

Julia Maria Nikiel

**Writing the Space of Flows. Representations of the Globalized World in Post-Millennial American and Canadian Fiction**

ABSTRACT

In the second half of the twentieth century, the human mind found itself confronted with a storyteller as skillful at narrating reality as the mind that created it. Global capitalism has narrated the world into a globe. The stories it has woven tell of individualism, progress unbound, of connectivity, power of knowledge, and limitless opportunity. Having captured human imaginations with their scope and vision, the stories have successfully diverted humanity's attention from the reality of inequality, exploitation, and destruction hidden behind and within the economic imperative. What is more, they have left contemporary individuals struggling to navigate, represent, and comprehend the overwhelming reality they are continuously told to be a part of, and to do so without knowing which navigational tools they can consider reliable.

It is for that very reason that recent decades have witnessed a proliferation of new tools, be they theoretical approaches or cultural products, designed to help individuals overcome the representational and interpretative challenges posed by capital's narration of the world as a global economic totality. From the perspective of the human story-telling mind, fiction is best countered with fiction. It is not surprising then that literature not only is among the cultural products most engaged with capitalist globalization, but also has recently come to be perceived as a medium, i.e. a tool for the most effective critique, or reality check of capital's fictions.

The post-millennial North-American literary scene abounds in literary imaginings of the global reality. Some of the "fictions of globalization," to use James Annesley's term, are purely realist. Others tread the ever more blurry boundary between literary realism and speculative fiction. Others still dive deep into speculation. The fictions' focus is equally multifarious. Nonetheless, in the majority of literary works published in the first decades of the new millennium life not only unfolds against the background of economic transformations but is also increasingly structured and determined by the immaterial flows of capital and capital-related power, information, and change.

While the variety of the fictions of globalization offers a panoramic view of the multi-layered nature of the world's restructuring, it is the literary narratives that engage directly with the complexity and fictitiousness of the global totality that are in the focus of my dissertation. The goal of my dissertation is to analyze the literary worlds projected in the post-millennial fiction of three contemporary North-American writers – William Gibson, Douglas Coupland, and Dave Eggers – and to read these worlds not just for a representation of the realities of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century globalization but also for a critique of fictions, that is, illusions which capitalist globalization has spurred and continues to rely on. While the focus of my dissertation is literary, my analyses draw heavily on multiple theoretical works from the disciplines of globalization studies, economics, sociology, political philosophy, economic geography, and anthropology. The theorists whose work I relied on include, among others, David Harvey, Fredric Jameson, Mark Fisher, Manuel Castells, Shoshana Zuboff, Wendy Brown, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Naomi Klein, and Timothy Morton.

The choice of Gibson, Coupland, and Eggers as the authors whose work I analyze in the dissertation hinges, first of all, on all three being writers of the (North-American) national in-between. While born American, Gibson has lived in Canada since the late 1960s and both affiliates and is described as American-Canadian, his literary work willingly claimed by both countries. While Canadian through and through, Coupland, in turn, has gained a literary

reputation of an Americanized Canadian, his aesthetic choices and subversiveness making him the black sheep of CanLit. Dave Eggers is the only one whose national literary affiliation is indisputable. Still, as is the case with Gibson and Coupland, Eggers' fiction is transnational in focus (with the Pacific Northwest/British Columbia borderlands featuring in it more than once), and clearly points to national borders as an outdated categorical marker for mediating the deterritorialized global reality. The second reason for the three authors' inclusion in the dissertation is the sense of entitlement they all either exhibit or are granted with. All three writers are elderly or middle-aged, white American men. Were they entrepreneurs, they would make archetypal capitalists; writers as they are, all three occupy a socially privileged position and, for one reason or another, sport the status of the writers of the *Zeitgeist* conferred on them by the readers and the critics. Internalized by now by both the reading public and the writers themselves, the recognition of the three as those in the know, privy to the ways globalization functions, includes them among the authorities whom the world looks to for the interpretation of the post-millennial reality. Apart from their established reputation, all three writers share as well a propensity to tread the line between literary realism and speculative fiction. All three, finally, are as engaged in delineating the experience of global reality as they are in finding the aesthetic means best suited to this reality's representation and critique. This said, all three are also – in my opinion at least – especially noteworthy due to the ways in which they story-tell the world both as and out of the global economic totality.

Apart from an introduction and a conclusion, the dissertation comprises four chapters. Chapter I is theoretical in nature, and represents an attempt at, on the one hand, outlining the most crucial aspects of globalization as an economic, political, and cultural fact as well as the bearing globalization has had on human imagination and, on the other, providing a brief overview of globalization's literary representations. The chapter is divided into two sections. Section I focuses on the restructuring the world has been undergoing since the late twentieth century. The section is divided into six parts. Drawing on a number of theoretical sources, the parts focus – respectively – on the economic, power-related, geographic, spatial and architectural, social, and ecological aspects of the ongoing transformation. Section II starts by invoking the ideas of Fredric Jameson, Mark Fisher, and Timothy Morton in order to elaborate on the effect that the global reality has had on people's minds and their ability to understand and represent their surroundings. Subsequently, the section focuses on what, after Annesley, I refer to as "fictions of globalization," taking those to comprise not just the ways in which people imagine and represent global capitalist processes but also the illusions globalization itself upholds and relies upon for its very functioning. Referencing the critical work of, among others, Daniel O'Gorman and Robert Eaglestone, Caren Irr, Peter Boxall, and Jeffrey J. Williams, in the second part of the section, I provide an overview of North-American literature concerned with the issues of globalization and, simultaneously, endeavor to map out the dissertation's critical focus.

In the next three chapters, I concentrate on the narratives of contemporaneity in the post-millennial novels by William Gibson, Douglas Coupland, and Dave Eggers respectively. Chapter II focuses on William Gibson's the Blue Ant or Bigend Trilogy, which encompasses *Pattern Recognition* (2003), *Spook Country* (2007), and *Zero History* (2010). In the chapter, I endeavor to demonstrate that when the future collapses into the overaccelerated present, the only way not to get lost is to become, as Gibson's characters try to do, hermeneutic coolhunters. Scanning reality for connections and contradictions allows one to not just navigate one's way through the late capitalist network but also to (use fiction to) make legible and lay bare the obfuscations of financialized reality. The chapter is divided into five sections. In Section I, I elaborate on the importance of narratives in the global reality Gibson projects and demonstrate the influence that information imbalance has upon the global pyramid of power. The next section focuses on the ways in which Gibson's trilogy represents global time-space compression; as time and space gain on indiscernibility, time comes to be experienced as an

all-encompassing flow and the boundary between the material/real and the virtual is blurred. Section III is devoted to the trilogy's descriptions of the globalized urban landscape, especially megacities and edge cities, and section IV explores Gibson's characters' emotional response to globalization and the strategies the novels seem to deem useful in either relieving the destructive influence of or mapping the global reality. The last section of the chapter concentrates on the turn to contemporaneity Gibson made with the Bigend Trilogy. Delineating the trajectory of critical thought pertaining to Gibson's temporal transition, I attempt to attest to the ways in which the trilogy contributes to the discussion of contemporary speculative fiction's extrapolative power; a discussion which seems to result in this fiction's progressing elevation to the status of *the* lens for representing and critiquing the post-millennial financialized reality.

In Chapter III, I analyze three of Douglas Coupland's post-millennial novels. Drawing on Coupland's body of work as a visual artist, essayist, and theoretician, I read Coupland's post-millennial fiction for a diagnosis of the present moment as well as a prognosis and a recommendation for what is to come. In *Generation A* (2010), *Player One: What Is to Become of Us* (2011), and *Worst.Person.Ever.* (2016), Coupland draws on the partiality to pop culture, absurd, trivia, and hyperbolization he is (in)famous for to, first, meticulously map and interpret what he sees as the new age of extremes – extreme time, extreme knowledge, extreme power, extreme inequality, extreme self, extreme loneliness, extreme arrogance, extreme nature, extreme superficiality, extreme abundance, etc. – and, subsequently, demonstrate both the mechanisms of and the potential ways of overcoming “the extreme vertigo” people seem to be experiencing in confrontation with the now. The chapter is divided into five sections, each one focusing on different extremes as presented in Coupland's three novels. In Section I, I define Coupland's concept of “the extreme present” and delineate his characters' attempts to function in “timeless time.” Section II focuses, in turn, on examining knowledge-based power relations and the dynamics of social inequality inherent to the literary reality of Coupland's novels. The third section is devoted to Coupland's characters' emotional response to the reality outlined in the previous sections. In the section, I chronicle the characters' disorientation and eagerness to narrate disjointed reality into sense and continuity. The concept of “the death of Superman” Section III ends with provides an introduction to the last section devoted strictly to examining Coupland's conceptualization of the extreme present and, simultaneously, the penultimate section of the chapter. Arguing in favor of the (epic) failure of the anthropostory, in Section IV, I focus on human planetary agency and argue that in Coupland's most recent novels hope for the future of the whole planet seems to lie in the final repudiation of human sense of exceptionalism and its replacement with non-discriminating cross-species togetherness. In the final section of the chapter, I present Coupland as a writer perfectly in sync with the post-millennial condition. Adept at identifying cultural trends, over the years, Coupland has developed for himself a personal aesthetics founded upon the appreciation of the digital condition and the belief in the revelatory power of superficiality and extravagance. Recognizing the potential inherent in cultural by-products and ephemera, in his post-millennial fiction Coupland offers his readers a choice to either carelessly enjoy the literary reality he projects or connect the dots, the latter with a goal to using literary reality as a lens for coming to terms with the real world and learning to recognize and appreciate the value of its extremity.

In Chapter IV, I present Dave Eggers as the master of the specific as well as an avid spectator, one engrossed in the post-millennial capitalist performance, both appreciative of its glamour and well-aware of its snowballing force and the ruin behind the illusions it casts. In the chapter, I read three of Eggers' post-millennial novels – *A Hologram for the King* (2012), *The Circle* (2013), and *The Parade* (2019) – for both representations of individual experiences of the current age and a broader diagnosis of the reality behind the spectacle. The chapter is divided into six sections. Section I focuses on the post-national character of the global realities projected in Eggers' fiction and presents capital as the true, underlying hegemon, responsible for structuring both the world and the power relations with it. Section II is a study of the

corporation. An impenetrable black box, granted with personhood and wrapped in appearances of familialism, in Eggers's post-millennial novels, the figure of the corporation stands for the hegemonic insidiousness and utter disregard for anything but profit. In Sections III and IV, I concentrate on Eggers' characters' struggles with the financialization of the everyday. Section III circles around Alan, the protagonist of Eggers' *A Hologram for the King*. Delineating Alan's failure to navigate the precarious neoliberal reality and become the entrepreneur of his self, the novel simultaneously comments on what seems like a crisis of self-made-masculinity. Section IV, in turn, centers on *The Circle*. Drawing on the experiences of the novel's protagonist, I attempt to demonstrate how – by framing its functioning as a game-like spectacle everyone can participate in – the capitalist system creates willing subjects happily perpetuating its reifying and extractivist logic. In the penultimate section, I chronicle Eggers' characters' attempts at escaping reality. Frustrated by their failure to counter it otherwise, many of Eggers' characters choose to retreat from reality, either mentally, by collapsing into themselves or into their delusions, or physically, by taking refuge in nature. As their attempts are mostly unsuccessful, the only valid escape route seems embracing one's role. The chapter ends with Section VI, in which I concentrate on Eggers as a writer, arguing that Eggers' stylistic choices, his decision to prioritize ideas over verisimilitude, plot, or characters, as well as his propensity for performance, not only reveal his eagerness to truly engage – both himself and others – with contemporaneity but also prove him to be a writer fit for the age, director of his own show.

Capital uses stories to frame reality; the fictions it projects are directed not only at narrating the world as an economic totality, i.e. translating every aspect of reality into economic value, but also at manipulating individuals into appropriating the capitalist narrative as their own. With expectations as their narrative engine, capital's stories project the future as open and uncertain and make it the benchmark for present behavior: what is (done, risked, or decided) should be measured in terms of what will be (achieved or gained). Casting individuals as the heroes/heroines in the stories of progress, limitless opportunity, or the unending pursuit of wealth, knowledge, and power, capital pushes them to consider their lives in terms of the value they generate and the gains that await them. The way the stories develop – whether or not individual heroes/heroines succeed or fail and, consequently, get their happy ending – is always uncertain, propelling ever more investment on their part and thus furthering capital's expansion.

It takes a storyteller to know a storyteller. While capital's method for organizing reality matches fiction's, the two diverge in objectives. Whereas the former aims to impress, the latter – apart from providing enjoyment – interprets reality and acts to lay bare the inconsistencies within it. What William Gibson, Douglas Coupland, and Dave Eggers show in their post-millennial novels is that things are seldom what they seem. While the three writers are definitely not the only ones intent on critically engaging with the themes of globalization, their representations of it stand out as both comprehensive and aesthetically sophisticated in their emulation of the global reality. The three authors differ in their foci: while all three recognize global capitalism for the master storyteller it is, their characterizations diverge as to the qualities they choose to foreground. To Gibson, global capitalism is the master obfuscator, whose ultimate goal is profit. To Coupland, it is more of a grifter, who disorients and makes fools of contemporary people but whose acts are, nonetheless, to be appreciated for the extremes to which they push both individuals and the world. Eggers' prose, finally, lands him somewhat in the middle. While appreciative of capital's power of performativity, Eggers looks behind the curtain to expose the puppeteer behind it. What all three authors share is an eagerness to go beyond either representation or naïve projections of future alternatives. Far from only enjoyable and impressive in their comprehensiveness, the authors' post-millennial novels use stories to skillfully expose the falsity of capital's self-narrative as the immaterial agent of change and the vector of empowerment and opportunity.

Julia Muell