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## The Atlas of Globalizing Fiction

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**Abstract:** David Mitchell has written a famous novel about how to make a (geographically fragmented) novel out of fragments: the six life stories included in *Cloud Atlas* are implicit fictional networks, simultaneously concealed and laid bare. The novel offers ample room for six nested histories and their divergent styles; the result is a strange and rather ostentatious book, shaped like a ziggurat, and providing an almost didactic initiation into matters of style. In fact, David Mitchell offers an atlas of the globalization of fiction. The spaces and times of *Cloud Atlas* engender not only polytopy and polychrony, but also a theory of fiction. The atlas of worlds, zones, territories, topographies becomes a structure that constantly generates other worlds to be visited or narrated. Their very narrativity allows for the globalization of fiction.

**Keywords:** David Mitchell; *Cloud Atlas*; Fiction; Globalization; Polytopy; Polychrony; Geocriticism; Elsewhere; Cartography; Transgressivity.

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The British author (and former pilgrim in various parts of the world) David Mitchell has written a famous novel about how to make a novel out of, and in fragments: the six life stories included in *Cloud Atlas* are implicit fictional networks, simultaneously concealed and laid bare. The novel offers ample room for six nested histories and their divergent styles; the result is a strange and rather ostentatious book, shaped like a ziggurat, and providing an almost didactic initiation into matters of style. With its six stories overlapping or even continuing one another (in the fashion of director Quentin Tarantino's post-modern films), the novel has a matryoshka, or nested structure; the ending takes us back to the beginning, its circular geometry serving as a reminder of the archetypal figure of the Ouroboros serpent. The reader is therefore presented with an extravagant geometrical combination – matryoshka, nest, ziggurat, Ouroboros. The style and the stories become experimental fluctuations, ranging from the intelligible to the unintelligible and back to the intelligible. The novel is reminiscent of Umberto Eco's bookish magic (since it also contains an allusive review of the world's literature), or of a dexterous and admirable compilation in the *imitatio libris* tradition (one of Mitchell's influences was Italo Calvino). But its

author aims much higher: the goal is to fabricate a compendium of human types and destinies, or even a sort of sophisticated biblical narrative, a journey in time and space throughout the earthly realm, undertaken by exemplary individuals who go through various avatars and whose reincarnations, both human and stylistic, are never the same, be they refined or primitive.

Mitchell has claimed that he has been tempted to write sequels to *Cloud Atlas* ever since its publication, but he has realized that such possible prolongations might not have the same aesthetic validity as the original novel.<sup>1</sup> To Mitchell handling an atlas means writing, narrating, constructing a multifaceted narrative. This is hardly surprising, given the vast knowledge of literature and use of literary influences of an author who is both an avid and a refined reader.<sup>2</sup>

Let us examine the novel's hexagonal structure.

First, there is the shipboard diary of an American notary, Adam Ewing, who is sailing the southern seas: his story seems a remake of the infernal trip taken by Bardamu in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*, whose ingredients it shares: squalor, corruption, pestilence, disease, fever. Tricked into thinking he has a parasite in his brain, this character is trapped on a horrifying boat controlled by tyrants and impostors; the only person who is authentic and faithful to Ewing is a native man who provides Mitchell with the opportunity to rewrite freely parts of the story of Robinson Crusoe and Friday.

The second narrative, in epistolary form, concerns Robert Frobisher, a talented but destitute young musician, engaged in an opportunistic search for a magister, Vvyyan Ayr. Frobisher's letters are sent to

his magnanimous friend, Rufus Sixsmith. However, the apprentice gets deceived by his very master, who submits him to a systematic artistic vampirism and a whole seductive and exploitative scheme (enacted by the adulterous wife and the sexually aloof daughter.) This is the section that provides the title of the novel, *Cloud Atlas*, a consummate sextet composed by Frobisher before he kills himself.

The third story, written as a newspaper report, belongs to the journalist Luisa Rey, who exposes several murders committed around a nuclear power plant.

The fourth story revolves around Timothy Cavendish, a publisher catapulted to wealth by the success of a post-avantgarde book written by a little known author. On the run from the author's money-grabbing relatives, after a series of bizarre adventures, Cavendish ends up in a retirement home which proves to be a penal institution. The style is anti-utopian, but the story resembles the initial narrative and its Célinian tone through its corrupt and grotesque universe, its blatant existential Darwinism, etc. It could also be a remake of Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest!*

The fifth story, written in elaborate science-fiction style, recounts the life of a rebellious clone, Sonmi-451, who provides a theological and philosophical interview intended as an official explanation for her revolt against the "purebloods" (the humans). This section is a post-apocalyptic and posthuman cautionary tale. The world of the soul-lacking fabricants regards the world of "souls" (the humans) through the eyes of expensive laboratory rats.

Finally, the sixth story (imbued with esoteric undertones) is written in slang and is, deliberately, virtually unintelligible; it

deals with Zach'ry, an inhabitant of an ambiguous, pagan, primitive and rustic time of oracularity, gods, clan rivalries and traces of myths.

The characters' avatars populate all the six narratives: Frobisher the musician finds an edition of Ewing's shipboard journal in his magister's library; Luisa Rey investigates the murder of Rufus Sixsmith, Frobisher's addressee; the publisher Cavendish meets an author writing Luisa Rey's story; later on, Cavendish skims through a book featuring Rufus Sixsmith; it is suggested that Sonmi-451 is Luisa Rey's clone, while Sonmi watches a film about Cavendish; in Zach'ry's primitive and mythical world, Sonmi is a local saint! After the six stories get interrupted halfway, David Mitchell goes on to the doublings, continuations and prolongations of all the texts (the so-called books) and films previously mentioned. They are all testimonials of revolution: the rebellion of Sonmi the clone and her last interview before being killed; Cavendish's revolt against the retirement home and his spectacular escape; Luisa Rey's detective story and her harassment by paid assassins to prevent her from exposing the nuclear mafia; Frobisher's persecution by the composer Ayrs and his suicide; Ewing's mental and physical suffering on the boat, followed by his rescue. Out of the six life stories, Ewing is the only character who survives.

The characters' life stories, vacillating between tragedy and dark comedy, between suspense and fatality, turn Mitchell's novel into a spectacular little periodic table. But the textual extravagance resides mostly in the style and structure: each chapter is dedicated to, and circumscribed by an initiatory style; the most exotic are the styles

used for telling the stories of Sonmi and Zach'ry. To understand the destinies of the characters in *Cloud Atlas*, the reader first needs to understand the author's stylistic juggling. Thus, style itself becomes a structure. This is the stake that Mitchell attempts to turn into a tour de force. The recipe for his strategy and techniques is almost pharmaceutical: how to compose a novel out of fragments, simultaneously separating and combining the saffron, cinnamon, thyme, paprika, basil and pepper! If they are separated, the taste stays classical and homogenous, but our palate will be bored. If they are mixed, the combination may cause predictable confusion and even a stomach upset in the reader.

In visionary fashion, *Cloud Atlas* sets a cosmological tone for highbrow contemporary fiction. Its author is fascinated by the identity of spaces and the identity of the creatures contained by these spaces; he therefore constructs various forms of *home* as a diverse matrix of identities. As it has been shown, the identity of space is double: it has to do both with the human insertion into the world, and with a deepened spatial knowledge, which may trigger the production of new spaces.<sup>3</sup> The characters find their identities just as much by situating themselves outside a place as they do by belonging to the inside of a place.<sup>4</sup> Space possesses fiction-making capacities; it allows itself to be recreated and extended; what matters is not so much its natural (genuine) authenticity, as its creative and productive authenticity.

David Mitchell is playfully engaged in a connoisseur's spatial festival that turns the readers into consumers of assorted topographies, through several spatial techniques. His atlas is actually a panopticum,

since the six narratives all share a tragic (or at least tense) core which, while always differing, seems to point at some sort of textual contamination. Since the six stories feature trips or voyages to some place (at some time), they all involve journeying through various physical or spiritual geographies.

The very act of writing is a form of mapping; the author (a novelist who can sometimes become a poet) becomes a map-maker by placing the narrative within a form, a landscape, a space or a topography.<sup>5</sup> The mapping is a linguistic and stylistic process. In their own way, every novelist is a geographer since through a story he is able to show and suggest a world, a landscape (human or natural), a (initiatory) journey, a map of cognitive and ontic experience. Plot itself becomes a sort of map.

Mitchell's novel resists the threat of Disneyfication<sup>6</sup> because he is fascinated by something different: by the artificially constructed futurized landscapes<sup>7</sup> reminiscent of postmodern technological assemblages; alternatively, he may be fascinated by subtopia<sup>8</sup> – a kind of cloned urban space that can also be interpreted as a cautionary image of a decayed subhuman world. However, the senses can still act as guides through such spaces, which become haptic geographies, smellscapes, soundscapes, visual geographies, themescapes or themed environments.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of the fact that one of the vital connections it investigates is the relation between literature and geography (via a concentrated and synthetic history of the postmodern world), Mitchell's writing should probably be described as geo-poetics, rather than literary mapping.

The ontology of the essential *elsewhere* in Mitchell's novel can be seen as generating a provocative matrix: the non-place<sup>10</sup> as

defined by Marc Augé. From a sociological and ethnological perspective, nonplaces are human assemblages which lack temporally and spatially established traditions and cultures (such as shopping malls, refugee camps etc.); transit areas are always nonplaces; they are products of supermodernity where identity is almost extinct.<sup>11</sup> The space inhabited by the traveler (if they are neither scientists or professional explorers) can be regarded as the archetypes of non-place. In point of fact, in Mitchell's novel it is not really the characters who become travelers, but rather the readers. Thus, it is the reader that inhabits a nonplace as he or she advances through *Cloud Atlas*. That is, if the present speculation does not amount to a presumptuous overinterpretation.

Bertrand Westphal distinguishes between two approaches and typologies produced by a geocritical analyses of real or fictional space: conceptual space and factual space.<sup>12</sup> *Cloud Atlas* may actually contain both, since, beyond the complex geography created by the author, space and (implicitly) time are turned into concepts. However, what is even more important is the transgressivity of space. Westphal defines the transgressive traveler as "a wanderer with the harlequin's spirit", a nomad<sup>13</sup> who defies the boundaries of space (both physical and mental). Transgressivity generates various forms of space-time, as it involves polytopy and polychrony – that is, multiple spaces and multiple times; one feature of transgressivity is spatial fluctuation. Transgressivity also means moving between the centre and the periphery, taking the periphery to be more important than the centre.<sup>14</sup>

*Cloud Atlas* presents a deliberate duality as it is at the same time an anti-utopia

(first and foremost), and a scientific utopia. Alexander Beaumont has stated that the novel's relation to the public sphere is both optimistic and pessimistic. The optimism is provided by the novel's cosmopolitan imagination, while the pessimism is produced by an emancipatory imagination suggesting that totalitarianism still dominates the twenty-first century.<sup>15</sup> Bozena Kucala locates the novel's circularity in a dialectic of sameness and difference which turns the six stories into reassembled artifacts according to both a Platonic logic of originals doubled by copies, and a Nietzschean logic of eternal return.<sup>16</sup> Lynda Ng describes *Cloud Atlas* as "a novel with clear global ambition," drawing on the age-old conflict between the human and the

natural in the thought of Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>17</sup> Heather J. Hicks believes that Mitchell's novel concerns itself with the myth of the eternal return as analysed by Mircea Eliade.<sup>18</sup>

Even though neither the author nor his critics state this explicitly, the novel is actually an atlas of the globalization of fiction. Its spaces and times engender not only polytopy and polychrony, but also a theory of fiction which uses the act of mapping as an instrument and support. The atlas of worlds, zones, territories, topographies is a structure that constantly generates other worlds to be visited or narrated. Their very narrativity allows for the globalization of fiction.

(Translated by **Petronia Petrar**)

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### Interviews with David Mitchell

<https://www.list.co.uk/article/64441-interview-cloud-atlas-author-david-mitchell-on-twitter-mid-life-crises-and-new-novel-the-bone-clocks/>

<http://www.nightmare-magazine.com/nonfiction/interview-david-mitchell/>

## NOTES

1. <https://www.list.co.uk/article/64441-interview-cloud-atlas-author-david-mitchell-on-twitter-mid-life-crises-and-new-novel-the-bone-clocks/>.

2. <http://www.nightmare-magazine.com/nonfiction/interview-david-mitchell/>.

3. E. C. Relf, *Place and Placelessness*, London, Pion Limited, 1976, p. 44.

4. *Ibidem*, p. 49.

5. Robert T. Tally Jr, *Spatiality*, London and New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 45.

“The act of writing itself might be considered a form of mapping or a cartographic activity. Like the mapmaker, the writer must survey territory, determining which features of a given landscape to include, to emphasize, or to diminish; for example, some shadings may need to be darker than others, some lines bolder, and so on. The writer must establish the scale and the shape, no less of the narrative than of the places in it. The literary cartographer, even one who operates in such non-realistic modes as myth or fantasy, must determine the degree to which a given representation of a place refers to any “real” place in the geographical world.”

6. *Ibidem*, p. 95.

7. *Ibidem*, p. 103.

8. *Ibidem*, p. 105.

9. Paul Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies. Body, Sense and Place*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 41, 63, 84, 115, 164, 176, 177.

10. Marc Augé, *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, translated by John Howe, London & New York, Verso, 1995, p. 34.

11. *Ibidem*, pp. 94, 103.

12. Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism. Real and Fictional Spaces*, translated by Robert T. Tally Jr., New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 5.

13. *Ibidem*, p. 41, 45.

14. *Ibidem*, p. 43, 45, 49.

15. Alexander Beaumont, *Cosmopolitanism without a World? David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas*, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328035443\\_Cosmopolitanism\\_without\\_a\\_World\\_David\\_Mitchell%27s\\_Cloud\\_Atlas](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328035443_Cosmopolitanism_without_a_World_David_Mitchell%27s_Cloud_Atlas) [accessed Jan 30 2020].

“David Mitchell’s 2004 novel *Cloud Atlas* equivocates between an optimistic articulation of a global public sphere and a more pessimistic inability to offer its readers a vision in which this public sphere can be realised. I attribute this equivocation to two competing imaginaries within the novel. The first—a cosmopolitan imaginary—wishes to dispense with teleological accounts of human beings, the societies they create and the world in which these societies are located. The second—an emancipatory imaginary—evidences deep concerns regarding the carceral conditions that increasingly dominate the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century.”

16. Bożena Kucala, “The Eternal Recurrence of (Hi)Story: David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*”, *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Jagelonicae Cracoviensis*, volume 13, issue 2, 2018, p. 107

<http://www.ejournals.eu/Studia-Litteraria/2018/Volume-13-Issue-2/art/12091/>

17. Lynda Ng, Cannibalism, “Colonialism and Apocalypse in Mitchell’s Global Future”, *SubStance*, 2015, #136, vol. 44, no. 1 (David Mitchell Special Issue), p. 107–122; p. 107, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/577275/pdf>.

18. Heather J. Hicks, “‘This Time Round’: David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* and the Apocalyptic Problem of Historicism”, *Postmodern Culture*, 2010, vol. 20, no. 3.

<http://www.pomoculture.org/2013/09/03/this-time-round-david-mitchells-cloud-atlas-and-the-apocalyptic-problem-of-historicism/>.

“Eliade formulated his anti-historicist critique in the wake of the cataclysm of World War Two; David Mitchell explores the limits of historicism in a contemporary eschatological context. In *Cloud Atlas*, a variety of characters, figures, and events represent the risks and possibilities of a cyclical *Weltanschauung*.”