

THE DIALECTICS OF GLOBALIZATION:  
Socio-Ecological Responsibility in David Mitchell's  
*Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks*

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April 2018



Tiedekunta/Osasto – Fakultet/Sektion – Faculty Humanistinen tiedekunta		Laitos – Institution – Department Kielten laitos	
Tekijä – Författare – Author Petteri Paavilainen			
Työn nimi – Arbetets titel – Title The Dialectics of Globalization: Socio-Ecological Responsibility in David Mitchell's <i>Cloud Atlas</i> and <i>The Bone Clocks</i>			
Oppiaine – Läroämne – Subject Englantilainen filologia			
Työn laji – Arbetets art – Level Pro gradu -tutkielma		Aika – Datum – Month and year Huhtikuu 2018	
		Sivumäärä– Sidoantal – Number of pages 63 s.	
Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract			
<p>Tutkielma käsittelee nykykirjallisuuden keinoja hahmottaa ja arvottaa nykyistä globaalia kehitystä. Tutkielman kertomakirjallisen aineistona toimii brittiläisen nykykirjailijan, David Mitchellin (synt. 1969) romaanit <i>Cloud Atlas</i> (2004, suom. <i>Pilvikartasto</i>) ja <i>The Bone Clocks</i> (2014). Kyseiset teokset ovat mittakaavoiltaan maailmanlaajuisia, ja ne liikkuvat ajallisesti ja maantieteellisesti vaihtelevissa sekä tyyllillisesti monenkirjavissa miljöissä. Tutkielma pyrkii osoittamaan, kuinka Mitchellin teokset valjastavat postmoderneja kerronnan välineitä ja trooppeja laajittavasti poikkeavilla tavoilla kuvaamaan toivoa vastuullisemmasta globaalista kehityksestä.</p> <p>Tutkimustehtävää lähestytään postmodernin viitekehyksen kautta sen eettispoliittisia ulottuvuuksia painottaen. Postmodernia katsomusta kuvastaa perinteisesti nihilismi ja yhdentekevyys, jotka ovat jäljitettävissä sen konstruktionistiseen todellisuuskäsitykseen. Tämän käsityksen mukaan todellisuus on pitkälti kielellisesti rakentunut, jonka vuoksi muun muassa yhteiskunnallisten rakenteiden katsotaan olevan pohjimmiltaan muutosalttiita. Postmodernin katsomuksen mukaan ihmisellä ei siten ole aitoa poliittista toimijuutta maailmassa. Postmodernin hegemoniakäsittelyn avulla tutkielma kuitenkin avaa näkemyksen siitä, kuinka samaiselle konstruktionistiselle todellisuuskäsitykselle voidaan rakentaa teoriaa toimijuudesta, joka mahdollistaisi myönteisen asennoitumisen poliittiseen muutokseen. Tutkielma soveltaa edellä mainittua hegemoniateoriaa analyttisenä mallina Mitchellin teosten temaattisessa tulkinnassa.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen perusteella Mitchellin teokset hyödyntävät postmodernismien konstruktionistista todellisuuskäsitystä ja tämän kirjallisia kuvantamiskeinoja puhuakseen globaalisti vastuullisemmän kehityksen puolesta. Tämä kanta tulee ilmi niin muodollisesti kuin temaattisesti. Muodollisesti <i>Cloud Atlas</i> kuvaa yhteen linkitettyjen pastissien eli tyylijäljitelmiä kautta sosiaalista vastuullisuutta ihmiskunnan monimuotoisuutta kohtaan. <i>The Bone Clocks</i> puolestaan paljastaa metafiktion eli kirjallisen itsetietoisuuden avulla kehitys-narratiivien sepitteellisen luonteen, jolloin moraalinen huomio kiinnitetään tarpeeseen ankkuroida yhteiskunnalliset narratiivit ekologisesti vastuullisemmalle perustalle. Temaattisesti ihmiskunnan kehitys jäsenetään molemmissa teoksissa vastuullisuuden ja itsekkyyden välisenä alituisena kiistanä, jossa ihmistoimijuus tunnustetaan keskeiseksi globaalin kehityksen luonteen määrittäjänä.</p> <p>Ihmiskunnan kehitys hahmotetaan romaaneissa elimellisesti kulttuurisena prosessina ja täten eettispoliittisten valintojen aikaansaamana ja alaisena kehityskulkuna. Näin teokset muistuttavat mahdollisuuskäsitteemme vaikuttavaa globalisoituneen maailmamme kehityksen suuntaan: koska sosiaalisesti konstruoitu todellisuus on muutosaltis, on toimijuudellamme täten merkittävä rooli kehityksen luonteen määrittämisessä. Muodollisen luennan kautta tutkielma osoittaa, kuinka postmoderneja kerronnan välineitä voidaan käyttää eettispoliittista eheyttä korostavilla tavoilla. Postmodernismia kriittisesti soveltamalla Mitchellin teokset välittävät toiveikkuutta ja muutosmahdollisuutta nykypäivän globaalisti verkottuneessa kontekstissa.</p>			
Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords David Mitchell, globalisaatio, postmodernismi, vastuullisuus, hegemonia			
Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited Helsingin yliopiston digitaalinen arkisto HELDA (E-thesis)			
Muita tietoja – Övriga uppgifter – Additional information			

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# INTRODUCTION:

## A Novel View of the World

This thesis is concerned with contemporary literary ways of conceptualizing and evaluating globalization. In its simplest sense, globalization means increased global interconnectedness. Yet by most accounts, globalization is a deeply contradictory phenomenon. It can concurrently be viewed as both a uniform or manifold process, or a set of processes; its effects as either conjunctive or disjunctive; its nature as either unprecedented in world history or just the latest version (albeit the most intensive one yet) of a historically recurring event.<sup>1</sup> For many, however, globalization essentially represents an extension and an amplification of the benefits or ills of the Western-led political economy (Jones 237–38; Saval n. pag.). Put simply, it seems money makes the world go around: transnational economic policies and arrangements largely define the texture, and fate, of the modern world.

At heart, however, globalization is a distinctly human phenomenon. The predominance of economic factors overlooks how globalization is not solely the operation of financial networks “of increasing global permeability,” as Mary Gallagher notes, “but also a cultural process” (26) reflecting human agency and experience. This bias informs critical analysis as well. For whereas the economic-political impacts of globalization are “exhaustively studied, the effects of this phenomenon ... on the ethical fabric of humanity’s imaginative relation to the world have received much less sustained critical attention” (Gallagher 34). In part, I address this blank spot in critical analysis by charting the ethico-political implications of global interconnectedness present in English novelist David Mitchell’s (b. 1969) world-spanning works *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and *The Bone Clocks* (2014).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Acclaimed sociologist Göran Therborn, for instance, argues that “six waves of globalization” (including the present one washing over Earth) can be discerned throughout human history (35–53).

<sup>2</sup> Note on in-text citations: where needed, references to *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* will be abbreviated throughout this study as *CA* and *BC* respectively.

For Mitchell, our imaginative relation to the wider world is distinctly myopic and skewed, resulting in the continued enforcement of self-harming paradigms of coexistence and development. As Mitchell admits around the time of *The Bone Clocks*' release, "I'm afraid our civilization is defecating in the well from which it draws life. ... We're intelligent but we're not wise" ("Questions and Answers" n. pag.). The picture that emerges from Mitchell's macroscopic works that traverse aeons and whole lifetimes is that we have successfully globalized our actions on this planet—but that our understanding of the consequences of these actions remains largely localized within culturally constructed boundaries. Thus, for Mitchell, globalization is an ethical issue that also requires political repositioning: a matter of formulating a global perspective that matches and informs our globe-defining capabilities.

As I will discuss throughout, the characteristic nature of Mitchell's fiction directs thinking on globalization to take place through an interrogation of postmodernism—in broad terms, a philosophical movement that rejects the possibility of objective reality, truth or point-of-view. In fact, "the literary reckoning with globalization," Suman Gupta notes more generally, "is rooted in and arguably begins with literary postmodernism" (102). This is not to say that postmodernism has the answers to the downsides of contemporary globalization. On the contrary, Peter Boxall explains how postmodernism has contributed to "a new kind of inarticulacy, a strange sense of disconnection, in response to a world that is more closely connected, more wired up" (*Twenty-First* 17) than previously experienced in human history. Postmodernism, in short, fails to define a constructive way of understanding this new cultural situation of the twenty-first-century (ibid.). Thinking globalization through postmodernist tenets, however, leads us to recognize that today's globalization "is not simply a novel phenomenon", unprecedented in its intensity and genuine planetary reach, "but is also a *discourse of novelty*" (Connell and Marsh 95, original italics). Through critical engagement with postmodernism, globalization can be revealed as a distinctly cultural, or humanly conceived process: an open-ended story, currently told by economic-political entities, that may in fact take any number of directions.

I argue that two general directions for this story centrally inform the imagination of Mitchell's works, reflecting the dual potential of humanity's developmental dynamics. As Boxall perceptively notes (*Twenty-First* 216), shared historical dialectics link Google Earth with global warming: the "very technological and cultural forces," he writes, which allow us to "see the world whole" also lead us to destroy "the environment we have

mastered”. I suggest that *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* tie this historical dialectic to the dichotomous impulses of humankind: responsibility and selfishness. For both novels, purely *selfish* motivations will drive human civilization towards destruction in the form of social and/or ecological exploitation. Yet on the other hand, we find that latent in our developmental dynamic is also the *responsible* route that gestures to peaceable coexistence. Mitchell, I argue, takes up what could be called the dialectics of globalization: a working towards alternative modes of worldbuilding—indeed, socio-ecologically responsible ones—that differ from the destructive stories told by rapacious agendas alone.

Moreover, this dialectic requires a novel view of the existing globalized world—one that breaks from postmodernism’s discouraging response, as identified by Boxall, to a world “more wired up” than anything before in human history. Our global system has genuinely constructive possibilities. Empirically, it may be, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri maintain, that globalization is a world-wide form of capitalist sovereignty producing alienation and poverty to all but the privileged few. But another “primary effect of globalization” *conceptually*, as Hardt and Negri note, “is the creation of a common world”:

a world that, for better or for worse, we all share, a world that has no “outside”.  
... [W]e have to recognize that, regardless of how brilliantly and trenchantly we critique it, we are destined to live in *this* world .... Abandon all dreams of political purity and “higher values” that would allow us to remain outside!  
(*Commonwealth* vii, original italics)

For many, globalization equals borderless exploitation, but it also means a framework for equitable global cooperation. In effect, if we strip “globalization” (the story, or, discursive construction) from its characteristic power relations, we are left with the bare notion of “global interconnectedness”. We are all in the same boat, as it were—and for Mitchell, this situation provides clear ethical parameters within which humanity must conduct itself. In *Cloud Atlas* (discussed in chapter 3), dreams of “political purity” are shattered by the sheer diversity of global demographics. And in *The Bone Clocks* (the subject of chapter 4), “higher values” allowing us “to remain outside” are undermined by the hard materiality of the world and our existence in it. What Mitchell proposes, then, is that we act responsibly towards the social and ecological conditions of our one and only globe as it currently stands.

To this end, Mitchell's fiction constructs an interface between globalization and postmodernism. Centrally, I shall argue that through dialectical engagement with the theoretical and formal tropes of postmodernism, David Mitchell re-conceptualizes global interconnectedness to correspond to a socio-ecologically responsible ethical outlook. In evoking a planetary sense of scale, *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* denounce selfishness by placing the political implications of human agency in their proper, global perspective. What these novels suggest is that if we can recognize the profound effects our stories can have globally, we can perhaps understand that the purely rapacious actions derived from our current diffuse-yet-dominant narratives of capitalist gain can only lead to our collective downfall. In response to a world determined by recurrent motifs of personal gain, competition and exploitation, Mitchell articulates ways in which we can imagine alternative modes of society-building and world-formation—ones that take into equitable account the essential multiplicity and materiality of our common world.

### **1.1. Outline and Methodology**

This central argument, as well as the various sub-themes outlined above, will be developed throughout this study. After outlining the methodology guiding my argument, this introductory chapter presents the novels in question in the form of plot synopses in section 1.2., and a selected overview of critical response in section 1.3. Chapter 2, "Towards Responsible Worldbuilding", maps out the conceptual framework supporting my overall argument. Chapters 3 and 4, in turn, comprise my critical analyses of *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks*. These individual readings follow closely on the framework established in chapter 2, but also extend the argumentation in line with the novels' own characteristic emphases. The concluding chapter ties the novels together, but also takes the opportunity to discuss the view Mitchell's fiction takes on our global near-future: Is there one? What will it look like? Who is to determine it, and does it have to look the way it does?

As I suggest throughout, Mitchell's response to these questions comes through a critically discerning dialogue with postmodernism's central tenets. It therefore becomes important to trace the implications of this dialogue. As discussed in chapter 2, Mitchell's composite novels are comprised of richly various stories. They are distinctly postmodernist in literary form, featuring stylistic *bricolage*, narrative fragmentation and intense self-awareness among other traits. Yet the ethically *positive* sensibility of Mitchell's novels betray their formally postmodernist casings, for postmodernism is by

and large associated with “nihilism, solipsism and deconstruction of values, subjects and agency” (Huber 48). According to Alex Callinicos, the “wit” and “irony” of postmodernist discourse reflects “the collapse of belief in the possibility ... of global political transformation” (22). Arguably, postmodernism’s emblematically “negative” sensibility comes from its troubled relation with the essentially *contingent* nature of our existence: as Linda Hutcheon argues, “[w]hat postmodern theory and practice together suggest is that everything always was ‘cultural’ ... that is, always mediated by representation[s]” (32) that we create through language. In other words, postmodernism claims that nothing has objective validity: because things—e.g. social systems, community, laws—are linguistically, or, textually built, they are entirely frail and unstable. Mitchell, I argue, accepts the textual nature of social reality but rejects postmodernism’s “negative” reaction to it in favour of a sensibility conducive to globally constructive values and agency.

The concluding section of chapter 2 shows how this radically poststructuralist view of reality translates into a constructive outlook that accentuates human agency in both *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks*. The concept of “hegemony”, I suggest, is central to understanding the political workings of both novels. Hence, it forms the primary analytical tool of my readings in chapters 3 and 4. Briefly, “hegemony” refers to the power of the dominant discourse in a given social setting (be it local, regional, national or global).<sup>3</sup> Social settings, however, as described above, are constantly subject to change; therefore any social order is always only the momentary expression of power relations that needs to be continually renegotiated through discursive articulations and actions that strive to define the social sphere (Mouffe 2; Laclau and Mouffe 85–86; Critchley, “Is There” 113–14).

It is this aspect of continuous political renegotiation, ingrained in the concept of hegemony (as Laclau and Mouffe describe it) and thematically present in Mitchell’s novels, that makes re-imagining global interconnectedness possible. Contemporary globalization is increasingly deplored as an economic network of social and ecological exploitation strongly determined by egoistic interests and the profit motive. Still, as Chantal Mouffe explains:

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<sup>3</sup> As I shall explain in more detail in section 2.3., my use of “hegemony” follows the post-Marxist notion as originated by political activist Antonio Gramsci, and later significantly refined by political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their seminal co-authored work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.



[E]very order ... result[s] from a given hegemonic configuration of power relations. The present state of globalization, far from being ‘natural’, ... is structured through specific relations of power. This means that *it can be challenged and transformed, and that alternatives are indeed available*. (Mouffe 131–32, my italics)

Like postmodernism, hegemony also involves seeing social reality as linguistically constructed and hence defined by contingency. But where the former is characterized by political indeterminacy, hegemony can be seen “as a theory of the decision taken in an undecidable terrain” (Laclau and Mouffe xi). Significantly, this scenario is reflected in both *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks*. Both novels form narrative realities through postmodernist techniques evolved to depict contingency and complexity, yet we see in Mitchell’s stories the commitment to a clear moral vision of a socio-ecologically responsible form of global interconnectedness. Indeed, far from being “natural”, a world corrupted by selfish stories *can* be challenged and transformed if we decide and act accordingly. As Adam Ewing, one of *Cloud Atlas*’s six protagonists, remarks: we need only to “*believe*” in the values we want to effect, and act in corresponding ways, then “such a world will come to pass” (528, my italics).

## 1.2. Plot Synopses

### *Cloud Atlas*

Greater than the sum of its parts, *Cloud Atlas* features six highly distinct novellas tied into a novel by virtue of common themes and various interconnecting strategies. Structurally, the six narratives are divided into eleven chapters, where each successive narrative is interrupted halfway and embedded into the next apart from the sixth narrative, which forms the novel’s fulcrum as well as its furthest, unembedded story level. Following the sixth narrative, the remaining narratives are recommenced in reversed order. Hence, the chapter order of the novel is as follows: 1–2–3–4–5–6–5–4–3–2–1.

The novel is bookended by “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing” set in 1850, in which the eponymous American notary relates his homeward voyage aboard the *Prophetess* from the Chatham Islands, home of the enslaved aboriginal Moriori people. Ewing’s hardships commence when Henry Goose, the ship’s acting doctor and confidence trickster, begins a sinister scam: under a false diagnosis, Goose slowly poisons Ewing to rob him of his possessions. As the *Prophetess* makes port in Hawai‘i, Ewing, robbed and dying, is abruptly saved by Autua, a Moriori stowaway for whom Ewing had

earlier on helped to secure passage as crewmember. Following Autua's deed, and after personal ruminations, Ewing pledges himself to the Abolitionist cause upon return to his native San Francisco.

Set between June and December 1931, the second story is comprised of "Letters from Zedelghem" written by Robert Frobisher, a young English composer, to his friend Rufus Sixsmith. Disinherited and in debt, Frobisher takes his chances on a self-imposed exile to Belgium, where he establishes himself as an amanuensis for the aged and decrepit Vyvyan Ayrs, a famed British composer of atonal music. What began in summer as a fruitful partnership, inspiring Frobisher to work on his own *Cloud Atlas Sextet*, turns, by early winter, into Ayrs openly exploiting Frobisher's talents and ideas. Frobisher escapes to Bruges, where as his life unravels his music comes into being. Upon completing his *Sextet*, Frobisher leaves a final letter and commits suicide.

The third narrative is a fast-paced thriller set in the mock-Californian town of "Buenas Yervas" in 1975. "Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery" follows journalist Luisa Rey's efforts to expose the corruption behind Seaboard Inc., the corporation behind the town's soon-to-be-operational nuclear power plant. Of central importance is a secret report revealing the plant's fatal design flaws written by would-be whistle-blower Dr Sixsmith (the recipient of Frobisher's letters), whom Seaboard assassinates before he goes public. As several parties converge on the Sixsmith Report, Luisa is thrown into multiple life-threatening situations. With the sacrificial help of ex-Seaboard personnel, Luisa obtains the report for a successful exposé.

"The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish", the fourth novella, is the memoirs of the eponymous picaresque vanity publisher teetering on the brink of old age. Set in the early 2000s, Cavendish's ordeals begin on his defaulting on royalty payments, fleeing his gangster-like creditors to Hull, where he unwittingly finds himself imprisoned in Aurora House, a nursing home for the elderly. Armed only with his wit, Cavendish struggles in vain against his new infantilizing reality, falling into despair until he joins a secret resistance movement (made up of fellow housemates Ernie, Victoria and Mr Meeks) plotting escape. Their breakout succeeds: the party of four find freedom and Cavendish sees a happy return to his publishing day job in London.

The novel's fifth narrative, "An Orison of Sonmi~451", takes place in a dystopian Korea of the future called Nea So Copros and comprises the interview of death row political prisoner Sonmi~451, a member of society's cloned and genetically engineered working classes known as fabricants. Arrested for attempting to foment a fabricant

uprising against the totalitarian “corpocratic” regime, the interview provides Sonmi’s account of the events leading to her political radicalization. Through her answers, Sonmi reveals the absurd predacity underlying her society: that corpocracy functions on the exploitation of fabricants as a disposable labour force and their reprocessing as protein nutrient. Understanding this has led to the creation of her anti-corpocratic *Declarations*, quickly followed by her arrest and trial.

Set after the “Fall” of civilization, the final story, “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After”, is the oral narrative of Zachry recounting the events leading to his exile from the “Big I o’ Ha-Why” (Hawai‘i Island). Meronym, outlander of the far more advanced Prescient people, comes on a mission to live among Zachry’s Valleymen, a peaceful tribe who worship the goddess Sonmi. Accompanying her up Mauna Kea to look for remnants of the “Old’uns” civilization, Zachry combats his own prejudices and the urge (spurred by Old Georgie, the devil in tribal cosmology) to kill Meronym. Following their return, the rapacious Kona tribe ambush and enslave the Valleymen: Meronym rescues Zachry, and together they undertake a precarious journey towards a Prescient airship. Upon reaching their destination, Zachry, knowing all is lost on the “Big I”, leaves with the Prescients to continue life elsewhere.

As with a patchwork quilt comprised of diverse cloths, describing a single patch fails to account for the nature of the end product. These collated pastiches that comprise *Cloud Atlas*, differing in scope, setting and tone, contribute equally to the overall picture presented by the novel, showing how social differences can be acknowledged as equally influential parts of a finite totality. By presenting different struggles within a contained collage, Mitchell foregrounds the shared ethics that underline these struggles. Each story, set in a spatiotemporally unique context featuring various kinds of people, is equally a part of the whole that is *Cloud Atlas*, just as each person is equally part of the whole that is our world. As I discuss in chapter 3, “Patchwork and Suture”, the novel amounts to an expression of responsibility towards global multiplicity in its formal and thematic reflection of interconnectedness.

### ***The Bone Clocks***

Also composed of six, semi-independent novella-like chapters, *The Bone Clocks* follows the genre-hopping construction of *Cloud Atlas*, albeit anchoring its stylistic exuberance largely within the span of a single lifetime. That lifetime belongs to Holly Sykes: the central heroine and focal point, whose life is viewed through her I-narration and that of

others whose lives cross Holly's at various points in time and in junctures of world development. As the novel unfolds across several timescales simultaneously, different narrative contexts are shown to overlap in asymmetrical ways, emphasizing the need to prioritize amid conflicting situations.

"A Hot Spell" in June 1984 sees Holly, a tetchy fifteen-year-old "punkette", running away from home in Gravesend, Kent. On its own, Holly's naïve narration relates adolescent growing pains replete with heartbreak and defiance. Yet interspersed with her escape are uncanny incidents whose full significance remain hidden until chapter five. Holly, for instance, meets a strange old lady called Esther Little seeking "asylum", as well as hitches a ride from a student couple—befriending them only for the whole sequence of events to be mysteriously "redacted" from Holly's memory. Holly's narrative ends abruptly with Ed Brubeck, a schoolmate secretly infatuated with her, alerting Holly to the disappearance of her strange little brother Jacko: an event that casts a shadow over Holly for decades to come.

A campus and crime story set in 1991, the second chapter "Myrrh is Mine, It's Bitter Perfume" is narrated by Hugo Lamb, a politics major in his early twenties, whose Machiavellian morality sees him ruthlessly exploiting others for selfish gain. During a holiday with his Cambridge coterie at the Swiss Alps involving drugs and debauchery, Hugo meets a reticent barmaid, Holly Sykes, and begins a cat-and-mouse courtship leading Hugo to fall in love (against his better, emotionally dissociating judgment). Mysterious events, however, lead Hugo to a crossroads as it transpires he has been headhunted by an elite group of predatory immortals, the Anchorites: accepting the Faustian pact on offer, Hugo leaves love and normality behind to join the paranormal Anchorite order.

Set in Brighton, England and the Iraq War in 2004, the third chapter entitled "The Wedding Bash" juxtaposes the two contrasting settings through Ed Brubeck; now a cynical-yet-determined war correspondent on leave to attend a Sykes family wedding. Partnered with Holly, now in her mid-thirties, and father of their six-year-old daughter Aoife, Ed struggles to balance profession and family—a schism further exacerbated by Ed's denial that he is a "war junkie". The mundane proceedings of the wedding are punctured with fragments of Ed's adrenalin-infused "'Official Bullcrap versus Facts on the Ground' piece" (227) depicting the absurdity of life in US-occupied Iraq. In Brighton, following Aoife's sudden disappearance (and rediscovery through Holly's seizure-like

“psychic” moment), Ed confides in Holly the full extent of his shell-shocked embroilment in the war and his estrangement from Western society.

The period between 2015–2020 that covers the novel’s globetrotting fourth chapter, “Crispin Hershey’s Lonely Planet”, traces the personal purgatory of the titular postmodern novelist (“the Wild Child of British Letters”) whose career plummets after his comeback novel is decimated by the critic Richard Cheeseman. A satiric *Künstlerroman*, the chapter charts Crispin’s development from an intensely egotistical and sardonic author, beaten into submission by remorse, to a modest creative writing lecturer capable of genuine kindness. Supporting him is his newly-acquired friend, the widowed Holly Sykes: now an author propelled into reluctant fame through her spiritual/psychic memoirs written to reach her still-missing brother Jacko. Taking a properly metafictional turn, however, Crispin’s story ends abruptly with his death due to his unwitting involvement in the elusive entity known as the “Script” (essentially an allegory for Mitchell’s *The Bone Clocks* manuscript) and its slyly intrusive paranormal war that makes up novel’s fantasy sub-plot.

Chapter five, “An Horologist’s Labyrinth”, then, is where the hitherto glimpsed at paranormal cosmology of the “Script” is fully revealed and the cross-dimensional Atemporal War that has been waged in secret for centuries reaches its conclusion. Overtly stylized as kitschy fantasy set in 2025, the Horologist Marinus’s narration takes us through the complex circumstances that free Esther Little (the strange old lady from “A Hot Spell”) from her “asylum” within the mind of Holly Sykes: a vital part of the Horologists’ offensive against Hugo Lamb’s Anchorite order. A mere mortal in her mid-fifties, Holly finds herself embroiled in the frenzied “psychosoteric” battle set in another dimension (“the Dusk”) that barely ends in Horology’s favour. Holly escapes the Dusk through a labyrinth created decades ago in June 1984 (during Holly’s teenage escape) by the Horologist Xi Lo—better known to Holly as her brother Jacko.

“Sheep’s Head”, the concluding chapter, sees a seventy-five-year-old Holly residing in Ireland’s Sheep’s Head peninsula with a family consisting of her orphaned teenage granddaughter Lorelei and adopted refugee boy Rafiq. Life in 2043 is precarious as civilization has plunged into “Endarkenment”: ties formed during the golden age of globalization are rapidly severed as we learn through Holly’s regretful narration of aberrant ecological forces having laid waste prominent cities of the world and the ensuing crises ravaging and re-fashioning the world order. Following the sudden termination of the Chinese trade treaty that effectively sustains the West Cork Lease Lands, bigotry and

violence break out within the Cordon that protects Holly's makeshift pocket of civilization. As things become increasingly grim, a *deus ex machina* organized by the Horologist Marinus can only give a bittersweet resolution to the novel: Lorelei and Rafiq receive lifelines to a stable Iceland, while Holly—content the children are shown hope—is left to face her rapidly disintegrating community.

As this synopsis suggests, *The Bone Clocks* mediates between reality and fantasy, “fact” and “fiction”, to distinguish between contexts that can *potentially* affect anyone in the world, and those that *necessarily* affect the whole of human civilization. The novel's fantasy narrative abruptly overtakes the “[l]ittle, local, normal stuff” (BC 451) of everyday reality, describing heady abstractions that may, as the novel's events show, bear consequences for oblivious by-standers. Narratives, then, true or false, have tremendous power in influencing what happens in reality. In chapter 4, “Perspective Distortions”, I shall describe how Mitchell uses metafiction to uncover the possibilities and limits of narrative efficacy. And in doing so, I argue that *The Bone Clocks* compels us to acknowledge everyday, or, worldly reality as the proper moral basis for our reality-defining narratives lest abstractions lead us towards the environmental collapse depicted in “Sheep's Head”.

### 1.3. Overview of Critical Response

As a writer of maximalist tendencies renowned for his stylistic creativity and liking for generic blending, David Mitchell is perhaps impossible to confine within strictly conventional parameters of literary and critical theory. The theoretical breadth of responses to both *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* seems only to confirm the multiplicity these novels portray. As one commentator writes of *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell's most widely read and discussed work to date), “[t]he complex structure and numerous ideas Mitchell explores lend themselves to viewing the novel through a variety of critical lenses” (Brown 77). Mitchell's fiction, then, tends to intellectual inclusivity: its manifest formal experimentation and thematic multiplicity nudging us to rethink the boundaries within which we perceive and interrogate our thoroughly—and globally—interconnected twenty-first-century social realities and the literatures that attempt to portray them.

Despite a variety of approaches, however, a consensus converges around the importance of *form* to Mitchell's works, with many critics engaging in stylistic and/or structural considerations in at least some significant aspects of their readings (see esp. Knepper; Mezey; Parker). In his magisterial study of Mitchell's novelistic oeuvre prior to

the 2015 horror mystery *Slade House*, Patrick O'Donnell asserts how in *Cloud Atlas*, “the mode of narrative transmission is a primary aspect of narrative meaning; narrative form implicates *philosophical perspective, politics, and historiographic context*” (74, my italics). This claim need not restrict itself to one novel only, but applies readily to any Mitchell novel published so far.

Closely following these implications for formal interpretation, moreover, is a critical debate on how to best characterize Mitchell generically: whether his fiction is postmodernist through-and-through, or if it is perhaps better described by some other rubric and its associated word cloud of ideas and qualities. In terms of philosophical and historiographic context, Joseph Metz's analysis of fantasy in *The Bone Clocks* traces the theoretical antinomies that characterize rival conceptions of historiography (3–6), pronouncing the Atemporal War between the Horologists and the Anchorites to be about “contesting ways of thinking history, memory, and the archive” (1). For Metz, the protagonist Horologists exhibit a “pre-postmodern” (4) outlook, evoking the historical-philosophical conceptions of Walter Benjamin as theoretical validation for his conclusion. (Incidentally, O'Donnell's reading likewise explains *The Bone Clocks*' timescape through Benjaminian theory [177].) Enacting a historiographic reading of her own, Maria Beville in turn convincingly argues that *Cloud Atlas*'s sense of time “abjures postmodern paradigms of uncertainty” (1), exhibiting a move (contra Metz's argument) “past the ‘post-’ of postmodernism” (2) as the novel anchors “circularity and causality” (3) as foundational to history. In both critics' understanding, the postmodern conception of time and history as “blank duration” (Metz 4), therefore, acts as a departure point for Mitchell's response to the “sense of apathy [or] fatigue, conventionally associated with postmodern writing” (Beville 4). However, their differing assessments of the direction of Mitchell's stance (“pre-” versus “post-postmodern”) only testifies to the potential nebulousness of “postmodernism” and “historiography” as critical concepts.

Consonant with Beville's view, Kevin Brown also reads Mitchell as “post-postmodernist”. Operating on broadly political terms, Brown links *Cloud Atlas*'s postmodernist form to a normative intent whereby Mitchell urges us to contemplate “the power of story to change others' lives” (81). Evoking the generic tag “New Sincerity” most famously associated with David Foster Wallace, Brown contrasts the *sincere* metafictionality of *Cloud Atlas* against the strictly “parodic, playful” (78) one of archetypal postmodernists like John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov or Italo Calvino, who

“often questioned the power of narrative within their own fictions” (ibid.).<sup>4</sup> Brown rightly argues that Mitchell reminds us of the efficacy of narratives in shaping our lives. His concluding argument, however, that “we tell our stories to keep people alive because ... our stories are our lives” (89) is a good deal more problematic, for not all stories are predicated on the preservation of life.<sup>5</sup> Lacking sensitivity to ideological undercurrents, Brown overlooks the fact that stories may not be unequivocally “good”: stories, for instance, may just as well be destructive or biased towards a specific bloc’s interests. In a social body, defining “good” is more likely a matter of incessant dispute and struggle that varies according to differing viewpoints and aspirations. In applying the concept of cultural hegemony in my readings, I aim to further clarify this aspect of political realism present in both novels.

Critics who understand predation and/or cannibalism as central to Mitchell’s works usually place it within Mitchell’s awareness that ideological struggle and conflict is endemic to human existence. Most inclusively, Peter Childs considers predation to be the “consistent and stark” (183) thread running throughout the fictional universe of Mitchell’s self-stylized “Überbook” (“On Reappearing Characters” 620), evinced in the “cross-generational re-emergences of an unceasing struggle between peaceful and predatory forces” (Childs 191–92) extending from *Ghostwritten* (1999) to *The Bone Clocks* (2014) and beyond. Similarly, Lynda Ng contends that as *Cloud Atlas* represents cannibalism as a “trope for savagery”, it “(re)stag[es] the perennial conflict between Hobbesian and Rousseauian conceptions of nature and humanity’s place within it” (107). For Ng, arguably missing Mitchell’s optimistic drift, “Hobbes, to put it bluntly, consumes Rousseau” (117). On an emphatically globalist scale, Wendy Knepper’s suggestive Marxist-inflected reading of *Cloud Atlas* likens cannibalistic themes to a critique of transnational capitalist practices of conquest and dispossession, ranging from “the world of mini-systems” of Zachry’s age to the “world-system of global capitalism” in Sonmi’s time (104).

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<sup>4</sup> Differentiation from Italo Calvino is especially apt as Mitchell has on several occasions confirmed Calvino’s notoriously “incomplete” novel, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, as the primary structural inspiration for *Cloud Atlas*. Mitchell recounts that, while writing his “devout MA on (ahem) ‘The Postmodern Novel’”, his “curiosity got stung to the core by the question, ‘What would a novel where interrupted narratives are continued later look like?’” (“Enter the Maze” n. pag.). Thankfully, we have Mitchell’s answer in *Cloud Atlas*.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as I shall discuss in my reading of *Cloud Atlas* in chapter 3, racist stories of human hierarchy or of the inherently rapacious nature of humanity facilitate exploitation (and death) on multiple levels.



Yet to me, a singular focus on predation and cannibalism distorts any attempt in seeking to understand the full ethico-political dynamics guiding the spatiotemporally interconnected contexts of Mitchell's novels. In the works I have chosen for study, while capitalism is recognized as a significant destructive factor, it is not the root cause but merely the historically situated systemic extension of a human impulse that may assume other forms or take on other implications. In Knepper's and Ng's usage particularly, cannibalism becomes too overpowering a metaphor that it sets severe conceptual restrictions, simplifying Mitchell's intertwined social and ecological concerns. Cannibalism-as-capitalism-or-savagery readily recognizes the nature and extent of socio-anthropological destruction, but is less sensitive to environmental harm evinced in both novels (as well as in our present, globalized Western capitalist reality).

Some critics (including myself) focus on the way Mitchell's globalist and panoramic scope contributes to our ethico-political understanding of interconnectedness and interdependence. As Kristian Shaw argues, "Mitchell's fiction is especially powered by this dynamic interplay between global and local processes" (120). Skilfully combining formal and ethical explication, Jason Mezey sees *Cloud Atlas*'s narrative and thematic "recursiveness" (or 'doubling back on itself') as creating the novel's "epic scope" (17) through which it forces "a sharp sense of ethical clarity about the individual's obligations to a global totality" (12)—crystallized in the *glocal* motto "think globally, act locally" (Mezey 12). Following the conceptual lead of Berthold Schoene, Kristian Shaw sees *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* as fundamentally promoting cosmopolitanism: the moral-political conception of humanity as forming a single inclusive community of shared morality (110, 120; see also Schoene 97–125). While rightly seeing Mitchell as responding to the "normative anxieties about globalization" (116), Shaw's cosmopolitan approach risks simplification, diluting the polyphony and multiplicity of Mitchell's pastiches and overlapping narrative structuring. Patrick O'Donnell's assessment of *Cloud Atlas*'s political framework similarly risks over-simplification: "[T]he story of civilization," O'Donnell suggests, "seems one of an endless repetition of utopic and dystopic extremes, the dream of permanent domain built upon the nightmare of exploitation extending into a timeless future" (94). Despite acknowledging that "[t]he emphasis in the novel's chains of circumstance is not based on notions of progress or advancement, but on contingency" (83–84), in likening historical progression in *Cloud Atlas* to a rhythmic, pendulum-like swing between ideational extremes, O'Donnell effectively overlooks the significance of *human agency* in the face of contingency. For as

I shall argue in subsequent sections, an active political impetus informs not only many of the central characters, but also the very literary performance of both novels, in articulating a moral message of responsibility against predominant expressions of selfishness.

Although *The Bone Clocks* has received noticeably less critical attention than the commercially acclaimed *Cloud Atlas*, the prominent approach thus far has been the novel's fantasy plot-line involving the Horologist–Anchorite war. As in Joseph Metz's reading briefly recounted above, the allegorical implications of the Atemporal War have not gone unnoticed within critical study (see e.g. Childs; Harris). Patrick O'Donnell's keen interpretation of mortality reflected in the *modus operandi* of the cosmic war's belligerent factions somewhat ignores the full ethico-political dimensions of the novel, including the more contained narratives of Holly, Hugo, Ed and Crispin, alongside what I argue to be the novel's foundational narrative concerning global development and the prospects of human civilization. Paul Harris, in his review article of *The Bone Clocks*, displays a sense of this hierarchy of narratives when he argues that the novel's "kaleidoscopic-episodic" (148) narrative progression "makes us feel viscerally that we live and act not only in human history but earth history" (151). *The Bone Clocks*, in other words, presents a form of "Anthropocene memory" (Harris 152)—and although Harris does not delve deeper into the socio-political dynamics at play, he certainly recognizes the main problematics Mitchell deals with: that human beings and their stories carry enormous potential for change, even on a planetary scale.

To conclude, David Mitchell is a novelist preoccupied with depicting human actions and their far-reaching consequences. Luke Hortle contends that although posthumanist themes are used in *Cloud Atlas* to ontologically critique aspects of human behaviour (268)—affording a defamiliarizing lens through which to observe humanity itself—the novel is overtaken by a "neohumanist resurgence [of] normative humanity" (258). It seems as if Hortle chastises Mitchell for writing about ordinary humanness; that it is a form of "anthropic irony [that] in thinking beyond the human we meet ourselves yet again" (ibid.). But I argue that the prospect of a *post*-human time—which inspires a whole generation of contemporary writers (Boxall, *Twenty-First* 14)—galvanizes Mitchell's fiction into discussing what must human agency, society and civilization be like to save itself from self-asphyxiation. My view is, that in Mitchell's novels, progression towards social and/or ecological destruction is not inevitable but entirely contingent on power relations and political agency. Humanity does not and *cannot* form a single community under a shared "world consciousness"; rather, humanity features

conflicting beliefs and stories vying for cultural power to fashion the rules of social and environmental interactions. Herein, however, lies the gateway to optimism in Mitchell's works: because any political order or trajectory is mainly the one-sided expression of a particular belief, there is always the possibility to effect alternative ways of fashioning common spaces and rules for interaction through struggle and dissent. The question I will now turn to, is how (and what kind of) literary articulation facilitates Mitchell's answer for an ethico-political re-fashioning of global interconnectedness—and what this re-fashioning entails.

## 2

# Towards Responsible Worldbuilding

### 2.1. “Two Faces to Globalization”

The central problematic underlying Mitchell’s fiction concerns our perceived inability to fully comprehend the implications our actions can have globally. Indeed, our *technical* grasp of the world seems to greatly surpass our *moral* understanding of planetary totality. Today, technology enables us to create intense global networks of trade, transport, communication and so on. Yet the emergence of tensions that risk escalating into major social conflicts, as well as the accelerating pace of ecological deterioration slowly and surely undermining civilization, suggest that current paradigms of development are untenable in the long run. In a word, the multiple processes and networks of contemporary globalization are marked by severe power imbalances across social and ecological axes. This chapter argues how Mitchell urges us to develop an ethical outlook directly attuned to global multitude—i.e. the rich variety of human identities—and global finitude—the material limitations of our physical planet. Given the immense effect humanity has on the world, Mitchell suggests we need to rethink our global outlook along more socio-ecologically responsible lines lest our current planetary actions become our own undoing.

This rethinking of our global outlook is possible if we understand that contemporary globalization is open to other possibilities. Hardt and Negri, for example, maintain that the key to global change is to recognize that there are, in fact, “two faces to globalization” (*Multitude* xiii). On one side, globalization merely reflects capitalist ideals of competition and exploitation; this is the face which determines much of our global reality and interactions (*Multitude* 273–78; see also *Empire* 40–46). Globalization as capitalist imperialism seeks to circumvent any barrier, social or ecological, preventing it from turning a profit, whether by homogenizing cultural multiplicity or exploiting the natural environment. On the other hand, however:

Globalization ... is also the creation of new circuits of cooperation and collaboration that stretch across nations and continents and allow an unlimited number of encounters. This second face of globalization is not a matter of

everyone in the world becoming the same; rather, it provides the possibility that, while remaining different, we discover the commonality that enables us to communicate and act together. (*Multitude* xiii–xiv)

That is, globalization also provides the rudimentary infrastructure upon which more harmonious or just forms of coexistence can be built. Contemporary concerns such as rising global inequality and increasing environmental degradation suggest this infrastructure is currently utilized in socio-ecologically destructive ways. A way to revert this development, Hardt and Negri suggest, is to release the latent potential of globalization currently smothered by globalized capitalist processes.

Mitchell acknowledges this duality expressed by Hardt and Negri but situates it within a broader dynamic shaping history and civilization. In *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks*, the two faces to globalization gain emphatically *human* features, reflecting two contrasting-yet-supplementary sides to the human psyche in the form of selfishness and responsibility. Indeed, the struggle between these forces forms the central dynamic of both novels on deeply interrelated levels. Crucially for Mitchell’s ethical argument, selfish motives enacted on a global scale lead invariably to humanity’s demise. As Adam Ewing fears in his mid-nineteenth-century “Pacific Journal”, “one fine day, a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself” (CA 528, original italics). End-of-the-world scenarios depicted in both novels—whether through nuclear apocalypse as hinted in “Sloosha’s Crossin’” in *Cloud Atlas*, or ecological collapse ongoing in the final chapter of *The Bone Clocks*—are characterized as resulting from a selfish mindset bent on rapacious or self-gratifying actions, dressed in different guises throughout history.

For Mitchell, the inevitable outcomes of current trajectories can be avoided, provided we adopt a more responsible outlook in our daily lives and on global development. Mitchell is not a “political” writer in the sense that he cannot be read as advocating any specific form of socio-political organization or global system. Rather, as I shall describe in this chapter, Mitchell’s depiction of ongoing struggles between selfish and responsible forces across interconnected narrative settings spanning centuries and the globe, aims at formulating the kind of ethical outlook according to which a more sustainable global future can be built. *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* show that the nature of global totality—replete with myriad interconnections rendering us dependent on each other and the planet in countless ways—morally obligates us towards global responsibility.

## 2.2. New Uses for Old Tools

Mitchell's fiction confronts problems of twenty-first-century globalism through what could be called a "dialectical evaluation" of postmodern literary and theoretical tradition. Postmodernism is (or was) not just a passing cultural fancy.<sup>1</sup> Peter Boxall explains that a great number of "the signature intellectual formations of the last century ... have been bound up with the thinking of postmodernism" (*Twenty-First* 15). He cites identity-based politics as a prominent example, but also the wide-ranging "general emphasis on *the textuality of our environments*, to the neglect of their material realities" (ibid., my italics). This latter point, as I explore below, is particularly pertinent to Mitchell, who treats the notion of textuality as a double-edged sword throughout both novels. On one hand, textuality for postmodernism has historically led to nihilism, or, a sense of meaninglessness to existence and society (Jameson 392). This postmodern sensibility, Hardt and Negri write, "is linked to the traditions of 'negative thought'" that downplay our capacity for positive change (*Commonwealth* 114), and is therefore severely inconducive to the responsible outlook Mitchell wants to express. On the other hand, as Mitchell's works show through their literary form, postmodern narrative tools are suitable for portraying a thoroughly complex, interconnected and textually conceived world. Overlapping narrative layers and the juxtaposition of difference and multiplicity, for example, convey fragmentation and contingency as potential platforms for positive creativity in *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks*. Effectively, Mitchell's novels constitute an attempt to put postmodernism's key intellectual findings to constructive use through a globally conscious sensibility.

The postmodern sensibility is felt by some, including Mitchell, to be "leading nowhere". There has arisen the need, however—over concern for contemporary socio-ecological circumstances—to "go somewhere". As contemporary philosopher Simon Critchley writes, "we have to resist and reject the temptation of nihilism and face up to the hard reality of the world" (*Infinitely Demanding* 6; see also Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth* xiv). Eminent theorist David Harvey specifically condemns postmodernism's inability to confront global realities due to its "penchant for deconstruction bordering on nihilism" (117). For Harvey, postmodernism's "dissolution of all narratives and meta-theories into ... [mere] language games" leads invariably to

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<sup>1</sup> See the introductory chapter to Irmtraud Huber's *Literature after Postmodernism*, aptly named "Epitaph on a Ghost", for a good overview of the discussion surrounding the ambiguous existence but resilient influence of postmodernism in literary culture today.

solipsism and anxiety (ibid.; see also Huber 4–5)—and its total indifference towards any form of structure means it “swims, even wallows, in ... the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is” (44). Mitchell, I argue, like Harvey and Critchley, in some respects rejects postmodernism as detrimental and counterproductive. Artist-characters such as *Cloud Atlas*’s elderly composer Vyvyan Ayrs (discussed below) epitomize the anxiety of nihilistic and excessively ironic postmodernism. Still, postmodernism is right in stressing all is in flux: as Holly Sykes remarks, “[c]hange is sort of hardwired into the world .... If life didn’t change, it wouldn’t be life, it’d be a photograph” (BC 578). Similarly, tangible structures can also be frail: “Even photos change, mind. They fade” (ibid.). Change, then, is the default mode of existence—and Mitchell proposes we make the best of it and move on, as opposed to endlessly deconstructing and wittily ironizing present societal systems and circumstances. In philosophical terms, Mitchell accepts postmodern ontology and epistemology which conceive reality as socially constructed and textually knowable, yet rejects postmodernism’s sense of ethics and political action. *The Bone Clocks*’ Crispin Hershey, postmodern novelist, comes to realize the futility of this wallowing in “text” while dedicating a copy of his novel to an acquaintance. Crispin struggles “to think of something witty to mark the occasion,” before finally settling on the simple and sincere “*To Örvar, from Crispin, with best regards*” (BC 375). As Crispin thinks to himself, “I’ve striven to be witty since [my debut novel]. Letting it go feels so sodding liberating” (ibid.).

Although evident across Mitchell’s novels, this notion of adapting or appropriating postmodernism is explicitly developed in *Cloud Atlas*’s “Letters from Zedelghem”, through Robert Frobisher’s description of his decrepit employer Vyvyan Ayrs. Effectively, Ayrs personifies the political and aesthetic views of postmodernism.<sup>2</sup> In terms of politics, Frobisher notes Ayrs “rarely proposes any alternatives for the systems he ridicules. ‘Liberality? Timidity in the rich!’; ‘Socialism? The younger brother of a decrepit despotism, which it wants to succeed’; ‘Conservatives? Adventitious liars, whose doctrine of free will is their greatest deception’” (61). Echoing David Harvey’s assessment of postmodernism, nothing meaningful emerges from Ayrs’s witty deconstructions. Moreover, Ayrs’s physical decrepitude further underscores the futility

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<sup>2</sup> This personification is reinforced through repeated allusions to Nietzsche—indeed, as Jo Alyson Parker notes, “the shade of Friedrich Nietzsche haunts *Cloud Atlas*” (208; see also Childs 188). Nietzsche’s link to postmodernism is significant: he is widely considered a central precursor to postmodern thought (especially in his influence on thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard) as well as being a regular topic of discussion among postmodern theorists today (Aylesworth n. pag.; see also Callinicos 62–91).

of his nihilistic outlook, being unable to compose new music on his own (leading him to hire Frobisher as his amanuensis in the first place). Mitchell, however, carefully distinguishes between postmodern politics and expression. Although, politically speaking, postmodernism leads to a dead-end, aesthetically it gives fresh perspective. “Irascible as Ayrs is”, Frobisher nonetheless sees in his artistry something “whose influence I want my own creativity informed by” (61). Artistically, Ayrs for Frobisher—like postmodernism for Mitchell—is “Janus-headed. One Ayrs looks back to Romanticism’s deathbed, the other looks to the future. This is the Ayrs whose gaze I follow. Watching him use counterpoint and mix colours refines my own language in exciting ways” (ibid.), effectively inspiring Frobisher to begin composing his own *Cloud Atlas Sextet*—the metafictional miniature to Mitchell’s own framing sextet of stories, *Cloud Atlas*.

The rhetoric of postmodernism, which for Harvey exclusively signals indifference to global reality, provides Mitchell with the language for refashioning global consciousness. Like Frobisher, Mitchell also rejects an ethico-political outlook founded on cynical nihilism and deconstruction. Yet as I will discuss below and in subsequent chapters, Mitchell’s works abound with postmodernist literary traits that, despite their conventional associations, directly confront global reality. Consequently, it proves important to discuss narrative form *thematically*: to uncover how Mitchell’s postmodernist exterior both facilitates and guides his ethically constructive argument for a socio-ecologically responsible worldview. Pastiche and metafiction in particular, both formal techniques regarded as standard postmodern modes of expression (Hoesterey xii; Waugh 54), attain novel significance in Mitchell’s works articulating alternative forms of globalization. Pastiche, i.e. the imitation and/or mixing of recognizable styles, becomes a way of ethically acknowledging the multiplicity of the global multitude; and metafiction, or literary self-reflexivity, tends to global finitude by drawing attention to the social narratives according to which we act in a materially limited planet.

For Fredric Jameson, pastiche is the archetypally postmodern form of aesthetic expression, but its potential for meaning is laced with postmodernism’s subservient function as the “cultural logic” of globalized capitalism. Hence, pastiche is inextricably bound with banal and lifeless commercialism. As Jameson famously argues, pastiche is “speech in a dead language ... the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture” (17–18). The pick-and-choose nature of pastiche represents postmodernism’s aversion to ethico-



political “priorities and commitments”, choosing instead to engage in mere “free play with the past” (Jameson 369; see also Harvey 116–18). In this view, pastiche is a shallow form of expression serving only to create entertaining cultural commodities (and by implication, not art) devoid of any profound normative meaning.

In *Cloud Atlas*, however, as chapter 3 explores further, Mitchell’s use of pastiche is essential in communicating the novel’s globally-inflected moral message. In its collage/montage-like construction, the novel resembles a colourful patchwork quilt comprised of six distinctly stylized parts, each evoking their own set of moods, sub-themes and genre-conventions. The universal reach of the novel, however, comes from the myriad interconnections effected between the pastiches, foregrounding the richness of the human condition while simultaneously undermining racism and essentialism (or homogeneity of identity) as either unethical or downright false. The unifying thematic thread, then, suturing the novel’s various parts together is the sense of responsibility towards human multiplicity. The interconnected characters and events in *Cloud Atlas* echo Hardt and Negri’s sense of the global multitude as being “an internally different social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity ... but on what it has in common” (*Multitude* 100). Just as Mitchell’s pastiches gain full meaning only in their mutual interconnections *and* their relation to *Cloud Atlas* as a whole, so we as individual persons, communities and societies only gain full meaning in relation to each other as well as in relation to the global totality we share.

In addition to affirming global multitude through pastiche, Mitchell acknowledges global finitude—the physical limits of our planet and its ecologies—through metafiction. If, as postmodernism conventionally holds, we live and act in “textually” built environments then, as Patricia Waugh notes, “literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of ‘reality’ itself” (41). Although prevalent in both novels, textual self-consciousness assumes greater thematic import in *The Bone Clocks*, where metafictionality directly interrogates the discrepancies between created and actual realities. These discrepancies not only reveal the extent to which “texts” govern reality, but crucially, they reveal how a textually constructed world always reflects the morality of its creators. As chapter 4 argues further, *The Bone Clocks* suggests contemporary humanity is disconnected from global reality; choosing instead to conduct existence and development under selfish delusions of infinite economic growth (the narrative of techno-capitalist Progress) that cannot be sustained by our material planet. Harrowingly, the novel’s final chapter “Sheep’s Head”, set in the not-

too-distant year of 2043, depicts an ongoing violent reversal of globalization (the “Endarkenment”) set forth by ecological collapse—“the inevitable result ... of population growth and lies about oil reserves” (*BC* 493). Current narratives of societal development distort our perspectives on global reality. As the novel sifts through layers of textually constructed worlds to reach solid ground, Mitchell compels us to live according to what I shall term “worldly” narratives; essentially stories that are predicated on responsibility towards global finitude. Diverting the “Endarkenment” requires a transformation away from our wasteful, self-centred paradigms: ““we need to fix stuff, build stuff, move stuff ... but do it all without oil’. *And start forty years ago,*” as an elderly Holly grieves (578, original italics).

For Mitchell, then, a textually determined world is best changed through equally textual means: an alternative form of globalization is effected by inventing and adhering to alternative stories. If, as postmodernism nihilistically maintains, “language games” are all there is to social reality (Hutcheon 32; Jameson 392), Mitchell suggests we make good use of this notion. Because we inhabit realities effectively defined by discourse—which in turn necessarily influence our thought, values and behaviour—we need to be certain these discourses can enable socially and ecologically just conditions for coexistence. Linda Hutcheon notes that although postmodernism lacks an “effective theory of agency” enabling constructive political action, it does function as “a site of de-naturalizing critique” (3; see also 15–22). Mitchell adopts this ability for denaturalizing critique, but also injects constructive political intent into his works motivated by the global socio-ecological context. In other words, instead of unlearning the lessons of late-twentieth-century postmodernism, Mitchell appropriates its best ideas and tools to suit a globally healing agenda for the twenty-first-century.

### **2.3. A Matter of Make-Believe**

To think (as I argue Mitchell does) that reality can be transformed through textual means is to understand political influence as characterized by *hegemony*. In effect, the theory of cultural hegemony as developed by post-Marxist political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (both collaboratively and individually) affords a useful model for interpreting Mitchell’s argument for global responsibility. This is mainly because, like Mitchell’s fiction, their model also builds on key postmodernist insights. Like postmodernism, Laclau and Mouffe’s hegemony also understands social reality as composed of “texts” (i.e. discourses, ideologies, narratives, stories) to a significant extent.

As described earlier, however, postmodernism responds to this fact unconstructively: either nihilistically deconstructing everything to “a rubble of signifiers” (Harvey 350) or else engaging in the relativistic “free play” of linguistic meanings without taking anything seriously (Jameson 369; Callinicos 22). In a word, postmodernism interprets reality as a series of chaotic or inconsequential “language games”.

In contrast, the post-Marxist sense of hegemony takes the aforementioned “language games” seriously; actively constructing a theory of agency Linda Hutcheon finds missing in postmodernism. In the strictly conventional sense, “hegemony” refers to the status or position of *predominance*: a particular “text” is hegemonic when it exerts disproportionate influence over how social relations, for instance, are organized (Eagleton 116). Yet this conventional definition overlooks the concept’s potential and tremendous dynamism. As Laclau and Mouffe argue, a textual construct “is not merely a ‘cognitive’ or ‘contemplative’ entity; it is an *articulatory practice* which constitutes and organizes social relations” (96, original italics). Moreover, the existence of an “articulation” implies an *articulator*: an agent behind each attempt at solidifying a social setting through *their* particular textual construct. Hence any setting is always a contingent one; at any given moment reflecting largely the values and beliefs of its chief articulator (Mouffe 2). Given the breadth of differing beliefs existent in any given social setting at any given time, the leading motif in this conception of hegemony is *struggle*: the continuous contest over whose articulations, or, stories—and the values embodied therein—get to shape what our common reality looks and feels like.

This kind of struggle for cultural, or, textual influence permeates Mitchell’s works: the ongoing tug-of-war for hegemony between the responsible and selfish sides of the human psyche, spanning local and global contexts alike. The inclusion of post-apocalyptic scenarios in both novels warn us of the logically inevitable outcomes of “a world of too many wolves and not enough woodcutters” (*BC* 546): a world that, for an elderly Holly Sykes, resembles a nightmare version of Little Red Riding Hood where wolf-like rapacity runs rampant and, as a result, social and ecological destruction is inescapable. In accord with hegemonic theory as discussed above, however, Mitchell suggests nothing is set in stone: no social order or practice is predetermined by any essentialist idea of humanity as being either selfish or responsible. Indeed, as Meronym (of the technologically advanced Prescients with historical knowledge of civilization’s demise) explains in *Cloud Atlas*, “*ev’ry human is both, yay. Old’uns’d got the Smart o’ gods but the savagery o’ jackals an’ that’s what tripped the Fall. Some savages ... got a*

*beautsome Civ'lized heart beatin' in their ribs. Maybe some [of the rapacious and violent] Kona. Not 'nuff to say-so their hole tribe, but who knows one day?"* (319, original italics).

To conclude this chapter, Mitchell suggests the key to effecting an alternative globalization (to the one predominantly characterized by the “*savagery o' jackals*” despite all our technological “*Smart*”) is to recognize all forms of social organization as essentially being historically contingent products of make-believe. For Mitchell, the lack of truly objective knowledge on what the world is like and how we should act in it, can only be meaningfully replaced by our subjectively or inter-subjectively held beliefs. This does not mean, however, as it does for postmodernism, that our beliefs do not have genuine political effect or tangible guidelines to follow. A more just form of globalization, with less chance of steering our world into man-made or natural cataclysm, involves inventing and adhering to stories that acknowledge global multitude and global finitude: stories that advocate responsibility towards the multiplicity of the world's peoples as well as the worldly limits of the natural environment.

### 3

## Patchwork and Suture: Multivocal Unity in *Cloud Atlas*

Just as humans are born with no eternal faculties written in their flesh, so too there are no final ends or teleological goals written in history. Human faculties and historical teleologies exist only because they are the result of human passions, reason, and struggle.

— Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* 221

As Laclau and Mouffe contend, any positive political action can only emerge from an acceptance of contingency, i.e. coming to terms with the fundamental “unfixity” of social reality (85–86). Building on this backdrop of radical contingency, *Cloud Atlas* emphasizes firstly the constant presence of hegemonic contestation in life, as the one true means of how history develops; and secondly, the necessity of engaging in this contestation for the materialization of socio-ecologically responsible forms of human life. The novel achieves this through a variety of interconnecting strategies effected throughout its six narratives that span various spatiotemporal, ethico-political and literary-aesthetic contexts. In other words, these varicoloured patches, as it were, depicting similar struggles and ethical outlooks albeit with differing plot trajectories, are stitched together by Mitchell to form a multivocal-yet-unitary whole informed by a global consciousness. And in the ethical struggle prevalent throughout the novel, essentialist systems imposed by selfish or rapacious motivations are contested on the grounds of their harmful consequences. In this chapter I shall argue that through the interlinkage of its constituent narratives, *Cloud Atlas* rethinks the ethos of global interconnectedness by articulating a multilateral appeal for socio-ecological responsibility attuned to the multitudinous nature of the world.

### 3.1. The Shape of Global Multiplicity

To begin with *Cloud Atlas*’s structural and stylistic framework, global and social interconnectedness is already strongly predicated in the very literary underpinnings of the

novel. In the course of its six narratives, *Cloud Atlas* provides several metafictional signposts pointing towards clues to its thematic interpretation. One such signpost is provided by Robert Frobisher, the Rimbaud-esque tragic-romantic composer of “Letters from Zedelghem”, through whom Mitchell explicitly discusses the novel’s form. Mid-October, Frobisher writes to his close friend Sixsmith to describe his unfinished concerto; a description which Mitchell slyly hijacks for his own metafictional purposes:

Spent the fortnight gone in the music room, reworking my year’s fragments into a “sextet of overlapping soloists”: piano, clarinet, ’cello, flute, oboe and violin, each in its own language of key, scale and colour. In the 1st set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the 2nd, each interruption is recontinued, in order. Revolutionary or gimmicky? Shan’t know until it’s finished .... (463)

Conspicuously entitled *Cloud Atlas Sextet* (479), Frobisher’s composition mirrors the formal and structural basis of *Cloud Atlas*, the novel. Stylistically, it is primarily through the extensive use of literary pastiche, or the imitation and mixing of aesthetic styles, forms and genre conventions, that Mitchell gives each of the six narratives their own characteristic “language of key, scale and colour”. Coupled with the overarching narrative structure of the novel, each distinctive story, as it is interrupted, is also overlapped by its immediate successor, so that Adam Ewing’s mid-nineteenth-century travelogue, written with period diction and spelling, is read by Frobisher in 1931, whose musically inflected letters are in turn read by Luisa Rey in 1975, whose labyrinthine search for truth is, in truth, the manuscript of a “young-hack-versus-corporate-corruption-thriller” (373) lauded by Timothy Cavendish in the early 2000s. Cavendish’s picaresque memoirs recounting his quixotic fight against old age, we find, have been adapted into a feature film banned by corpocracy (the totalitarian polity of the futuristic Nea So Copros) and watched by Sonmi-451, whose dystopia-set story of rebellion given in interview format survives the “Fall” of civilization as a hologram-recording, while she also lives on as goddess in the beliefs of Zachry’s tribe, the Valleysmen of Hawai’i Island. Zachry’s oral fireside “yarnin” about survival and spiritual crisis functions as the novel’s turning point, after which the five interrupted narratives are recommenced in reversed order to their respective conclusions (i.e. in the order of Sonmi–Cavendish–Rey–Frobisher–Ewing). Beyond the in-built interconnectedness effected by the novel’s Russian doll-like structure, these “overlapping soloists” are further linked by *intratextual* cross-references of varying levels of subtlety, of which even the author has confessed he only possesses an imperfect knowledge (Mitchell, “The Art of Fiction” n. pag.).

Already we can see from this skein of relations how *Cloud Atlas*'s formal framework is, hence, in itself a necessary element of the novel's overall thematics, as other critics have also found (see esp. Mezey; Parker; O'Donnell). The novel's sophisticated interlocking of six highly singular pastiches evokes not only the tension between *diversity* and *sameness*, in the sense that common features are discernible in recognizably different things, but also the tension between *chance* and *pattern*. As the novel collapses time, space, events, characters and different discourse conventions together in its pages, chance and pattern intersect in ways that reveal how things are not fixed on any conception of universally or absolutely "true". Rather, things are fixed on locally invented fictions and socially determined conventions that, for better or for worse, may possess the cultural or political clout to impose patterns across social reality. In a word, it is to say that *contingency* is part and parcel of reality: a field of possibilities where any established order is always "predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities" (Mouffe 2).

### 3.2. The Intersection of Chance and Pattern

With contingency in mind, Mitchell draws attention to *how* order is established: which principles should dictate what kinds of interconnections are drawn between disparate elements to form a whole. In sharp contrast to Fredric Jameson's view of pastiche as amounting to nothing more than stylistic "free play" devoid of ethical or political significance (369), Mitchell makes use of a collage of pastiches to articulate responsibility towards human multiplicity.

Across its globally dispersed story contexts, *Cloud Atlas* takes a clear stand in advancing diversity over sameness or homogeneity. In "Letters from Zedelghem", Frobisher's acknowledgment of diversity is key to his story's progression and resolution. At the outset of the very first letter, he relates a dream setting the thematic backdrop against which to read his subsequent development as composer:

Sixsmith,  
 Dreamt I stood in a china shop so crowded from floor to far-off ceiling with shelves of porcelain antiquities etc. that moving a muscle would cause several to fall and smash to bits. Exactly what happened, but instead of a crashing noise, an august chord rang out, half-cello, half-celeste, D-major(?), held for four beats. [...] Ah, such music! (43)

Frobisher's dream suggests an artificial disparity between harmony and cacophony, which he later on in his third-to-last letter understands to be true, even beyond its

immediate musical context: “Boundaries between noise and sound are conventions, I see now. All boundaries are conventions, national ones too. One may transcend any convention, if only one can first conceive of doing so” (479). What is acceptable is in effect wholly contingent on predefined expectations: what for one set of conventions is a monotone “crashing noise” is for the other “an august chord” effectively composed of a mix of different timbres; the sonorous “half-cello”, for instance, counterpointed with a bell-like “half-celeste”. Realizing this possibility for hybrid mixing effectively sets Frobisher’s creativity free and turns him into “a Roman Candle of invention. Lifetime’s music, arriving all at once” (479). As Frobisher remarks of his finished *Cloud Atlas Sextet* (and by metafictional extension Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*), “it’s an incomparable creation. Echoes of Scriabin’s *White Mass*, Stravinsky’s lost footprints, chromatics of the more lunar Debussy, *but truth is I don’t know where it came from*” (489, my italics). Its “pristine, riverlike, spectral [and] hypnotic” (425) quality, as Luisa Rey entrancedly describes a rare recording of it in mid-70s California, is the result of an eclectic mixture of diverse elements funnelled into a multivocal whole of untraceable genealogy. The captivating beauty of Frobisher’s *Sextet* is in its mongrel constitution.

Conversely, forms of homogeneity are closely associated with myopic worldviews and the construction of unjust societies. Racism, or, discrimination based on essence is not only ethically suspect but also falsely validated. Adam Ewing’s “Pacific Journal” recounts a dinner-table conversation in which Giles Horrox, preacher and colonial despot of a ramshackle “Christian” community on Nazareth Isle, explains his theory of “Civilization’s Ladder”—topped by the “Anglo-Saxon[s]” (507), not unexpectedly—which accounts to a feeble justification of exploitation perpetrated by the white man:

Nature’s Law & Progress move as one. Our own century shall witness humanity’s tribes fulfil those prophecies writ in their racial traits. The superior shall relegate the overpopulous savages to their natural numbers. ... A glorious order shall follow, when all races shall know &, aye, embrace, their place in God’s ladder of civilization. (507)

Behind this veneer of “divine grace” (508) given to colonial exploits, “men of intellectual courage must not flinch” (ibid.) at gruesome scenes enacted for the manifestation of the “glorious order”. Earlier in the novel, but in fact centuries later in its chronology, the pretentious rationales underlying Horrox’s theory are grotesquely manifested in the social order of Nea So Copros in “An Orison of Sonmi-451”. Here, the idea of “Nature’s Law



& Progress” moving as one has led to extreme distortions of humanity under the ultra-capitalist dynamics of the corpocratic regime. For as Sonmi reveals in her interview, the foundation for corpocracy’s mock-meritocratic class structure is in effect the differences in *essence* between natural-born “purebloods” and cloned “fabricants”. Genetically engineered, or, “genomed” for specific tasks, fabricants are the “ultimate organic machinery” (342) misled to believe in the “divine grace” of the corpocratic order and the possibility of social ascendance. Indoctrinated by the Catechism “*One Year, One Star, Twelve Stars to Xultation*”, fabricants are “xhorted [to] work hard” their entire lives until, “twelvestarred”, they are taken to the “golden Ark” departing for “Xultation”: a blissful retirement in Hawaii and ascendance to the status of an ordinary consumer (190, original italics). In reality, however, the Ark is a “nitemarish” (360) abattoir: instead of Xultation, retired fabricants are gruesomely recycled for food production and other “liquefied biomatter” (359).

As in the racist discourse of preacher Horrox in Ewing’s journal, the supremacy of one group is founded on contrived notions of hierarchy, which are in turn founded on contrived notions of essentialist identity. Reflected against the spatiotemporal totality of *Cloud Atlas*, i.e. the whole geographical and chronological reach of its six narratives, imposed notions of homogeneous or “pureblood” superiority reveal themselves to be ontologically and morally insupportable, hiding the perhaps unfavourably contingent nature of the world behind legitimating and naturalizing stories. Sonmi clearly understands this during the course of her story: “What if the differences between social strata stem not from genomics or inherent xcellence or even dollars, but differences in *knowledge*?” (231, my italics). Normative differences between people are purely textual, as it were. Fabricants are, in fact, not inherently less intelligent than purebloods, but kept docile through “highly genomed” (341) sustenance, or Soap, provided by the totalitarian regime itself. So it seems that what is presented as “natural” is upheld throughout time by coercive means, either through brash aggression or more subtle biopolitics.

Compared to the dark systemic consequences of racist and essentialist ideology encountered in Ewing’s journal or Sonmi’s interview, “The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish” provides a light-hearted variation of the theme on an individual level. As he flees northward away from his creditors in London, the sixty-something-year-old Cavendish finds his conceptions of England—gilded by memories of his Oxbridge-youth in the southeast—outdated and crashing against twenty-first-century reality. From lamenting how today’s globalized multicultural “England has gone to the dogs, oh, the

dogs, the ruddy dogs” (162), Cavendish realizes over the course of his episodic ordeals how only through learning to accept the multiplicity of the world can he be at peace with himself and those around him. Essentialism simply does not work in an inherently diverse world.

Most clearly this is evidenced in his escape from Aurora House in the concluding half of his narrative. As Cavendish’s solitary escape attempts fail one after another (178, 380 and 388), it is only through the chance hybrid union of a retired working-class Scotsman Ernie, his fellow countryman the exceedingly senile Mr Meeks, middle-class ex-milliner of Irish descent Veronica and the “hoity-toity southern wazzock” (384) that is Cavendish himself, that breakout is successful. Having found temporary refuge in Edinburgh, Scotland, Cavendish remarks how London, the “city that knitted my bones” (404), effectively “darkens the map like England’s bowel polyp. There is a whole country up here” (402). In the end, the pristine England of Cavendish’s youth exists only in the beautified longhand of his memories. As Cavendish complains at the outset of his story, “[t]hat’s the problem with inking one’s memoirs in longhand. You can’t go changing what you’ve already set down, not without botching things up even more” (148). “Botching things up”, however, is necessary for moving on. It signifies understanding the *permanence of change* and the need to adapt accordingly: how previously established narratives (e.g. conceptions of England and Englishness) prove ineffective for understanding later and larger contexts. Nostalgic memories of the past, in other words, do not hold normative sway in the present.

Yet to acknowledge that change is a permanent state of the world does not deny the existence of deeper principles that may guide contingency. The novel’s overarching metaphor of a “cloud atlas”, a pictorial key of various cloud types used in meteorology, suggests a methodical quality to Mitchell’s fictional treatise on the interplay between chance and pattern as well as diversity and sameness. In “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After”, Zachry muses how “[s]ouls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an’ tho’ a cloud’s shape nor hue nor size don’t stay the same it’s still a cloud an’ so is a soul” (324). In a manner of speaking, no two souls, or, persons (like no two clouds) are ever identical in shape, hue or size—yet we can still discern recurring intellectual, spiritual and moral commonplaces despite their appearance in different latitudes, longitudes and cross-sections of time. For while *Cloud Atlas*’s broad, pastiche-built sweep of history from 1850 to ca. 3000 CE rejects the fixedness of identities and hierarchies, it nonetheless affirms the influence of human agency (our capacity to make choices) in the context of

contingency—which, as explored in the previous chapter, archetypal postmodernism is given to downplaying.

### 3.3. Human Agency and Human History

Contingency is, then, the very fabric of social being unto which different sects compete to weave their own patterns—that is, to get to decide how reality is perceived and how, for example, social relations are organized. Having heard many views on how the technologically advanced white man should treat the indigenous peoples he encounters, Ewing ponders in his journal that there are, indeed, “[a]s many truths as men”, and how “[o]ccasionally, I glimpse a truer Truth, hiding in the imperfect simulacrum of itself, but as I approach, it bestirs itself & moves deeper into the thorny swamp of *dissent*” (17, my italics). “Truth”, as it were, can only be fleetingly glimpsed at through various philosophies; but to truly *grasp* it is to make it your own through struggle and dissent, in the absence of absolute values or higher entities dictating what “truth” *really* is. In pronouncing contingency as the default mode of reality, while concomitantly affirming the essence of truth as being a matter of opinion, *Cloud Atlas* stresses the importance of hegemonic struggle as a defining characteristic of human life across spatiotemporal and cultural contexts. To reiterate from chapter 2, hegemonic struggle (following the Gramscian school of thought) means the struggle over the right to define what is to be understood as “true”, natural, or accepted. In other words, hegemonic struggle is about who gets to say which ideals and values are predominant and which conventions are solidified into the *common sense* of a given social setting.

In this vein, the last entry of “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing” contains the novel’s most explicit statement of hegemonic social reality, and what this reality demands of individuals looking to change it. Convalescing in a Hawaiian infirmary after surviving Henry Goose’s poisoning scheme, Ewing reflects on the nature of humanity—or more precisely, he reflects on the discursive frameworks through which we understand the nature of humanity. Outlining his thoughts as an argument, he begins by rejecting theories that suggest human history is determined by “rules that govern the rises & falls of civilization” (527–28). Instead, he proposes that “Belief” alone, as the precipitator of both “[v]icious & virtuous acts”, leads to historical outcomes:

Belief is both prize & battlefield, within the mind & in the mind’s mirror, the world. If we *believe* humanity is a ladder of tribes, a colosseum of confrontation,

exploitation & bestiality, such a humanity is surely brought into being, & history's Horroxes ... & Gooses shall prevail. (528, original italics)

In Ewing's fledgling understanding, human history is therefore *not* predetermined by the likes of preacher Horrox's racist and racist "Civilization's Ladder", and *nor* is all of humanity like the conniving "Dr" Henry Goose (to be discussed shortly) who believes in and acts on greed and self-interest. History is effectively a "battlefield", as Ewing puts it, defined by recurring struggles between competing beliefs in contest to gain hegemonic status; once again, the status of having the "say-so" (in the lingo of Zachry's times) over the composition of social reality, as opposed to rules of any kind managing dynamics of power or determining human "essence".

The sci-fi dystopian "An Orison of Sonmi~451" aptly explores this tension between historical predetermination and human agency. At the end of her recommenced narrative, Sonmi reveals to the Archivist how the events she has recounted have been part of an elaborate hoax: a regime-orchestrated "theatrical production [composed of] scripted events [to] provide Nea So Copros with the enemy required ... for social cohesion" (363–64). From the inducement of greater sentience and her education in banned subjects, such as history and literature,<sup>1</sup> to providing the means of disseminating politically deviant propaganda (her *Declarations*), the corpocratic regime controls every set piece of Sonmi's predetermined life. It seems, then, that Sonmi was utterly duped: her rebellious efforts undertaken with genuine zeal were in fact scripted to end in a show trial and execution. In another one of Mitchell's subtle interlinking strategies, this setting finds a mundane-yet-telling analogy in the narrative immediately succeeding Sonmi's. During a slow day at Aurora House, Cavendish from "The Ghastly Ordeals" questions the logic of the single-player card game patience, or, solitaire: "Patience's design flaw became obvious for the first time in my life: the outcome is decided not during the course of play but when the cards are shuffled before the game even begins. How pointless is that?" (383–84).

The narrative structure of *Cloud Atlas*, however, has already revealed what becomes of Sonmi ahead of her recommenced narrative in the latter half of the novel. In "Sloosha's Crossin'", the novel's fulcrum narrative immediately preceding "An

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<sup>1</sup> Sonmi's education consists of Western canonical writers and works perhaps deemed too encouraging of critical thinking, from banned writers such as "Orwell and Huxley; and Washington's *Satires on Democracy*" (220), Ludwig Wittgenstein, Plato's *Republic* and Seneca the Younger, whom Sonmi even quotes against corpocracy: "No matter how many of us you kill, you will never kill your successor" (365).

Orison's" concluding half, we find that Sonmi outlives her corporeal death in becoming a goddess of the tribal pantheon of post-apocalyptic Hawai'i. As the Prescient outlander Meronym reveals to Zachry, Sonmi died centuries ago "*on a pen'sula all deadlanded now but its oldtime name was Nea So Copros an' its ancient one Korea. A short'n'judased life Sonmi had, an' only after she'd died did she find say-so over purebloods'n'freakbirths' thinkin's*" (291, original italics). As we come into Sonmi's recommenced narrative knowing she successfully achieved "*say-so*" despite the "*short'n'judased*" manner of her life, we learn that "patience"—namely the predeterminate logic of the card game—is the wrong way of conceptualizing history's progression. Sonmi effectively re-writes the rules of the contest: understanding the contingency of social orders and conventions, she subverts the teleology of the "theatrical production" imposed on her in "a further endgame" (364) involving her *Declarations*: "Every schoolchild in Nea So Copros knows my twelve 'blasphemies' now. ... *My ideas* have been reproduced a billionfold" (364–65, my italics). Detained in body, her beliefs are all she has to fight with; and as it turns out in "Sloosha's Crossin'", her beliefs outlast those that uphold corpocracy. Human agency, in the novel's view, is the definitive means to create human history.

### 3.4. Responsibility v. Selfishness

Aside from the immediate circumstances present in the individual stories, there is a profounder ethico-political dimension informing the struggles presented throughout *Cloud Atlas* as we examine the novel in its entirety. The thread, as it were, that forms the suture reciprocally linking the six varicoloured patches, is the ever-constant transcontextual tug-of-war between responsibility and selfishness. This struggle, I argue, is the central conflict informing *Cloud Atlas* manifesting itself in various guises throughout the novel, with various implications with respect to the kinds of worlds we have the capacity to build.

"The Pacific Journal's" account of Ewing's newfound political motivation to deviate from the beliefs of his colonial peers encapsulates the moral dynamics of *Cloud Atlas* as a whole. Living in a context where rapacity and exploitation are by and large the norm, Ewing relates why we must "fight the 'natural' (oh, weaselly word!) order of things" (528). Because for Ewing, if indeed "history's Horroxes ... & Gooses shall prevail", then "one fine day, a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself. Yes, the devil shall take the hindmost until the foremost *is* the hindmost. In an individual, selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction" (528, original italics).

Speaking of the whole novel by metafictional extension, Ewing touches upon the various levels in which rapacity is prevalent: the individual level in which “selfishness uglifies the soul”; the systemic level in which rapacity equates to a path leading to “extinction”; and the spiritual level, as it were, wherein purely selfish actions corrupt our humanity to entirely beastlike forms.

Henry Goose, Ewing’s seeming companion and acting doctor of the *Prophetess*, is perhaps the novel’s starkest personification of individual selfishness. Dismissing preacher Horrox’s highfalutin theories as hypocritical “fig-leaves” (509) covering up a simple truth, Goose perceives the world as a single global food chain: a social hierarchy founded exclusively on self-interest and ruthless opportunism. Goose’s worldview takes as given the natural predacity of humanity and conceives human history as the playing out of animal instincts wherein the white man simply excels others in his will to power: “Wolves don’t sit in their caves, concocting crapulous theories of race to justify devouring a flock of sheep! ... True ‘intellectual courage’ is to ... admit all peoples are predatory, but white predators ... are exemplars of predacity *par excellence*, & what of it?” (509, original italics). Indeed, for Goose, “The Weak are Meat the Strong do Eat”—the first of his two “Laws of Survival” the second of which tersely states “there *is* no second law. Eat or be eaten” (508–9, original italics). To Ewing’s near-fatal misfortune, Goose practices what he preaches. Blithely divulging the rationale of his scam at its moment of completion, Goose explains how “‘Tis absurdly simple. I need money & in your trunk ... is an entire estate, so I have killed you for it. Where is the mystery?” (523). In fact, there is no mystery—Goose’s actions simply reflect what he believes is common sense and objectively true in the world.

Yet despite being one of *Cloud Atlas*’s most recognizable antagonists, Goose’s example reiterates the central principles regarding the novel’s political workings as outlined by Ewing, providing a link that underlines the role human choice plays between individual and systemic expressions of selfishness. A hegemonic, or, commonsensical discourse permeates all spheres of life and encourages conformity to its behavioural models. As Goose argues, “Whites prey on darker-hued cousins, fleas prey on mice, cats prey on rats, Christians on infidels ... Death on the Living. The weak are meat the strong do eat” (523–24). The novel’s emphasis on the contingent and mutable nature of reality, however, reminds us that Goose’s idea of reality is merely a claim for hegemony: “the world *is* wicked” (524, original italics), as Goose tells Ewing, but only if enough people share this belief. Individual articulations such as Goose’s may turn into systemic orders,

as the various cross-sections into the novel's expansive timeline show, but the point Mitchell is emphatically making throughout *Cloud Atlas* is that these systems are not devoid of human agency. Put differently, that something becomes systemic does not mean to say it operates outside of human control or is incontestable.

In "Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery", Luisa's struggle to uncover a corporate conspiracy behind a potential nuclear disaster foregrounds individual moral deliberation as vital for responsible counteraction. Fortunately for the fictional town of Buenas Yervas, it is not just Luisa that acts on at least a modicum of socio-ecological responsibility against the powerful and faceless Seaboard Inc. Being the only narrative in *Cloud Atlas* not restricted to the inner life of its central protagonist, the brisk "chapteroid"<sup>2</sup> format of "Half-Lives" provides snippets of several characters with Seaboard ties having qualms over the inauguration of the corporation's unstable HYDRA nuclear reactor. Dr Rufus Sixsmith's ultimately fatal refusal to comply with Seaboard because of his conscience (108) not only leads Luisa on the breadcrumb-trail to truth, but also fellow scientist Isaac Sachs to consider the consequences his own inaction might have. Sachs's "thoughts slide to a hydrogen build-up, an explosion, packed hospitals [and] the first deaths by radiation poisoning. [...] So far, his betrayal of Seaboard is a thought-crime, not one of action. *Dare I cross that line?*" (130, original italics).

In light of *Cloud Atlas*'s close marriage of form and theme, this question supports two contiguous interpretations that both enforce the novel's argument for ethico-political responsibility. Decidedly, Sachs's "line" marks a moral threshold between inaction and action. But in another sense accentuated by the novel, "that line" can also be understood as a contrived boundary separating different contexts, or, worlds. In effect, nothing is self-contained or isolated: Sachs's hesitance to carry out his "thought-crime" is due to his reluctance to admit that his personal laboratory context—his own hermetic world "made of mathematics, energy and atomic cascades [where] he was its explorer"—is inevitably linked to "political orders of magnitude, where erroneous loyalties can get your brain spattered over hotel bedrooms" (130). True to form, a variation of this motif appears in "Sloosha's Crossin'", where Meronym is reluctant to use "*spesh Prescient Smart*" to save Zachry's sister Catkin from dying, on account of not wanting "*to interfere in [the] nat'ral order*" of Valleysmen's lives (279–80, original italics). But as Zachry counters to

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<sup>2</sup> Although actually rendered in seventy very short chapters, this term comes from Timothy Cavendish's derisive remark on Hilary V. Hush's "artsily-fartsily Clever" manuscript *Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery*, written in "neat little chapteroids, doubtless with one eye on the Hollywood screenplay" (164).

Meronym, “*I reckon jus’ by bein’ here you’re bustin’ this nat’ral order. I reckon you’re killin’ Catkin by not actin’*” (280, original italics). For Meronym, as for Sachs, the inherent interconnectedness of contexts imposes a moral responsibility to act across *artificially* dissociated spheres. Indeed, Sachs’s “line” is in this respect a mere convention—just like “[a]ll boundaries are conventions” (479) potentially to be transcended, according to Robert Frobisher quoted earlier in this chapter.

Not only, then, is *opposing* a system down to individual moral deliberation (as exemplified by “Half-Lives”), but so is *upholding* a system likewise a matter of choice and conscience. In other words, no social order (no matter how “systemic” or “functionalist” it is dressed up to be) is a perpetual motion machine scripted to reproduce itself until kingdom come. Ewing’s earlier remark how “one fine day, a purely predatory world shall consume itself” is, in fact, not eerie prescience but simply the extension of the dynamics of unbridled rapacity to its inevitable conclusion. The halfway point for this trajectory comes in “An Orison of Sonmi~451”, where the absurdly capitalist Nea So Copros “is poisoning itself to death. Its soil is polluted, its rivers lifeless, its air toxloaded, its food supplies riddled with rogue genes. [...] Those Production Zones of Africa and Indonesia that supply Consumer Zones’ demands are sixty per cent uninhabitable” (341).<sup>3</sup> The fate of this self-devouring world, however, is inseparable from human conscience and agency, for the corpocratic elite’s response to a teleology of self-destruction “is that strategy beloved of all bankrupt ideologues: denial” (341). Mitchell effectively asks whether the human conscience can afford, for the sake of its future, to turn a blind eye to the existential threat it has created itself. Can a present generation continue mining future sustainability for the upkeep of its level of economic growth and technological advancement?

At heart is the question what beliefs should guide the development and wielding of the technologies human hands create. From the “deadly duet of disease-dust & fire-arms” of Ewing’s colonial period to the ultra-efficient society-wide production line of Sonmi’s era, *Cloud Atlas*’s panoramic view of civilization’s speculative future history is unequivocal in claiming selfish developmental paradigms result in social and ecological destruction. The novel’s depiction of civilization’s reversion to primitive tribalism in

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<sup>3</sup> Through Nea So Copros, Mitchell is also arguably effecting a more targeted critique of modern day economic neoliberalism. The absurd excess of “corpocratic” capitalism is reflected in the sheer ubiquity of privatization, subjecting close-to-all aspects of life under market influence: e.g. MediCorp, TimberCorp, VegCorp, PimpCorp, WaterCorp, AirCorp etc.



“Sloosha’s Crossin’” explores this question with compelling clarity. Under mythic knowledge passed down for generations, Zachry knows to hold “the holy mist’ry o’ the Civ’lized Days” (257) in high regard: despite their advanced technology (or “Smart” as it becomes known), the “Old’uns” could not repel Old Georgie, the devil in tribal cosmology, from commencing the apocalypse, as Zachry argues to Meronym. Meronym’s “true true” account, however, reveals that “Old’uns” had, in fact, “*tripped their own Fall*” (286, original italics) with their selfishness:

*Yay, Old’uns’ Smart mastered [everything] but it din’t master one thing, nay, a hunger in the hearts o’ humans [for more] gear, more food, faster speeds, longer lifes, easier lifes, more power, yay. [...] Now the Hole World is big but it weren’t big ‘nuff for that hunger what made Old’uns rip out the skies an’ boil up the seas an’ poison soil with crazed atoms an’ ... so new plagues was borned an’ babbits was freakbirthed. Fin’ly, bit’ly, then quicksharp ... the Civ’lize Days ended, ‘cept for a few folds’n’pockets here’n’tthere, where its last embers glimmer. (286, original italics and emphasis)*

Perhaps paradoxically, “*human hunger birthed the Civ’lize, but human hunger killed it too*” (286, original italics). Insofar as humanity’s selfish streak facilitated ever greater technological innovation and more comfortable lives, insufficiently checked it also undermined the very foundations upon which civilization was built. Through great verbal irony, *Cloud Atlas* insinuates that if governed by a hegemony of self-interest, “Civ’lized” humanity may stumble on its own ingenuity and smartness: the “Old’uns” of Sonmi’s lifetime, for instance, failed (or chose not) to use their clever “Smart” to further wise, socially and ecologically sustainable ends. In line with the novel’s fractal symmetry, the very same ethico-political dynamics that govern the macroscopic scale of human civilization—i.e. “Old’un’s” capacity to both create *and* destroy the “Civ’lize Days”—are also inherent in Zachry’s personal struggles against the evils of Old Georgie.

Seen through the tribal goatherd’s viewpoint, Zachry’s narrative strips human moral deliberation to its barest, most primeval level without undermining its profundity—“de-intellectualizing”, as it were, the hegemonic contest of well-articulated beliefs into a primordial *spiritual* struggle of conflicting voices within the human conscience. Zachry’s formerly abated suspicions towards the Prescient outlander Meronym, for saving his dying sister Catkin, are rekindled on Mauna Kea’s derelict observatories as Meronym’s revelation of Sonmi’s non-divine, worldly origin plunges Zachry into spiritual crisis (290–92). Malignant voices issue Zachry a simplistic and false ultimatum, telling him either to kill Meronym or witness his tribe perish under a Prescient invasion: “*Ain’t no*

*right or wrong [in killing her,] jus' protectin' your tribe or judasin' your tribe, yay, jus' a strong will or a weak'un"* (293, original italics). But just as there is no Goddess Sonmi to order existence, Old Georgie is likewise a mere projection of the morally bad innate in every human in the form of selfish irresponsibility. As Zachry explains earlier, Old Georgie would be troubling one's soul, "[s]ee, if you b'haved savage-like an' selfy an' spurned the civ'lize" (255). Effectively, Zachry subverts the "strong/weak will" dichotomy founded on a logic of homogeneity in helping Meronym, the "brewy-brown'n'black" (259) outlander, reach the Prescient ship at the story's end. For as Zachry comes to understand, it is not so that people of different colour or strangers from other tribes are always the threat, but the people whose "*master is his will an' if his will say-soes 'Kill' he'll kill. Like fangy animals*" (318, original italics).

That Zachry's closer-to-core-humanity "yarnin'" is placed in the middle of *Cloud Atlas*'s narrative structure is thematically highly significant, in that this positioning foregrounds the struggle for hegemony as foundational for human societies. For we find that even after civilization is largely in ruins and humanity is reverted to near-prehistoric states of development, the same tug-of-war between responsibility and selfishness that recurs throughout *Cloud Atlas* persists in Zachry's post-apocalyptic context as well. "Sloosha's Crossin'" is chronologically the furthest narrative in the future, yet plot-wise<sup>4</sup> it is nevertheless followed by the five successively antecedent narratives; a fact that emphatically underlines the constancy of hegemonic struggle within human history and the precarious equipoise between opposing sides of the human conscience. If indeed civilization is to begin anew, with the dark-skinned Prescients for the time being spearheading the process, the very same ethico-political dynamics will be present throughout time. In other words, the "Fall" of civilization is not a predetermined end: the "Old'uns"—i.e. the nations, "tribes" and peoples before the "Fall"—in forwarding selfishness as common sense and systemized rapacity as cultural hegemon, effectively developed the conditions and solidified the pattern that led to self-destruction in *seeming* inevitability.

*Cloud Atlas*, however, suggests each context is but one permutation among several possible rearrangements of existing elements. Therefore, each order is always the expression of power relations momentarily coagulated into particular configurations. As

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<sup>4</sup> "Plot", in this instance, is meant in the strictly technical sense of *syuzhet* (as popularized by Russian formalists) to denote the *order of presentation* of events as regards the whole novel, and differentiated from *fabula* ("story"), which denotes the chronological order of events.

Ewing fully understands at the end of his “Pacific Journal”, the fact that no social order is eternal testifies to the central importance of hegemonic struggle in effecting political change for good (or for ill). The same method through which a world of rapacity and predation is formed is also the method for creating a more sustainable and just alternative: “If we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, if we *believe* divers[e] races & creeds can share this world [and] if we *believe* leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass” (528, original italics). Because Ewing’s argument concludes the novel, it is to be read as the final assertion of *Cloud Atlas*’s clarion call for socio-ecologically responsible modes of global coexistence. And as I have shown in this chapter, socio-ecological responsibility entails being attuned to the inherently multitudinous nature of the world as well as subverting false hierarchies predicated on the logic of sameness. As each story develops its own singular thematics, it voices in modulation the different-yet-same ethics that comprise the conjoined whole. Inasmuch as *Cloud Atlas* thematically compels us towards a responsible hegemony in a world that is necessarily various and interconnected, it substantiates this argument in its literary performance: suturing diversity into a multivocal, profusely interlinked and globally conscious whole.

## 4

## Perspective Distortions: Worldly Morality in *The Bone Clocks*

Does the questioning of an absolute ground not deprive moral commitments of any foundation? If everything is contingent, if there is no[thing to] constitute a bedrock of morality, are we not left with a situation in which “anything goes” and, consequentially, with moral indifference and the impossibility of discriminating between ethical and unethical actions?

— Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* 50

Discussing the epistemological value of the novel genre, Peter Boxall reminds us that fictional narratives, though by definition cannot tell the truth, can nevertheless be truthful (*The Value of the Novel* 119–21). It is perhaps useful to apply this same axiom to narratives that arguably are equally imaginary yet hold effective political power, i.e. narratives that somehow build or define social reality. Do we, in fact, read the stories around us with the same suspension of disbelief with which we read stories circulated as fiction? How conscious, in other words, are we of the truthfulness—the degree of correspondence with actual reality—of the fictions we find ourselves immersed in?

In this chapter, I shall argue that for the sake of civilizational continuity, David Mitchell’s *The Bone Clocks* insists the stories structuring our social reality must be anchored to an understanding of the *worldly* conditions—the temporal and material limits—of human existence. This becomes apparent through the novel’s two-fold argument which links narrative mechanics to ethico-political implications. Firstly, in juxtaposing the fantastic and the mundane across narrative levels spanning decades as well as dimensions, the novel examines the notion of our discursive immersion through a heightened sense of textual awareness. In effect, the novel uses metafiction to self-reflexively gauge the nature and extent of narrative efficacy—how it is through stories that we make, and make sense of, the social realities we inhabit. Secondly, building on this notion that narratives form our realities, the novel suggests that only by taking the material and temporal limits of our existence into consideration can we invent stories by

which the world can be ethically organized. Ultimately, through narratives based on worldly awareness, it becomes possible to re-focalize human action towards socio-ecologically responsible modes of development and being in the world.

#### 4.1. Metafictional Realism, or, Perceiving Reality Textually

As with *Cloud Atlas* discussed in the previous chapter, *The Bone Clocks*'s thematics are likewise greatly influenced by its formal characteristics. The novel's socio-ecological re-focalization is closely supported by its engagement with "focality", or the quality of being *at or around* a focus, through the novel's central protagonist, Holly Sykes. For although *The Bone Clocks* traces Holly's life between the ages 15–75, the novel's episodic progression (lending narratorial duty to four other characters as well) reveals a host of narratives hidden behind the seeming rubric of a Bildungsroman. Despite being sidelined for much of the novel, Holly's life is nonetheless woven throughout the chapters like a red thread drawing the various events and characters together. In this sense, the novel is a *multifocal* Bildungsroman: its central character veers towards the edges of, but never quite leaves, the narrative field of vision. Holly provides a cardinal point with which to grasp the novel's complex narrative scheme comprising several interconnecting story levels of differing scopes. At the same time, Holly's focal toing and froing also highlights the power of contextual circumstances—i.e. what takes place in one's peripheral vision—in determining the trajectory one's life may take.

This focally shifting progression loosely centred on a single character foregrounds the effects of being situated in different narrative contexts simultaneously—to highlight how things "over *there*" can affect things "over *here*". To this end, Mitchell evokes multiple narrative levels in *The Bone Clocks* ranging from the local to the global, compounding these together to form unique interactions among them. Larger narratives, and the conflicts that define them, underpin or overshadow the micronarratives of Holly, Hugo, Ed and Crispin, the respective narrators for chapters 1–4. In "A Hot Spell", for instance, national politics appears in the peripheral vision of teenage Holly's runaway journey which effectively takes place during the UK miners' strike of 1984. Thus, we find through protest signs Holly reads in passing that Prime Minister "*THATCHER DECLARES WAR ON THE WORKERS*" (10, original styling); a small detail foreshadowing a deeper development later in the chapter of competing stories battling for political control (to be discussed shortly). And across national borders, in "The Wedding Bash" in 2004, Holly is affected by the Iraq War through her "war junkie" (203) partner, the journalist

Ed Brubeck, who is stationed in the combat zones directly covering the US-led “Iraqi intervention gone so horribly off script” (245).

For a substantial part of *The Bone Clocks*, however, the most immersive narrative level involves transcending commonplace reality into *paranormality*: a move that simultaneously uncovers the full extent of the novel’s metafictional, or, intensely self-conscious mode of operation. Indeed, as the novel unfolds, Holly finds herself transdimensionally enmeshed in a wildly fantastic war apparently determined by the elusively named “Script”, and fought between two belligerent factions of nigh-immortal humans collectively known as Atemporals. The two Atemporal groups are the morally righteous and “naturally” reincarnating Horologists and the “metaphorically vampiric” (444) Anchorites who postpone death by consuming the souls of ordinary human beings.<sup>1</sup> In what contains significant thematic implications to be discussed later, the two groups’ mutual animosity stems from the Horologists’ wish to prevent the Anchorites from selfishly cannibalizing innocent ordinary people. The “Script”, however, within the novel’s reality, is a mysterious God-like entity with the apparent ability to influence the unfolding of the novel. Even the Atemporals, despite their supernatural powers that may include precognition, only receive “glimpses of the Script” (404) or just “flicker[s] of glimpses. It’s points on a map, but it’s never the whole map” (494). The Script is thus shrouded in mystery for the novel’s cast of characters. Yet in a veiled address to the reader, we are told that “No, no—the Script’s not some complex formula. As often as not it’s just staring you in the face, so close you can’t see it” (278). That is, the Script is the physical writing on the page “staring you in the face”. It functions, then, as “a self-reflexive motif for the text itself” (Harris 149): a kind of immaterial master entity within the world of *The Bone Clocks* doubling as David Mitchell’s *The Bone Clocks* manuscript in an expression of the novel’s profuse metafictional consciousness. As the Script affects the unfolding of events within the novel, it also acts as a sly assertion of Mitchell’s ultimate authority as the author of the work at hand.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In what resembles a wicked cultist ritual, the Anchorites’ process of prolonging their lives without physically ageing involves “decanting” the souls of abducted, psychically sensitive individuals into “Black Wine”, which is then drunk on “Rebirthday” (see esp. 444–50).

<sup>2</sup> In fact, not just the work at hand: readers of Mitchell’s prior novels will recognize the Script as more extensive than what it lets on to be. Breaking the fourth wall, Soleil Moore (a minor character) explains to Crispin Hershey how “you wrote yourself into the Script. You describe it in ‘The Voorman Problem’. What you wrote, in that story, that’s what the Anchorites do” (393). Crispin’s “The Voorman Problem” is thus revealed to be the source-text for *PanOpticon*, the film watched by protagonist Eiji Miyake in Mitchell’s 2001 novel *number9dream* (see 28–36). The Script, in fact, encompasses all of Mitchell’s novels (see Mitchell, “On Reappearing Characters” 617–20).

This metafictional consciousness within the novel, given concrete form through the Script and its Atemporal plotline, foregrounds the power of stories and other narrative constructs to influence worldly reality. As Patricia Waugh argues, metafiction “destabilizes ‘commonsense’ contextual constructions of the everyday world” by making the reader “aware of possible alternatives to this ‘commonsense’ reality” (90). In other words, reality is never what it seems to be, and metafictional strategies remind us of this fact by pointing out other ways how reality could be constructed. Especially in connection with its otherworldly goings-on, *The Bone Clocks* abounds with metafictional asides repeatedly drawing attention to its status as being artificial and fictional. “The paranormal”, for instance, as Hugo Lamb remarks in “Myrrh is Mine”, “is always, *always* a hoax” (144, original italics). Yet in equating Atemporality with artificiality, while simultaneously telling a story where otherworldly elements cut into “commonsense reality”, *The Bone Clocks* shows how non-real narratives influence the everyday world. This point is emphatically underlined near the outset of “Crispin Hershey’s Lonely Planet”, where Mitchell explicitly highlights the novel as a text characterized by a mismatch of discourse styles and tenors; i.e. a literary commodity knowingly mixing high seriousness (e.g. the Iraq War and environmental collapse) with high-flown fantasy. Talking shop, as it were, through Richard Cheeseman’s “chainsaw massacre” (289) review of Crispin Hershey’s “*Bone Clocks*-esque” (Metz 3) novel *Echo Must Die*, Mitchell self-ironically recognizes how “the fantasy sub-plot clashes so violently with the book’s State of the World pretensions, I cannot bear to look” (289–90). But whereas for the fictional Cheeseman this mismatch of styles proves embarrassingly inappropriate, for Mitchell, the clash of fantasy on realism (of artificiality on reality) throws an important thematic principle into sharp relief: that narratives need not be grounded in fact or be particularly tangible to exert influence over real people in real situations.

Moreover, narratives do not need to be visible to be in full operation in the background. Though it fully surfaces in the novel’s fifth chapter, an early indication of the Atemporal War’s influence is foreshadowed during a sequence in Holly’s teenage escape in “A Hot Spell”. Anticipated by the miners’ strike taking place in the chapter’s backdrop, Mitchell invokes an analogy with Marxist class struggle (arguably a type of narrative or script) to prepare us for the emergence of the fantastic conflict ahead. Heading towards the Isle of Sheppey, Holly hitches a ride from minor characters Heidi and Ian: two LSE postgraduates promoting communist revolution through the distribution of *Socialist Worker* magazine. Ironically characterized as well-to-do, or, champagne

socialists, Mitchell employs Heidi and Ian's far-leftist views to suggest the existence of an abstract behind-the-scenes narrative defining the mechanisms of everyday life. As Heidi ardently explains to Holly: "An invisible war's going on ... and all through history—the class war. Owners versus slaves ... the bloated bosses versus workers, the haves versus the have-nots. The working classes are kept in a state of repression by a mixture of force and lies" (52–53). The factual Marxist macronarrative recounting two ideologically polarized social blocs, labour and capital, locked in prolonged historical struggle is analogous to *The Bone Clocks*' (or its Script's) fictive macronarrative of ideological war between the life-affirming Horologists and the life-destroying Anchorites. To the extent that class war secretly defines our reality and occasionally surfaces as e.g. labour strikes, the Atemporal War likewise secretly defines the reality of the novel—revealing itself intermittently through peculiar incidents on the surface of everyday life until it becomes centre-staged in "An Horologist's Labyrinth", the novel's penultimate chapter. Fundamentally, however, this analogy suggests that whilst only some are directly implicated in a story (becoming heroes or villains, as it were), all people are potentially caught within its sphere of influence.

#### **4.2. "A Terrain of Conflictuality"**

Critics duly recognize that the fantastic dimension of *The Bone Clocks* readily opens itself to "philosophical explorations" (Harris 152), continuing what Joseph Metz describes as Mitchell's "ongoing dialogue with ... postmodern modes of theorizing" (3). But as I have argued throughout this study, this theoretical dialogue serves an ethico-politically conscious end in Mitchell's works. As we have seen, in typical postmodernist fashion, narratives are recognized as configuring our common reality. Yet as the Marxist analogy discussed above suggests, *The Bone Clocks* also draws attention to the existence of conflicting stories and narrators competing to define the spaces we share. Because all manner of things are possible through the textual production of reality, it is essential to critically evaluate the contents and consequences of what exactly is being constructed and by whom.

Following postmodern theory, the conjoined effect of metafiction and fantasy in *The Bone Clocks* is to uncover the unstable-yet-flexible nature of *text* and demonstrate its general susceptibility to manipulation. To this end, the intentionally overt or even shoddy fictionality of the fantastic elements in the novel invites us to recognize Atemporality as *contrivedly* imaginary. That is, the Atemporal plotline is a narrative that is emphatically



fictional not just in terms of content but also in terms of *construction*: Atemporality is “mechanically transparent”, or, ostentatiously created through storytelling techniques, generic conventions and stylistic choices. Marinus’s quest in “An Horologist’s Labyrinth”, for instance, to revive master Horologist Esther Little from her forty-one-year state of incorporeality, trapped within a specific memory in Holly Sykes’ mind, unfolds through an exceedingly complex chain of events kept in motion by obviously executed plot forwarding devices.<sup>3</sup> Together with its, at times, clichéd or kitschy dialogue, Mitchell evokes Atemporality as hyperbolically fictional to show how fabricated discourses allow for improbable twists and turns in plot, form and—crucially—truth content. Read against Mitchell’s tendency for formal experimentation and interplay, these are deliberate stylistic choices meant to convey the properties of textual constructs. As Hugo Lamb recognizes by the end of “Myrrh is Mine” when the Anchorites initiating him into their ranks display their “psychosoteric” abilities: within Atemporality—or allegorically speaking, the realm of *abstract textuality*—“[t]he impossible is negotiable. What is possible *is malleable*” (200, original italics).<sup>4</sup>

This heightened imaginary and linguistic nature of the fantastic in *The Bone Clocks* effectively casts the Atemporal War as an allegory of hegemonic struggle. The two Atemporal groups are portrayed as conflicting moral stories locked in a battle to define our textually negotiable and malleable social reality—or what Chantal Mouffe terms “a terrain of conflictuality” (xi). As the name suggests, Atemporals do not exist in the same way as normal human beings do: they are “timeless” in that they do not expire with time like ordinary mortals. Allegorically, then, the Atemporals are thus abstract creatures whereas our beingness-in-time affords us our concrete materiality. Yet the key difference between Anchorites and Horologists lies in the respective groups’ willingness to exist in such a state. Twelve in number, the Anchorite order’s sole purpose is to “ensure the indefinite survival of the group” (194): to strive for artificial immortality by consuming the lives of innocent mortals to prolong their own in an extreme expression of self-centredness and predation. Horologists, on the other hand, likewise few in number, live in a “spiral of resurrections *involuntarily*” (444, my italics): upon dying, they reach

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<sup>3</sup> These plot devices involve characters with no further mention in the novel: a teacher in Trondheim, Norway, who is prompted to send a cassette to Marinus in Manhattan if and only if his statuette of composer Jean Sibelius shatters to pieces (401–4), and a junkie-turned-cabbie in Poughkeepsie, NY, who is instructed to relay a “mnemocrypted key” (418) to Marinus, if and only if they ever meet (413–17).

<sup>4</sup> “Psychosoterica” denotes the Atemporals’ supernatural psyche-based abilities that defy physical laws (e.g. “ingress/egress”) as well as manipulate minds (e.g. “scansion”, “suasion”) and memories (e.g. “redaction”, “hiatus”). For a working glossary on the novel’s expansive fantastic terminology, see Tougaw.

the afterlife only to be resurrected back on Earth in “a lottery of longitudes, latitudes and demography” (425)—that is, in a different part of the world, in a different body of a different ethnicity, sex and social standing, with memories intact from *all* previous lives. “What matters,” however, as Marinus (in her forty-first lifetime) explains, “is that no one pays for our Atemporality. Its cost we alone pay” (444).

Significantly for the novel’s moral sensibility, this cost which Horologists feel they must pay for their infinite-yet-undesired existence is *meaninglessness*. An endlessly protracted existence gives rise to what Marinus terms the “*Ennui* of Eternity” (503, original italics): a sense of boredom and discontent conjoined with a “debilitating” loneliness that is so profound as to be “indescribable yet [has] to be endured” (ibid.). To directly counter the ennui of an Atemporal or purely textual existence, Horologists wilfully attach themselves to worldly (i.e. temporal and material) circumstances—the domain, essentially, of ordinary humankind.<sup>5</sup> As Marinus explains, notwithstanding the boredom of eternal being, “being a doctor, and an horologist, gives my metalife a purpose” (503). In other words, Horologists find meaning in the tangible aspects of human existence; they *choose* to spend their metalives studying and practising philosophy, art, natural sciences and medicine, and form bonds with temporally bound humans in full knowledge of the fact that these bonds will, in time, be severed. For the Horologists, then, the pain that comes with human transience is far preferable to the pain of being alive with nothing truly valuable to hold on to. Conversely, the Anchorite way of life is predicated entirely on nihilistic self-service: the ruthless exploitation of others for the hedonistic gain of the self.<sup>6</sup>

This essential difference in how the two groups construct meaning in life translates to a struggle between opposing ways of justifying existence, foregrounding the Horologists as an exemplary ethical model within the novel. Figuratively speaking, Horologists are to Anchorites as gamekeepers are to poachers (494): the former defend ordinary humankind from the latter’s deadly abductions enacted for selfish gain. Although the struggle only ever involves a handful of Atemporals at best, the Horologists

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<sup>5</sup> As the novel itself discloses, the word “horology” means “the study of the measurement of time” (481). Founded in the 1660s, the Horological Society of the Atemporals, however, developed a “curative function” reflecting their conservationist outlook on ordinary temporal humanity: Horologists “assassinate ... carnivorous Atemporals—like the Anchorites—who consume the psychovoltaic souls of innocent people in order to fuel their own immortality” (ibid.).

<sup>6</sup> Tellingly, as Metz notes, the “baroque excess” (2) of the group’s full name—“The Anchorites of the Chapel of the Dusk of the Blind Cathar of the Thomasite Monastery of Sidelhorn Pass” (BC 194)—aptly reflects their insatiability and vainglorious egoism.

feel that inaction against the Anchorites' violent incursions into the lives of innocent Temporals would constitute a crisis of conscience that would go against their deepest-held beliefs. As Marinus explains, they fight the Atemporal War:

Because nobody else would believe in the animacides [i.e. "soul-murders"] committed by a syndicate of soul thieves like the Anchorites .... Because if we spent our metalives ... getting stoned on the opiates of wealth and power, *knowing what we know yet doing nothing about it*, we would be complicit in the psychosoteric slaughter of the innocents. (438, my italics)

Turning a blind eye to a moral wrong, then, is as good as committing it. The knowledge alone of the Anchorite *modus operandi* compels Horology to act according to their consciences. A lifetime (or meta-lifetime in the Atemporals' case) spent on nihilistic self-indulgence, whether on wealth or power, is both subjectively meaningless *and* socially destructive, taking place at other people's expense. In fighting the War, the Horologists strive to solidify their belief that life needs to be conducted under worldly terms and conditions. In wilfully choosing to spend their metalives defending temporal humanity from the purely egoistic impulses of soul-eating carnivores (as opposed to "getting stoned" on the near-limitless possibilities offered by immortality), the Horologists exemplify other-regarding responsibility and moral rigour through an awareness of material and temporal grounding—despite not being inherently materially and temporally grounded themselves.

### **4.3. Facing Up to the Concrete World**

The moral struggle between selfish and responsible beliefs, however, is not just the stuff of genre fiction and textual abstractions, as *The Bone Clocks* strongly emphasizes towards its concluding chapters. Notwithstanding the prominence of the otherworldly Atemporal dimension, the novel's real concerns lie with its "State of the World pretensions" (290): the social and ecological circumstances that sustain our everyday, worldly existence. As described above, fantasy and metafiction in *The Bone Clocks* sensitize us to the role texts (or, indeed, "Scripts") and the beliefs embodied in them have in configuring reality. Still, the moral struggle between allegories of responsibility and selfishness, represented by the Horologists and Anchorites respectively, transcends fictional boundaries—conducting a leap of scale, as it were, from the limited scope of the Atemporal War to the mundane context of ordinary humankind with significantly graver and more globally far-reaching implications.

In what is the novel's central ethico-political concern, *The Bone Clocks* suggests that like the Anchorites, contemporary humanity has also lost touch with concrete reality for selfish reasons. It has done so by pursuing ever more comfort and efficiency, under a dynamic geared towards infinite growth and indifferent to the social and ecological strains this development causes. As a result, it seems “*the Hole World [is not] big nuff' for that hunger*”, as *Cloud Atlas*'s Meronym puts it, “*in the hearts o' humans [for more] gear, more food ... longer lifes, easier lifes*” (286, original italics). Halfway through “An Horologist's Labyrinth”, Marinus provides the recently revived Esther Little a summary of world development during her absence since 1984: “On the bright side, there's more computing power in [a single mobile device] than existed in the world when you last walked it” (491). Conversely, however, “[o]il's running out” in 2025, and:

Earth's population is eight billion, mass extinctions of flora and fauna are commonplace, climate change is foreclosing the Holocene Era. ... China's powerhouse—though their air is industrial effluence in a gaseous state [...] People outsourced their memories to data centres and basic skills to tabs. ... Inequality is truly Pharaonic. The world's twenty-seven richest people own more wealth than the poorest five billion, and people accept that as normal. (491)

In this alternate-yet-plausible vision of global futurity, Marinus unveils the ramifications of contemporary development enacted under the hegemony of selfish rapacity. The foreclosure of the “Holocene Era” is arguably ushered by the Anthropocene, the geological epoch of superior *human* influence. And with this immense capacity for world-formation, humankind refuses to take responsibility for those it holds power over. While humanity expands onto its eighth billion, natural ecologies face “mass extinctions”. We function under a delusional conception of “normal” detached from worldly reality: effectively a system of “Pharaonic” inequality biased by the selfish interests of an elite few. Correspondingly, this detachment is further underscored by the commonplace commercial “outsourc[ing]” of basic human faculties, such as memory, to incorporeal digital domains.

This overview of world development between 1984–2025, however, is only a foreshadowing glimpse looking towards the major focal shift that occurs after “An Horologist's Labyrinth”. Again, the novel manipulates focality to dramatic effect: just as the Atemporal War is anticipated in chapter one, and is out of focus throughout the novel only to be centre-staged as late as chapter five, the grand narrative of world development—likewise taking place in the peripheral vision of the novel's gaze—comes

into full focus only in the concluding chapter. The ecological failure depicted in “Sheep’s Head” surprises most of humankind. But for the socio-ecologically mindful it is clear “[t]he future looks a lot like the past”: civilizational regression, as Marinus infers, is “the inevitable result ... of population growth and lies about oil reserves” (493).

The transition from “An Horologist’s Labyrinth” to “Sheep’s Head”, then, reveals what happens to a societal order that develops out of touch of with worldly reality. As we move in time from 2025 to 2043, we discover that the techno-industrial dynamics of modern society result in the human and environmental wreckage that comes to be known as “Endarkenment”—the conceptual opposite to the self-evident sense of rational progress of the Enlightenment. Having surpassed an ecological tipping point within the novel’s timeline and simultaneously within Holly’s lifetime, the shifting conditions of the globe, previously taking place in the novel’s peripheral vision, now form a narrative which directly affects the whole of humanity. Holly, at seventy-five, recalls:

the pictures of seawater flooding Fremantle during the deluge of ’33. Or was it the deluge of ’37? Or am I confusing it with pictures of the sea sluicing into the New York Subway ...? Or was that Athens? Or Mumbai? Footage of catastrophes flowed so thick and fast through the thirties that it was hard to keep track of which coastal region had been devastated this week, or which city had been decimated by Ebola or Ratflu. The news turned into a plotless never-ending disaster movie I could hardly bring myself to watch. (541)

Abstract projections of fantastic entities give way to entirely concrete circumstances in this part of the novel’s progression. In a powerful thematic and stylistic contrast effected by this focal shift, the exceedingly implausible and complex plot of the Script dissipates into the “plotless [and] never-ending” yet entirely plausible sequence of events that obey natural laws situated in *time*—the dimension of ordinary human existence. Time and materiality are inextricably linked in ecology and in humanity: to paraphrase eminent poet Dylan Thomas, time is the dynamic force driving the growth and decay of both human beings and the natural world.<sup>7</sup> Arguably, our currently prevailing narratives advocating infinite growth on a materially finite planet (see e.g. Magdoff and Foster 380–87) overlook this rudimentary truth.

As *The Bone Clocks* reaches its concluding chapter, we find that the same ethical dynamics present in the Atemporal War are also at play in the novel’s “commonsense” reality. The conflicting outlooks of responsibility and selfishness, given narrative form

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<sup>7</sup> The poem in question is entitled “The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower”.

by the Horologists and Anchorites respectively, also struggle to define “real world” settings. However, in the “real world” of Holly and the rest of humankind, the stakes are revealed to be significantly higher than in Atemporality. In projecting a near-future of environmental collapse and socio-political upheaval that results from the continued exploitation of our worldly surroundings, Mitchell compels us to recognize the material detachment of our developmental forces and act to revert them back to solid ground—before the environment does it for us in exponentially more powerful ways in the form of natural catastrophes. As I shall explore below, like the Horologists on their own accord, we must also value the tangible aspects of human existence: that it is our attachment to worldly reality that ultimately sets the scene for an individually meaningful life and collectively sustainable existence.

#### **4.4. “consciences r 4 bone clocks”: The Morality of Worldly Beings**

This interlinkage of life, worldliness and human agency is belatedly revealed to already have been pronounced in the novel’s title. As it turns out, a “bone clock” (437) is a derogatory Anchorite term referring to an ordinary, non-Atemporal human being; one bound to life by the limited timespan of her material body. That is to say, our bodies make up the physical clocks that count down the time to our unavoidable deaths. Given that our lives have a concrete time limit, how we choose to use that time and what beliefs guide our choices become significantly emphasized and gain utmost thematic importance. Just as the novel’s “State of the World pretensions” overtake its flamboyant “fantasy sub-plot” (289–90), *The Bone Clocks* correspondingly elevates the mundane influence of temporal humans, its titular beings, over that of super- or supra-human entities.

The extent of this influence is explored through a dialectic between transience and continuity, closely informed by the novel’s ethical focus on worldly existence. Indeed, worldly boundaries impose severe limitations on our lives. Prior to becoming an Anchorite, Hugo Lamb knows “that whatever I do with my life, however much power, wealth, ... knowledge or beauty I’ll accrue, I, too, will end up [a] vulnerable old man” (123). For Hugo, nihilistically, “[l]ife is a terminal illness” (167) where our choices become meaningless in the face of our mortality. Yet it is entirely within these limits, placed by time and materiality, that our lives find their definition both individually and beyond our individuality. Our worldly existence ties us to the vast entangled networks (only intensified by globalization) that make up the finite globe: as Hardt and Negri write, “[w]e live on and with the planet, which is one interconnected whole” (*Multitude* 282).

For Mitchell, the very terms and conditions of human existence that render life transient in individual terms also afford us continuity in our relations and connections to our surroundings. “We sort of live on,” as Holly comes to understand in her old age, “as long as there are people to live on in” (542).

Effectively, human continuity requires a leap of scale from human morality: of acting on a broader consciousness of global interconnectedness that dispels the perspective distortions created by purely self-serving desires. “Sheep’s Head” illustrates this through the tension of intergenerational relations. A tone of auto- or self-generational shame pervades elderly Holly’s narration, as she recurrently admonishes her “feckless generation” (549) for having lived on what was essentially time borrowed from future generations. For Holly, instead of accepting worldly limits, “[m]y generation were diners stuffing ourselves senseless at the Restaurant of the Earth’s Riches knowing—while denying—that we’d be doing a runner and leaving our grandchildren a tab that can never be paid” (550). A more upfront instance of generational blame that also accounts to a problematization of agency evinces itself in the young bandits robbing the solar panels from Holly’s neighbour Mo Muntervary. Deeming themselves as vigilante “bailiffs” prosecuting an overdue bill for “[y]our power stations, your cars, your creature comforts”, they accuse Mo and Holly for gradually “reinstating the law of the jungle ... every time you filled your [fuel] tank” (588–89). But as Mo understandably objects, however, “it wasn’t us, personally, who trashed the world .... It was the *system*. We *couldn’t* change it” (588, my italics).

Considering the novel’s metafictional apparatus, however, *The Bone Clocks* demystifies and deconstructs the “system” (effectively a combination of economic and technological forces) into a humanly conceived textual construct. In Chantal Mouffe’s words, the “system”, or any other political order, “is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices. It is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity that is exterior to the practices that brought it into being” (2). In simpler terms, the “system”, like all narratives whether purely imaginary or based on fact, requires *belief*—or the suspension of disbelief—to stay afloat. As Holly knows, “Civilisation’s like the economy, or Tinkerbell: if people stop believing it’s real, it dies” (590). Hence the “system”, from conception to full operational capacity, is entirely dependent on human agency. “Myrrh is Mine”, set in 1991, provides a cautionary example of this. Despite seeing the futility of it all, the young Hugo Lamb believes a cog-in-the-system future, most likely in London’s financial district, must nonetheless be embraced. In the abstruse and speculative world of “stocks,

properties [and] portfolios” where one can “stab and bluff [one’s] way to a phone-number income within two years” (167), Hugo sees being “inside the system” as infinitely better than “dropping out” of it altogether. Indeed, for Hugo, “‘outside the system’ means poverty” (133): we must fend for ourselves in the free-for-all of global capitalism because this is how the world seemingly is—a reality determined by selfish discourses and models of predatory behaviour where, as *Cloud Atlas*’s Henry Goose maintains, “The Weak are Meat the Strong do Eat” (508).

Measured against the backdrop of planetary fragility vividly portrayed in “Sheep’s Head”, the need to re-evaluate our currently hegemonic stories takes on an insurmountable urgency. The novel refutes the selfish paradigm endorsed by Hugo by referring to global finitude as the foundation for evaluating the ethical soundness of competing beliefs and actions. The five-year anniversary of the “’38 Gigastorm” (539) killing Aoife and Örvar, Holly’s granddaughter Lorelei’s parents, fills Holly with grief distinctly tinged with remorse over “everything” (549) in contemporary history leading to this point. As Holly laments, “it’s not just that I can’t hold Aoife again”, it is also:

grief for the regions we deadlanded, the ice caps we melted, the Gulf Stream we redirected, the rivers we drained, the coasts we flooded ... the seas we killed, the species we drove to extinction, the pollinators we wiped out, the oil we squandered ... the comforting liars we voted into office—all so we didn’t have to change our cosy lifestyles. (549–50, my italics)

Self-serving choices drove civilization to ruin; that instead of acting on the knowledge that ecology is failing, humanity chose to suspend its disbelief over the imaginary story that economic growth and resultant lifestyles can be sustained on a finite planet. Within Holly’s local community the Endarkenment is discussed “as if it’s an act of God”, when the uncomfortable truth is it was “summoned ... with every tank of oil we burnt our way through” (550). Human agency is at fault for not questioning and subverting destructive beliefs; but as *The Bone Clocks* also recognizes, human agency is also the force to look to for constructing alternatives. “There is no God but the one we dream up”, as Holly remarks, “humanity is on its own and always was” (563).

The conclusion to “Sheep’s Head” unequivocally elevates human agency over superhuman influence in its staging of a final contrast between the novel’s fantastic and mundane reality. True to form, Mitchell flaunts fictional conventions to refute reliance on miracles and abstractions. Following Holly’s desperate wish for “one final abracadabra” (575) to save her grandchildren from worsening conditions in Ireland, an



abrupt reprise of the novel's fantastic dimension, after an eighteen-year hiatus, provides a *deus ex machina* to resolve the situation. Marinus, now in *his* forty-second lifetime representing the Icelandic government,<sup>8</sup> presents a “one-way lifeboat” (606) in the form of an offer to repatriate Holly's granddaughter Lorelei (Icelandic on her father Örvar's side) and Lorelei's foster-brother Rafiq. The sheer improbability of this plot twist is reflected in the strenuous “psychosoteric” effort required of Marinus to pull the rescue off: “suasioning” minds on the warship *Sjálfstæði* to his favour “past the point of no return, when all the protagonists would be wondering what had got into them” (608). As Marinus informs Holly, “I won't lie: it would be a tall, tall order” (*ibid.*)—not only for Marinus's Atemporal capabilities but also for our, the reader's, willingness to continue suspending disbelief over the novel's happenings. In deliberately stretching our suspension of disbelief to its breaking point, however, Mitchell in this way illustrates the shortcomings of purely imaginary and abstract narratives: “abracadabra” may grant comfort for individuals but it cannot solve the bigger problems society faces.

By extension, we are meant to apply this to our own reality and recognize the abstract and inadequate nature of the narratives currently guiding our global development. *The Bone Clocks* suggests that contemporary globalization—i.e. the figurative shrinking of the world due to technocratic capitalism, promising ever-rising living standards and creature comforts such as “central heating, online ordering, Ryanair and chocolate” (563)—this version of globalization is much too reliant on wishful thinking and the materially detached stories that keep it going. Yet the “system” driving this development which for Hugo was unavoidable and for Mo was unchangeable is in fact neither. The grim context of Endarkenment, or, civilization's violent reversion to entirely worldly conditions forces Holly to recognize how the rapidly progressing world of the best part of her life (from her teens in the 1980s through her adulthood to the 2020s) was not “‘the natural order of things’ but *entirely man-made*” (583, my italics). As such, like all overly abstract or wishful constructs, its foundations are very vulnerable. Indeed, “a world that kept expanding as technology regressed was not only possible but waiting in the wings” (*ibid.*). What is man-made and textually constructed, however, is by the same token textually alterable. The Atemporal War effectively shows us that equally important as the

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<sup>8</sup> With Manhattan “half-feralised” (604), remnants of Horology following the Anchorite showdown (in “An Horologist's Labyrinth”) moved base to Iceland and founded the think tank “Prescience”. This effectively forms a *hyperlink* between *The Bone Clocks* and *Cloud Atlas* suggesting lineage between the Horologist organization and Meronym's people, the Prescients, in “Sloosha's Crossin”.

deconstruction of narratives, is the capacity and willingness to construct alternative ones. In this, we need to take ethical example from the Horologists, themselves narrative constructs: it is imperative to choose responsibility over selfishness and to believe in the preservation of humanity and the world that sustains it, rather than pursue hedonistic gains for purely selfish aims.

As Mitchell makes clear, stories carry enormous potential for worldbuilding; indeed, it is through narrative conventions that we make, and make sense of, our realities. As I have argued in this chapter, *The Bone Clocks* teaches us to recognize the fictionality, or, constructedness of *all* narratives—not only the ones which are obviously labelled as such. The novel's frequent and intensely self-aware transgressions of ordinary worldly reality sensitize us to the notion that, within the realm of discourse, anything is imaginable. As the novel shows, immortality and infinite economic growth, for instance, can be given believable form through narrative conventions. And these narratives, whether based on fact or fiction, may come to define how we see and act in the world. It is *The Bone Clocks*' central contention, however, that not all stories should be allowed to structure our reality. We need to be wary of suspending our disbelief over political narratives that would drive our world over its material limits. In effect, in recognizing the fictionality of our currently hegemonic stories, and identifying the harmful beliefs that animate them, we stand the chance of supplanting these stories with more ethical ones: inventing narratives that gesture towards socially and ecologically responsible modes of global coexistence and development. We cannot rewrite the terms and conditions of our basic mode of existence; but we *can* rewrite the terms and conditions of our social reality.

## CONCLUSION:

### The Possibility of Other Possibilities

The world is an ordered flowchart of subplots, after all. Look at all these cars—driving past and never colliding. The order is difficult to see, but it is here, under the chaos. [...] Life goes on.

— Eiji Miyake, in David Mitchell's *number9dream* 259

As *Cloud Atlas*'s Timothy Cavendish, the cantankerous vanity publisher in his mid-sixties, quickly realizes during the course of writing his memoirs: things can serve better purposes than their original uses allow. Following the false start to his autobiographical "Ghastly Ordeals", Cavendish proclaims that "[a]s an experienced editor I disapprove of backflashes, foreshadowings and tricky devices, they belong in the 1980s with MAs in Postmodernism and Chaos Theory" (152). Realizing their intuitive usefulness for recounting his experiences, however, Cavendish "make[s] no apology ... for (re)starting my own narrative" (ibid.) with just such "tricky" devices. Like his creator David Mitchell, Cavendish is able to see past the customary "chaotic" associations of these devices and regard them as neutral tools that can be employed in genuinely helpful ways.

In what has been a signature theme throughout this study, I have explored how Mitchell examines the prospects of twenty-first-century globalism through a critical dialogue with postmodernist theory and practice. Essentially for Mitchell, what utility postmodernism has in a mimetic sense it severely lacks in an ethical one. In other words, postmodernism can describe, but it cannot interpret, the world in an adequate way. Far from being outmoded, as Cavendish initially suggests, postmodernism's "tricky" devices become in Mitchell's use a timely way of illustrating the diversity and complexity of our globalized world without subscribing to the *chaos* or disruption typically linked to a postmodernist worldview. As the preceding chapters have shown, Mitchell deploys postmodernist tools in ways which convey moral determination and optimism where indeterminacy and nihilism are perhaps conventionally expected.

This ethically constructive outlook, I have suggested throughout, is a response to the novel globalist circumstances of our current century. For Mitchell, interconnectedness is a necessary fact of life; as individuals, communities and complex societies, “[w]e cross, criss-cross and recross our old tracks like figure skaters” (CA 165). The development of civilization, however, has reached an unprecedented point in history whereby humankind is now not only intimately interconnected, but also entirely *interdependent*. Whatever happens in—and to—this globe affects all of us across natural and artificial boundaries. Contemporary globalization has not only revealed the vast extent of our technical know-how, but also accentuated the vast extent of the damage our world-shaping actions currently have, and their continuing contribution to increasingly bleak social and ecological prognoses. Hence it seems our practical mastery of the globe greatly outdistances our ethical grasp on planetary totality. Mitchell seeks to right this imbalance: as I have shown, *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* can be read as joint formulations of a globalist ethics that strives to re-align our values and actions to responsibly account for the thoroughly interdependent nature of contemporary global reality.

Mitchell’s focus on the ethics of our global interconnectedness across spatiotemporal boundaries foregrounds the essential role values play in shaping civilizational development. Globalization is, on the face of things, a predominantly technical achievement; but like all technical developments, it also embodies values that went into its invention and use. By extension, Mitchell suggests the globalist problems we face in our century are not simply technical issues solved by technical means alone, but ethical dilemmas to be confronted firstly by ethical deliberation. Like the literary tools discussed above, technology itself can equally be considered value-neutral; but it is the purpose to which technology can be put that determines whether actions taken are ethical or not. As *Cloud Atlas* suggests through its millennia-long timespan from the enterprising and ruthlessly colonial 1850s to a post-apocalyptic and tribalist far-future following the collapse of Sonmi-451’s ultra-capitalist “corpocratic” state, human coexistence can take almost any form imaginable, made possible by technical advances constantly opening up new paths to explore. It is Mitchell’s contention, however, that we need a moral compass to guide our explorations.

This bewildering array of contingent directions regarding world development is condensed to a choice between two distinct possibilities in Mitchell’s novels. As has been my central argument, Mitchell frames historical progress as a contest between selfishness and responsibility across the social spectrum. With respect to our own times, we can

continue with our current, *selfishly* motivated dynamic which—as *The Bone Clocks*' comparatively condensed timeline between 1984–2043 shows—will drive contemporary civilization to greater technological marvels but also its ultimate undoing. Conversely, and centrally for the moral message of Mitchell's works, we can choose to conduct development along more *responsible* lines; having greater chance of guaranteeing social and ecological justice as well as civilizational continuity without woeful apocalyptic intermissions. This, however, is not simply a matter of ethical choice, but also one of political struggle. Even though both *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* end their timelines in post-apocalyptic settings, Mitchell's purpose is not to frighten us into inaction in the face of a seemingly predetermined historical arc. It is not entirely the case, as Robert Frobisher quotes a cynical acquaintance saying, that “[o]ur will to power, our science, and those v. faculties that elevated us from apes, to savages, to modern man, are the same faculties that’ll snuff out *Homo sapiens* before this century is out” (CA 462). Realistically, there may be every chance of this scenario taking place. Yet to regard this view as true is to overlook faculties that are equally part of humanity and thus capable of determining our common fate: responsibility, altruism, compassion and countless overlapping others. Indeed, “*It ain’t savages what are stronger’n civ’lizeds ... it’s big numbers what’re stronger’n small numbers*” (CA 318, original italics). For Mitchell, then, it is imperative we recognize our agency and fight for alternative forms of development, against opposing views that would drive things towards destructive ends.

The concept of cultural hegemony, as developed by Laclau and Mouffe, provides a useful model and vocabulary for interpreting this central motif of struggle between conflicting beliefs that permeates both novels. “Hegemony”, in this sense, is seen as strictly neutral in value: a position or status of discursive influence that may be contested over by conflicting beliefs—a device, essentially, for defining what constitutes “common sense”. As my “cultural hegemonic” readings of *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* show, Mitchell's interconnected stories of struggle between responsible and selfish beliefs across spatiotemporal contexts compel us to shake off the sense of “normality” with respect to how we conceive of our predominant, or, hegemonic social frameworks. *The Bone Clocks* succinctly advises us to “[t]hink larger. Re-draw what is possible” (138). Placing a succession of individual contexts within a larger global perspective, Mitchell reveals social frameworks for what they essentially are: artificial textual constructs (or simply, fictional stories) that define social relations and practices in favour of their creators. In revealing the hegemonic constructedness of social orders and rules, however,

Mitchell simultaneously undermines the stories that have become so commonsensical as to constitute a real obstacle to thinking ourselves out of our current global predicament. In other words, both *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* point towards the possibility of other possibilities—the possibility, for instance, of inventing stories that correspond with the nature of global reality and teach responsible coexistence under its terms and conditions.

On this final note, Mitchell's works represent hope and optimism for political change, by narrating a way forward from the ethical stagnation characterizing a contemporary atmosphere divided between nihilism and selfish profiteering. Precisely because social paradigms that determine our world are culturally constructed, they *can* be subjected to change or replacement. Any alternative world is likewise textual in precisely the same way: mutable and reflective of the interests of its creators. Still, it is the nature of these common texts and the values they represent and reinforce that makes all the difference. Currently, globalization is largely narrated by self-centred voices defining our common world and the interactions within it along exploitative and competitive lines. For Mitchell, however, struggling to install a hegemony of mutual socio-ecological responsibility “isn't some pie-in-the-sky lefty dream”, as *The Bone Clocks* states in its double-coding narrative register, “but a matter of survival” (53). We need different storytellers to ensure civilizational continuity: to narrate alternative stories that solidify into alternative paradigms that acknowledge the interdependence of the world's peoples within a shared, materially limited planet. This involves the whole spectrum of society. As Mitchell writes in his debut novel *Ghostwritten*, in what has proven to be a leitmotif across his fictional universe: “Nowhere does the microscopic world stop and the macroscopic world begin” (373). Even the smallest of acts may contribute to building a socio-ecologically responsible world—indeed, as the concluding words to *Cloud Atlas* contend, “what is any ocean but a multitude of drops” (529)?

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