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"Time, no arrow, no boomerang, but a concertina": Cloud Atlas and the Anti-Apocalyptic Critical Temporalities of the Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel

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"Time, no arrow, no boomerang, but a concertina": *Cloud Atlas* **and the Anti-**

Apocalyptic Critical Temporalities of the Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel

In the period around the millennium and into the twenty-first century, non-science fiction writers have become increasingly preoccupied with the apocalypse and its end-of-the-world scenarios, publishing growing numbers of post-apocalyptic novels.[1] Through analysis of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), the present article argues that this body of contemporary writings is characterized by three elements coalescing into a critique of traditional apocalyptic discourse. Firstly, in these texts, the aftermath of the destruction of the world as we know it is preponderantly dystopian. That is, contemporary post-apocalyptic novels do not espouse the notion of a utopian teleology active in history, a notion which is at the core of traditional apocalyptic logic.[2] Secondly, contemporary post-apocalyptic fictions are essentially concerned with time and history and, thirdly, this concern is not only central to the narratives' content but is embodied within their formal features. Whilst all post-apocalyptic narratives which are not utopian implicitly question the traditional apocalyptic paradigm, the temporal focus of contemporary novels, and the ways in which their structures articulate time, suggest a deliberate attempt to challenge apocalypticism. I argue that contemporary post-apocalyptic fictions expose the apocalyptic conception of history at the core of western modernity as a narrative enmeshed with power structures and subvert it through their formal features. With its concertina-like structure, which reflects and reinforces its anti-apocalyptic content, *Cloud Atlas* serves in this article as the paradigmatic example of the anti-apocalyptic critical temporalities – namely, constructions of time which critique a hegemonic temporality – articulated by the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel.[3]

The popularity of dystopian end-of-the-world scenarios in contemporary fiction is undoubtedly the product of the twentieth century, where "we have had the opportunity . . . to see in a strange perspective what the end would actually look like: it would look like a Nazi

death camp, or an atomic explosion, or an ecological or urban wasteland" (Berger xiii). Furthermore, apocalyptic writings, ever since their religious origins, flourish at times of crisis and the present has been qualified, by many, as an unprecedented moment of crisis and of risk.[4] Ulrich Beck defines contemporary society as a "risk society in the sense that it is increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing risks that it itself has produced" (332). Risks associated with anthropogenic climate change have become particularly pressing in recent years, and the term *Anthropocene* was itself popularized in 2000 by Paul Crutzen to denote the current geological epoch in which human activity is having a growing impact on the Earth's history (Trexler 1). This preoccupation with the environment is reflected in many contemporary post-apocalyptic fictions: from *Cloud Atlas*'s "deadlands" to *The Road*'s post-apocalyptic wasteland, from the *MaddAddam* trilogy's pre-apocalyptic world, ravaged by various environmental disasters, to *The Book of Dave*'s and *The Possibility of an Island*'s post-apocalyptic geographies, significantly altered by rising sea water levels. Yet the issue with deploying risk theory to discuss the dominance of end-of-the-world scenarios is that this framework sidesteps the history of apocalyptic discourse and the sense-making utopian teleology at its core.[5] To understand what is at stake in the contemporary flourishing of post-apocalyptic novels one needs to consider the apocalyptic ideological foundations of modernity and how these have significant and dangerous legacies in the contemporary moment, complicit as they are in proliferating risks.

The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel: Anti-Apocalyptic Critical Temporalities

Etymologically *apocalypse* does not refer to a *catastrophe* of overwhelming proportions and consequences, as in contemporary popular parlance, but, from the Greek *apocalyptein* (to unveil), the term denotes revelations intertwined with time and history.[6] In their religious inception, apocalyptic writings, epitomized by the biblical Book of Revelation, are "fictions

of historical order" (Zamora 4) aimed at making sense of periods of crisis by disclosing that the whole course of history is tending towards a utopian resolution. The Book of Revelation does disclose the future catastrophic end of the material world, but more fundamentally reveals the advent of a transcendent utopian world for the righteous: the New Jerusalem at the end of history. This utopian teleology is central to western modernity and its secular understanding of time, indeed, "[the apocalyptic] vision of history gives rise to 'history' as a theoretical production" (Keller 89).[7] Modern metanarratives are apocalyptic, as they are totalizing explanations of history based on utopian teleology.[8] In particular, progress, the modern metanarrative *par excellence*, "represents the main example of the secularization of apocalypse" and of its utopian telos (Keller 6). By the same token, modernity's "rationalizing of time and space – by which national, international, and, in time, a global market emerged" can be traced back, Catherine Keller argues, to the "universal chronology of the apocalyptic vision" (118, 120). The dominant dystopian mood of contemporary post-apocalyptic texts indicates, therefore, a noteworthy shift away from the utopian resolution which makes sense of everything that happened before in the traditional apocalyptic paradigm. It is this shift that this article theorizes.

I argue that, just as traditional apocalyptic discourse is essentially concerned with time, contemporary post-apocalyptic discourse is about critical temporalities which subvert the hegemonic temporality of modernity: time as a homogeneous and teleological continuum, namely, time as constructed by the traditional apocalyptic narrative. Like Heather J. Hicks' study of the twenty-first-century literary post-apocalyptic novel, the present article argues that these fictions deal with the "episteme of modernity" (2). However, unlike Hicks, I maintain that they do so to critique, rather than to salvage, modernity and its apocalyptic ideological foundations. Whilst Revelation is traditionally interpreted as resistance literature against the oppressions perpetrated by the Roman Empire,[9] the text "was canonized by the

very sort of imperial Roman establishment for whose overthrow [John] provided the symbolic *locus classicus*". This canonization is the source of Revelation's "strange doubleness", namely, of its use to defuse resistance and enforce exploitations, rather than to oppose them (Keller 18). As Mitchell's novel shows, because of the emphasis on a pre-determined end, the apocalyptic model of history compromises the possibility of choices and ethics and legitimizes power's oppressions as part of a deterministic pattern tending towards betterment. The apocalyptic metanarrative, Quinby sums up, is a "quintessential technology of power/knowledge", since its "tenet of preordained history disavows questionings of received truth, discredits skepticism, and disarms challengers of the status quo" (xiii). And, as Keller stresses, the moral dualism of good versus evil underlying apocalyptic teleology too easily translates into power dynamics such as colonialism. The trope of the new world is of clear apocalyptic derivation, and colonialism, together with its contemporary incarnation – neoliberal imperialism – is tellingly explored in texts like *Cloud Atlas*.

The modern and apocalyptic conception of history appears increasingly untenable in the present conjuncture of a world "without predictability or teleology, but with proliferating instability" (Buell 15). Yet it is precisely because of this instability that apocalyptic logic, with its promise of a sense-making order, continues to perform its seduction. John Gray foregrounds the "unmistakably apocalyptic tone" (33) of neoliberalism and post-9/11 politics. Signaling a resurgence of modern metanarratives – or perhaps, that they never really collapsed – neoliberalism is characterized by the belief that "the world is converging on a single type of government and economic system – universal democracy, or a global free market" (Gray 1). There is no alternative, to put it with Margaret Thatcher's infamous words, or, we are at the end of history, as argued by Francis Fukuyama. 9/11 was cast in the reassuring apocalyptic terms of moral dualism – the good elect versus the evil other – and as an attack against the neoliberal teleological convergence, "trigger[ing] an attempt to

accelerate this process throughout the Middle East" (Gray 74). Neoliberalism's underlying apocalypticism precipitates the violence of the War on Terror, for those who posit a telos to history also conceive of themselves as the rightful agents of this telos, and justifies profound global inequality – itself a legacy of colonial apocalypticism – as a necessary phase in a historical pattern tending towards betterment. The same logic conceals that the "fantasy of plenitude, regeneration, and persistence lying behind [the late capitalist] structures of accumulation" (Williams 2) is complicit in, and thus deeply threatened by, anthropogenic climate change. The deconstruction of traditional apocalyptic logic is, therefore, an urgent task which, I argue, is taken up by the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel. As discussed in the following pages through the example of *Cloud Atlas*, these fictions variously target the nexus between apocalypticism, (neo-)colonialism, global capital and neoliberalism, and the Anthropocene.

The equation of the post-apocalyptic with the postmodern is often acknowledged (Berger 36), but this article fleshes out the connection between the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel and the postmodern narrative turn in historiography. As Paul Ricoeur contends, "Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative" (3), and postmodern theorists underline the importance of narrativity in our conceptualization of history: there is no history, understood as an objective account of the past, but only histories, narratives about the past (White; Jenkins). The issue, however, is which understanding of narrative is implied in these arguments. To many scholars, the apocalyptic epistemic primacy of the end – its sense-making function – is central to narrativity. Peter Brooks, for instance, talks of the "anticipation of retrospection" as the foundation of plots, since "we read [present moments, in literature and in life] in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot" (94). This structuring power is what Frank Kermode terms the sense of

an ending in a study which analyzes the correspondence between fictional plots and apocalyptic history. In both cases, the end "confer[s] organization and form on the temporal structure" (45). Just as we expect that in narratives closure will tie up all loose ends and reveal the concordance between beginning, middle and conclusion, when interpreting history apocalyptically, we expect that the end will allow us to discern the pattern governing time.

Yet Brooks' and Kermode's identification of readers' expectations only tell us that the sense of an ending is a predominant narrative convention. Readers' expectations are not sufficient grounds to contend that narrativity is inherently defined by the epistemic primacy of the end and, therefore, that time can only be made sense of teleologically.[10] It is this understanding of narrative that contemporary post-apocalyptic texts complicate. For to conceive of histories as teleological is still to follow apocalyptic logic and, hence, to be complicit with the power dynamics embedded in the very notion of telos. Addressing the connection framed by Kermode between apocalyptic end and narrative endings, post-apocalyptic fictions not only invite us to reflect on history *qua* narrative, but challenge the essentially apocalyptic model of narrative dominated by the end, articulating anti-apocalyptic critical temporalities through their structures.

In the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel, the postmodern critique of metanarratives corresponds with postmodernist formal features that variously defy chronology, linearity, continuity, foreshadowing, cause and effect, and the sense of an ending itself. Examples include narrative fragmentation and the movement between pre- and post-apocalypse, as in *Cloud Atlas*, *Station Eleven*, *The Book of Dave*, the *MaddAddam* trilogy, and *The Possibility of an Island*; *Toward the End of Time*'s exploration of disparate historical epochs and branching universes; the complete absence of the apocalyptic end, as in *The Road* and *The Pesthouse*; and *The Stone Gods*' cyclicality. These complications of a linear and teleological narrative time are typical of numerous postmodernist texts which "brea[k] down

the convention of historical time, . . . reveal[ing] the arbitrariness of its historical 'neutrality'" (Ermarth 41).[11] Indeed, Linda Hutcheon's influential notion of "historiographic metafiction" identifies postmodernist novels concerned with the narrative nature of history and the debunking of this neutrality.[12] Mitchell is celebrated as a postmodernist author (Dillon) – as are other literary writers of contemporary post-apocalyptic novels, such as Jeanette Winterson, Will Self, and Douglas Coupland. Yet, what distinguishes contemporary post-apocalyptic fictions from historiographic metafiction and other postmodernist temporal experimentations is that the apocalyptic subject of the former allows them to critique the modern conception of history more fully. Since the structure of modern temporality is apocalyptic, the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel deconstructs this structure by targeting its very core: apocalyptic logic. In these fictions, the post-apocalyptic collapse of the nexus between end and meaning that underlies the modern understanding of history, combined with non-teleological narrative structures, effectively deconstructs the epistemic primacy of the end in history and narrative.[13]

Cloud Atlas's Narrative Structure: "Time, no arrow, no boomerang, but a concertina"

Cloud Atlas consists of six narratives unified by a common theme, mankind's will to power, which Mitchell derives from Nietzsche, and by the fact that each story is featured in the following one. The novel begins with the journal of Adam Ewing, a nineteenth-century American notary travelling across the Pacific and experiencing first-hand the damage inflicted by colonialism. His diary is found in Belgium in 1931 by young composer Robert Frobisher, the protagonist of the second narrative and the amanuensis of invalid Vyvyan Ayrs. Robert's letters, which make up his sections, are then read in the third story, set in the USA in the 1970s, by Luisa Rey. Luisa is a journalist who starts investigating the dangers of Seaboard Corporation's HYDRA Zero nuclear reactor, after the suspicious death of Rufus

Sixsmith, the addressee of Robert's letters. A manuscript about her adventures is sent to Timothy Cavendish, a vanity publisher in contemporary Britain and the protagonist of the fourth narrative. Imprisoned in a nursing home, Timothy writes a memoir which is later made into a movie, and seen in the fifth section, set in a future dystopian hyper-capitalist Korea, by clone Sonmi-451. Sonmi, finally, becomes in the sixth chapter the goddess of a Hawaiian post-apocalyptic community, where her orison – a device which recorded her testimony before she was executed for her rebellion against the regime of corpocracy – resurfaces.

The peculiarity of *Cloud Atlas* is that all the stories – with the exception of the sixth, situated in the middle – are interrupted in order to give way to the following one, and are then resumed in reverse order in the second half of the book. This structure has been central to critical analyses of the book which have drawn on Robert's reflections on the cyclical trope of eternal return (Hicks; Machinal; Mezey), on Timothy's image of the boomerang (Parker), and on the matrioshka dolls brought up by Isaac Sachs, a scientist for Seaboard Corporation (Hopf; McMorran; Parker) to conceptualize the development of the plot. Whilst taking into consideration all of the above, I focus on an element which has hardly received critical attention: Timothy's image of the concertina, which captures the complexities of the book's anti-apocalyptic structure.[14] As Mitchell underlines, this structure reflects the theme of the will to power, for "each narrative is 'eaten' by its successor and later 'regurgitated' by the same" ("Genesis"). Yet, since *Cloud Atlas* arguably depicts the will to power being legitimized by apocalyptic discourse, the structure mirrors the anti-apocalyptic content of the novel and the centrality of the post-apocalyptic chapter signifies Mitchell's attempt to debunk the apocalyptic metanarrative. The concertina-like structure articulates a critical temporality as it resists a telic closure, warps the deterministic linearity of apocalyptic history and of traditional plots, and links the various recurrences of the will to power in the

novel, foregrounding the dystopian implications of apocalypticism, from colonialism to the future neo-colonial biopower of corporations and anthropogenic environmental crises.

By opening and closing with the same narrative, *Cloud Atlas* appears to rely on a cyclical temporality and plot. This idea is reinforced by repetitive patterns in the narratives; by the theme of reincarnation, for a comet-shaped birthmark accompanies one of the characters in each section; and, more importantly, by the references to Nietzschean eternal recurrence.[15] Robert helps Vyvyan write a symphony named "Eternal Recurrence" and, just before committing suicide, the young composer is comforted by what he terms, with a fitting musical metaphor, "Nietzsche's gramophone record. When it ends, the Old One plays it again, for an eternity of eternities" (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 490).[16] Yet the cyclical repetition of the same cannot account for *Cloud Atlas*'s plot. The very fact that the only passage in the novel explicitly expounding a cyclical conception of time is associated with Robert's desperate act suggests Mitchell's cautiousness about the theory. When hearing a song about the eternal recurrence, Timothy is horrified (173). And the future Korean clones, which should by definition represent the return of the same, are instead as "singular as snowflakes" (191). The second half of *Cloud Atlas* goes back to the past, but it does so only in the sense of picking up the stories where they were interrupted, without any indication that time itself rewinds. The events of the first half are not reproduced but, rather, the narratives are brought to their endings. Thus, the novel's conclusion does not really coincide with its beginning and there is no endless repetition of a cycle, unlike Winterson's *The Stone Gods*, where one finds a destructive apocalypticism – the desire for utopian new beginnings, which translates into the colonisation of new worlds – leading humankind to cyclical environmental demises.

It is Timothy who provides readers with two images that help us understand *Cloud Atlas*'s structure and its anti-apocalyptic critical temporality. In a first passage he declares that "Time's Arrow bec[o]me[s] Time's Boomerang" (149), which encapsulates how, in the

first half of the text, the narratives follow a chronological order, from the nineteenth century to a distant post-apocalyptic future, to then boomerang back in the second half. The arrow embodies the sense of an ending which the structure of the novel complicates throughout. The names of the protagonists of the first and sixth story suggest a teleological development. Adam, reminiscent of the biblical progenitor of mankind, and Zachry trace with their initials an alphabetical progression from the colonial antecedents of today's global patterns of exploitation to their (teleo)logical cataclysmic end. The arrow, therefore, signifies a negative teleology, which subverts the utopianism at the core of the apocalyptic metanarrative. As typical of contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction, in *Cloud Atlas apocalypse* comes to mean merely *catastrophe*, critically effacing the etymological sense of a *revelation* of a better world to come and the sense-making function of the end.[17]

After an unspecified disaster, the Hawaiian society depicted in "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After" has reverted to an archaic way of life: the "Valleysmen" are herders and farmers, with very little technology. This reversion is what I term temporal inversion, a critical temporality typical of post-apocalyptic fiction, where the future is often represented as a dystopian return to a past stage of human civilization, as exemplified by the neo-medieval futures of *The Pesthouse* and *The Book of Dave*, or the small, self-governed, and insecure communities of *Station Eleven* and *California*. "Time's Arrow bec[o]me[s] Time's Boomerang" also because, as suggested by Sonmi's hyper-capitalist and environmentally-devastated future, it is the apocalyptic ideology of progress that backfires, driving civilization to its own demise and to the dystopian future-past of temporal inversion. The post-apocalyptic chapter is a *mise en abyme*: as Zachry's community returns to mankind's past, so does the text as a whole retrace its steps back to the beginning after "Sloosha's Crossin'". To see the matter from a complementary perspective, in the second half of the book, temporal inversion, with its anti-apocalyptic critique of utopian teleology, is made structural.

In articulating its critical temporality, *Cloud Atlas* also problematizes the arrow in terms of narrative teleology. On the one hand, the individual stories are abruptly broken off, and Mitchell emphasises the extent to which our narrative practice is traditionally informed by the epistemic primacy of the end by replicating each interruption, and ensuing disappointment, at the diegetic level, thanks to characters who possess merely part of a journal, in Robert's case, or of a manuscript, in Timothy's, and so forth. All the textual disruptions climax in the chronological conclusion of *Cloud Atlas*. Not only is the apocalypse the interruption of what the apocalyptic metanarrative constructs as a progressive history, but the catastrophe is one of the gaps left between the stories. The continuous deferral of closure in the first half of *Cloud Atlas* thus parallels the absence of a utopian resolution at the end of its fictional history: like the final blank chapter of *number9dream*, the chronological conclusion of *Cloud Atlas* signifies devastation and textual incompleteness, not the meaningfulness of the sense of an ending.

On the other hand, the novel undermines foreshadowing, and hence, the deterministic inevitability which the closed structure of conventional novels imposes on events. Foreshadowing is crucial to the temporality of traditional plots, where the present is "the harbinger of an already determined future" (Bernstein 2). When we narrate history according to a traditional, and apocalyptic, narrative model, we subscribe to a teleological temporality which denies ethical value to the present and ignores the fundamental difference between conventional narratives and life: "Unlike most art, life is genuinely eventful and set in open time, with loose ends and without closure" (Morson, "Sideshadowing" 600). *Cloud Atlas* rejects an understanding of history in terms of apocalyptic determinism and gives prominence to the individual's agency to shape the future, reflecting the openness of actual time, as opposed to the closure of time in traditional plots.

In the first half of the novel, the chronological order of the narratives encourages us to read in Brook's anticipation of retrospection, looking for clues foreshadowing an ending which will integrate the various strands. Yet the shift from one era to the other remains unclear and Mitchell does not allow us to construct an unbroken causal-teleological sequence for the plot. The gaps in the fictional history traced by the arrow indicate Mitchell's wish to subvert the sense of an ending and keep spaces of possibility open in the structure. Even more effective, in this respect, is the boomerang of the second half of *Cloud Atlas*. By situating "Sloosha's Crossin'" in the middle of the book, Mitchell effaces it through the real ending, Adam's journal, and suggests that the temporal inversion of Zachry's society can be averted in the readers' world if they learn the novel's anti-apocalyptic lesson. The notion of a future that is not pre-determined is reinforced throughout the second half. Although this part illustrates "the driving need to see . . . a narrative through to completion" (Mezey 12), the stories are somewhat open-ended. Timothy's chapter features a double ending: the first features a cinematic "THE END", contradicted in its closure by the words immediately above, "Where all this will end, I do not know" (401). This conclusion is followed by an epilogue in which Timothy looks forward to finding out Luisa's destiny. Hinting at an ongoing action, the other sections finish with the protagonist reading the following story, or in Sonmi's case, watching a movie about it. Even Robert's last letter before committing suicide contains a reference to Adam's journal, which he leaves to Rufus. The final chapter also closes in a suspended way, as Adam vows to pledge himself to Abolitionism once he is back in America.

Although the image of the boomerang captures some aspects of the critique of teleology, it does not account for another element of the novel's structure: the repetitive patterns which unify the different strands, articulating an anti-apocalyptic critical temporality. These repetitions complicate both the teleological development of the plots and the

apocalyptic metanarrative of progress, for they underscore the recurrence of an exploitative will to power in history. As Timothy's second temporal image indicates, "Time, no arrow, no boomerang, but a concertina" (370). This musical instrument is made up of "two hexagonal or square wooden endpieces, which carry the reeds and the buttons that control them, . . . linked by folded cardboard bellows" (Montagu). Particularly relevant to the present analysis is the characteristic of a regular pattern, the series of zigs and zags of the folds, which can be compressed or expanded.

Timothy's concertina-like perception of time occurs soon after he suffers a stroke, when he feels that everything is "topsy-turvy" (370) and that he has lost the ability to see his life-story as a linear sequence – as an arrow. However, Timothy is reminded of Margo Roker, a comatose character in "Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery", which he was reading before the attack, because of the similarities with his own situation. Therefore, the image of the concertina should be interpreted metafictionally, as setting out a protocol of reading. Instead of looking for chains of causality and for clues which may foreshadow the conclusion(s), the repetitive patterns of the bellows signal that we must pay attention to the interconnections between the six narratives. While the stories are sequential, in order to grasp the novel's anti-apocalyptic message, we should consider them as if they were running in parallel, each influencing our understanding of the other and, in turn, of the present world. The very title of the novel refers, on the one hand, to Zachry's notion that "Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies" (324), which emphasizes the links between the chapters, and, on the other, to Robert's final composition. The structure of this sextet is a clear allusion to the structure of *Cloud Atlas* itself (463), an element gesturing to the importance of music in the theorization of the book.

The birthmark is one of the most important instances of the narrative recurrences, and provides us with an "atlas" for finding a plot beyond the individual stories. Since characters

often experience impossible analepses, it may be tempting to interpret the motif as indicating the reincarnation of the same soul throughout the centuries. Yet this possibility "is not particularly explored or validated within the novel" (Hopf 109). Rather, Timothy metafictionally dismisses "the insinuation that Luisa Rey is this Robert Frobisher chap reincarnated" as "Far too hippie-druggy-new age" (373). Furthermore, Timothy and Luisa, though they both have the birthmark, cannot be the same soul, for they were born around the same time – not to mention the fact that Luisa may just be a fictional character invented by Hilary V. Hush and, hence, not on the same ontological level as Timothy. The birthmark is instead a symbol, in the etymological sense of throwing something together (from the Greek *syn* and *ballein*), as it unifies the different strands of the novel. It embodies the concertina-like parallels between the narratives, pointing at how readers should interpret the book and replicating their experience at the diegetic level. Indeed, the source of the characters' "uncanny moments of recognition" is not reincarnation but "The act of reading" (Hopf 108). The birthmark signifies that the characters remember something they have read in what is for us another part of *Cloud Atlas* and we are encouraged to follow the motif and go beyond it, looking for other possible connections. The shape of the birthmark is revealing as well: the orbits of the comets make them recurrent phenomena, an element which corresponds to the repetitive patterns the device points to, while the tradition which sees these celestial bodies as omens of disaster hints at the apocalypse looming over the novel.

The birthmark engenders a sense of spatiotemporal compression and extension that can be pictured through the contraction and expansion of concertina folds and encapsulates the way in which the teleology of apocalyptic/narrative logic is warped and subverted in the book.[18] Since in each section one of the characters is connected with the other stories, every instant in *Cloud Atlas* has the potential either to contract upon itself, back to past chapters, or to expand beyond itself, towards the future narratives. The concertina indicates how the

moments of *Cloud Atlas* do not yield to the arrow and to the deterministic sense of an ending, but are "elastic", with "ends . . . disappear[ing] into the past and the future" (448) and into the other chapters. As argued, Mitchell invites us to read for parallels – the repetitive patterns of the folds – and not for elements foreshadowing the end. The movements of expansion and contraction also explain the disorientation produced by the fact that, while Adam's sections are, in terms of their position, the frame of the novel, it is Zachry's chapter which contains all the others. Drawing on Isaac's "*model of time: an infinite matrioshka doll of painted moments*" (409; emphasis in original), critics, and even Mitchell himself ("Genesis"), often describe the embedding in *Cloud Atlas* as a Russian doll. However, this structure "implies a process of framing, or mothering, in which each successive segment is contained within the previous segments[,] . . . . precisely the opposite of what actually happens", at least in the first half (McMorran 163). Folds, instead, by definition complicate the internal/external opposition, since what was once outside becomes inside, thus making the concertina a more accurate model of the novel's structure.

In addition to the birthmark, the most notable recurrence in the narratives is that of the will to power. If we take the two endpieces of the musical instrument to stand for the beginning and the conclusion of *Cloud Atlas*, the concertina as a model of the novel's structure suggests that what goes on between these sections is not the repetition of the same, as in eternal recurrence, but repetition with difference. The pleated bellows are all identical, yet the flow of air generated by their expansion and contraction causes specific reeds to vibrate when the buttons are pressed. Thus the player, i.e. Mitchell, can produce different sounds, namely, various articulations of the will to power. Together with the structure, this pattern of predatory behavior has been the protagonist of critical analyses (Mezey; Dunlop) that emphasize *Cloud Atlas*'s associations between will to power, colonialism, and global capital. The following section adds a previously unnoticed element to these interconnections,

apocalyptic discourse, arguing that the predatory pattern makes tangible the dystopian implications of the modern and apocalyptic conception of history. Not only does the pattern warp the apocalyptic metanarrative of progress, showing that "we share the predatory and cannibalistic impulses of earlier individuals" (Mezey 24), but what recurs in *Cloud Atlas* is the will to power as legitimized in all its greed and brutality by an apocalyptic understanding of history.

Debunking Power's Apocalyptic "Landscaping"

By subverting the determinism of apocalyptic and narrative teleology, *Cloud Atlas*'s structure reinforces a content which debunks the end as a construct of the will to power, a threat to individual agency and freedom. In "Half-lives" Isaac theorizes history as a dialectic between actual and virtual past (408-9). His words recall Jean Baudrillard's argument that, in our age of simulation, there is a "*precession of simulacra*": representations come to precede what they represent, engendering "a real without origin or reality; a hyperreal" (1-3). Although Isaac does not seem to concur with Baudrillard in proclaiming the liquidation of the real *tout court* – after all, he still speaks of an actual past, though this is inaccessible – he does subscribe to a "historiographical hyperreality", namely, that "we know [historical reality] only in and by its representations" (Ankersmit 190-1). In Isaac's terms, the representations of the virtual past "*gro*[w] *ever 'truer'*" than the actual past, to the extent that this itself becomes a "*simulacrum of smoke, mirrors + shadows*" (408-9; emphasis in original). In a truly postmodern fashion, what this theory foregrounds is that there is no history but only histories. *Cloud Atlas* emphasizes this point by featuring "historical" narratives whose constructedness, consonantly with historiographic metafictions, is continuously underscored through Mitchell's play with different genres – from travelogue, to epistolary narrative, to thriller and

memoir.[19] But while *Cloud Atlas*'s virtual pasts flaunt their own textuality, historical simulacra, Isaac warns us, often partake in what Baudrillard terms a "strategy of the real", for power seeks to "restore the truth beneath the simulacrum" (27). As Isaac explains, "*The present presses the virtual past into its own service, to lend credence to its mythologies + legitimacy to the imposition of will. Power seeks + is the right to 'landscape' the virtual past*" (408-9; emphasis in original). In other words, the will to power aims at determining which virtual past is to be held as "true", which narrative is to become a metanarrative.

Isaac notes that "*Symmetry demands an actual + virtual future*", that is, the will to power also "landscapes" the virtual future as an act of self-legitimization, for consonantly with Baudrillard's precession of simulacra, "*the virtual future may influence the actual future*" (409; emphasis in original). In accord with Quinby's anti-apocalyptic critique, the concertina-like pattern of predatory behavior exposes the apocalyptic metanarrative as a technology of power/knowledge which "landscapes" history as tending towards an ultimate state of perfection, in order to justify oppressions and preserve the status quo. This is particularly evident in the opening and closing phase of the book's negative teleology, "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing" and "An Orison of Sonmi-451", where the will to power fabricates narratives about an apocalyptic utopian telos, in order to legitimize the exploitations of nineteenth-century colonialism and a future corporate post-human slavery, as well as to conceal anthropogenic environmental disasters.

In a sermon reported in Adam's journal, preacher Horrox claims that "[i]t is Progress that leads Humanity up the ladder towards the God-Head" (506). Horrox's "Civilization's Ladder", however, is a racist order, where the race on the highest step, the Anglo-Saxon, rules over those on the lower. The sermon is a patent instance of the "civilising mission" (Nayar 36-9), a discourse legitimizing colonialism through assumptions of racial, cultural, and ethical superiority. Yet the sermon is not only a critique of this discourse, but also of

progress *qua* apocalyptic metanarrative. The reference to the "God-Head" suggests a teleology inherent in history and the preacher's final remarks are reminiscent of the utopian end of the New Jerusalem, since catastrophic events are followed by the questionable eternal bliss of a "glorious order . . . when all races shall know &, aye, embrace, their place in God's ladder of civilization" (507). In Isaac's terms, Horrox's teleology is a way of apocalyptically "landscaping" the future in order to justify colonialism, keep the native population submissive and conceal the fact that "rapacity . . . powers [the white man's] Progress" (509). *Cloud Atlas* underscores that the will to power is often the ugly truth behind the simulacrum of progress and posits an exploitative apocalypticism at the heart of the civilization whose development the novel depicts – a civilization that closely resembles our own up to Timothy's story.

In the recurring pattern of the concertina folds, apocalyptic teleology is deployed to legitimize the neo-colonial oppression of the post-human Other by the regime of "An Orison", which constitutes Mitchell's extrapolation from present trends, signaling concerns over the rising power – especially biopower – of corporations under global capitalism and the system's staggering inequalities. One finds similar themes in other post-apocalyptic fictions, such as the *MaddAddam* trilogy, where corporations rule over an extremely stratified world and lead to the apocalypse through reckless genetic experimentations, and *The Stone Gods*, where MORE corporation controls a dying world and signifies through its name the dangers of the unquenchable apocalyptic drive towards progress. As the neologism *corpocracy* underlines, Nea So Copros, *Cloud Atlas*'s future Korea, is ruled by a disturbing conflation of state and corporate power, a conflation whose infancy the novel traces back to the beginning of neoliberalism in the 1970s through the depiction of Seaboard's abuses. Echoing the Latin *corpus* (body), corpocracy also encapsulates the corporations' biopower, for the "state Pyramid" (342), a variation of Horrox's ladder, is based on a race deemed inferior and

designed to perform menial jobs. Like Horrox's Polynesians, who "pa[y] for the benefits of Progress" (510), the fabricants are told that they are working to "repay the Investment" which brought them into being, before being released at Xultation (190).

Xultation is seemingly the millennium of the subaltern and appears to conform to the liberationist reading of the apocalyptic paradigm, establishing a utopian teleology at the core of the clones' sense of time. In effect, recalling Isaac's reflections, Xultation is a simulacrum created by the will to power. The fabricants are repeatedly shown footage of their "sisters" becoming "busy, well-dressed consumers" – what human beings are called in this hyper-capitalist society – and leaving for Hawaii, their materialistic New Jerusalem (190). These representations, though, do not make reference to an external reality; rather, they generate a Baudrillardian hyperreal, and their medium – 3D film – emphasizes their power of simulation. The simulacrum of Xultation engenders a virtual future telos which affects the clones' actual future by keeping them submissive and depriving them of their agency. Once again, apocalyptic discourse is exposed as what covers up, rather than as what reveals, oppressions, since Xultation is an end devoid of any utopian dimension.

In the Golden Ark which is supposed to take them to Hawaii, the fabricants are slaughtered to be fed to their own species and human beings (357-60). The ark, a religious symbol of deliverance, becomes deadly and, to illustrate this anti-apocalyptic reversal in the nature of teleology, Mitchell draws attention to the inexorable linearity of the process which prepares the fabricants for their alleged journey. At first, Sonmi "envie[s] their certainty about the future". She then realizes that the very faith in a virtual utopian telos condemns the clones to an actual horrible death without leaving them any space for rebellion, a realization which foregrounds the dangers of apocalyptic determinism. Soon after Sonmi observes that "the only direction [i]s onwards", Xultation is revealed to be a dystopian "slaughterhouse production line" (357-9). The repetitive actions of the latter expose the simulations of

progress, a linear metanarrative concealing the iterated exploitations framed by the concertina folds, as well as consumerism's auto-cannibalistic loop. A production line, after all, is made of conveyor belt systems which continuously feed, so to speak, on themselves.

Firmly rooted in the present conjuncture, in which ecological concerns are becoming more and more pressing, *Cloud Atlas* reflects the trajectory traced by Keller, who argues that the colonial "objectification of the apocalyptic millennium future" in a territory to be conquered leads to "the construction of Nature as the new and ultimate 'other', the recipient of the messianic aggressions of Progress" (141, 165). These aggressions, "An Orison" shows, risk culminating in the eco-apocalypse of consumer society. Nea So Copros is surrounded by the tangible result of overdevelopment: "deadlands" cover most areas of Sonmi's world and are inexorably advancing. Indeed, the mention of a "Californian boat-people solution" (224) suggests the collapse of the United States and of western dominance more broadly. This is a trope which recurs in the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel, signaling not only the end of the current neoliberal and global capitalistic order but also a further aspect of the texts' anti-apocalyptic critique. The links between the United States and apocalypticism are profound, for "The idea of a messianic saviour, which was at the core of early Christianity, became the idea of a Redeemer Nation" (Gray 112) expressed in the ideologies of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny. Many post-apocalyptic fictions thus depict the demise of the nation and its apocalyptic ideologies – from *The Pesthouse*, in which the migration of Manifest Destiny is inverted, to *The Road*, where the wasteland subverts the trope of the New World as a bountiful territory, and *Zone One*, where the operation American Phoenix deploys exceptionalist apocalyptic rhetoric but is later revealed to be a mere publicity stunt. Similarly, corpocracy conceals the impending eco-catastrophe by "landscaping" itself as the culmination of a progressive history: "the most stable state Pyramid in the history of civilization" (342). On the one hand, an apocalyptic

conception of history serves, once more, to preserve the status quo and, by blinding people to the approaching end, deterministically condemns them. On the other, the transhistorical dimension of *Cloud Atlas* indicates how it is the unquenchable will to power behind the apocalyptic "landscaping" of progress which is driving this civilization – and our own, Mitchell's extrapolation indicates – towards environmental demise. *Cloud Atlas*, together with Mitchell's other post-apocalyptic novel, *The Bone Clocks*, is an Anthropocene text that explores the devastating human impact on the environment by "creat[ing] a feeling for the deep past of the species" (Harris 14) through the various periods the narrative straddles.[20]

Whilst Horrox's sermon and Xultation are exposed as simulacra of a virtual future the will to power fabricates according to the utopian teleology of the traditional apocalyptic paradigm, the two narratives are also part of a novel which "landscapes" the anti-apocalyptic virtual futures of "An Orison" and, more importantly, "Sloosha's Crossin'". Through these sections, in which the end is a dystopian catastrophe caused by predatory apocalyptic logic, Mitchell seeks to debunk the apocalyptic metanarrative and positively shape the actual future, all the while respecting the latter's radical openness. As Luisa's neighbor, Javier, ponders, "If you could *see* the future, like you can see the end of 16th Street from the top of Kilroy's department store, that means it's already there. If it's already there, that means it isn't a thing you can change" (418; emphasis in original). Through its anti-deterministic structure, *Cloud Atlas* suggests that "the end of 16th Street", be it a metaphor for the telos of apocalyptic history or for the chronological conclusion of the book, is not "already there". Rather, the novel's structural resistance to teleology exalts the individual's agency to inform the course of history and, therefore, avert the catastrophe in the readers' actual future. If "*the answer* [to whether the future can be altered or not] *is not a function of metaphysics, but one, simply of power*" (418; emphasis in original), the power of narrative to imagine anti-apocalyptic virtual futures and call the readers to action is what Mitchell pits against the will to power and its

apocalyptic simulacra. As Zachry points out, in a concertina-like parallel with Isaac's theory, "pretendin' can bend bein'" (297) – for the worst, but also for the best.

Sonmi's testimony, archived in the orison, can be seen as a symbol of the book as a whole and of *Cloud Atlas*'s anti-apocalyptic message. Sonmi's testimony revolves around the dystopian dangers of apocalyptic determinism. She appears to embody the revolutionary and utopian possibilities of the apocalyptic paradigm, as she becomes the "Messiah of the fabricants" (346), the central actor in what is seemingly an uprising against corpocracy, preparing for a "briter tomorrow" (343). However, in this case too, the revolutionary and utopian possibilities of apocalyptic discourse are just pre-determined simulacra produced by the will to power in order to pass even more coercive laws. Yet, referring to the meaning of *orison*, Jonathan Boulter notes that the object functions "as a prayer to the future" (135). From "Sloosha's Crossin'" we know that, chronologically, Sonmi's prayer for a world beyond predatory apocalypticism is not enough to prevent the catastrophe from happening. Thanks to the concertina structure, though, the effects of the fabricant's story are not written once and for all and it is as if her appeal is heard by the other characters, in particular by Adam, who pledges himself to Abolitionism. More importantly, her testimony "confers upon [readers] a burden, the burden of responsibility" (Boulter 137). At the conclusion of "Sloosha's Crossin'", Zachry's son invites readers to "Sit down a beat or two" (325) while Sonmi tells her story through the orison. Mitchell thus directly asks readers to reflect upon the fabricant's anti-apocalyptic appeal and to take responsibility for their own civilization, in order to avoid *Cloud Atlas*'s dire virtual futures. Indeed, the passage leads to the second half of the novel and, hence, encourages readers to "believe", as Adam continues to repeat in the conclusion (528), in the narrative boomerang, namely, in the possibility of a different world from the one culminating in the apocalypse.

Beyond the Sense of an Ending?

Adam's final words exalt the power of individual agency against determinism and the predatory civilization apocalypticism supports. "[A]ny ocean [is] but a multitude of drops" (529), and thus any life, although a mere drop, can make a difference – a point that becomes all the more relevant in the current globalized context, to which the novel's transnational stories allude, where localized individual action may seem ineffective against decentered networks of power.[21] After all, the image of the ocean, combined with the concertina structure, suggests that these individual acts of resistance can come together, transhistorically and transnationally, to amount for more than localized effects. To Adam, "history admits no rules; only outcomes", that is, he rejects the way in which the apocalyptic metanarrative, by discerning a pattern in history, pre-empts any attempt to alter the course of events. The fundamental notion is, instead, that of belief, which narrative can inform. Since "a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself", as the arrow of the first half demonstrates, the key is not to believe that this "entropy [is] written within our nature" and succumb to the passivity fostered by apocalyptic determinism. Rather, we must "*believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, . . . *believe* [that] diverse races & creeds can share this world . . . *believe* leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & its Oceans shared equitably" (528; emphasis in original) – a repetition which is in stark contrast to the pattern of predatory behaviour and encourages the readers' active resistance to the pattern itself.

What are we to make, though, of the fact that "The Pacific Journal" is set in the nineteenth century and that the world Adam wishes for has not come true, either in the fictional world of the novel or in the readers' world? Arguably, this element contributes to Mitchell's subversion of apocalyptic and narrative determinism, for it is an instance of "sideshadowing", which draws "attention to the unfulfilled or unrealized possibilities of the

past [a]s a way of disrupting the affirmations of a triumphalist, unidirectional view of history" (Bernstein 3). Nevertheless, by positing that "if we *believe* [in a better world] . . . such a world will come to pass" (528; emphasis in original), Adam reconstructs history in terms of apocalyptic teleology, gesturing to the double bind inherent in anti-apocalyptic critiques, namely, the fact that anti-apocalypses end up mirroring apocalyptic logic.

On the one hand, although there is no revelation of a utopian renewal *per se*, the anti-apocalyptic end of contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction still serves as a site of revelation: that of the truth about apocalyptic logic, its pervasiveness and dystopian potential. As Jacques Derrida remarks, in denunciations of apocalyptic discourse, "The structure of truth . . . would [still] be apocalyptic" (53). On the other hand, as emphasized by Adam's words, if anti-apocalypse is to go beyond a merely destructive critique, it ends up replicating the apocalyptic hopes for a utopian new beginning, even though this new beginning is about the overcoming of apocalyptic discourse itself. As Derrida puts it, "whoever would come to refine, to say the finally final, namely the end of the end, the end of ends, . . . that person would, whether wanting to or not, participate in the concert [of the apocalyptic tone]" (48-9). It it is therefore necessary to recognise the double bind that "we are *in* apocalypse: we are in it as a script" (Keller 12; emphasis in original) even when we seek to subvert it, since the apocalyptic paradigm is capable both of critical and reactionary impulses. Thus, fictions like *The Book of Dave* or *The Island at the End of the World* turn to the parody of biblical apocalyptic tropes to foreground this double bind and deconstruct apocalyptic logic from within. To continue with Derrida's musical metaphor, it is no chance that, when discussing his "Cloud Atlas" sextet, Robert comments that its final note is a "Violin note, misplayed, hideously" (479). *Cloud Atlas*'s final note – Adam's words – is misplayed in that, by reinscribing a utopian teleology to history, the conclusion of this anti-apocalyptic novel

participates in the concert of the apocalyptic tone, signalling the double bind at the core of the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel.

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[1] Examples include: Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), Edan Lepucki's *California* (2014), Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), Margaret Atwood's trilogy – *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013) – Douglas Coupland's *Player One* (2010), Sam Taylor's *The Island at*

the End of the World (2009), Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse* (2007), Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007), Will Self's *The Book of Dave* (2006), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* (2005), Doris Lessing's *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* (1999) and *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* (2005), John Updike's *Toward the End of Time* (1997).

[2] Contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives feature varying degrees of dystopian scenarios: from *The Road*, where human survival appears to be highly unlikely, to *The Pesthouse*, where the tone is far more optimistic. Yet even in cases like the latter, readers do not find the utopian renewal which is so central to the traditional apocalyptic paradigm. In *The Pesthouse*, for instance, the apocalypse has made civilisation revert to a more primitive state, and the result is hardly a pastoral utopia, so much so that people wish to emigrate from post-apocalyptic America. For a more detailed discussion of *The Pesthouse*'s post-apocalyptic scenario see De Cristofaro.

[3] The notion of anti-apocalypse derives from Lee Quinby's critique of apocalyptic logic. My use of the term, however, places the emphasis on the temporal aspects of this critique.

[4] To take the example of the Book of Revelation, "th[is] archetypal apocalypse in literary history . . . [was w]ritten some time during the reign of Roman Emperor Domitian (81-96 C.E.), who had persecuted Christians and confined the author of the book to a labor camp on the island of Patmos, so that the Apocalypse of John bears the marks of its provenance in crisis and suffering" (Hamerton-Kelly 12).

[5] See for instance Mizruchi, who reads *The Road* through risk theory.

[6] Henceforth, unless otherwise stated, *apocalyptic* and *apocalypticism* refer to the traditional paradigm, whereas *apocalypse* is deployed in its contemporary sense of catastrophe. This semantic alternation frames the shift I theorise in this article: from apocalypse to anti-apocalypse.

[7] Cf. also M.H. Abrams "the prototype of the Western concept that history has an intelligible and end-determined order, whether fideistic or naturalistic, is the scheme of the course of earthly affairs from genesis to apocalypse which is underwritten by a sacred text" (344).

[8] Cf. Heffernan "the prominent and interconnected Enlightenment narratives . . . continue to be secured by the spirit of the Christian apocalypse, a narrative that posits an origin and moves definitely, through a series of coherent and concordant events, towards an end that will make sense of all that has come before it" (8).

[9] In this sense, as Ernst Bloch demonstrates, the western revolutionary tradition – Marxism included – is profoundly indebted to apocalyptic utopian teleology.

[10] For an argument against narratives being essentially defined by the sense of an ending, see, for instance, Miller.

[11] Examples include Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1966), where the author invites readers to "hopscotch" through the text, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant Woman* (1969), with its footnotes and multiple endings, and Salman Rushdie's looping narrative in *Midnight Children* (1981)

[12] Examples of historiographic metafictions, in addition to the already mentioned *The French Lieutenant Woman* and *Midnight Children*, are Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), D.M. Thomas' *The White Hotel* (1981), and Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983).

[13] Hardly by chance, some writers of contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction have interrogated the nature of history in other texts – for instance, Mitchell's *The Thousands Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010), McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000), and Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) – but arguably, given the imbrication of the western conception of history with apocalypticism, it is in their post-apocalyptic novels that history, as a narrative, is deconstructed more fully.

[14] To my knowledge, Patrick O'Donnell is the only critic who mentions "The notion of time as elastic or as a concertina' as a way of capturing 'the experiences registered in the novel" (97). O'Donnell, however, does not connect the concertina to the novel's anti-apocalyptic critical temporality.

[15] The trope of reincarnation and the echoes between the narratives are examined later in the section.

[16] All further references to *Cloud Atlas*'s UK edition in parentheses. I specify "UK edition" following Martin Paul Eve's article, which has pointed out textual variants between the UK and US editions, especially in the section "An Orison of Sonmi-451".

[17] The apocalyptic tone devoid of any utopian element recurs in Mitchell's writings. The ninth chapter of *Ghostwritten* (1999) closes on a comet fast approaching Earth; the last words of *number9dream* (2001) refer to a major earthquake in Tokyo, a disaster made even more apocalyptic in its devastation by the following empty chapter; *Black Swan Green* (2006), set during the Cold War, is pervaded by anxieties about a nuclear apocalypse. The only partial exception is *The Bone Clocks* (2014), where, amidst the dystopian devastation of the "Endarkment", Iceland, for which Lorelei and Rafiq depart at the end of the book, appears to be a safe enough haven. However, the dystopian apocalyptic tone is most extensively explored in *Cloud Atlas*, since the association of the post-apocalyptic section with the text's structure produces a fully articulated anti-apocalyptic critique.

[18] Cf. Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963), which similarly critiques metanarratives through the image of folds: "Perhaps history this century . . . is rippled with gathers in its fabric such that if we are situated, as Stencil seemed to be, at the bottom of a fold, it's impossible to determine warp, woof, or pattern anywhere else. . . . We are accordingly lost to any sense of continuous tradition" (141).

[19] See also Machinal: "on the one hand, each narrator becomes a fictitious character in the narrative that follows his or her own, and, on the other, the fictive reality we have taken for granted in each narrative is questioned in the next" (131).

[20] The same can be argued for *The Stone Gods* and *Toward the End of Time* because of their exploration of different timeframes.

[21] For a discussion of this tension see Archibugi, Held, Köhler.