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## Review

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## REVIEW

# Book Reviews

Pynchon Leads McHale Through Postmodernism's Underworld  
(And the Journey Is Really Worth It!)

Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism*,  
New York: Cambridge UP, 242 pp., \$24.99, 2015 (paperback)

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In full postmodern spirit let me begin from the end, by quoting a sentence from the book's last chapter:

No literary career, perhaps no career of any kind, is more intimately involved with the trajectory of postmodernism, from beginning to end, and even *beyond* the end, than Thomas Pynchon's. Pynchon's novels bookend postmodernism and keep pace with all of its successively unfolding phases, from the onset (*The Crying of Lot 49*, 1966) through its rebranding and peak phase (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 1973), to the post-1989 interregnum (*Vineland*, 1990), all the way down to the new millennium and the emergence of post-postmodernism. (187–88)

This is familiar ground for Pynchon scholars, but it tells something not only about the acuteness of McHale's reflections—recall that way back in 1979 he wrote an insightful essay on *Gravity's Rainbow* as best representing the passage from modernist to postmodernist aesthetics—but also on the peculiar organization of this book: Pynchon plays the role of Virgil, leading the pilgrim McHale through the dark woods of avant-garde, the underworld of postmodernism, and then ahead of it, to a still hazy post-postmodern world.

One might stop reading here and ask: do we really need another book on post-modernism? As we know, much has been written about it. Between 1993 and 2013

more than a hundred monographs came out—not to mention the various companions, readers, anthologies, users' manuals, and the guides 'for dummies'—all dealing, if one may trust the titles, with some version of postmodernism. These works have ostensibly outlined, illustrated, introduced, analyzed, revisited, repositioned, renegotiated, explained, deconstructed, announced the disappearance of, crossed, and reread the postmodern phenomenon by looking at it from every possible perspective and by employing the most disparate critical stances. Almost all agree on the fact that postmodernism passed, vanished, disappeared, changed forever sometime around the beginning of the millennium.

But what *was* postmodernism? McHale's book opens with this overwhelming question, and one of its merits is to acknowledge the best critical ideas of his predecessors—the bibliography at the end is a precious tool for both students and scholars—without losing itself in the labyrinth of definitions. Did postmodernism represent a breakthrough from modernist aesthetics, or simply an intensification and/or a reorientation of it? Is it only what the prefix seems to imply, a phase that came *after* modernism, or should we consider the "post" as something more than a chronological mark? As McHale explains in the introduction, his book "is structured around a fundamental distinction between historical *breaks* and *continuities*" (6), so that postmodernism is inscribed into a "dialectic" that, without privileging any theory over the other, can best express the idea of flux connected to such a liquid and elusive phenomenon.

In this regard, the boxes placed at the end of each chapter make it possible to follow alternative paths to gain an original and quite uncanny idea of postmodernism. Here, significant themes or images are analyzed 'transversely' through their postmodern embodiments and representations. For instance, it is interesting to follow the various declinations of a crucial figure like Lewis Carroll's Alice through postmodern wonderlands, or to find out postmodern reconfigurations of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, or, again, to detect the multifaceted image of the angel during the nineties, or the omnipresence of ruins in contemporary texts.

For those willing to follow safe roads, in the first chapter, "Before Postmodernism," McHale establishes a genealogy of the postmodern occasion through the past

centuries. Taking its cue from the Borgesian principle of a reverse-genealogy, the chapter digs into the folds of what Ihab Hassan aptly called “the literature of silence.” McHale traces postmodernist motifs “from Western Europe to India and China, and from the Hellenistic era to the Latin Middle Ages to the baroque period and the experimental fringes of modernism” (12), back to the dramaturgy of seventeenth-century Stuart court masques, pattern poetry, action painting, the Dada artists. The idea is that “postmodernism creates its own precursors, modifying the past retrospectively” (11).

Borrowing a notion from cosmology, the second chapter is headed “Big Bang, 1966”—the very year, as the author clarifies, of the publication of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, whose protagonist embodies “the typical condition of the novels of 1966: pushed into the corner, poised on the brink” (34). McHale proposes 1966 as the “primal scene” of postmodernism, “the year when [Bob] Dylan, The Beatles, Leonard Cohen, Andy Warhol, J. G. Ballard, and others stopped doing what they had been doing and started doing something else; the year when some people broke through and others broke down, and some did both” (25). Though he specifies that “[t]he transition to postmodernism, like the earlier transition to modernism, is a process, not a punctual event” (26), McHale points out that “a number of major novelists [Coover, Gass, McElroy, Sorrentino] who would subsequently make the transition to postmodernism published their first novels in that year” (32). Maybe he is too eager to make it all collide in 1966—he himself admits that someone else could (and actually did) choose another year and come to very similar conclusions. Nonetheless his reconstruction remains truly convincing.

In the third chapter McHale describes postmodernism’s major phase, situating “Peak Postmodernism” between 1973 and 1990. According to him, “Americans around 1973 experienced a rupture in their history, a collective ‘nervous breakdown,’ and began to suffer from that inability to think historically that Fredric Jameson would later identify as a key characteristic of the postmodernist sensibility” (63). The author singles out some key events that happened on that year—the Arab nations’ embargo, the emergency of the details of White House involvement in the Watergate scandal, the Paris Peace Accords, “the beginning of the end of the Vietnam War,”

the nationwide legalization of abortion, the appearance of “reality TV”—along with the publications of “postmodernist literary landmarks” such as Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Ballard’s *Crash*, and Don DeLillo’s *Great Jones Street*.

McHale is always careful to broaden the discourse beyond literature, encompassing other artistic fields (architecture, painting, music, theory, cinema, videogames etc.) and analyzing how these aesthetic fields interact with postmodernism. Going back to literature, he deals extensively, among other things, with magical realism, minimalism, dirty realism, Avant-Pop, graphic novels, metaphysical detective stories, science fiction (especially cyberpunk), and Proceduralist practices such as OuLiPo or those proposed by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E group. After a detailed overview of “a number of characteristic forms and practices associated with the peak period” (65), he sums up:

On or about the year 1966, postmodernism had been a practice—a set of practices—without a name; by 1973, a name had been proposed, but it was still casting around for an appropriate referent; by the Orwellian year of 1984, postmodernism had acquired its own theory, indeed a whole clutch of theories, some of them mutually incompatible [. . .]. In less than a decade, postmodernism had escalated from a rumor to a clamor. (66)

According to McHale, this is the very moment of postmodernism’s *rebranding*. And yet the conclusion is always the same: “Whatever criteria one proposes for postmodernism, *Gravity’s Rainbow* appears to satisfy them” (72). You don’t say!

Chapter four deals with a twelve-year “Interregnum”—from 1989 to 2001—when “the dualistic or manichaeian world-view of the Cold War era was temporarily suspended, replaced by a vision of multipolarity, or even *a*-polarity, that was at once baffling, risky, and rich with possibilities, with implications and knock-on consequences extending far beyond geopolitics” (125). These are the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, of “the beginning of the end of apartheid,” and of the First Gulf War, of the geopolitical crisis in the Eastern Europe and of a new kind of cosmopolitanism that favored the advent of globalization.

Particularly effective is McHale's reconstruction of the rise of the World Wide Web, which "became generally available to Internet users just in time to succumb to the frenzy of commodification and monetization of cyberspace that drove the dot-com boom of the nineties," when "[t]he liberatory and even utopian potential that first-generation theorists attributed to hypertext was overwhelmed by the commercial imperatives of the market" (132). Yes, let's go re-read *Bleeding Edge*!

This chapter, maybe the book's most interesting and original, deals at length with the new forms of realism that faithfully capture "the multi-world quality of nineties experience;" with steampunk and alternate-history novels; with the impact of new technologies (mobile phones, RPGs, the evolution of hypertexts, even to Google Glass and *fantasy sports* such as "Fantacalcio," as we Italians call the soccer version of this very popular practice). In literature we see the rise of writers "[h]aunted by feelings of belatedness, of being preempted and overshadowed by his postmodern precursors" (136); writers like David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, William Vollmann, Michael Chabon, Neal Stephenson, Steve Erikson, Colson Whitehead, who, in McHale's opinion, "seemed condemned to the status of second-generation postmodernists, acutely aware of their first-generation precursors" (137), and especially by the most influential of them, the omnipresent Pynchon.

Finally, though he declares that "it is surely still too early for definitive characterization of whatever cultural phase is in the process of succeeding postmodernism" (175), in the book's last chapter McHale tries to outline some of the characteristics of the post-9/11 cultural arena, such as the displacement of Conceptual Writing "from one context (a newspaper page, a television broadcast) to another" (179), or the development of "*cyborg* poetics, involving a collaboration between flesh-and-blood poets and digital technologies," that becomes particularly significant in an age when virtual realities are "more pervasive than ever before in human history" (180); McHale is convinced that "technological development has caught up with cyberpunk, which no longer projects a future reality but only mirrors a *present* one" (182), so that "we now experience real life *as though it were* science-fiction" (183). Though this is probably true, in my opinion it strikes an odd note; no mention, for instance, of the British "New Space Opera" (see Roger Luckhurst's 2005 monograph, *Science*

*Fiction*, 222–30), or the so called slipstream literature that crosses genre boundaries between science fiction and fantasy.

Should I find a flaw in this book, I deem McHale's drawing of the contemporary landscape excessively bleak and somehow inconsistent. The problem is that he adopts quite exclusively the view proposed by Jeffrey Nealon in his *Post-Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (2012), a (mostly failed) attempt to reframe (update? mock?) Jameson's highly influential work, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Though Nealon, in his monograph, intelligently deals with several topics—from rock music to Las Vegas architecture, from the contemporary situation of the university to the future of liberal arts—the impression one gathers from his book is that of an age of empty and useless repetition, a dead end, or a demonstration of what Robert McLaughlin maybe less elegantly described as postmodernism's "tendency to disappear up its own asshole" (55).

McHale ends his book with the feeling—straight from Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*—of "living in Hell" or "becoming a zombie," while "genuinely apocalyptic possibilities loom ahead of us" (189); he does not seem to notice that at the end of *The Road* there is still a tenuous hope for a better future, entrusted to the child who "carries the fire." Even Pynchon, the guide McHale diligently followed through his journey, ends his last novel with a positive message for the future—if not of the already doomed virtual territories of the Internet, at least of "meatspace" reality. It is true: the planes have crashed, the sky has fallen, and probably the end is near; but we, like McCarthy's and Pynchon's children, must find the strength to face every apocalypse looming ahead; this means to grow up, to become adult. In this sense, I think postmodernism has finally grown up, too—it has become something else, more mature, though maintaining its very essence. When Maxine, on *Bleeding Edge's* last page, is late for accompanying her sons to school, one of them tells her: "It's all right, Mom. We're good" (477). If McHale had followed his leader to the very end, he would have thought that, too.

### **Competing Interests**

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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*Rocket States: Atomic Weaponry and the Cultural Imagination*,  
by Fabienne Collignon. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 179, 2014.  
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It is not easy to say what Collignon's *Rocket States* is. Of course I could resort to the usual word which has been fashionable since the early 1980s, that is, *theory*. Collignon herself evokes this noun when she strives to outline her method, in the very first page of the essay. After telling her readers that she is going to carry out "an analysis of technology [that] has to be expressed in an idiom that corresponds to its subject matter: labyrinthine, fantastic, dynamic, rhizomatic, resonant" (1), she informs them that her "mode of thinking refers to the work of a number of theorists". And—of course—what can one expect from theorists if not theory?

Yet the names of the men Collignon points out as her guides compel one to think twice. Would Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, or Jean Baudrillard have styled themselves as "theorists"? Benjamin was first and foremost a non-academic literary critic (who, of course, was also a first-rate philosopher and also a critic of culture); Derrida was fundamentally a philosopher who, for a series of reasons that should be the subject of a ponderous monograph of intercultural studies, became the guru of a heterogeneous group of American academic literary scholars; Baudrillard was a sociologist whose insights on post-modern or late-modern societies have been unbelievably successful outside the specific field of sociology. I am not trying to say that these thinkers (another unsatisfactory word, alas!) didn't produce theories (though defining "theory" their diverse intellectual achievements does sound as an act of intellectual laziness: whatever they have written is sort of neutralized and trivialized when the label THEORY is stuck on it), but that labelling them as theorists is much less interesting than trying to see them as those borderline figures they have been and still are.

So I will not present you *Rocket States* as a book of theory, nor I will introduce Collignon as a theorist. I will instead try to genealogically position her book, because this could help prospective readers to understand what they may and may not find in it. One powerful influence is of course Thomas Pynchon, and this is overtly acknowledged by the author, when she declares that the book “investigates US missile technology in terms of a peculiar sensibility that emerges [. . .] through Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*” (1). The title itself comes from the fourth part of the novel, from the “Rocket state-cosmology” (726) that is evoked in Enzian’s long inner monologue while the Schwartzkommando is stealthily carrying the 00001 rocket to its launching pad. But one cannot say that *Rocket States* is a commentary on *Gravity* (or the Rocket in it), and if this is what you are looking for you might be disappointed. Actually its closest relatives are a constellation of cultural studies monographs, such as M. Keith Brooker’s *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds and the Cold War*, or David Seed’s *American Science Fiction and the Cold War*; the main difference between *Rocket States* and these overviews of the Cold War/nuclear imagination being that Collignon focuses on a smaller corpus of texts than Seed or Brooker, and her interpretive strategies are more complex and multi-layered. It is an extremely dense monograph, and this review will not be able to follow all the threads in its tapestry.

As for us Pynchon scholars, however, I wish to underscore the undeniable fact that Collignon started from *Gravity*, and often gets back to that novel and others written by our favourite novelist; it would not be unfair to say that the whole book is haunted by Pynchon and his Rocket (or should I say Blicero and his V-2?). Yet the structure itself of *Rocket States* bespeaks another powerful influence.

The four chapters of the monograph have key concepts coupled with toponyms as their titles: “Excavation: Colorado,” “Preservation: Kansas,” “Evacuation: Cape Canaveral,” and “Transmission: New York” – thus anchoring their discourse in the American geography, just like Jean Baudrillard did in his *America*, which is unsurprisingly mentioned in *Rocket States*, e.g. in the chapter on New York (96). But there’s an important difference; while Baudrillard wrote a travelogue which is at the same time an insightful–albeit non-systematic–analysis of the American cultural

identity, Collignon strives to carry out an interpretation of Cold War imagination by focusing on a handful of highly meaningful places, thus outlining “the interface between American geography and missile technology” (1), without inscribing herself as a traveller in her book (à la Baudrillard), but playing the more distanced role of the cartographer. To put it in her terms, “*Rocket States* is about incorporation: the implantations of rocket technologies in the territory, geographical and psychic, of the United States in a process of inhabitation is one of deepening occupation” (17). The language Collignon uses is, as one can easily see even in the short quotations from her monograph I have provided so far, quite baroque—an exuberantly mannerist style so often met in those books that are labelled as—ehm—theory. It is something definitely French (surely showing the impact of such stylistically gifted philosophers as e.g. Derrida and Foucault) but also quite common in today’s English-language academia.

Thus I appreciate the fact that Collignon feels she has to motivate her stylistic choices, inasmuch as they often impinge on the articulation of her discourse. She declares right from the Introduction (whose unavoidable subtitle, given the issues at stake, is “Ignition”) that her book “is executed in the spirit of a radical critique that, in the writing practice, is articulated in such a way that it allows for slippages (through metaphor, for example, but also punctuation) of meaning” (20). There is a geography (physical and mental) of the Cold War (and the Rocket, of course) that Collignon explores; but there is also a *language* of the Cold War that she strives to deconstruct, and both endeavours ask for a highly metaphoric language which often forces the readers to stop and start rereading a period or paragraph from the beginning. This is – be it clear – a legitimate approach, though there is a difference between what a certain textual strategy aims at and what it really manages to achieve. While most of the time Collignon’s “slippages of meaning” may allow readers to see things from a different perspective, and may help us to reconsider events, concepts and discourses we give for granted (her discussion e.g. of Cape Canaveral as a stronghold of the Cold War and reinterpretation of the US astronauts’ plight in chapter 3 is absolutely compelling), sometimes her original and unexpected metaphorical connections may

sound a little contrived and far-fetched (see the reading of the island of Tinian as a sort of double of Manhattan [109–10] that reminds one of the mirror images of Enzian and Tchitcherine in *Gravity* or the specular characters Renfrew and Werfner in *Against the Day*), and in a few cases may sound simply unconvincing, as when Collignon strives to read Stephen King's *The Shining* as a Cold War novel in chapter 1.

The title of this chapter is "Excavation," and its location is Colorado. The obvious connection for Pynchon scholars is *Against the Day*, but this novel does not seem to be mentioned in the chapter (one thing that is definitely missing in *Rocket States* is the titles of quoted literary works in its Index, which might have greatly helped those interested more in Pynchon than the the general Cold War discourse). Collignon highlights the role played by Colorado in the Cold War system, as a testing ground for nuclear weapons and a source of uranium, but her reading of King's novel, albeit competent and interesting *per se* (it made me reconsider some aspects of the narrative, even though the idea that Jack Torrance represents the archetypal male American is not novel), does not really manage to prove it is a Cold War narrative. Most of the time it strives to do that with an excess of metaphorization which can be summarized in her final statement: "The hotel institutes, inside, inhuman hollow subjectivity, an archive of its implacable law: a compulsive, over-written mind, nested by nuclear logic – paranoid and sheltering, underneath new skin or glass domes, unending impressions of the deathly politics of the Cold War" (44). There is no doubt that US politics show a strong and disquieting paranoid streak, and did it well before Richard J. Hofstadter recognized it as a truly American style, but *The Shining* seems to me to be evoking a past before the Bomb, not that dream of total control and protection that the Rocket States (the USA) tried to enforce by developing atomic weaponry (one of the overarching concerns of Collignon's book).

Unsurprisingly Adam Piette's reading of *Lolita* is quoted in this chapter (30), another interpretation of a postmodernist classic where private fantasies are connected to the military-industrial complex which ran the Cold War; a reading which is carried out in the weakest chapter of Piette's *The Literary Cold War*, another struggle to directly connect a text to a historical context when indirect connections, through

mediating concepts or discourses, were required (off the top of my head I suggest that in both cases patriarchy and its deconstruction should have played a more important role and might have allowed both commentators a stronger and steadier grip on the novels).

The second chapter, "Preservation: Kansas," dealing with the Sunflower state and the ICBM silos buried in its soil, entails a much stronger and persuasive (in some points enlightening) discussion of the spaces in which atomic weaponry was preserved, and how such destructive (or better annihilating) devices were conjoined, in the language of Cold War, with protection, enclosure, security and safety. Collignon shows how these discourses connect with the peculiar nature of Kansas as a state split between pastoral Arcadia and wilderness, a sort of metaphorical desert whose vocation seems to have been that to host the pits of the Titan and Minuteman missiles thanks to its (real or purported) emptiness. To do this Collignon aptly refers to *The Wizard of Oz* (already suggested by one of the epigraphs in *Gravity's Rainbow*), and analyses the connotations of the word "silo", used both in agriculture (Kansas' main economic activity) and in ICBM systems as a shelter for weapons which could only protect the US if they are protected. Surprisingly, she doesn't mention an iconic Cold War movie which is partly set in Lawrence, Kansas, that is, *The Day After* (1983), whose images kept coming to my mind while reading this chapter of *Rocket States*. (A nitpicking remark: we are told that "[t]he propulsion vehicle's fuel" was "a combination of liquid oxygen and liquid nitrogen" [67], but all the sources I have consulted declare that American ICBMs burnt liquid oxygen and RP-1, a form of kerosene, or hydrazine and nitrogen tetroxide. Since usually the author is quite accurate when it comes to technical details, this glitch—possibly a typo—somewhat stands out.)

The third chapter, "Evacuation: Cape Canaveral," is the one I found most interesting. This is due in part to the fact that Collignon deals with some stories by J.G. Ballard, such as "The Cage of Sand" and "Memories of the Space Age", seeing them as interconnected narratives on the US Space Program and its deep assignments (to use a typical Ballardian phrase), and this of course draws the attention of

an avid JGB reader like me (79–81; 91); in part, and I guess this is the most important part for the readers of *Orbit*, because Collignon connects Cape Canaveral, the Space program from the Mercury capsules to the Apollo missions, Cold War and the ending of *Gravity's Rainbow*. I might wish the author of *Rocket States* had said it in a more straightforward fashion, but her remarks on Gottfried's sacrificial flight (71–2; 79) and its subtext of whiteness, plus the stress she put on the passivity of the youth imprisoned in the 00000 V-2 by Dominus Blicero, clearly aim at reading this episode of Pynchon's novel (endowed, as we all know, with a strategic role, as it practically closes the narrative) as an anamorphic image of the US space programs, with the (WASP) astronauts "as submissive laboratory animal[s] in a capsule operation" (79). There is obviously more than this in this rich chapter, in terms of both historical-geographic reconstruction and connections to other American writers, such as Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer and John Updike, not to mention the discussion of the double nature of the Rockets which carried astronauts to space and might have carried nuclear warheads to their targets. Collignon persuasively outlines the dream of total control which haunts both sides of missile R&D, also connecting it to the idea of the astronauts as cyborgs (72), and presents us with a reading of the landscape in Cape Canaveral which rivals the visionary lyricism of Baudrillard's *America*: "The Cape's wasted expanses plot the bleak, interminable realms and petrified conditions of a political culture orbiting around the glare of a device, acquiring its radiance from the 'star' created by the explosion of a nuclear warhead" (93); it is a dazzling mental short-circuit, superimposing Cape Canaveral and Alamogordo, and the "the moon's cratered, forbidding territory". A definitely Ballardian vision, one would like to add.

The fourth chapter, "Transmission: New York", mostly deals with the SDI, the science-fictional missile defence system sponsored (or dreamed) by Ronald Reagan, then 9/11 – unavoidably, given the location – and a series of half-forgotten plane crashes which took place before the 2001 event. This chapter deals with the permanence of the Cold War and its apparatus, in a moment in which military technologies seem to have forsaken titanic ICBMs, relying on smaller cruise missiles, unmanned

drones, invisible stealth aircraft plus omni-pervasive electronic intelligence (not to mention the digital warfare of State-sponsored hackers and the stress on smart weapons). Collignon has found a not-so-unlikely, actually quite plausible cultural ancestor of the SDI and other systems of total remote control (including ECHELON, of course) in Nikola Tesla's Wardencllyffe Tower. The history of technology tells us that Wardencllyffe was meant to be the center of a wireless transmission system which should compete with Marconi's wireless telegraph, but what Collignon is dealing with here is technological imagination (aka science-fiction), hence Tesla's aborted project is linked to a series of statements found in letters written by the scientist, expressing disquieting "fantasies of supremacy" (104).

Here one may appreciate the coherence of Collignon's work, inasmuch as the last chapter deals with very recent events such as 9/11 and drone warfare. There is a political thread in her book, which emerges in the conclusion of *Rocket States*, "Mobilization: Un/Endings". Its thesis is that the Cold War is only apparently over. The sad truth is that its apparatus has been put to other uses, with the war on terrorism (provided one can really wage a war against terrorism, and that such a war is not a terrorist act itself) replacing the suddenly obsolete competition with the USSR. The language of Cold War analysed by Collignon "keeps legitimating war without end" (121); its key terms, as we all know too well, are "terrorism, defence, security, democracy". Be it in the more brutal Republican version (the exportation of democracy to rogue states which brought us the arid Vietnam known as Iraq) or the "lightweight" Democrat version (with the ill-fated "Arab Springs" and the massive use of drones), rockets are always part of the picture, and the apparatus which designed, produced, preserved and maintained them is still working. Such a truth is difficult to deny.

What should be done, then? Of course this is the overwhelming question we keep asking ourselves, and one cannot blame Collignon if her answer – an interminable critique, critical thinking without horizon (124) – sounds a little naïve. We have had plenty of critical thinking on the Cold War and its consequences, but this does not seem to have stopped or at least slowed the pace of the war machine, of the Rocket States of America, plus its equivalents in other parts of the world (one has to

add that the good old ICBM has made a surprising comeback in Russia, thanks to the R-30 Bulava, a ballistic missile that is purported to be resistant to the SDI anti-missile technologies. . .).

However, *Rocket States* is a feat of solid scholarship, and – its baroque prose notwithstanding, or thanks to it – a rewarding read. As I have already said, one cannot use it as a commentary on Pynchon's fiction, but there are many ideas here that open new perspectives and point at very interesting lines of scholarly research for critics interested in Pynchon's fiction (but, as I hope to have shown, this monograph also engages the works of other authors). It is what lies beyond *Rocket States*, the trails that start from its pages, which is absolutely relevant to any Pynchon scholar, making this book a must-read for all of us.

(Last but not least: I hope Collignon will continue her research moving to a bordering territory, that is, science-fiction. While reading her book I kept thinking of how many of her best insights easily, one might say *naturally*, connected to a number of science-fiction stories, novels, films dealing in a more or less direct fashion with the Bomb and the Rocket. She has recently published an essay on Philip K. Dick's *Ubik*; but there is still a lot to be said about the language and imagination of the Cold War scattered in the pages of the Californian writer. I look forward to reading more by Collignon about that.)

### **Competing Interests**

The author declares that they have no competing interests.



Toward a General Study of the Corporation in Contemporary Narratives: A Review of *Fictions Inc. The Corporation in Postmodern Fiction, Film, and Popular Culture* by Ralph Clare. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, xiii + 244 pp, \$26.95, 2014

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Ralph Clare's book is a series of Marxist oriented close readings of a variety of novels and movies all of which explore the representations of the corporation and how those representations disclose shifting attitudes and ideologies in America. These individual studies are framed by a loose theoretical introduction and conclusion offering a view of contemporary capitalism and what might be done about its current hegemony. Clare analyzes the corporation not only as a material institution that organizes and scripts, through its vast economic machinery, the life world of our age in at times nefarious and at other times vertiginous and exhilarating ways, but also as a site of current anxieties over the steadily growing disenfranchisement of people in an increasingly posthuman world. He furthermore notes that the legally embodied nature of the corporation, that it is a legal person, provides a locus of antagonism for this growing discontent; the analysis of the corporation, therefore, might point to potential liberating actions that mobilize change by embracing the posthuman and perverting the aims of capitalism from within, away from the profit motive and toward a more egalitarian system. While Clare draws on a range of theoretical critical ideas from such figures as Agamben, Foucault, Žižek and Jameson, he remains firmly rooted in the classical Marxist tradition; indeed, David Harvey is perhaps his most consistent touchstone to elaborate his critical enterprise regarding the corporation in postmodern culture. Clare also discusses and juxtaposes a host of diverse narratives: he moves fluidly from such complicated novels as Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, DeLillo's *White Noise*, Gaddis's *JR* and Powers's *Gain* to such decidedly less substantive movies as Ron Howard's *Gung Ho*, Ivan Reitman's *Ghostbusters* and Peter Segal's *Tommy Boy*. These choices of study, the hodge-podge of theory, along with his

fondness for puns and a somewhat Žižekian playfulness in treating pop culture on a par with these already canonical postmodern works, make Clare's work an enjoyable and informative set of readings, though, perhaps, lacking in theoretical rigor and remaining somewhat general in its ultimate findings.

Clare begins his book with the observation that in reading the pop culture tea leaves, one can note a shift in ideological coercion from the political variety during the Cold War to an economic variety through the rise of neoliberalism. The corporation consequently threatens democracy in its masking of exploitation while simultaneously disempowering anybody to do anything about it—what Mark Fisher has called capitalist realism. Intriguingly, Clare notes, riffing off of Giorgio Agamben, that we live in an economy of exception, wherein individuals are abandoned to neoliberal economic forces while corporations, legal individual persons, are able to suspend the economic rules when crises hit—and we live now in permanent fiscal crisis. But postmodern fiction and film have offered critiques of the erosion of individual liberties and economic inequality and therefore offer a glimpse at potential ways of working toward an emancipated future. As he says, “I do not wish simply to tear back the veil and expose the ‘truth’ of the corporation’s legal-fictional existence [. . .] but to show the ways in which postmodern literary and cultural artifacts have provided critiques of, or windows into, late capital by following the logical extension and limit of this kind of figurative ‘thinking’ about corporate capitalism” (13). What Clare finds is an opening up of the possibility of immanent change as expressed through the imaginative power of postmodern fiction, film and popular culture. While a close reading of the movies disclose capital's power of dissimulating its exploitative tactics, the novels point to how “corporations create, despite their increasing decenteredness, a figurative, if amorphous, ‘self’ or body that can serve as a target for those who attempt to battle neoliberal capitalism as it transitions into a truly unique and hitherto-unparalleled biopolitical stage of late capitalism” (197). This in turn leads Clare to see the possibility of the multitude, in the Hardt and Negri sense, as acting as a new biopolitical body to challenge the corporate body or corporate personhood: “To embrace the concept of the multitude or a coming incorporation is to see the

utopian and productive potential in the posthuman instead of fearing it to be simply the dehumanized detritus of techno-capitalism" (203).

The strength of Clare's book is in his dynamic investigation of individual works. Beginning with a comparison of the representation of the corporation in Norris's *The Octopus* and Pynchon's *Lot 49* allows Clare to demonstrate the way in which the corporation has insinuated itself into the social life of America in seemingly innocuous and natural ways, but in fact is quite ruthless and ubiquitous in its hegemony. Later popular films, as is shown in the next couple chapters, are symptomatic of the ways in which American capitalist industry either displaces worker anxieties onto foreign corporate intrusion, thereby mystifying the plight of the worker, or point to the latent contradictions upon which corporate capital is built. He then moves to *White Noise* to show how "postmodern death" is yet another manifestation of a "highly particularized cultural construct" (116) until shifting gears with *JR* and *Gain* to show that even as capitalism embodies itself through the corporation, "individuals themselves are disembodied, and social institutions, such as marriage and the family, find their bodies or structures transfigured and transformed—and [ . . . ] *produced* by the irrepressible flow of capital" (Clare's italics) (137). Thus, it appears the general trajectory of Clare's readings seek to show capitalism, via the corporation, begins as a top-down repressive force, only to morph into an insidious, disseminating power, that forecloses the possibility of resistance by usurping cultural products and social institutions, particularly the family, toward its own coercive ends. As the individual and the humanist ethos fades, a posthuman corporate body rises in its place, yet one which, ironically, may point the way to a new site and mode of resistance.

The problem with Clare's work is not its general assessment or its particular critical dissection of these various works, which offer intriguing readings and possibilities and are written in a refreshing and lucid style; rather, Clare's theoretical underpinning and his ultimate goal and conclusion remain quite general and ultimately undeveloped. From the theoretical perspective, Clare utilizes a variety of concepts from a variety of theorists: the body without organs, the state of exception, biopolitics, cognitive mapping, the imaginary, in a kind of mix and match way. There

is no consideration of the tenability of these concepts in unison, which often come from antagonistic theoretical perspectives; in other words, there is no justification of how these differing conceptual approaches add up to a coherent grand view. And, in contradistinction from the post-structuralist suspicion of grand narratives, Clare seeks to reinvigorate materialist Marxist explanations for some larger, even global, revolutionary potential. It is also revealing that there is very little by way of engagement with critical scholarship about the specific works. While there is an ample bibliography, it is made up primarily of social and cultural criticism non-specific to the many close readings performed. The conclusion also is symptomatic of the somewhat nebulous and undefined goal of this effort: “this study has sought to trace the larger pattern at work in the figure of the corporation, to diagnose the dialectical trap of joy and despair that accompanies capital’s boom-and-bust cycles, and to point toward the political possibilities that lie beyond the limits of the capitalist regime” (206). These tracings, diagnoses and speculations of the operation of capital and its limits are tantalizing yet never fully formulated. In the end, one can say of Clare’s book that it offers an articulate, engaging introduction to this line of inquiry: a guide for beginning scholars, for elaborating the history of twentieth and twenty-first century capitalism via the corporation and these select works, for historical contextualization of the permutations and expansions of corporate power, and for how literature can be read through a Marxist lens to reveal socio-cultural anxieties concerning the place of the individual in a posthuman world dominated by capital.

### **Competing Interests**

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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