

(Dis)connections in *Cloud Atlas*:
A Textual Analysis of David Mitchell's Novel
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Introduction

Nonlocality is a concept germane to quantum theory that opposes the principle of locality, which asserts that an object is influenced directly only by its immediate surroundings. However, its fundamental principles parallel those of globalization. Globalization narratives typically encompass increased connectivity and formation of a new global consciousness, but just as pertinent is the (non)presence of a global *unconsciousness*; it is just as much about *disconnection* as it is connection. Digital bonds proliferate remaining unadulterated by the screaming deterioration of real physical human relationships.

Cloud Atlas explores the encompassing theme of real and virtual (dis)connections by illuminating more specific matters of technology, memory, power, and individual agency. It seeks an understanding of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways life is interwoven, to examine the intermediate mechanism where clearly one exists, to find one where there appears to be none, and to examine its potential uses. Mitchell posits that it is not an innate characteristic of technology to serve society's powerful, but that it can be used by the individual to create her own system of navigation, her own atlas. This study utilizes narrative textual analysis to consider various potential social, political, and philosophical implications of a technologically advancing society.

So, how is individual agency depicted in *Cloud Atlas* in relation to society as an aggregate? How exactly is the relationship between the individual and humans as a collective (institutions, organizations, etc.) portrayed? What degree of autonomy do individuals have relative to their social environments? What is technology's role in this relationship? What are the parallels and relevance for our contemporary society? To investigate these guiding research questions, Gilles Deleuze's fitting Assemblage Theory is used as the theoretical lens.

Background Research

What Could Be: 'Imaginary Media'

MP3s, DVD players, the iPhone, the GPS, the watch, the laptop, along with other mass-produced technologies that pervade our daily lives, are only the most economically viable (Parikka, 2012). The spark of an idea may birth a prototype, fall under the scrutiny of a cost-effectiveness-minded executive committee, and then shot down, discarded, cast into the abyss of the financially infeasible. Zielinskis urges us to resist such "an economically driven, narrow appropriation of media technologies" (Parikka, 2012, p. 51). From this we can conclude that even academic studies with the object of investigation

being some currently existing form of media have, in this respect, sprung from the economic base of Marx's model (Wayne, 2003). Massive waves of literature deliberate over what *is* while foregoing potential futures, that which *could be*. This is why theory consistently lags behind reality (P. Shoemaker, personal communication, April 22, 2013). Thus, not only is the phenomenon of financially-based media creation a problem in itself, but the lack of research on other potential media, which in turn contributes to the shaping of civilizations, contributes to people's lack of awareness of their potential for change, for affect.

Production for profit appears 'natural,' but what would life be like if technology weren't founded on market principles? This is a question most fitting for science fiction. Media scholar Jussi Parikka notes that 'imaginary media' (media that do not actually exist) are born from authors of science fiction, thus further validating study of the genre (Parikka, 2012, p. 54). *Cloud Atlas*, with its postmodern hybridity of genre, is itself an artifact exemplifying the potential 'imaginaries' of the past, present, and future. Our present could be something entirely different than what it is now. The characteristics demarcating each of the six genres of the novel could be different. The potential to change our ways has existed in the past and thus exists now. It is only when we come to this realization (via research such as this or otherwise) that we can do anything about it: "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" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 460). It would be wise for academia to place more emphasis on the science fiction genre.

Cloud Atlas

In English, literary criticism and textual analysis of contemporary literature is common. In media studies, though, the subject of most research evolves in tandem with society, revolving around popular visual media (television, film, internet, etc.). Concerning *Cloud Atlas* in particular, there is a great deal of online periodicals, reviews, interviews, and informal analyses of the film and even a good deal on the novel as well. However, after a wide-spread search, only one formal academic paper—a Master's Thesis—was found. This study's main focus is on the postmodern structure of the novel. Similar to this study, it focuses on themes of power and memory, yet chooses to frame the discussion using chiefly the theory explicitly stated by Mitchell in the novel (Nietzsche's will to power) (Johnston-Ellis, 2010). It is advantageous to consider these same issues using Deleuze's Assemblage Theory supplanted with Bernard Steigler's ideas pertaining to memory, which have been elucidated after this thesis was written to provide a slightly more up-to-date interpretation of the novel.

Key Findings

Theme I: Technological Disconnections

Individuals are immersed in the virtual such that they become accustomed to it. Time and again they relegate technology over physical human contact. Frobisher comes across a dying bird and decides to put it out of its misery by smashing its head with a stone. "Wished I had a gun. [...] Unpleasant—not the same as shooting a bird, not at all" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 443). Primitive tools are more intimate in that they require close

physical proximity. The gun, which in this case is representative of technology, is much less difficult for the perpetrator to commit the crime. This incident foreshadows people hiding behind technology for its instrumental ease. Cavendish is forced to stand in a 31-person line and join the “queue for a human ticket seller” because the credit card machine is broken. The human is his second choice. When his train breaks down, static overtakes the speaker system as the conductor explains the problem, then says “see our website for more info.” The conductor remains secluded, faceless, and doesn’t have to deal with the upset passengers. People resort to it when they expect confrontation and seek to use it as something to hide behind. This transcendence of time and space causes a dehumanization paralleling Walter Benjamin’s assertion (Benjamin 1936/2012).

Technology as a distancing instrument is something the powerful utilize. In the dystopian world of Sonmi-451, she claims fabricants have personalities while the Archivist holds the popular belief that such an assertion is absurd. She responds:

This fallacy is propagated for the comfort of purebloods. *Comfort? How do you mean?* To enslave an individual troubles your consciences, Archivist, but to enslave a clone is no more troubling than owning the latest six-wheeler ford, ethically. Because you cannot discern our differences, you believe we have none. But make no mistake: even same-stem fabricants cultured in the same womb tank are as singular as snow-flakes (Mitchell, 2004, p. 187).

The delegation of tasks and responsibilities are increasingly deferred to technology. Consequentially, Mitchell delves into its repercussions regarding memory.

Theme II: Memory

Humans not only evolve biologically, but also ‘epiphylogenetically,’ meaning we exteriorize ourselves in “tools, artifacts, language, and technical memory banks” (Stiegler, 2010). Plato opposes the exteriorization of memory (termed ‘hypomnesis’). He says it is false, unnatural, and a threat because it makes reliance on our own memory less necessary (Stiegler, 2010). Mitchell would likely agree with Plato. One example of how humans have become so reliant on technology that they no longer possess the skills necessary to keep society going resides in *Sloosha’s Crossin’ An’ Ev’rythin’ After*. Zachry talks about how humans have forgotten how to make fire because of heating systems, so after the Fall of technology people died from the cold and inability to use it as a heat source to cook. Sonmi-451 addresses this issue also as she puts forth the idea that if fabricants ceased to work, society would crumble: “Who would work factory lines? Xtract oil and coal? Stoke reactors? Construct buildings? Serve in dineries? Xtinguish fires?” (Mitchell, 2004, p. 326). Purebloods (humans) have forgotten how to execute the very things upon which society rests because these processes are abrogated to technology. However, as Steigler states, as technology advances via hypomnesis, its threat against the individual is amplified, but in tandem so does its possibility for positive affect, for empowerment (2010).

Theme III: Individual Agency

Hegel’s totality asserts that individuals cannot have an independent existence because their relations define their identity—parts are inseparable. The Archivist in Sonmi-451 operates under this belief by stating that if you “*hate men like Seer Kwon*

[powerful government official], *you hate the whole world*" (Mitchell, p. 336) The Archivist is so indoctrinated that he equates individuals with society as a whole. In essence, according to his perceptions the individual has ceased to exist. He cannot fathom the concept of individual. Unanimity is all there is from his vantage point. This is the ideology Mitchell is attempting to refute and can be viewed with Deleuze's theory of assemblages, directly in opposition to Hegel's proposition.

Assemblage Theory is rampant throughout the book (as shown more below), but one notable point is the parallel with character Meronym. Meronymy is a concept in literary criticism that literally means part of a whole. Moreso applicable to this theory is the structure of the book. Assemblages can become stratified and transform over time by going through phases of high/low territorialization and coding. Territorialization is how well-defined the identity of an assemblage is, how sharply defined, unchanging, and homogenous it is. Codes are the rules assemblages operate under (whether laws, religious principles, DNA, etc.) Adam Ewing's story (1849) can be considered low territorialized/low coding. Each subsequent story increasingly transforms from an assemblage into a strata ('strata' is even used commonly in Sonmi-451 world). It is worth noting that findings from the earlier settings (1849, 1936, 1973) may seem insignificant and perhaps a stretch, but it's important to note the matryoshka doll style of the novel includes a *build-up* of major themes which means these examples are much more subtle and crystallize in the later stories (2012, 2144, 2321).

Subtheme IIIA: Predetermined Futures. Predetermined futures are what the majority of people in each respective story destined to. "A five-star one, look you. Meals get provided, all your laundry is done. Activities laid on, from crochet to croquet. No confusing bills, no youngsters joyriding in your motor. Aurora House is a ball! Just obey the regulations" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 179). Everything is planned, regulated, controlled for you. A second example is when Sonmi-451 discovers embryos whose DNA has been engineered to create efficient uranium extraction workers. Cultivating embryos for labor is only damning their fate, assigning their lives in a completely organized fashion. This gives the individual no choice, no agency whatsoever. Also, on several occasions Sonmi-451 expresses her envy toward other fabricants' ignorance and "certainty about the future" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 324). Sonmi-451's future is uncertain, so she does not have the comfort the others do, as they have a routine, regimented factory line life. However, Sonmi-451 has sacrificed this security for the ability to make choices. A third instance of predestiny is from Frobisher: "[...] [N]othing is more tiresome than being told what to admire, and having things pointed at with a stick" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 449).

Subtheme IIIB: Autonomous from Society. Deleuze says parts do indeed interact with one another, but retain their identity when they are removed from each other. There are two main characters that act as exemplars of this idea of having a degree of autonomy from society: Timothy Cavendish and Sonmi-451. While at a train station frustrated with the typical protocols and frustrations that accompany traveling, Cavendish thinks to himself:

"A volume I once published, *True Recollections of a Northern Territories*

Magistrate, claims that shark victims experience an anesthetic vision of floating away, all danger gone, into the Pacific blue, at the very moment they are being minced in that funnel of teeth. I, Timothy Cavendish, was that swimmer, watching London roll away [...]"

This statement comes immediately after his brief critique of the city's routine life. Mentally, he is detaching himself from the rest of society. A second example is when Sonmi-451 describes her ascension/awakening from a fabricant worker (clone) to a person with personality and feelings: "Lastly my sense of alienation grew. Amongst my sisters I alone understood our existence's futility and drudgery" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 198). Similar to Cavendish, Sonmi-451 relieves herself from the society she lives in.

In the 19th century, the heart couldn't survive outside the body, so Hegel's theory of totality made sense. Today, though, technology has made it possible for the heart to survive outside the body (DeLanda, 2012). Advancement has changed theory and hence the ideology and philosophical notions purported in *Cloud Atlas* is a product of our contemporary culture.

Deleuze's idea of the possibility for autonomy is further emphasized in highlighting the main character's ability to use the social system/environment they live in to create their own customized ways of navigating through life: "If losers can exploit [sic] what their adversaries teach them, yes, losers can become winners in the long term" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 224). For example, Sonmi-451 uses a Sony video screen to illegally view the social justice story of Cavendish. She later repeats the line verbatim from the film "I will not be subjected to criminal abuse" when a consumer in Papa Song's restaurant sexually assaults her. It is ironic that technology was used to commence her journey of rebellion, a recurring theme. Several contemporary media scholars provide discourse on how "we can use the newfound technical precision of space-time mapping as a rich and poignant means of asserting our own existential uniqueness. [It] gives us the opportunity to map global space-time in relation to our own movement through it" (Mitchell & Hansen, 2010, Ch. 7). Technology can be simultaneously empowering and threatening. It is therefore not innately in favor or opposed to a certain ideology, but is determined by political struggle (Stiegler, 2010).

Cloud Atlas acts as political commentary on subjects of technology, memory, power, and individual agency. Referring back to the concept of nonlocality, the ability to act at a distance, the question should be put forth: Is the intermediary mechanism that exemplifies our individual capacity to act—to affect—truly absent? Or, is it simply not amenable to our technologically mediated perceptions?

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Appendix A: Methods

A narrative textual analysis has been employed to allow both *form* (structure of the novel) and *content* to be placed under the scope of assessment. Of concern here is *not* the most "likely interpretations of [the] text made by people who consume them" (McKee, 2010).

Instead, *Cloud Atlas* is filtered through Deleuzian philosophical notions in order to comprehend socio-political and -technological implications of our past- and post-industrial society (Halsey, 2009).

Science fiction is chosen for this study because it “can be read as tracing the impression of the impact of globalization” (Higgins, 2012). “Science fiction doesn’t predict the future; its primary goal is to encourage public awareness and debate around the thresholds of scientific understanding” (Jenkins & Tulloch, 1995). Science fiction is a medium through which we can apply critical logic to a fantasy world that we would be hesitant to apply to the actual world we inhabit. People are typically (unconsciously) apprehensive in critiquing their current maps of meaning (Higgins, 2012), their realities, for fear of discovering flaws. The discovery of these flaws could then potentially serve as a catalyst for cognitive dissonance, an unwanted psychological phenomenon. Science fiction eliminates this possibility, allowing the audience to develop their critical thinking in tandem with the economic, social, and political conditions of the story’s fantasy world. The opportunity arises then, for the audience to go through a reflective process, to re-apply these newly discovered tools to their own world. It is evident that Mitchell clearly recognizes this occurrence, not simply because of his authorship of a novel ripe with political commentary, but because Luisa Rey, one of the main characters, in reference to Hitchcock, says

“[T]he key to fictitious terror is partition or containment: so long as the Bates Motel is sealed off from our world, we want to peer in, like at a scorpion enclosure. But a film that shows the world is a Bates Motel, well, that’s ... the stuff of Buchenwald, dystopia, depression. We’ll dip our toes in a predatory, amoral, godless universe—but only our toes.”

As a former Jehovah’s Witness, I have a proclivity toward being critical of authority figures (in religion, school, government, etc.). Given that postmodernism critiques hierarchical power structures, analyzing the structures in the book and relating them to real-world events is relatively instinctive as it is a thought-activity I often do during leisure time. In addition, my research interests fall within critical cultural studies and how methods of power and control morph with new technology, explored in the book with its genealogy of power over six eras.

A postmodern approach is fitting because it shares two key characteristics with the *Cloud Atlas* story: power and genre chains. Assemblage Theory is suitable to the postmodern vantage point this study adopts. Postmodern theories analyze negative conditions that result from relations of power. This approach is marked by “‘metanarratives’—universals that hold true regardless of social conditions” (Creswell, 2013, p. 27). This parallels the novel as explained by Mitchell in an interview: “So the book’s theme is predacity, the way individuals prey on individuals, groups on groups, nations on nations, tribes on tribes. So I just take this theme and in a sense reincarnate that theme in another context” (Begley, 2010). Concerning genre chains, David Harvey suggests that a key characteristic of postmodernity is “hybridity,” the blurring of boundaries (in this case genre) and is also a product of globalization. *Cloud Atlas* encompasses six different genres, smudging the lines and conventions between each of them to create one overarching story (Harvey, 1991). This is applicable to the text internally and externally. In the external sense, different social events, practices, and intertextual references (for example *Moby Dick*, *Oryx and Crake*, *Riddley Walker*) that

have informed certain characteristics and themes of the novel (Johnston-Ellis, 2010). More interestingly, within the novel exists a chain of material media/artifacts that link each story together: journal entries, personal letters, a 70s pulp fiction thriller, a memoir, a formal interview between a corpocratic archivist and a rebel, and lastly, after the Fall of civilization, the verbally delivered story of Zachry. Each of these media (except for the last) are discovered in the subsequent story by the main character in that next story. “Genre chains contribute to the possibility of actions which transcend differences in space and time, linking together social events in different social practices, different countries, and different times, facilitating the enhanced ‘capacity for action at a distance’ [...]” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 31). In sum, power and genre blending are characteristics of both postmodernity and *Cloud Atlas*, which justifies the choice of postmodernism.

To obtain the data, a hard copy of the 2004 science fiction novel *Cloud Atlas* was ordered from Amazon.com. The first read-through consisted mostly of descriptive notes, (underlining, highlighting, writing in the margins, etc.) in order to follow the complex plot of the novel as closely as possible. The themes of power, time, memory, and globalization emerged after this read-through. Next, based on these themes, I researched communication theories that pertain to them and took in-depth notes on multiple theoretical arguments. Then, I scanned through the entire book, reading only my notes and used post-its to mark prominent examples of the themes. These examples were placed into Appendix B and organized according to theme. Within the themes the examples were given subheadings of chapter titles and reflective/analytical notes were written. Having an aggregate of examples together in close proximity allowed for more in-depth contextual analysis relative to other parts of the book. From this process, some themes derived from the first read-through were solidified while others appeared to dissipate and weaken. The most pronounced themes in terms of frequency and relevance to the story were derived from Appendix B and included in the executive summary.

