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The Resurrected Future of *Cloud Atlas*: Writing and Filming Dystopian Time

ABSTRACT

Focusing on the vagaries of narrative temporality and what I take as its “availability” for lapsing into dystopian figurations, the present paper investigates the overlappings and departures entailed by the adaptation of David Mitchell’s 2004 novel, *Cloud Atlas*, into the 2012 film written and directed by Lana Wachowski, Andy Wachowski and Tom Tykwer. My paper considers the contemporary novel’s dystopian proclivities, successfully illustrated by Mitchell’s text, in light of Mark Currie’s casting of fictional time as instantiating a “philosophy of surprise” predicated on the notion of eventfulness; it then goes on to explore the film’s temporal structure through the lens of Bernard Stiegler’s notion of “cinematic time” as the globalised time of the consciousness, which *Cloud Atlas* simultaneously engenders and disrupts.

KEYWORDS

Narrative Temporality; Dystopia; Narrative Unexpectedness; Cinematic Time; Technics as Dystopia.

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I think that time is to us what the ocean is to marine life, only more so: time, the great enabler of being. Yet time is a slow-burning “decay bomb” not outside us but within us, all the while transforming our newborn selves through biological maturity into our senescent selves: time, the great dismantler of being.

David Mitchell,
Interview with Paul A. Harris¹

In one of the interlaced episodes of his multi-layered novel, *Cloud Atlas*, the contemporary British novelist David Mitchell has the “ascended” clone Sonmi-451 (genetically designed to serve food in a futuristic diner reminiscent of today’s globalised fast-food networks) recount the forbidden experience of watching a film based on the misadventure of Timothy Cavendish, himself a character in a previous episode of the novel. Facing the death sentence for threatening the “corpocratic” order by becoming human, Sonmi submits to an interview by an “archivist” in order to have her story recorded, theorising (along with the novel) that the transmissibility of narrative language will ensure the subversion of genetic, economic and social hierarchies, in spite of her failure to achieve an actual revolution. When the intrigued Archivist documents her



fascination for watching an ancient film (rebranded as a “disney” by corpocratic New-speak), Sonmi retorts:

Certainly: the vacant disneyarium was a haunting frame for those lost, rainy landscapes. Giants strode the screen, lit by sunlite captured thru a lens when your grandfather’s grandfather, Archivist, was kicking in his natural womb. Time is the speed at which the past decays, but disneys enable a brief resurrection. Those since fallen buildings, those long-eroded faces: Your present, not we, is the true illusion, they seem to say. For fifty minutes, for the first time since my ascension, I forgot myself, utterly, ineluctably.²

Just as the humorous story of Timothy Cavendish’s escape from his imprisonment in a retirement home survives in remediated form through the centuries to resonate with Sonmi’s attempt to change the fate of the clones used as sub-human slaves by Nea So Copros, the record of her “orison,” now turned into the holy words of a mythical founding figure, will resurge through time in the primitive human community populating the postlapsarian world figured in the central episode of the novel to guide the protagonist’s moral choices. The “brief resurrection” of the past into what is still the reader’s future, made possible by various forms of narrative (and explicitly invoked both by Mitchell’s novel and by the 2012 filmic adaptation of *Cloud Atlas* by writers and directors Lana and Andy Wachowski and Tom Tykwer), enacts a part of the complex temporal philosophy of fiction, whose figurations of the inextricable connections between the past, present and future often bring to the fore the contradictions and aporias of our experience of time, most noticeably, during the past decades, through the

projection of apocalyptic threats onto a live-able future. It has become a common place to comment on the marked inclination towards dystopia exhibited by the contemporary novel, but, if the editors of the present issue of *Caetele Echinox* are to be believed, a similar concern seems to be less obvious in filmic productions, at least as far as statistics go. While I do not contend that the Wachowski’s adaptation does not succumb to the fascination of dystopia, their version does end in more “optimistic” fashion than the novel, by casting Zachry and Meronym as the Adam and Eve of a new humanity, transported on a new planet. Given the directors’ uneasy relationship with Hollywood and their experimental treatment of dystopia in *The Matrix* trilogy, this is probably less the effect of conventional and economic pressure, and more a matter of artistic choice, as well as of the specificity of the filmic medium per se.

This last prospect – of the relationship between the cinematic medium and the figurations of dystopia – is a fascinating one, and raises important questions that have to do with the profound influence cinema has had and will continue to have on the shaping of the individual and collective psyche after supplanting the novel as the most popular vehicle for carrying forth ideology under a fictional guise. Extrapolating on Fredric Jameson’s description of utopian temporality as the supplementation of the present from the perspective of what is still to come (since it is the projection of a possible future that enables the present to define itself),³ I will argue that the dystopian future pre-figured contained by both the book and the film is used, in different manners, in order to subvert a comfortable sense of a presentified end of history seen as more dangerous than any of the threats the future might hold.

My account of the complex sense of time in *Cloud Atlas*, the novel and, to a



certain extent, the film, crucially relies on Mark Currie's definition of narrative temporality as the structure of the future perfect, or future anteriority (what has not yet occurred, but will occur in a completed form: "not what *will happen*, but what *will have happened*" (emphases in the original).⁴ According to this view, "the hint of the impossible" inherent to the future perfect condition of narrative time accounts for the effect of mediation between our expectations and the reality of experience achieved through stories. This involves a counterintuitive recalibration of our idea of narrative, and we are forced to expand the boundaries of storytelling to accommodate both anticipation and the emergence of the unexpected, as the time of the reading unfolds by coalescing the past (related events that are usually presented as having already occurred) and the future (experienced in the expectation of cognitive closure, or at least the knowledge that there will be a textual ending) of the narrative into a sort of present. Rather than being a form of re-living and coming to terms with the past (a still valid, but – according to Currie – insufficient assumption of narratology), narrative becomes "a transaction between some recapitulation of past experience and a reading process in which that capitulation of the past is re-experienced, its retrospect decoded in that process as a quasi-present" that has more to do with answering questions about the future, than anything else.⁵ Currie's ultimate goal is to argue in favour of the need for a field of study mindful of poststructuralist variations of classical narratology and founded on what he terms "the philosophy of surprise."⁶ Pointing out that, ever since Aristotle, one of the basic features of all storytelling – fictional or nonfictional – seems to have been the production of the unforeseen (and in fact the "expectation of the unexpected" has come to define the most deeply-ingrained contemporary judgements of artistic

or informational value), Currie shows that the temporal doubling involved by casting the expectation of the unknown as a sort of future anterior ties the interest in narratives to the study of time via the notion of surprise or the eventful, as connected to responsibility and action, manifest in the work several contemporary philosophers, with Derrida, Badiou and Žižek as the foremost examples.

Currie's insistence on the contribution of fiction to explaining and installing a sense of the future is verified by David Mitchell's frequent experiments with a sweeping temporal span, more often than not reaching a future that is yet unexperienced as such, but whose historicised seeds have been germinating all along. As a recent interpretation of Mitchell's novelistic projects has put it,

One way of regarding Mitchell's writing is to see it as the fictionalization of futurity in plot, character, style, and theme. The hallmarks of this writing are many, but the principal signs are the many instances of prophecy, projection, and imagining possible futures that occur in his work. These, combined with the bi-location of characters (e.g. when Holly Sykes of *The Bone Clocks* imagines what would be going on in her house at a given hour; were she there to see it instead of from her observational point on the road as a runaway), the scattering of characters or character-ancestors and descendents among novels, and the multiplication of temporal zones that various characters inhabit, suggest the degree to which identity is plural, not singular in his fiction.⁷

Unwittingly, Currie and Mitchell even use similar terms when talking about fictional temporality, as an extract from an



interview I have already quoted shows: “Tense is an obvious variable: is the narrative purporting to describe events already happened, or is the narrative surfing along on the never-quite-breaking wave of the Eternal Present? (An anathema to some reviewers, as I’ve learned at my cost.)”⁸ Furthermore, Mitchell’s interest in time, which seldom goes unspoken of,⁹ becomes even more interesting to explore if we consider the author’s assertion that he is actually engaged into producing one “macro-novel” spanning over the history of humanity and creating and what Paul A. Harris (to Mitchell’s delight) has called “the memory of the Anthropocene:”¹⁰ in 2010, upon the publication of *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, Mitchell famously confessed to one interviewer:

I’ve come to realize that I’m bringing into being a fictional universe with its own cast, and that each of my books is one chapter in a sort of sprawling macronovel. That’s my life’s work, for however long my life lasts. Of course, it’s important that each of the books works as a stand-alone, so that readers don’t have to read everything else I’ve written to make sense of the novel in their hands. But I write each novel with an eye on the bigger picture, and how the parts fit into the whole.¹¹

To take only some obvious examples, Mitchell’s debut novel, *Ghostwritten*, which consists of a series of seemingly unrelated stories (most of them taking place at roughly the same time), geographically located on several contiguous regions of the globe, from Japan to New York, ends with an episode set in a not-too-distant future where an (ambiguously benevolent) artificial intelligence has taken over the control of military satellites. As will be made clear,

Cloud Atlas’s “central” narrative, which splits the book into halves and paradoxically constitutes its structural middle, takes place in a distant, post-apocalyptic future. *The Bone Clocks*, published in 2014, revisits all themes and characters shedding light on some of their mysterious actions, and ends with a story that seems to be set immediately after the event of “Fall” of *Cloud Atlas*, and Mitchell has publicly spoken about his plans to complete a “Dr. Marinus trilogy” reaching back to the dawn of human history.

Cloud Atlas neatly illustrates the imbrication of past, present and future, being composed by a series of embedded (seemingly) autonomous narratives, each set in a different century, ranging from 1850s to a fictional distant future, each centered around a different protagonist (sometimes an actant narrator), and each containing each other concentrically – an effect achieved by interrupting the first five stories midway in order to start the next one, and reprising them successively, so the book ends with the return to the nineteenth-century plot, and the only “uninterrupted” narrative is the “central” one, set in a post-apocalyptic future. The first story (reconstituted) consists of the diary of the idealist American clerk Adam Ewing who, on his way back from Polynesia, after being poisoned by an unscrupulous doctor, is saved by a Moriori stow-away whom he had shown kindness to. The second section, set in Belgium in the inter-war period, is made up by the letters addressed by Robert Frobisher, a young, impecunious and sexually adventurous composer (author of the little-known sextet “Cloud Atlas”) to his lover, just before committing suicide. “Half-Lives: The First Louisa Rey Mystery” is cast as a detective story featuring the eponymous heroine, a daring Californian reporter investigating rumours of misdeeds taking place at a nuclear power plant. The fourth section features the



ludicrous memoirs of contemporary book publisher Timothy Cavendish, who, in the wake of machinations by a revengeful brother, finds himself imprisoned in a retirement home. The already mentioned “An Orison of Somni-451,” taking place in a futuristic consumerist dystopia, presents itself as the archival trace of the final interview with an ascended clone. Finally, “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After,” the innermost (at least in formal terms), and temporally most distant story, is narrated by Zachry, a member of the remains of humanity surviving in the a-technological world after the “Fall.” The effects of ambiguity and open-endedness created by the repeated deferrals of narrative closure are intensified by the “fictionalisation” of each section, as the protagonists are gradually turned into readers or audiences of the preceding story: Frobisher finds and reads Adam Ewing’s diary, Louisa Rey comes across both Frobisher’s letters and a recording of his “Cloud Atlas” sextet, Cavendish is considering publishing a novel about Rey’s adventures, Sonmi watches the movie based on Cavendish’s story, and Zachry comes across a hologram of Sonmi (who is now revered as a deity) publicly reciting her teachings.

According to Patrick O’Donnell, the novel’s projection of a plural identity is inextricably linked to “the conception of a temporary future” as “a transitory site where alternative narratives are disseminated” and which comes about at the intersection of causality and contingency, fate and chance.¹² It could be added here that it is precisely the attempt to create a unitary, universalistic future that is totalitarian and dystopic, because it rests on an image of homogeneous humanity which will necessarily submit difference to violence and erasure. Similarly, O’Donnell anchors *Cloud Atlas* in “a poetics of relation,” embodied by the paradox that “the similitude of human identity is visible in its movement through time and

space only as a series of variations made most evident in those forms of cultural violence that attempt to install a homogeneous regime of ‘the human.’”¹³ One cannot but agree with the suggestion that the novel’s meaning, as well as its philosophy of time, relies on the intricate relations between modes and forms of narrative, as the recursive structure makes it clear that “the primary work of the narrative” is “its potential for connectivity.” If anything, the complicated network of metaleptic contaminations confirms the idea that the process of signification is crucially, if somewhat arbitrarily, determined by the medium of transmission: rather than a geometrically arranged vision of space and time, the novel projects a fragmented “image of history [...] conveyed as a series of partial stories serendipitously linking mediated identities across scattered spatiotemporal reaches and domains.” As O’Donnell shows, the novel’s structure underscores the dematerialisation of the utopian illusion, which functions by obfuscating the materiality and contingency of history through the projection of a perfect, “pure” and permanent future placed “at the end of history.” Founded on the forgetfulness of “temporariness as the primary condition of human continuance,”¹⁴ utopia reveals its dystopian origins when placed against the special temporality of fiction and its dialectics of permanence and impermanence, remembrance and anticipation which creates a flickering present whose holes paradoxically enable the texture of human connectivity. The “elastic time” described by O’Donnell’s analysis of Mitchell’s writing, composed by accidental, pulsating events linking the past with the present and with the future in random sets dependent both on the multiplicity of the characters’ experiences and on the diversity of textual readings, breaks down the universalist temporality of utopia and reveals its intimate dystopian nature.



If the novel's exquisite textual web, made up of subject and object positions, intertextual allusions and cross-references, various demands on the readers, comes to supplement its sense of multi-layered time, how does the film figure the future and its dystopian protensions? One avenue for investigation is opened by a study by Jo Alison Parker, who, starting from the writer's own musings on the directors' success when it came to adapt his "unfilmable book," argues that the changes brought about by the filming montage, which Mitchell had labelled a "pointillist mosaic" – distinct from the novel's "boomerang structure" – enact a temporal shift from the novel's "future in a flux" to a "future that is fixed, [...] entailing a conclusion that is both less and more hopeful than Mitchell's."¹⁵ As Parker puts it, "[a]fter it ends, the novel then boomerangs back through the preceding stories in a reverse cascade, bringing each to closure for the readers of the text and the readers *inside* the text" [emphases in the original].¹⁶ The section are also related by common themes and recurring imagery, such as the comet-shaped birth mark of most of the main characters, thus creating a "global plot of reversing humanity's drive for instant gratification" which the film actually turns into Zachry's solitary quest for individual redemption.¹⁷

The film starts and ends with Zachry's story, thus rendering the fragile centrality of the novel's innermost narrative into a frame that acts on multiple levels – temporal (firmly determining the future as the time of the telling and therefore as a point of reference); discursive (Zachry's warning, "I'll yarn you about the first time we met eye to eye" is immediately followed by a rapid series of very brief scenes introducing the rest of the episodes of the novel, but in what looks like aleatory order – Adam Ewing meeting Dr Goose, Louisa Rey driving through the city, Timothy Cavendish at his editor's desk

ironically dismissing the writerly "gimmicks" of using flashbacks and flash-forwards enacted at that very moment by the filmic montage, Robert Frobisher writing his suicide note to Sixsmith, the Archivist starting the interview with Sonmi, etc. The Wachowski also had the same actor who impersonated Zachry, Tom Hanks, play the Dr. Goose, the villain of the earliest story in the chronological sequence, thus achieving a sort of unification of the fragmented set under the umbrella of the same identity gaining moral insight through temporal experience.

While Jo Alison Parker's interpretation offers useful insights, it nevertheless fails to take into account the unusual pace of the cuts and the insurmountable effects of dissipation that the film produces. Here's what a reviewer privileged with an early insight into the making of the film has to say about its conception:

The filmmakers' initial idea was to establish a connective trajectory between Dr. Goose, a devious physician who may be poisoning Ewing, in the earliest story line, and Zachry, the tribesman on whose moral choices the future of civilization hinges, after the Fall. They had no idea what to do with all the other story lines and characters. They broke the book down into hundreds of scenes, copied them onto colored index cards, and spread the cards on the floor, with each color representing a different character or time period. The house looked like "a Zen garden of index cards," Lana said. At the end of the day, they'd pick up the cards in an order that they hoped would work as the arc of the film. Reading from the cards, Lana would then narrate the rearranged story. The next day, they'd do it again.¹⁸

It may be precisely because these effects were never intended to be overcome,



with the film offering a unifying account of one protagonist's experience, that it manages to credibly keep away from the lure of dystopia and offer a more "optimistic" ending, which is kept in line with the other major departure from the film: while in the book Sonmi's partner Hae-Joo is revealed to be a mere puppet in the corprocacy's plot to expose her ascension as an abomination, the filmmakers turned him into an idealistic freedom fighter and the ideal romantic partner for Sonmi. What is uncritically skipped over, though, because of such mutations, is Mitchell's profound insight into the powers of narrative to undermine authority through its mere existence, as the record of ideas and experience that will resolutely remain authentic and subversive, no matter how distortedly they are manipulated.

Returning to the film's experimentation with time, its fragmentation may be said to interrupt what the contemporary philosopher Bernard Stiegler has criticised as the disorienting, homogenising "cinematic consciousness" produced by the omnipresence of consumerist Hollywood flicks, which will be outlined below.

Stiegler's basic assumption is that technics and the human are not opposites, but co-constitutive: constantly emerging as a means of exteriorising thought, technology participated in the creation of what we think of as the human and acts as its supplement: "What is exteriorized is constituted in its very exteriorization and is preceded by no interiority; this is the logic of the supplement".¹⁹ Technology functions on a fundamental level as collective memory, since it allows not only for the material manifestation, but also for the recording and preservation of the historicity of shared experience. Stiegler's aim is to continue Husserl's investigation of the constitution of the human through a sense of temporality by focusing on what he claims phenomenology had ignored: the existence of "tertiary

retentions" (in the form of [mnemo]technics) that will always precede, and thus govern, Husserl's primary and secondary retentions. (Husserl had defined primary retentions as the persistence of recently perceived objects in our memory, and secondary retention as the larger background of recollections that constitute memory and therefore will crucially determine the experience of "temporalizing" the world.²⁰)

The directors of *Cloud Atlas* (most predictably, the Wachowski siblings, who were turned into global celebrities by *The Matrix* trilogy) are aware of the film's ambiguous participation in the technosphere. As an essential technological product, whose artistic ontology depends on the development of advanced instruments and techniques, the film contributes to the technogenesis of the world and is part of what Stiegler calls "technological memory." The Wachowskis' reliance on innovative special effects has been notorious since the release of *The Matrix*, and *Cloud Atlas* is no exception, though in the latter special effects seem to be used in order to enhance the mimetic effect of the representation of the future, rather than with a view to disturbing the mimetic grounding of the cinematic image by providing a distorted representation of perceptual functioning. This may act as an explanation of the film's ultimate avoidance of the catastrophic consequences of technology, which weakens the dystopian potential of the cinematic form. Both as a technological object, and as a set of artistic ideologies, *Cloud Atlas* stops at the threshold of dystopia and foregrounds the uses of technics by pointing out it remains a foundational part of the human.

On the other hand, the thematic critique of the darker aspects technology is poignant in the Louisa Rey and Sonmi episodes, and it is made all the more so by the Wachowski's statement that their model when adapting the book was Kubrick's *A*



Space Odyssey.²¹ However, it may be their treatment of time through fast cross-cutting that disturbs the continuity of the montage, revealing it as an artifice and probing the limits of the unifying capacities of our consciousness (the film essentially consists of a collage of rapidly moving scenes and a bombardment of receding informational loads) that may crucially contribute to the investigations of the effects of the technosphere. In the final volume of his important trilogy on *Technics and Time*, Stiegler posits the “*essentially* cinematographic structure for consciousness in general,” based on film’s functioning through the same retentional integration of past, present and anticipated future as the human psyche. Nevertheless, the cohabitation of cinema and consciousness has installed a reified, homogenised identity at the heart of the techno-human continuum, one of whose versions can be traced back in several steps. The first one would be the Barthesian assumption of the temporal co-existence of the photographic image and the photographed object: “[t]he instant of the snap coincides with the instant of *what* is snapped, and it is in this coincidence of two instants that the basis of the possibility of a conjunction of past and reality allowing for a ‘transfer’ of the photograph’s immobility in which the spectator’s ‘present’ coincides with the appearance of the spectrum.” The illusion of referential presence, conducing to the overlapping of the time of the object with the time of the image and the time of the viewing, is complemented by the addition of sound and movement, so that “the coincidence between the film’s flow and that of the film spectator’s consciousness, linked by phonographic flux, initiates the mechanics of a complete adoption of the film’s time with that of the spectator’s consciousness – which, since it is itself a flux, is captured and “channelled” by the flow of images.”²² The danger is the occurrence of the reproducibility of the

flux of the consciousness itself,²³ which installs sameness at the expense of difference through a standardisation of reactions and protensions of the future.

The film’s insistence on temporal incompleteness and rapid succession of themes challenges the chronological telling of events which, paradoxically, the intertwined stories still observe. The links between scenes are created by means of match cuts, cross-cutting, verbal juxtapositions, or are simply inexistent, leaving it to the viewer to experience the performance of connectivity required by the framework of the storylines. In other words, the directors make sure that each viewing will rely on projections of different connectors among the rapidly succeeding images, and thus, each viewing will be different. The film thus manages to re-compose, with its specific means, the unstable equilibrium between unity and fragmentation suggested by the intricate texture of the books’ narrative strategies, even though it remains determined to avoid its darker suggestions. David Mitchell may well have been right to be appreciative of the adaptation, despite the cautionary tales that surrounded the novel’s “unfilmability.”

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Notes

¹ See Paul A. Harris, "David Mitchell in the Laboratory of Time: An Interview with the Author," *SubStance*, Volume 44, Number 1, 2015 (Issue 136, dedicated to Mitchell's work), (pp. 8-17), 9.

² David Mitchell. *Cloud Atlas*. London: Random House, 2008, 235.

³ Fredric Jameson. *Archaeologies of the Future. The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London and New York: Verso, 2005.

⁴ Mark Currie. *The Unexpected. Narrative*

Temporality and the Philosophy of Surprise. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013, 1.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 2.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 5.

⁷ O'Donnell, *A Temporary Future: The Fiction of David Mitchell*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, 20.

⁸ Harris, "Interview," 9.

⁹ See, for instance, Mitchell's remarks in the same interview with Paul A. Harris, when queried about the role time plays in his writing: "a novel is a model of a universe, and that universe, like ours, must have integrated into it a working model of time" (Harris, "Interview," 9).

¹⁰ Harris, "Interview," 14.

¹¹ Wyatt Mason, "David Mitchell, The Experimentalist," New York Times Magazine, June 25, 2010, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/27/magazine/27mitchell-t.html?_r=0. Accessed October 30, 2015.

¹² O'Donnell, *A Temporary Future*, 20.

¹³ O'Donnell, *A Temporary Future*, 70.

¹⁴ O'Donnell, *A Temporary Future*, 92.

¹⁵ Jo Alyson Parker, "From Time's Boomerang to Pointillist Mosaic: Translating *Cloud Atlas* into Film" 123-124, in *SubStance*, Volume 44, Number 1, 2015 (Issue 136), pp. 123-135, 124.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 124.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 134.

¹⁸ Aleksandar Hemon, "Beyond the Matrix" (2012), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/09/10/beyond-the-matrix>, NewYorker.com. Accessed October 31, 2015.

¹⁹ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 2*, 4.

²⁰ See Stiegler, *Technics and Time 3*.

²¹ See Hemon, "Beyond the Matrix."

²² Stiegler, *Technics and Time 3*, 14.

²³ *Ibidem*, 46.