The Posthuman Quiddity of Matthew Derby's *Super Flat World*

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> I hope that, above all things, you have not opened
> this book in order to learn. Because it is not what
> has been learned in these years that makes those
> of us who have been allowed to remember crumple
> with deep nausea every time we look back, but
> what has not been learned, the secret language we
> have carried in our bodies throughout these
> ordeals, in spite of them, the navigational matter
> coiled tightly in our hearts like the springs in a
> clockwork toy, gestures we sprung on one another
> in dense, overcrowded basement camps, in
> regenerative supermarket aisles, in the public
> showers, fussily breathing whole histories into the
> ear of whoever should be unluckily close.
>
> Matthew Derby, *Super Flat Times*, 9

1   Drawing on themes traditionally found in such science fiction classics as Huxley's *Brave New World* or Orwell's *1984* as well as less fortunate spin-offs such as Nolan and Johnson's *Logan's Run*[1] that depict a nightmarish and totalitarian version of modern society, Matthew Derby's collection of short stories entitled *Super Flat Times* (2003) addresses such *minor* issues as ethnic cleansing, mass production, eugenics, genetic manipulation and political control applied on a global scale, the key notion being the frightening normalization, or leveling off of a "super flat world". Derby explores the dehumanizing and derealizing consequences of the ensuing destruction of experience and the impossible redemption of a past that has become so radically other that it eludes the grasp of language. As a fictional history of the future, the book depicts an alternate reality offering "an analogy to unrealized possibilities in the implied reader's empirical world" (Suvin, 1988, 37), using this time shift as a distancing mechanism to satirize

contemporary society. Derby evokes a desacralized world of commodified bodies marked by the global production of norms and values to interrogate the very possibility of a relation to be understood both in the sense of kinship, that which cements a community as well as the weaving of a narrative, be it fictional or historical as language fails to refer to an improbable world outside. As clearly stated in the main narrator's forewarning, there is nothing to be learned from the mock-history of a post-apocalyptic world. Such a comment is to be interpreted not only as the preclusion of the process of memorialization of the irrepresentable, but also as a metafictional spoof pointing out the very limits of the genre itself. Derby's tinkering with the codes of science fiction bears indeed a more radical ambition as it undermines the very grounds of referentiality, thus foregrounding the ontological implications of what turns out to be an *un-world* (*immonde*) in philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's own critical terms, or an indistinct totality characterized by a "background of general equivalence" (Nancy, 2007, 54) resulting from globalization, as opposed to "world-forming" (or *mondialisation*) which keeps the horizon of a "world" as a space of possible meaning for the whole of human relations (or a space of possible significance) ... (Nancy, 2007, 28).

It actually *was* the *fufier*...

2   Derby subverts the usual gimmickry typical of popular science fiction that does not actually depart from realistic narratives except for a few technological wonders such as the odd "food-o-rator", or some far away moonscape that merely has a cosmetic effect on the construction of a possible world. Thus in the short story entitled "The Father Helmet", a title incidentally reminiscent of Ben Marcus's own parodies, an orphaned boy named Pembroke and raised by a robot surrogate manages to change the past by communicating back in time with his long-deceased father through the use of a mail-order helmet, an activity the blasé robot ironically deems to be quite passé : "No one is even doing that anymore" (81). Derby thwarts the sense of wonder inherent in the genre even further as in one of these improbable time defying conversations, Pembroke's answer to his father's interrogations about the future bluntly dismisses the marvelous streak inherited from fairy- tales : "Will people really fly, and eat a pill that tastes like steak, and wear silver boots ?" "Sort of, but it's so lame." retorts the child " (89).

3   Derby adopts a parodic stance in order to open up a critical distance to the genre while bringing comic relief to a bleak and distressing evocation of the future. The comic slant of the book gives way to a curious and most disturbing blend of detached dark humor that often borders on the absurd with an impossible white laughter in front of the horrors of the Holocaust. In the prologue to the collection, Mi Jin Ahn-Strauss's pseudo-scientific explanations about the memorializing process taking place in the Hall of Memory through the massaging of air pockets by expert translators drift even further toward the ludicrous and the mundane as she proceeds with highlighting that : "the great majority of relevant data is occluded by fits of shouting, flailing, or violent outbursts such as 'Please help me die', 'I can't feel my shoulder', or 'Someone I hate is on top of me.'" (5) People's last breaths seem to be mostly ridden with banal concerns which never reach an epiphanic status. The fragmented narratives of the dead become the stuff a book of prayers is made of, a memorial of sorts honoring those who have not survived the apocalypse, itself turned into some mock-sacred myth of origin situated in a time out of time. However the attempt at reinstating a form of community by collecting the victims'

final thoughts proves to be vain. The commemoration of a mythical past boils down to the erasure of differences and the rejection of chronological time as an altering force, that is the denial of history as a self-reflexive process that shapes a community. The unspeakable reality of the event lies outside discourse and knowledge.

4   The reader cannot entirely fathom the language and logic of such a world and yet tries to thread back narrative strands into a continuous and coherent whole in an attempt to reduce this world's otherness, to bring it back onto more familiar grounds and reconstruct a coherent backdrop for the narrated events. Derby's narrative technique relies on the disturbingly comic distance he manages to create as he most often undermines any quivering sense of wonder or soaring aspiration for some sort of metaphysical redemption. The opening lines of the short story entitled "Meat Tower" epitomize the oddly pragmatic, matter-of-fact and resigned tone adopted by most narrators :

> All of us were in the future, where we belonged. It actually *was* the future — a period of time that so embodied what we thought the future would be like that the government had to replace the term with a new one, *fufier*, in order to designate the grim, impending series of events that had not yet occurred. Those were the years of corporate oligarchy, of videophonic telephones, meal tablets, and robot hearts. Years of silver foil and mass, private flight. We were observed, things were expected of us, a green pill was created to help us remember to take a certain blue pill. We did all the important things and let the old and the sick work in the Factories. (31)

5   The text unfurls on a horizontal axis and merely brushes the surface of this alternate reality in a disturbingly flattening out effect which not only prevents any hermeneutic approach, but will not yield to the hypnotic exhaustiveness of the catalogue (Hamon, 1993, 60-64) either. The descriptive process dissolves into the general and the indeterminate, the more crucial aspects of the population's activities remaining encapsulated in an elusive reference to "things", which deflates the potential emphasis of such a paratactic list. Furthermore the renaming and recategorizing of familiar elements bears a definite parodic value as exemplified in the ludicrously childish sounding "fufier", a paranomastic substitute for the notion of future.

6   Traditionally the introduction of a "novum, or cognitive innovation" (Suvin, 1980, 64), fosters an epistemological crisis as it creates a tension between what the reader identifies as "reality" and the fictional Other whose presence informs and determines the whole narrative logic. In Derby's short stories, it brings about a "totalizing" paradigmatic shift all the more acute as Derby focuses on the unthinkable consequences of the apocalypse on human nature, as well as on the impossible construction of reality through fiction as it destroys the very possibility of meaning and reference. The troubling process of defamiliarization at work in the book often results from the comical use of a totalitarian newspeak which smacks of a technocratic and exaggeratedly euphemistic linguo favored by the mysterious police-State government organization in charge of ruling this world. The authorities have managed the problem of overpopulation as well as the lack of resources through such radical means as "Population Redistribution and Elimination" (6), a measure later completed by "The Royal Child Harvest" program (7) (obviously initiated by the "Ministry of Child Harvesting"), the victims of organized mass-killings being referred to as "the Missing Person".

7   On a more comical note, enforced the so-called "Meat Initiative", an absurd all-meat diet for everyone enabling the author to brand a few names such as "porksicles", or meat

chocolate, and "chilk", chocolate milk that is, to name but a few lexical blends to be found in the story entitled "Meat Tower" (32). Beyond the apparent absurdity of such portmanteau words Derby takes the reader through the looking glass as he spoofs on branding techniques while foregrounding the arbitrariness of linguistic reference. After all, once passed the shock of novelty, one could easily picture "chilk" being catered by the supermarket next door. Quite similarly to Ben Marcus's work on language,[2] Derby rejects the metaphorical approach (Vernon, 2001, 118-124) and the usual pyrotechnics of the genre. He therefore relies mostly on the metonymic to delineate and redefine the hazy contours of what turns out to be a distorted and exaggerated mirror image of contemporary society recontextualized as *other*, and yet tangentially familiar. In this alternate reality, children may hold such peculiar jobs as "air harvesters" who administer "behavorial drugs" to solid clouds ("Behavior Pilot", 124), or "Clouds", due to the extensive use of colored gas, or "Fud", by the government in an attempt to advertise on the atmosphere. In an absurd inversion of the working age pyramid, personal trainers teach nineteen year olds facing early retirement because they have reached their "Terminal Age Potential" how to "get the best performance out of meal" through a technique called "Eating" ("The Boyish Mulatto", 45), with a capital E, that is "eating with one's whole body", reportedly conducive to a whole different lifestyle, which clearly reads like a parody of self-improvement training programs. Derby obtains an equalizing effect of the potentially metaphorical through a general drift toward the genericity induced by a systematic recourse to capitalization. As the realm of the notional tends to prevail over the metonymic particularization inherent in the evocation of an already-there, the cornerstone of fictional credibility, or "*effet de réel*" (Barthes, 1982, 81-90) is being undermined to the point of pointing to a most problematical quiddity, which in turn shakes the ontological grounds of a so-called reality we supposedly share as a community.

"Life was so distant and abstract to us as never to have really happened at all…"

8   In such a context, full-fledged characters and realistic situations are certainly the first casualties of metafiction. The process of defamiliarization at work in Derby's fiction does not originate as much in the temporal shift or gadgetry pertaining to science fiction as in the warped and often childish self-centered logic of deflated and disanchored characters who have trouble acknowledging a sense of self, let alone the presence of others. They not only lack critical distance, but also in the most basic empathy, which enables Derby to deaden the emotional outbursts one could rightly expect in the face of the unthinkable, which estranges the reader and prevents any identification process : the deadening of affect leads to the dissolution of the most basic ties that bind society together, starting with family relationships.

9   Hence in "Meat Tower" a woman fails to display any motherly affection or spousal love as her boy tries to commit suicide while her depressed husband who spends his days curled on his bed in a fetal position actually manages to blow his brains out. The thoroughly detailed description of the suicide scene in the form of a tableau gives way to an oddly lyrical sense of loss and fatality perceptible in the very cadence of Derby's perfectly balanced periodic sentences :

> I thought about my husband, lying there on the bed, how long he had been there, how we would find him, later that day, after having put away the groceries, lying on the bed, in the same position that we'd left him, a tiny, blue handgun nestled in the twisted sheets, still warm, the contents of his head spread out across the pillows like an anatomical diagram — how, even with this degree of detail, the events of his life would remain so distant and abstract to us as never to have really happened at all. ("Meat Tower", 43)

10   The woman's very last comment may read as a metafictional reflection on the necessary role of memory in the elaboration of affective ties for the reader who strands together scraps of information leading to the sketching out of an identifiable figure. The narrator barely remembers the time of her meeting with her husband as well as the first years of their marital life as she "sold a great deal of those memories to buy cloth for Philip's bassinet" (35). This final vignette rehashes previous comparisons of the helpless father with a sleeping newborn or a young child "braiding long strands of the bedclothes into crude rags dolls" (39), images that indirectly point to a form of motherly attachment to the character depicted as a calmly sleeping child. The narrator's ultimate thoughts highlight her degree of alienation from the world partly for lack a historical anchoring to a collective memory, but also because of the gap that separates the reader from the irreducible otherness of her most intimate musings. Super flat characters appear as mere empty shells and therefore have no interiority to speak of. Derby actually lays bare the very mechanisms of fiction writing, preventing the reader from weaving all too direct (and possibly naïve) emotional ties to fictional non-entities.

11   Human relationships are rooted in a dispassionate form of materiality that often boils down to the literally grotesque, the carnivalesque and the bathetic abrasion of the metaphorical. The following self-assessment performed by a man who reflects upon his relationship with his wife exemplifies the technique consisting in systematically stamping out any spiritual aspiration through an obscene focus on the body's lower functions :

> My own feelings were as crudely hewn as cave paintings, a child's tentative stab at the human form — what they called a cephalopod. No matter how hard I tried to fudge the numbers, everything came down to a constant preoccupation with the status of my dick ("Crutches Used as Weapon", 108).

12   The abolition of hierarchies is reinforced by Derby's frequent use of the zeugma. Instead of merely striving for a merely comic effect by bringing out irreconcilable differences, Derby flattens out the metaphorical potentialities of the figure as in the following example excerpted from "Home Recordings" : "She brought a child and a waffle iron into our relationship ; I brought nothing but a lifetime of pouting and relentless self-indulgence." (62).

13   The amusement parks that loom in the background of several stories provide an interesting glimpse into regressive and often absurd forms of entertainment such as the fecal men who slide down a dung mound barefoot ("Behavior Pilot", 131), or the more disquieting "Diaspora", an innovative roller-coaster which takes its passengers up a steep incline twelve hundred feet above ground and lets them climb down a flight of sometimes brittle steps which can take the whole group down ("The Father Helmet", 85). Fear is indeed an outmoded response to fun. What's more, once it has been emptied of its original meaning the signifier "Diaspora" appears as an obscene and violent form of dark humor which only increases the uneasiness experienced by the reader. The erasure of meaning produces an excess that resists the banalizing process to be linked with the

pervasive presence of simulacra which thematically prolong the afore mentioned leveling off of language. The omnipresence of fake-looking duplicates gives a disturbing fictional feel to historical references and stamps out any meaningful temporal depth :

> The city we lived in had been recently and brutally reworked to resemble a bustling, late-nineteenth-century industrial center. Old buildings were made to look new, and the new buildings were made to look old. Certain clothing styles from that era returned vengefully and without warning on the bodies of those of us who lived there ("Behavior Pilot", 124).

14   The abrasion of history leads to the fictionalization of reality that prevents the characters from situating themselves both in time and space to the point of losing their sense of self and preventing them from relating to others. The lack of syntactic cohesiveness apparent in the phrase : "they returned [...] on the bodies of those of us" underlines the dissociation between body and self while evacuating the subject as a full-willed agent. Hence the recurrent comparisons of human beings with puppets (53), dolls, or wax figures (165). As people's bodies are commodified through repeated mass-killings and enforced artificial reproduction programs, the human subjects are in turn objectified. Life and death become interchangeable as they depend on similar techniques of mass management which transform the human body into either superfluous waste or absurdly fruitful procreating machines :

> [...] the generative pills that, when processed by the body, yielded up to nice thousand eggs a month, grapefruit-sized clusters that often broke the carrier's hips, so that they walked forever afterward like angry, three-wheeled vegetable carts. ("First", 7)

15   The grotesque distortion of the human body participates in the impossibly comic evocation of such dehumanization. Derby's world is peopled with Beckettian cripples whose grotesque and distorted bodies are endowed with all sorts of prosthetics like fake plastic or steel lungs, or fake feet. There are also those who wear drool cups around the neck ("Night Watchmen", 114) or one of their kidneys on the outside in a little gauze bag ("The Father Helmet", 87) for having tumbled in a dryer all night long in a failed attempt to commit suicide. Life has become an external parameter and death a desirable end. A profuse number of suicidal characters approach their own death as well as that of others as a mere abstraction. The explanation given by a suicidal teenager is quite telling as to the perception of the body as an external reality : "Myself, I tried to but was unable to fully remove myself from the act." ("The Boyish Mulatto", 53). Body and self do not seem to coincide, thwarting any sense of identity as the result a self-reflexive process involving a relationship to the world as an extension of one's flesh.

"Tiny, creped flakes of life", or the remainder of the world.

16   Derby plays on the usual (*un-worldly*) figures of abjection such as human waste, bodily fluids and excrements that blur the clear-cut delineation between self and other, but contrary to the reader, the characters do not seem affected in the least and register the loss of a limb or threat to the body's integrity as a mere fact, following in the general deadening of emotional reactions. For instance, the acute nausea experienced by those in charge of massaging the texts in the Hall of Memory often causes the breaking off of a limb due to intense bouts of vomiting, hence Mi Jin Ahn-Strauss's stump of a hand (6), which appears as a literalizing of the feeling of abjection that which resists assimilation is

vehemently excluded as intolerably *other,* be it the narrator's own body.[3] In fact Derby conjures up images of bodies that fail to contain themselves in order to depict strange osmotic relationships[4] that trespass into each others' lives as if the self could actually dissolve and detach itself as in the short story entitled "The End of Men" : "I got some of myself out—I exhausted myself into her skin. [...] There was a mole by her ear, and by morning it resembled my face" (153). The nameless narrator literally imprints himself out onto the other's body without ever displaying any emotional attachment to his lover. The characters cannot seem to situate themselves in the world as full-fledged subjects, living a ghostly existence on the brink of extinction. This is highly reminiscent of Gary Lutz's free-floating characters in search of a stable identity, and also of the author's syntactic manipulations. The literalization of the metaphorical meaning of phrasal verbs (to get out ; to exhaust into) reveals the quintessential spatiality of the English language while bringing out the vectoring effect of the prepositions[5] "out" and "into" in the examples above.

17   Derby's desacralized world precludes spiritual elevation as it lies outside any metaphysics of transcendence and focuses on an objectified and unredeemable *world of bodies.* The stubborn materiality of Derby's universe seems to resist full abrasion through the inscription of residual traces which tangentially touch upon an ever elusive and differed presence, that of the other as a body and the body as other[6] to paraphrase Jean-Luc Nancy (Nancy, 1992, 29), be it as wasted scraps. In the same way as the self cannot seem to become fully incarnate, the other's presence is mainly residual, and therefore tangentially inscribed in space and time, literally ob-jected. In the short story entitled "Sky Harvest", the tooth grooves of a mouthpiece have literally recorded the lives of previous users : "I could taste the lives of men and other women, could sense, though surely it must have been my own creation, the pungent, confectionary muck of my first wife's slobber [...]" (58).

18   Derby displays a constant attention to the materiality and texture of seemingly intangible elements such as air, sounds, smells as if the presence of the other could be traced back to the outermost limit of her existence. Despite the global attempt at erasing people's memories, the past keeps haunting the periphery of the world and takes the shape of residual matter which appears to be the locus of emotional longing and sole point of contact, tangential though it may be, between singularities. For philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, the body inhabits neither matter or discourse, but exists as the ultimate limit that bisects the continuum of matter as well as the continuum of sense. In Derby's work the scorified body brings language to its very limit : it remains unspeakable and untouchable as such, and yet stubbornly resists erasure as a testimonial and testamentary trace. The ghostly remains of the dead point to an ever elusive and differed presence as exemplified in "Home Recordings" in which the narrator records the memories of the houses he visits.

> I'd spend a day or two in different areas of a house, using the long, fluted horn of the microphone to record the billion fluttering tones, the way different angles of sunlight on the walls colored reflections, memories of footsteps embedded deep within the wide slats of the floor, the places where the last people who lived there grieved and sprawled, shed tiny, creped flakes of life (61).

19   Places bear a resonance, or rather a timbre as the word is more intricately linked with one's vocal grain, that which stands on the very limit where a body exposes and proffers itself (Nancy, 1992, 26), the elusive point of contact where interiority and exteriority tangentially coincide and affect each other. Far from being some abstract intellectual

process in the world according to Derby emotion becomes a form of bodily gesture : "I didn't like what the sound was doing to my body—I went cold, and there was a spot in the center of me that glowed like a car lighter, but it didn't stop me from listening" (65) the narrator declares upon capturing traces of his wife's and her child's spectral presence. In the very moment when language seems to fail us following the disruption of meaning caused by the Holocaust, the evocation of what has become radically other seems to depend on a poetics of contiguity, a sense of touch that may bridge the gap separating self and other and reinstate a tangential form of community *at the limit.* For as Mi Jin Ahn-Strauss puts it some "prayers contain only the fragile ululations that accompanied the words, and there is little that can be done to preserve them. One can feel these works, but their translation into English III", a gestural language deprived of words, "is impossible"[7] ("First", 6).

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NOTES

1. Derby has provocatively claimed in an interview he could not see the link with Orwell's books, and that this was some sort of "a demented comparison" only meant to contextualize his own work, referring critics to the 1970's cult movie entitled *Logan's Run*, inspired by the eponymous novel by William F. Nolan and George Clayton Johnson published in 1967. *Logan's Run* depicts a dystopian future society in which overpopulation is avoided by demanding the death of each person upon reaching a certain age (Derby, 2008).

2. I am indebted to Marc Chénetier's article on *The Age of Wire and String* which provides a thorough analysis of Ben Marcus's radical techniques of estrangement through linguistic displacements (Chénetier, 1997, 78-90).

3. "I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*." (Kristeva, 1982, 3)

4. "As she clings to me I can feel some of myself going away—as if my body were suddenly nothing more than a decanter and I could pour myself out entirely, spoil someone else's life with own dank, ruinous indecision ("Crutches Used as Weapon", 111).

5. For a detailed analysis of the use of prepositions in Gary Lutz's works, please refer to the following article : Eric Athenot, "Fiat Lutz : Civilising Grammar in *I Looked Alive*" in *Cahiers de Charles V #38 - Etats-Unis : Formes Récentes de l'Imagination Littéraire (II),* Marc Chénetier ed. (Institut d'études Anglophones - Paris 7, June 2005) 119-35.

6. "The other is a body because only the body is other" ('Un autre est un corps parce que seul un corps est un autre').

7. It may prove fruitful to read this quote in the light of Jean-Luc Nancy's prefatory note to the English language edition of his book on globalization. The author underlines the untranslatable nature of the word "mondialisation" as opposed to that of globalization, which points to linguistic differ*a*nce as a locus of resistance and in turn opens up the possibility of a world, or world-forming, through a constant process of expansion involving that which cannot be assimilated, the other, as a dynamic critical force (Nancy, 2007).

ABSTRACTS

This article purports to analyze the way Derby interrogates through a parodic history of a post-apocalyptic future the consequences of the destruction of a common experience of a world so radically other that it eludes the grasp of language.

Cet article se propose d'analyser la manière dont Matthew Derby interroge les conséquences de la destruction de toute communauté d'expérience à travers l'histoire parodique d'un futur post-apocalyptique, celle d'un monde devenu si radicalement autre qu'il échappe à toute représentation dans la langue.

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