northerners who seek refuge in the African south, fleeing the encroaching cold enveloping an old civilisation in Europe to journey to a continent that newly represents freedom. Countries above the equator descend into armed struggle between an increasingly sentient robot class and the surviving de-civilised humans. Gee's novel censures the present for its failure seriously to attempt to balance environmental concerns, human liberties, and technological advances, primarily dramatising this, like Alderman, through an ideological and political gender division. The novel ends indeterminately, undecided between a future with or without people, suggesting this is a question for the present to consider in the light of human indifference to planetarity.[25]

5

As Intimated in Gee's novel, the most prominent global issue challenging the primacy, centrality, and responsibility of individual and collective humanity is climate change since the beginning of the Anthropocene. Novels have addressed environmental concern in numerous ways, often in grand speculative fictions such as the post-apocalyptic new world possibilities of Winterson's *The Stone Go*ds (2007), but perhaps none more obliquely than Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010), which synecdochally places the collective failings of *the human* in the face of this hyper-object squarely on the shoulders of one flawed individual.[26] While the novel's scientific focus, sustainable and renewable clean energy, is a matter of increasing political urgency (and direct action by diverse modern movements from Greenpeace to Occupy, Extinction Rebellion, and the G20 protestors), *Solar* is in fact a novel without commitment. It paints a tragicomic portrait of human nature, depicting the short-term promotion of individual interests and rewards against the collective longer term need for social and ecological care to ensure the well-being of all life in the future. It is not concerned with the rapacious pursuit of greed and power but the rather more quotidian paths of lazy least-resistance and easy quick-wins to achieve creature comfort and selfish benefit. A central theme is human irresponsibility, embodied in the ironically entropic figure of theoretical physicist Michael Beard, head of the National Centre for Renewable Energy. A now complacent Nobel-prize winning scientist, Beard both embodies and espouses the case against anthropocentrism: 'physics was free of human taint, it described a world that would still exist if men and women and all their sorrows did not.'[27]

Like Stephen Hawking's argument that 'our genes and our inability to make rational choices' mean that human nature's selfish gene contains within it the seeds of its own destruction, or David Mitchell's belief that the greatest threat to the planet is human predation, McEwan's novel seems to despair of positive agency in the face of climate change, the

narrative ending in an imminent personal crisis to mirror the impending global one.[28] Consequently, Padmaja Chatterjee concludes on the approach used in many books that: 'cosmopolitan political subjectivity as represented in contemporary fiction is conservative because it is fundamentally specta-torial.'[29] Yet, there are alternative examples of a conducive planetary under-standing in the work of other writers that show political action of the kind that has for many years protested at world summits.[30] There is, for example, Robert Newman's *The Fountain at the Centre of the World,* a novel that begins in London but whose narrative snakes across the world describing the lives of diverse communities affected by the flows of labour and capital.[31] Prefiguring McCarthy's use of the 2001 Genoa G8 summit in *Satin Island*, which will be discussed below, Newman's novel concludes in a long final section detailing the excessive repression of the anti-World Trade Organisation protestors in Seattle in 1999, and its focus is on the human and nonhuman cost of the fight for water and oil supplies in global negotiations.

My principal example of fiction attempting to tackle 'the human problem' of the twenty-first century is Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* (2015), which McCarthy says 'is completely projected towards the search for what is con-temporary'.[32] The book repeatedly tries on images and metaphors for modern life in numbered paragraphs, like a treatise. McCarthy defines the contemporary in terms of three conditions investigated by his narrator, U: trauma, repetition, and mediation. Hired to act as a Company anthropolo-gist, U uses his observations of social patterns to move product, but his grand aim is to write, or even better 'live', a definitive Great Report.[33] To this end, he is compiling dossiers on memes in present-day culture, scanning for patterns, for repetitions exposing these signal archetypes that might resemble rituals underscoring the contemporary in a 'Present-Tense Anthro-pology^{TM}': scams, avatars, obituaries, interviews, tattoos, and airport designs. (72).

In one indicative example of trauma, repetition, and mediation, U points to the Vanuatuan cargo cult. When the American military left after the Second World War, some of the South Pacific islanders carefully constructed an airfield, from runway to control tower, out of bamboo and balsa. Re-enacting the behaviours of the air traffic controllers they sought to call the planes full of provisions to return again. U's argument relies on the similarity between such ceremonies and traumatised behaviour, repeating the past in the hope of conjuring earlier outcomes. Yet, the significance for the contem-porary is the perspective this offers: a perception that human agency is an illusion, that larger forces beyond local comprehension are determining out-comes that may or may not coincide with individual desires. In the novel, U maps these conventional consolations, in fiction and life, while observing human gestures that expose a lack of real agency in their reliance on attempts

to find the rituals of 'what works' that mask the absence of understanding. For McCarthy, or his corporate anthropologist, the contemporary is defined by networks, or outlines in Cusk's terminology, which have replaced substance and meaningful causation. Failures are of deficient information and incomplete databases: the wrong or missing connections define an inability for the individual successfully to fashion a believable grand narrative or even a comprehensible design.

U's first image of this is a rimless wheel: like the diagram of an airport (in this case Turin) where the radial arms are not joined together at their periphery and so, though close in proximity, are increasingly disconnected as they extend from the centre. Other scraps of mediated reality he elevates to overarching significance are reports of an oil spill, emblematic of the cancerous destruction centuries of heavy mining now represent, and a news of a parachutist who plunges to his death because the cords of his chute have been severed. Both of these examples, of the chute and the oil spread, are variants on human sabotage but also hub and spoke imagery: it's all just 'ink-blots' he remarks (2). Thus, in interview McCarthy also states that 'The book is a parable of all the efforts we make to give meaning to that chaos: to unite points that are not connected to each other in constellations; look for images in Rorschach ink blots.'[34] This image is also deployed by Zuboff as emblematic of data mining and the oil-spread of information under surveillance capitalism:

> just about everything we do now is mediated by computers that record and codify the details of our daily lives at a scale that would have been unimaginable only a few years ago. We have reached the point at which there is little omitted from the continuous accretion of this new electronic text … as it spreads silently but relentlessly, like a giant oil slick engulfing everything in its path (182).

U recognises that none of his own chosen images is objective, just the discernment of a pattern in the oil spill. Yet, perceived patterns harden into beliefs about reality, because, he argues: 'People need foundation myths, some imprint of a year zero' (3). In its design, McCarthy's book places in a contemporary context the anthropologist's study of culture, of habits and faith, arguing that while reality is meaningless the imposition of a code is an irresistible human impulse.

As a cultural anthropologist, U presents the mountainous detritus of Satin Island as the closest he can get to a master code, or at least a symbol, for the contemporary. Satin Island is a variation on New York's Staten Island, home to the 2,200-acre Fresh Kills landfill site. Fresh Kills was opened as a temporary site soon after the Second World War but by 1955 it had become the largest landfill in the world.[35] Two of the four landfill mounds were closed and covered with a thick, impermeable

cap by 1997 and the site was mothballed in 2001. Then, in another codable moment of historical fortuity, after the September 11 attacks, Fresh Kills was temporarily re-opened to sort through millions of tons of rubble and human remains from Ground Zero.[36]

The affectless U decides to take a visit to Staten Island at the end of the novel and witness first-hand the dumping ground for human culture past and present, but he falters before boarding the ferry:

> To go to Staten Island –– *actually* go there –– would have been profoundly meaningless. What would it, in reality have solved, or resolved? Nothing. What tangible nesting space would I have discovered there, and for what concrete purpose? None. Not to go there was, of course, profoundly meaningless as well. And so I found myself, as I waded back through the relentless stream of people, struggling just to stay in the same place, suspended between two types of meaninglessness. (170)

As he returns, salmon-like, back through the human stream, U's sense of purposeful agency is entirely expunged as he finds himself struggling even for stasis before the human tide washing him towards the mountain of disposed things.

In McCarthy's fiction, behaviour is primarily ritualistic: quasi-religious ultimately phatic actions repeated in the hope of reproducing earlier outcomes that appeared within human reach, if decreasingly in harmony with a social or natural environment. In other words, as Jane Bennett argues the 'impetus' behind the nonhuman turn comes in part 'from the voluminous mountains of 'things' that today surround those of us living in corporate-capitalist, neoliberal, shopping-as-religion cultures.'[37]

Eschewing simple criticisms of dilettantism in his fiction of cultural anthropology, McCarthy in his novel still situates the human in relation to some engaged resistance. Political struggle is illustrated by the repetitive behaviour and ritual of democratic protest in the story of Madison, U's girlfriend, who is caught up in the 2001 G8 protests in Genoa. These protests were particularly notable for the way in which they were suppressed: most notoriously in the raid on the 'Armando Diaz' School, the subject of the 2012 film *Diaz – Don't Clean Up This Blood*, in which, like a scene from McCarthy's *Remainder*, the police attack is re-enacted together with the subsequent torture of detainees. In all, 93 people were arrested and 60 injured and the events amounted, said Amnesty International – as quoted in the film – to being 'the most serious suspension of democratic rights in a western country since the second world war.'[38] On April 7, 2015, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the relevant authorities had violated the human rights Convention at the summit.[39] The example counters the sense that McCarthy's narratives are simply frivolous or disengaged from

human suffering. His modern ethnographer U nonetheless relinquishes meaning while departing from centuries of humanist belief in his anthropologist's attempt to understand the contemporary human condition(s) in terms of trauma, repetition, and mediation.

To end where this essay began, Zuboff notes not only that instrumentarian society is a threat to the human but that 'Individuality is a threat to instrumentarian society, troublesome friction that sucks energy from 'collaboration,' 'harmony' and 'integration''. She cites Alex Pentland's *New Scientist* article on 'The Death of Individuality':

> Instead of individual rationality, our society appears to be governed by a collective intelligence that comes from the surrounding flow of ideas and examples … . It is time that we dropped the fiction of individuals as the unit of rationality and recognised that our rationality is largely determined by the surrounding social fabric … (438-9)[40]

This seems similar to what McCarthy essays: he exposes the fiction of individual agency and rationality in favour of the surrounding ceremonials and U's 'scripted fantasies' offering 'parables of mankind's hubris' (104). McCarthy's laments are not like Zuboff's, for the spectre of human agency, but for the loss of an integration that gave meaning free from the fiction of human agency.

Not irreconcilable in its most positive vein with a turn towards the nonhuman, McCarthy theorises twenty-first century human behaviour in terms of the magical thinking behind the re-enactment of social rites: a nostalgic pursuit of purposeful agency through repeating earlier actions.[41] His observed patterns also have something in common with the algorithms tracking mass migration or mass consumption, with the predictability of hard baked evolutionary psychology against the need to stop ecologically destructive industrial and chemical pollution, with the increasing inadequacy of the brain or the body as a substitute for machine technology. The inkblots may also include silhouettes like the outline of Cusk's emotionally hollowed-out narrator who finds elusive lessons in the profiles she draws of others' stories, just as U records the shapes of compulsive human behaviours seeking resolution and meaning in the re-enactment of personal, social, and political actions.

Notes

1. Rachel Cusk, *Outline.* (London: Faber, 2014), pp. 239–40.
2. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile 2019), pp. 11–12.
3. Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber, 2005), pp. 248–9.
4. Douglas Coupland, 'Convergences', *The New York Times*, 3 March 2012. [Date accessed 25 April 2016].

5. Ibid.
6. Hamid in interview on his novel *Exit West* with Cressida Leyshon, 'This Week in Fiction: Mohsin Hamid on the Migrants in All of Us' *The New Yorker* 7 November 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/this-week-in-fiction-mohsin-hamid-2016-11-14. [Date accessed 19 March 2020]. Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017).
7. Or 'West and the rest' worldview. This outdated mindset is shown to be both prevalent and false in, for example, Hans Rosling's *Factfulness*, London: Sceptre, 2018.
8. Mohsin Hamid in conversation with John Freeman, 'The First Post-Brexit Novel: Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*', *Literary Hub*, 6 October 2016, https://lithub.com/the-first-post-brexit-novel-mohsin-hamids-exit-west/ [Date accessed 19 March 2020].
9. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 213.
10. John Burnside, *Living Nowhere*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), p. 87.
11. See Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate *The New Atheist Novel* (London: Continuum, 2010).
12. Hilary Mantel, *Beyond Black* (London: HarperCollins, 2008).
13. Samanatha Goldman, 'Why I helped organise the "handmaids" protest of Mike Pence', *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 27 July 2018, available at https://www.inquirer.com/philly/opinion/commentary/the-handmaids-tale-pence-protest-opinion-20180727.html [Date accessed 19 March 2020].
14. The novel was both inspired by and written under the mentorship of Atwood.
15. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile 2019), p. 365, quoting Max Friedrich Meyer's *Psychology of the Other-One* (1921). Meyer saw the shift from souls to organisms as part of the development of democracy in which the universal soul would be replaced by the more secular notion of the human body as a universal for oversight, scrutiny and control.
16. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile 2019), pp. 376–95, p. 352, and p. 277. Zuboff summarises as instrumentarianism as 'It's this whole digital surround that is now the instrumented medium that is producing the knowledge that creates the opportunity for the power to modify your behavior.' Quoted in Noah Kulwin, 'Shoshana Zuboff on Surveillance Capitalism's Threat to Democracy', *Intelligencer*. 24 February 2019, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/02/shoshana-zuboff-q-and-a-the-age-of-surveillance-capital.html [Date accessed 19 March 2020].
17. Hari Kunzru, *Gods without Men* (London: Penguin, 2011). The description of this category touches all of Kunzru's fiction, and suggests the company he might keep in contemporary fiction.
18. Max Haiven, 'An Interview with Hari Kunzru', *Wasafiri*, 28:3 (18–23), 2013, p. 19.
19. In interview, Haraway says coyote is 'a trickster figure, and, particularly in Navaho figurations, the coyote is often associated with quite distressing kinds of trickster work. Coyote is about the world as a place that is active in terms that are not particularly under human control, but it is not about the human, on the one side, and the natural, on the other. There is a communication between what we would call "nature" and "culture," but in a world where "coyote" is a relevant category, "nature" and "culture" are not the relevant

categories. Coyote disturbs nature/culture ontologies.' Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 328.

20. Hari Kunzru, *Gods without Men* (London: Penguin, 2011). p. 3.
21. Max Haiven, 'An Interview with Hari Kunzru', *Wasafiri*, 28:3 (18–23), 2013, p. 19.
22. In his seminal study *Modernity at Large* Arjun Appadurai captures this fluid quality of global relations with the analogy of planetary space as a flow of seas-capes composed of financial, cultural, technological and demographic move-ments, to which could be added the natural. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), pp. 27–47.
23. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile 2019), p. 352.
24. Maggie Gee, *The Ice People* (London: Telegram, 2008).
25. 'Planetarity' is a term used by Spivak to evoke the planet as that which exceeds human control. See *Paragraph* 38:2, June 2015, pp. 290–2.
26. The term hyper-object is used by Timothy Morton to denote those things that are too vast, too insufficiently localised, for them to be understood in terms of objects on a human scale. See Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, (Cam-bridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 10.
27. Ian McEwan, *Solar* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2010), p. 9.
28. Stephen Hawking quoted in John Baird, 'Our "selfish" genes contain the seeds of our destruction – but there might be a fix', *The Independent*, 23 May 2017, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/our-selfish-genes-contain-the-seeds-of-our-destruction-but-there-might-be-a-fix-a7757256.html [Date accessed 19 March 2020].
29. See Connell, Liam and Nicky Marsh (eds.), *Literature and Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 222–7.
30. See https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/
31. Robert Newman, *The Fountain at the Centre of the World* (London: Verso, 2003).
32. Quoted in Tiziana Merani. 'Tom McCarthy, *un etnografo alle prese con la sintesi del mondo*', 1 March 2017, https://www.lindiceonline.com/incontri/interviste/tom-mccarthy-un-etnografo-alle-prese-con-la-sintesi-del-mondo/ [Date accessed 19 March 2020].
33. Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (New York: Knopf, 2015), p. 71. Further page references are given in the text.
34. Quoted in Tiziana Merani. 'Tom McCarthy, un etnografo alle prese con la sintesi del mondo', March 1, 2017, https://www.lindiceonline.com/incontri/interviste/tom-mccarthy-un-etnografo-alle-prese-con-la-sintesi-del-mondo/ [Date accessed 19 March 2020].
35. As a name Satin Island is clearly a variant on Staten Island but it can be noted that satin is a fabric that typically has a glossy smooth surface, a lustrous face, and a dull back. The name has a resonance with the novel's presentation of deception and depthlessness as features of contemporary living.
36. See Martin V. Melosi, *Fresh Kills: A History of Consuming and Discarding in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).
37. Jane Bennett, 'Systems and Things. On Vital Materialism and Object-Oriented Philosophy', in Richard Grusin (ed.), *The Nonhuman Turn*, (Wisconsin: Uni-versity of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 224.

38. *Time Out Live*, '"Diaz: Don't Clean Up This Blood" Q&A Trailer', 18 June 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4P7uTJEuoo&index=7&list=PLRHTxMfpnVIb6tkJ41zIa_Vga8SZsTb3f [Date accessed 19 March 2020].
39. Roy Greenslade, 'My Name is Cleared at Last', *The Guardian*, 22 May 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2013/may/22/g8-italy [Date accessed 19 March 2020].
40. See Alex Pentland, 'The Death of Individuality', *New Scientist,* 222, no.2963 (April 2014), pp. 30–31.
41. A term with nuanced meanings in anthropology, psychology and philosophy, 'magical thinking' describes beliefs that one's human thoughts, wishes, or desires can influence what happens in the external world: that there are causal relationships between thoughts and events. See Richard A. Shweder, 'Likeness and Likelihood in Everyday Thought: Magical Thinking in Judgments About Personality', *Current Anthropology.* 18:4, 1977, pp. 637–58.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).