

‘Getting Constructively Lost:’ Narratives of Escapism in Contemporary American Fiction

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Mattia Ravasi

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Abstract

The subject of this thesis is self-conscious escapism in a selection of contemporary American novels, chief among them works by Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem, Thomas Pynchon, Junot Díaz and Jennifer Egan. I explore the ways in which these texts interrogate the consequences of the act of escape into fictional worlds, exposing its dangers – among them social isolation and ontological confusion about one's relation to the written or unwritten world – while also considering its benefits, including relief from trauma, a sense of communal belonging, and insight into historical and social phenomena. Challenging established assumptions about escapism and escapist fiction, I argue that the core texts of this thesis represent escapism as an aesthetically legitimate pursuit, with complex philosophical and political implications.

The thesis' first chapter offers close readings of these core texts' staging of escapism as an alternately redemptive and damning pursuit. It also situates the text's re-evaluation of escapist fiction within broader discussions on the cultural and aesthetic value of popular narratives.

The second chapter reflects on the significance of these texts' reliance on an explicit form of intertextuality, central to their conception of literary influence, and to the way they represent popular fiction as a source of communal belonging with the potential to transcend barriers of ethnicity and social status.

Finally, the third chapter focuses on a narrative strategy I define as generic contagion, by means of which many of my core texts represent the process by which characters become so addicted to fiction they are no longer able to distinguish it from reality.

I conclude by situating my core texts in the broader contemporary landscape, arguing that their exploration of the dynamics of escapism casts new light on and deepens

our understanding of the function and the implications of our engagement with fiction.

Declaration of Original Authorship

Declaration: I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

Mattia Ravasi, November 2nd, 2019

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Introduction

The subject of this thesis is self-conscious escapism in a selection of contemporary American novels. The texts I am going to analyse variously stage the process of narrative escapism, through which readers and consumers of books, comic books and other media can become detached from their everyday lives and concerns through immersion in fictional narratives. By staging this process, these novels interrogate the act of escape and its consequences, exploring its potential dangers – among them social isolation and ontological confusion about one's relation to the written or unwritten world¹ – but also considering its potential benefits, including relief from trauma, the pleasure associated with a sense of closure, a sense of communal belonging, and insight into the most disparate historical and social phenomena. These texts challenge established assumptions about escapism and escapist fiction, and represent escapism as an aesthetically legitimate pursuit, with significant philosophical and political implications.

What I propose to do in my thesis is to map the dynamics and manifestations of self-conscious escapism within a range of contemporary American fiction. I will highlight the way these texts' discussion of escapism is connected with their call for a re-evaluation of genre and popular fiction, and at the same time allows them to engage with many of the central debates of literary criticism, including questions of influence, intertextuality, and the nature of narrative immersion.

Self-conscious escapism is closely related to metafiction. In her seminal study

¹ I shall borrow these terms, very useful in making such a fundamental distinction, from Philip Roth – who borrowed them from Paul Goodman – since 'everyone can think through readily enough to the clear-cut differences between the two' (ix).

Metafiction (1984), Patricia Waugh argues that 'metafiction is not so much a subgenre of the novel as a tendency *within* the novel which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels' (14). Two aspects of this definition are especially relevant to my discussion of self-conscious escapism: first, the idea that the subject of this thesis is not a subgenre, but a *tendency*. I do not suggest that my core texts constitute a specific category of fiction, let alone a genre: their existence in what Michael Chabon calls 'the no man's land' of fiction (*Maps and Legends* 13), and as such *between* genres, is in fact inextricably bound to their form and concerns. Instead, I argue that these texts share common structural features and thematic interests, and that these textual characteristics can be understood all the more clearly in a comparative study. Second, Waugh argues that metafiction relates to features that are universal in literature: the same can be said of self-conscious escapism. Just as narrative escape is, paradoxically, an inescapable process – as I will argue later – so any fiction that features stories-within-stories, or characters immersed in narrative escapism, will reflect more or less overtly on this process. The difference is one of intensity: my core texts 'exaggerate,' to use Waugh's terms, these concerns, often turning them into key points of their plots, or extended thematic reflections. The characters in these texts become so obsessed with the vehicles of their escape they often forget precisely where the boundaries of their world begin, resulting in a peculiar form of metalepsis I define as generic contagion.

Indeed, self-conscious escapism can be conceived of as a *variant form* of metafiction, in itself a tendency discussed in different terms by various critics and on whose nature there is no absolute consensus. My position regarding self-conscious escapism will be to treat it as belonging to the metafictional spectrum described by Waugh, and more precisely to the side where novels 'take fictionality as a theme to be explored,'

while also showing occasional signs of that 'formal and ontological insecurity' (19) – for instance in the works of Mark Danielewski – that pertains to more experimental works. Indeed, a crucial feature of self-conscious escapism that I will explore in the course of this thesis is the way in which, rather than constituting a genre, it challenges generic assumptions about the texts that exhibit it.

But what exactly qualifies a text as showing self-consciously escapist tendencies? In order to arrive at a working definition, it is helpful to identify what unadulterated escapism looks like. A relatively unequivocal instance of pure escapism in contemporary American fiction is Ernest Cline's science fictional novel *Armada* (2015), in which a young man who is obsessed with video games discovers that he has been secretly trained, through participating in these games, to save Earth from an alien invasion. The wish-fulfilling potential of the text is clear: turning an apparently inconsequential hobby into a noble pursuit, crucial to the survival of the human race. 'All those years I spent playing videogames weren't wasted after all, eh?' *Armada's* protagonist says to his mother (259). His personality exhibits no nuances that might complicate the process of wish-fulfilment: his main flaw is that he is too zealous in protecting his friends from bullies. Similarly, there is no serious questioning in the novel of the methodology and ideology of the secret and belligerent military organisation that recruits the protagonist. Love and glory are achieved in the course of the narrative, and the protagonist's military prowess is complemented, in the novel's conclusion, by wisdom sufficient to put an end to the conflict. The escape process is thus uncomplicated, unapologetic.² For a historical

² It is instructive to compare *Armada* to Cline's previous novel, *Ready Player One* (2011), in which the pure escapism of the text is mitigated through a protagonist more flawed and three-dimensional than *Armada's*, and which features a final reflection on the need to put an end, under certain conditions, to

precedent of pure escapism of this sort, one might turn to any of the nineteenth-century love stories George Eliot rails against in her essay 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,' narratives peopled by unlikely heroines 'with perhaps a vicious baronet, an amiable duke, and an irresistible younger son of a marquis as lovers in the foreground, a clergyman and a poet sighing for her in the middle distance, and a crowd of undefined adorers dimly indicated beyond' (178). A distinctive feature of unbounded escapism emerges from this list: the idea that it is represented through characters who become mere vehicles of wish-fulfilment, rather than complex individuals in their own right.

Just as with pure escapism, it is possible to identify within the literary spectrum novels that stage the process of escapism within their diegesis in order to critique it, usually in the form of 'cautionary tales' against the dangers of unchecked escapism. The most celebrated instance in contemporary American fiction may be David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), featuring a movie so powerfully escapist that whoever watches it is unable ever to stop, until they eventually die. Although it often flirts with pure escapism and contains numerous action-packed subplots, *Infinite Jest* ultimately frustrates rather than fulfils the possibility of escape, representing the seductive narcotic allure of entertainment as imprisoning rather than liberating. Its extensive warnings against escapism (into entertainment, sports and drugs, most notably), and against the solipsism that these escapes engender, further reinforce its thematic concerns. Perhaps the best historical instance of this type of fictional text is Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), whose heroine is so obsessed with romance novels she mistakenly believes her own life might follow their template, until she is abandoned by her lover, who turns out to be very

unbound escapism. For an overview of the two novels, and of their respective reception and cultural resonance, see Constance Grady's 'The *Ready Player One* Backlash, Explained.'

different from the heroes she read about, no doubt in novels of the sort decried by George Eliot. Her eventual suicide does not give her the tragic demise she imagined, but a slow and agonising death.

Where does self-conscious escapism fall between these two extremes? Texts that exhibit this tendency provide critiques of escapism similar to those in *Infinite Jest* or *Madame Bovary*; while at the same time offering detailed apologias for escapism. Self-consciously escapist texts tend to be more bittersweet than their purely escapist counterparts, and more ambivalent. Their characters reach enlightenment, or heal from their traumas, thanks to the escapist fictions they hold dear; and we have seen in the case of *Armada* how it is the supreme form of wish-fulfilment to see that one's escapist hobbies, far from being a waste of time, constitute a noble and necessary pursuit. Yet this self-congratulation is never present in my core texts, whose characters invariably sacrifice something valuable in the process of pursuing their escape; in some cases, their own lives. Self-conscious escapism highlights both the benefits and costs of escapism, which is represented, with profound ambivalence, as both a blessing and a curse. The most canonical historical example of a self-consciously escapist text is *Don Quixote* (1615), which follows the adventures of a Spanish nobleman who has convinced himself he is a knight from a romance tale. The self-proclaimed knight, in the course of his adventures, occasionally comes to appear saner than the people living in the 'real' world around him; but the shock of having his dream shattered is so strong it eventually leads to his death. As the fictionalised Paul Auster reflects in the novella 'City of Glass,' *Don Quixote* betrays its writer's passion for knightly romances at the same time as it denounces them (Auster 98). A less tragic, but equally powerful, example of this tendency is Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), which is a cautionary tale against the risk of seeing the world in terms of the

dynamics and plot patterns of escapist fiction, but also – in common with my core texts – a homage to the very genre it parodies. While Catherine Morland is so enthused by her love of Gothic novels she comes to believe, erroneously, that the father of her suitor, Henry Tilney, may be a murderer, she is still right in recognising – thanks in part to her obsession – his ruthless and manipulative nature.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to pass aesthetic or critical judgement on any of the above categories and tendencies, or to suggest that any is artistically superior to the others. As John G. Cawelti argues convincingly, while we usually ascribe superior artistic value to original/literary narratives over genre/formula fiction, there is a specific artistry to formula fiction that should not be underestimated (8). Nor are the examples I have cited rigidly fixed in one category: I see how it would be possible, for instance, to provide a reading of *Infinite Jest* as self-conscious escapist fiction; or to say that *Don Quixote*, with its tragic final pages, is more of a cautionary tale *against* escapism than a text exhibiting self-consciously escapist tendencies. Michael Chabon's *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* (1988) reflects on how certain readers, for instance, curiously fail to identify the cautionary tale at the heart of *Madame Bovary*, and instead revere its flawed protagonist, thus reading the book as pure escapism (97).

In light of these distinctions, the core texts of my dissertation will be Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), *Telegraph Avenue* (2012), and *Moonglow* (2016); Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2001); Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007); Jennifer Egan's *The Keep* (2006); Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003); and Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006) and *Bleeding Edge* (2013).

In the course of my thesis I will analyse these texts in a number of different

contexts, demarcated by chapters. In the first chapter, I will explore the ways in which they represent ideas of escapism and escapist fictions in terms of their redemptive possibilities and potential dangers, moving beyond and subverting simplistic views of escapism as unethical. In the second chapter, I will explore the ways these texts contextualise and stage the dynamics of escapism through intertextuality, situating themselves inside vast intertextual webs, at the heart of a literary continuum with profound implications for notions of literary influence. I will also explore how some of these texts employ this intertextual dimension to promote the idea of popular entertainment as the potential source of a renewed idea of community.

Finally, in the third chapter, I will explore the way these texts further problematise the process of narrative escape through a device I term 'generic contagion,' a peculiar form of metalepsis in which narrative immersion leads characters to a state of confusion concerning the boundary between the written and unwritten worlds. Julio Cortazar's 'Continuity of Parks' offers a textbook example of metalepsis: its protagonist is reading a book, and, in the story's final sentence, is assassinated by a character from the story he was reading. With generic contagion, it is not a single character but an entire world that is transported from the metadiegetic to the diegetic sphere; and since we are talking about *textual* worlds, they carry with them generic conventions that inevitably operate *contextually*. Jonathan Culler argues that generic conventions 'establish a contract between writer and reader so as to make certain relevant expectations operative, and thus to permit both compliance with and deviation from accepted modes of intelligibility' (*Structuralist Poetics* 147); or, to use Umberto Eco's aphoristic maxim from *The Role of the Reader* (1979), 'no text is read independently of the reader's experience of other texts' (21). The presence of aliens, monsters and supernatural elements will suggest that a narrative may

fall into a specific genre, like science fiction, fantasy, the Gothic novel, etc.; and these genres bring with them specific expectations: say, that supernatural elements be either acknowledged as inexplicable, or explicated through a rational framework. As a consequence, when such textual worlds are inserted in a different narrative – most usually, in my core texts, inside a realist narrative, be it the story of a youth, an immigrant saga, etc. – their different expectations clash too. The broader implications of this clash, and of generic contagion, are interconnected in crucial ways to several other features of my core texts, including their generic uncertainties and their intertextual webs. Moreover, the way in which generic contagion blurs the boundaries between diegetic and metadiegetic worlds has interesting parallels to instances of such confusion in the unwritten world, such as the Slender Man phenomenon, which I will also discuss.

I have defined self-conscious escapism not as a genre but as a *tendency* that one can find across texts. As such, while the texts listed above are those that I believe best exemplify this tendency, I also locate instances of it in several other American texts from the last three decades. Consequently, I will occasionally refer, in the course of my thesis, to additional primary sources, such as Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1994) and Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* (2016). These other texts may be said to 'orbit' around my core texts for the purpose of this thesis, shedding interesting light on them and providing a broader context for my discussion. I will also refer to texts *engendered* by my core texts, for instance to the Escapist comic books published by Dark Horse Press and explicitly modelled on the superhero created by Michael Chabon in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. These 'engendered texts' are helpful in terms of extending my discussion of intertextuality, and of the way my core texts employ it to problematise neat distinctions between the written and unwritten world.

Before I attempt to provide a more detailed definition of escapism and escapist fiction, I would like to add a further note on the principles of selection I have used to identify my core texts. Any literary study, no matter how ambitious, inevitably has to limit itself to a finite selection of texts; this, as Tzvetan Todorov has pointed out, does not mean that other texts are ignored, or excluded from the picture, but rather that in any thesis one can only infer a broad theory from the exploration of a limited body of material (21-2). At the same time, I see how some objections might be made to my choice of core texts.

Many of the authors I study have produced large and wide-ranging oeuvres, and it may seem arbitrary or tendentious to cherry-pick just a handful of texts from such wide oeuvres. In some cases, most notably with Pynchon, Chabon and Lethem, I will refer to other texts from their canons to support or complicate my argument, but I have chosen the particular texts listed above because I identify them as demonstrating complex and elaborate instances of self-conscious escapism. In other cases, I have chosen a single text from a writer's bibliography – and this is the case in particular with *The Keep* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* – because although these texts present intriguing varieties of self-conscious escapism, they are in this sense atypical of their authors' careers.

Finally, one might ask why there are no clear examples of genre fiction among my central primary sources. My answer is that, as mentioned, certain textual features of my core texts situate them in between genres, rather than solidly inside any specific category. What this means is that the type of self-conscious escapism I discuss invariably complicates a text's generic status, excluding from consideration texts that fall neatly into any specific category – including the genre of 'literary' fiction. *Don Quixote*, in many ways, is and is not itself a knightly tale; *Northanger Abbey* can be read as a Gothic novel or as an *anti*-Gothic novel. While certain works of genre fiction may share some of my

core texts' concerns, their unequivocal investment in a specific genre quarantines them from the sort of generic contagion that characterises and complicates my core texts.

Towards a Definition of Escapist Fiction

Like many of the literary concepts that will be discussed in this thesis, such as influence or intertextuality, escapism is ostensibly easily understood, but risks remaining shrouded in an aura of indeterminacy. Robert Eaglestone argues most persuasively that 'there are no clear definitions in literature,' and that the explications of literary concepts 'are more like pointers drawing attention to an aspect of a work than a container to entrap it' (7). So far I have proceeded by relying on general assumptions about the concept of escapism; but considering its prominence in the course of this thesis, it is first and foremost important to anchor it to a specific 'pointer,' no matter how temporary and open to objection. The same will be done for other such problematic concepts – influence, intertextuality – later in this thesis.

We are informed that Todorov considered his clarity to be his worst flaw (Todorov v). The more clearly a critical concept is defined, the easier it is to question it: blurry, ineffable definitions go a long way toward pre-empting many objections that could be moved against them. In the case of an attempted definition of escapism and escapist fiction, the most immediate objection might be the idea that escapism is a ubiquitous, inescapable, and thus unqualifiable and unquantifiable act: any reading act is to a degree a form of escape *from* the unwritten world *into* a written world. Richard Gerrig's *Experiencing Narrative Worlds* (1993) is largely devoted to arguing how the most trivial fictional statement inevitably transports the mind of a reader, on a cognitive level, to an

alternate world, potentially to the extent of making them question their established beliefs about history and reality. Linda Hutcheon affirms the same idea when she asserts that 'all reading (whether of novels, history or science) is a kind of "escape" in that it involves a temporary transfer of consciousness from the reader's empirical surroundings to things imagined rather than perceived' (*Narcissistic Narrative* 76-7).

In order to move beyond these valid but simplistic points we first need to draw a distinction between escapism and escapist fiction. (This study will deal with both terms). Escapism refers to a feature of the reading act that depends little on the fiction that is used to achieve it: virtually any text can be used as escapism. A crude example of this is the dental patient who reads or skims any magazine available to avoid thinking about the unpleasantness awaiting them. Confining ourselves to the sphere of literature, one might cite the example of John Stuart Mill, who was famously able to heal from his nervous breakdown thanks to the poetry of Wordsworth (Heilman 454). One person's high culture is another person's escapism, and particular readers might see the works of canonical authors such as Jane Austen or Henry James as a pleasurable escape from the vicissitudes of their life (450).

A useful model for sketching the limits of the escapist mode of reading is provided by Marie-Laure Ryan's study of narrative immersion, the phenomenon in which readers find themselves captured by the narrated world of a text. The term 'captured' is used here to suggest the double nature, liberating yet binding, of the process of escape into narrative. Basing her categorisation on the field work of Victor Nell's *Lost in a Book* (1988), Ryan distinguishes the phenomena of 'imaginative involvement' and 'entrancement,' which correspond respectively to the act of a reader 'who transports herself into the textual world but remains able to contemplate it with aesthetic or epistemological detachment,' and to

'the nonreflexive reading pleasure of the reader so completely caught up in the textual world that she loses sight of anything external to it, including the aesthetic quality of the author's performance' (Ryan, *Narrative As Virtual Reality* 98).

Escapist reading can be said to correspond to an act of entrancement. On the one hand, even if we were not about to discuss books that extensively defend the value of escapist fiction, it is worth stressing again that escapism is not necessarily to be associated with fiction that is devoid of aesthetic and artistic qualities: as JA Appleyard rightly points out, readers whose aim is 'total involvement in a book [...] can do this even with demanding and complex books' (169), and the classics can indeed be used as a source of escapism. Still, this mode of reading may be arguably considered of little value, critically speaking, even when it is performed through canonical and respected texts. As Ryan rightly points out, the one 'truth universally acknowledged' of criticism is that 'attention to the rhetorical devices through which a world emerges out of words is an essential aspect of aesthetic appreciation' (*Narrative As Virtual Reality* 176). If entrancement reading prevents the reader from appreciating the features of the medium through which a specific story is told, it goes without saying that it automatically prevents any deep and discerning aesthetic appreciation. As the no-nonsense graduate student of Abrams' & Dorst's *S.* tells his undergraduate friend, who praises the diegetic novel *Ship of Theseus* for being a good 'escape,' 'if you thought it was an "escape", then you weren't reading closely enough' (frontispiece).

Part of the effort in my core texts is aimed at showing how any escapist/entrancement reading act does not necessarily prevent a reader from appreciating the aesthetic quality of a text, but might in fact yield an even closer connection and a better understanding of the text's dynamics than more conventionally detached critical stances. A

simple objection thus arises: if my core texts praise escapism as a way of accessing deeper truths about texts, then what they are discussing is not entrancement, but imaginative involvement. Yet this is not an acceptable definition: one of the key concerns of these texts, in fact, lies in showing how their characters are not able to preserve the 'aesthetic or epistemological detachment' (Ryan, *Narrative As Virtual Reality* 98) that is a condition of this mode of reading. Rather, their obsession with their escapist fiction of choice, while granting them access to a form of solace to be found there, also has damaging effects, in particular by blurring their perception of the boundaries between written and unwritten worlds. Generic contagion, which I will describe extensively in chapter three, is precisely the process through which my core texts stage this phenomenon.

It is worth mentioning here that Ryan lists another reading category besides involvement and entrancement: that of addiction, corresponding to '(a) The attitude of the reader who seeks escape from reality but cannot find a home in the textual world because she traverses it too fast and too compulsively to enjoy the landscape. (b) The loss of the capacity to distinguish textual worlds, especially those of fiction, from the actual world' (98-9). While Ryan's second definition is of some relevance to my research, and I shall go back to it during my discussion of generic contagion, it is worth repeating how escapist reading tends to be closer to entrancement than addiction. Consider JRR Tolkien's useful metaphor to distinguish between the two: we must not confuse 'the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter' (56). Drawing a parallel between escapist readers and daydreaming prisoners, Tolkien reflects on how 'the world outside [the prison] has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it' (56). Or has it? To escapist readers, addiction is always only a step away, and many of my core texts explore the liminal space that separates escapist and entrancement reading from a loss of contact with reality.

If it is true that escapism is a mode of reading that can be accessed through virtually any narrative, it is equally true the concept is most often associated with particular narrative forms that encourage precisely that mode of reading. As Appleyard points out, 'readers do not commonly apologize for getting absorbed in Proust or Saul Bellow' (165). Heilman indicates the most common forms of escapist entertainment as 'light fiction, musical comedies, and detective stories' (451) – a list that, having been compiled in 1973, serves as a reminder of the ever-changing nature of canonical and cultural conventions (see Fowler 233).³

If escapism is a mode of reading, then escapist fiction is a transmedia, transgenre category of fiction that is supposedly produced and/or enjoyed precisely as a source of escapist reading. And if we take escapism to correspond to entrancement, and accept that entranced readers take little notice of the aesthetic or stylistic qualities of the fiction they read, it follows that escapist fiction is necessarily created with little concern for style, aesthetic criteria, and other features conventionally of interest to literary critics.

Indeed, there are a number of theoretical models that identify escapist fiction as a formally inferior mode. Eco distinguishes between closed texts, which 'obsessively aim at arousing a precise response on the part of more or less precise empirical readers' (*Role of the Reader* 8), and open texts, which feature more complex stylistic and rhetorical devices, and can thus only be used 'as the text[s] wants you to use [them]' (9). This latter category fulfils the supposed function of the novel, which is to be 'una macchina per generare

³ See Fowler 233 for an overview of how literary canons are tied to cultural factors related to the evolving nature of taste, itself connected to changes in social conventions and to the preferences and status of the consuming classes; and to the shaping influence of state-guided apparati such as school curricula.

interpretazioni⁴ (*Il Nome della Rosa* 507). The novels of Ian Fleming and Superman comic books are among the examples of closed texts cited by Eco, who does not necessarily exclude the possibility that 'escape entertainments' like Superman might be, under certain circumstances, 'innocuous and perhaps beneficial' (121). Hutcheon coincides with Eco on this point, when she claims that the ordered plots escapist fiction provides may be 'a kind of "vital" consolation for living in a world whose order one usually perceives and experiences only as chaos' (*Narcissistic Narrative* 77).

On the other hand, this reassuring feature of escapist fiction is cast in a negative light in the work of Bakhtin, according to whom the concept of the novel is not associated with a specific literary genre but with a dialogic tendency found across texts – not necessarily texts we would consider, at a glance, novels (5) – that display a mingling of different styles and voices, a fundamental ambiguity, that makes them closer to a reality that is unfinished and constantly evolving (7). In this sense, if we take escapist fiction to be rigid and to present a neat and progressive idea of order, we can assume it to lack this type of novelistic, dialogic nature. At the same time, one might argue that the ways in which my core texts interact intertextually and extensively with non-canonical escapist texts corresponds to the dialogue between what a given system will admit as literature and those texts that are otherwise excluded from such a definition: a quintessential feature of the novel in Bakhtin's system (xxx1).

But this is not a sustainable approach to my core texts. It posits them, in fact, in a category different – and inherently superior – to the escapist texts they refer to extensively; or even worse, it implies that these escapist, popular texts are recuperated or rendered instrumental by my more praiseworthy, 'novelistic' and 'dialogic' core texts. Rather, as I

⁴ 'A machine to generate interpretations' (my translation).

will argue in the second chapter of my thesis – in particular in my discussion of Michael Chabon's and Jonathan Lethem's theories of literary influence – these texts situate themselves on a continuum with the escapist fiction to which they refer, and indeed with more texts from other literary genres and categories.⁵

For the same reason, the distinction between 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts delineated by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (1970) is not applicable. Like Eco's, Barthes' taxonomy is hierarchical, with readerly texts – inherently inferior – being characterised by their striving toward the type of neat completion that, as we have seen, is a feature of escapist fiction (105). In contrast, in the course of my thesis I will argue that my core texts challenge assumptions that escapist fiction is necessarily 'readerly' and passive, suggesting instead that the characters who people my core texts handle escapist fiction with the care and attitude of scholars, interrogating these texts for answers to harrowing historical and personal problems.

Probably the best example of a theoretical system that does not simply place escapist fiction in an inferior hierarchical relation to 'serious' literature, then, is to be found in Cawelti's original study of genre literature, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (1976). Like Eco, Cawelti claims that escapist fiction may serve a basic need for its audience (8), but also acknowledges the 'artistry' implied in the creation of what he calls formulaic fiction. The type of talent needed to produce valuable fiction of this type is indeed different, up to a point, from the talent required to produce other literary forms. Cawelti's work will be an important point of reference in this thesis because of the ways in which it

⁵ Though there is no universal agreement on this point, and Henry Wessells, for instance, believes that the genre fiction referenced extensively in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is exploited condescendingly by the narrator to paint a grotesque picture of the novel's protagonist.

anticipates some of the theoretical approaches developed in their fiction by my core authors, in particular Michael Chabon. I will highlight the relevance of Cawelti's notions to any discussion of escapist fiction while arguing that his distinction between original and formulaic fiction may still be determined by a biased approach to the subject of his study. A close reading of my core texts, and of the essays produced by my core authors, points toward the formulaic nature of *all* literature, including the most canonical and 'literary' of works; and to the fact that the best examples of escapist fiction are ruled by a profound concern with technical, stylistic and aesthetic ambition – in other words by the same tensions that animate original literary works. The whole enterprise of *Kavalier & Clay's* *Escapist*; the interpretative powers granted to genre fiction in *Oscar Wao*; and the enlightening plotlines of video games in *Bleeding Edge* are only some of the most macroscopic instances of the ways in which my core texts re-evaluate and rehabilitate escapist genres and media.

As my discussion so far has suggested, the term escapism is commonly imbued with an implicit value judgement, and with negative undertones. In his etymological study of the word, Robert Heilman highlights how it is mostly used as 'a weapon against an action, attitude, or art work' (444). The *Oxford English Dictionary* informs us that the term was first used in 1933 to describe 'the bibulous, aphrodisiac lyrics strummed out by Anacreon of Teos at the banquets of Polycrates, tyrant of Samos,' which are 'comparable to the songs of Alcaeus and Sappho in strife ridden Mytilene' ('Escapism'). Escapism from the start, then, is pleasing but toxic, a drug or an immoderate pursuit, like alcohol or carnal lust; a term, in fact, comparable to an insult. 'Do you take me for an escapist?' asks the Neo-Angular, the allegorical CS Lewis character whose utterance includes the first registered use of that word, in the 1933 novel *The Pilgrim's Regress* ('Escapist'). Here too,

interestingly enough, a rigid and pious character is arguing with someone who is aware there is 'danger' and 'evil' in 'romantic trash,' or imaginative fiction, but is still willing to defend the positive elements that can be gleaned from it (Lewis 119).

My aim in the course of this thesis is to strip terms such as escapism and escapist of what may be perceived as their most superficially negative connotations; but the *OED* definition is still useful as a way of addressing one final feature of escapist fiction that is tackled extensively in my core texts: its supposed submission to an established social and political order. Cawelti believes that formulaic narratives reiterate their audience's existing beliefs in 'the nature of reality and morality' (35) by conforming to highly predictable plotlines in which evil is inescapably punished, and good always triumphant. Eco too identifies Superman as conveying 'a pedagogic message which is substantially immobilistic⁶ [sic]' (*Role of the Reader* 122).

To explain the political implications of the way escapism is employed in my core texts, and to highlight how this concern is inevitably tied to others – and in particular to my core texts' re-evaluation of popular culture and genre fiction – I want to offer an initial comparative overview of these texts, using an influential precursor as a point of reference and comparison.

A Story of Books: *The Name of the Rose*

In order to highlight some of the main features of my core texts, I will refer extensively in this section to Umberto Eco's *Il Nome della Rosa* (1980), translated into English as *The Name of the Rose*, a novel that is not American and that was published a

⁶ Meaning 'fixed in a specific, unchallenged world-view.'

few decades before the twenty-first-century novels that I focus on in this thesis. Indeed, *The Name of the Rose* is studied extensively in Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) as a paradigmatic case of historiographic metafiction, and as an archetypal type of postmodernist text; whereas the texts I will focus on in my thesis have been produced for the most part by a generation of writers that was influenced by, but started working after, the days of high postmodernism (Thomas Pynchon being a notable exception).

I see no contradiction here, and hope that the choice of an Italian text will suggest how, on the one hand, the literary features I study in my thesis are not the exclusive domain of American literature; and on the other hand, how self-conscious escapism is a tendency, much like metafiction, that, while more prominent in specific contexts and historical periods, is by no means absent from previous decades, in the same way as one can see much of the metafiction that was a key feature of postmodernism in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century texts such as *Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy* (1760) and *Tom Jones* (1749) (Waugh 24).

The Name of the Rose identifies the potential for escape into imagination granted by books, and the distance that separates them from the concerns of the unwritten world, as one of their paramount assets. In a world that is disordered, uncertain, and rife with injustice, books provide a minor form of order precisely because they are removed from the problems and great questions of the political and social sphere. The novel's frame narrative makes it explicit that the 'found manuscript' at the heart of *The Name of the Rose* is a 'storia di libri' (15), a story of books – but also *by* books and *about* books – without any connection to contemporary politics, and written without any didactic purpose. According to the 'Umberto Eco' who narrates the novel's preface, this is exactly what

confers dignity on the text.

My core texts share this valorisation of narrative escape, and they explore its possibilities on a number of different levels. Michael Chabon, who has possibly articulated his views on the topic more extensively than any other contemporary writer, underlines this point most emphatically in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, with its problematic but energetic argument that the escape granted by narrative – specifically, by such a 'humble' medium as superhero comic books – might be a legitimate, even admirable, reaction to as large a historical tragedy as the Holocaust. Confronted by the general public's contempt for the escapism allowed by comic books, one of the novel's protagonists, Joe Kavalier, bitterly reflects that 'there could [not] be any more noble or necessary service in life' than 'satisfying the desire to escape;' (582); and that 'it was a mark of how fucked-up and broken was the world [...] that such a feat of escape, by no means easy to pull off, should remain so universally despised' (576).⁷

This is a strong philosophical, even political stance.⁸ Escapism in these texts is not so much born of a desire to avoid difficult choices: it is a choice *in itself*, arguably the most persuasive one in the context. In this light, 'Eco's' argument in the preface to *The Name of the Rose* needs to be read ironically, as does his claim that in today's world 'la veglia della ragione ha fugato tutti i mostri che il suo sonno aveva generato'⁹ (15). For all that the novel is supposed to be an apolitical story of books, significant parts of it are dedicated to the

⁷ In a recent article Chabon confirmed that he 'can't think of higher praise' for art than to remark on its ability to offer 'a kind of escape from the grim reality of reality' ('What's the Point?').

⁸ The political implications of Italian postmodernism a la Eco – sometimes seen as self-involved and disengaged from social arguments – have been explored by Lucia Re in her essay 'Pasolini VS Calvino, One More Time.'

⁹ 'Reason awoken has vanquished all the monsters that its sleep had produced' (my translation).

minutiae of medieval Italian politics, and to political struggles inside the Catholic Church of the time; the contemporary resonance of which, indeed, is a constant concern of much of Eco's non-fiction (see Glynn 103). The American texts I will analyse in this thesis are often even more vocal about their political concerns, whether in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, with its extensive footnotes on the traumatic history of the Dominican Republic, or in Thomas Pynchon's condemnation of the horrors of capitalism in *Against the Day* and *Bleeding Edge*.

And yet, in spite of these political interventions, still recognisable in all of these texts is the idea expressed by Guglielmo da Baskerville in Eco's novel: that certain books, like the lost book of Aristotle at the heart of *The Name of the Rose*'s plot, are more important than pope and emperor, and than any political power (397). Should this imply that this thesis will focus on books with a certain agenda, willing to point to books as a final answer – be it constructive or nihilistic – to the problems of the world? Hardly. For all that escapism is represented as a valuable process, its problems and paradoxes are highlighted too lucidly to allow for any simplistic or straightforward political interpretation. *The Name of the Rose* represents the world as a chaotic, meaningless place, where the minor consolations of fiction, and its ability to bring order through the closure of a plot or the solving of a mystery, are all that human beings can hope to achieve (494-5). The political context of the book reinforces this attitude, rather than invalidating it: while characters invest political struggles with great importance, the world is always represented as quintessentially broken and doomed, a place where these struggles are bound to fail and may even be pointless in the first place. In both *Kavalier & Clay* and *Moonglow*, Michael Chabon portrays the fight against Nazi Germany in World War II as necessary, while never glossing over the human and moral cost of such a violent struggle; but he is also careful to

show the fight as potentially compromised, as the United States absorb some of the traits of Nazi Germany they had set out to fight in the war – be this represented through the censorship and burning of comic books (in *Kavalier & Clay*) or through a ruthless approach to scientific discovery, pursued even at the cost of employing Nazi war criminals (in *Moonglow*). *Moonglow's* protagonist, in a particularly poignant moment, has to limit his indignation and stop confronting this dreadful truth about history, or risk losing his belief, necessary even though possibly delusional, that 'it made a difference that Old Glory and not the *Nationalflagge* had been planted in the lunar dust' (396). A similar ambivalence can be found in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: while the novel is rife with political accusations levelled at both the Trujillo regime and later Dominican political figures, one of the characters is led to wonder, with a disillusioned cynicism one encounters time and again in my core texts, whether the Dominican Republic as a whole isn't hopelessly evil: 'Ten million Trujillos is all we are' (324).

In the context of such a bleak world-view, the ordering power granted by books is invested with even more meaning, and becomes an almost magical pursuit. But this should not suggest that these texts' faith in escapism and imagination as refuges from the chaos of history is unwavering. *The Name of the Rose* leaves uncertain whether the minor consolations of an ordered plot may not be a foolish mirage. It leaves us torn, in fact, between two attitudes: the one we find in the opening pages of its found manuscript, as the narrator wonders whether the evil facts he is about to relate may hide a deep and valuable truth (19); and the one we encounter in its closing pages, as the same narrator suspects his words may in fact be foolish and meaningless, and that the deeper truth they hide may be a malicious joke beyond his understanding (503).

My core texts demonstrate a similar duality, and this same ambivalent commitment,

toward the escapism offered by entertainment. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* marvels at the healing potential of artistic creation at the same time as it reflects on the invincible forces of a world whose real magic is dark and destructive:¹⁰ history's power to erase people and dreams, a tangible magic in the context of the Holocaust (339). Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* offers a hopeful view of the Web as a place where deeper meanings and connections can still be established, and broken realities – pre-9/11 New York City, the lives of the towers' victims – can be recreated and preserved; but it is conscious, at the same time, of how the Web is bound to be absorbed by the toxic, enslaving forces of capitalism, determined to exploit it in order to reap economic benefit. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* sees its narrator, in the novel's final chapters, reflecting on the meaning of the life of Oscar De León, the novel's protagonist, a life spent immersed in the escapist worlds of genre fiction and comic books. The narrator significantly recounts an ambiguous dream in which Oscar alternately shows him a way of breaking free from the curse plaguing his people, or turns into the nightmarish monster that is *Oscar Wao's* main antagonist, a cryptic faceless man (325). In fact, in their basic pessimism, all of my core texts are quintessentially Lovecraftian, featuring echoes of the influential horror writer's nihilistic world view. I shall have more to say about this presently.

The Name of the Rose pits a Holmesian Franciscan friar against a cryptic blind monk called Jorge ('of Borges', of course) to stage the conflict between an inclusive idea of literature and a hierarchical canon, which relies on rigid distinctions between proper and

¹⁰ Shu-li Chang's 'Superhero Comics and Everyday Heroics' focuses on precisely this tension in the novel, and reads it as neither escapist nor nihilistic; while Joseph Dewey's *Understanding Michael Chabon* (2014) interprets the author's poetics as constructed around the opposing forces of imagination and commitment (2, 90, 101).

improper, 'high' and 'low.' The good friar, who believes no topic is intrinsically unsuitable for literary treatment, is opposed to the symbolic embodiment of a strict literary order in which low culture must be quarantined from nobler works, and deemed unworthy of serious attention. It is entirely appropriate that the former is the protagonist, and the latter the antagonist, of a novel that mixes whodunit and medieval theology, and whose opening line is a variation on 'it was a dark stormy night.'¹¹

This distinction allows me to point to a major feature of the texts I will study in this thesis: while they interrogate the idea of escapism in all of its complexities, they also offer an extended defence of the escapist fiction that is a vehicle of such an escape; and, by extension, a defence of popular, low culture. Before I conclude this Introduction with an overview of how my core texts engage in broader discussions on canons and values in literary criticism, I shall touch briefly upon the world view of a writer whose poetics will influence much of my close reading and analysis throughout the thesis: HP Lovecraft.

The Horror of Reality: HP Lovecraft

Even more than Eco's *Name of the Rose*, HP Lovecraft's poetics will provide a critical framework that will be useful in order to contextualise some major themes and philosophical stances in my core texts. Since he will be an important point of reference throughout this study, I shall provide an overview of his artistic outlook, and of the points of contact between him and my core authors.

¹¹ A recognizably sensationalist opening line – defused in Eco's novel – whose origins trace back to Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Paul Clifford* (1830), and which was popularized by Snoopy's fondness for it in Charles Schultz's *Peanuts* comic strips.

Reducing the poetics of a writer – even one whose main writing phase can be said to have lasted about twenty years, and whose entire output, collaborations included, can be collected in a thousand-page volume – to a single uniform world-view implies a certain amount of naivete or disingenuousness on any critic's part. It is safe to say that Lovecraft would have hardly considered his fiction escapist, unlike other writers in his circle of friends, most notably Clark Ashton Smith.¹² Rather, Lovecraft's poetics across his oeuvre constantly wavers between the comforting hopes of his dream tales, best exemplified in 'The Silver Key' (1929) and *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1943), where 'a blindly impersonal cosmos' (Lovecraft 400) can be escaped in dreams, fantasies, and personal memories; and the cosmic horror of his more popular Cthulhu cycle, portraying a world in which humans 'live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that [they] should voyage far' (355): an existential pessimism in which the secrets of life and the world, when investigated, inevitably drive the investigator to madness.¹³

This same tension, as I will argue throughout my thesis, pertains to my core texts too. These works are set in worlds where historical tragedies, pernicious social dynamics,

¹² 'To me, the best, if not the only function of imaginative writing, is to lead the human imagination *outward* [...] and *away* from all that introversion, that morbidly exaggerated prying into one's own vitals – and the vitals of others' (Smith 345).

¹³ Indeed, other than Pynchon, the other major modern writer deserving of a comparative study with Lovecraft would be Thomas Hardy. While Hardy's attention to the emotional turmoil of his characters shares little with Lovecraft's misanthropic outlook, the core set of beliefs at the heart of the two writers' fiction is surprisingly similar. Compare Lovecraft's pessimism with Hardy's conviction that 'the universe was a huge impersonal mechanism, directed by some automatic principle of life unknown, pursuing its mysterious end, and utterly indifferent to the feelings of mortals' (Hawkins 24).

and personal difficulties are inescapable; where the very act of investigating the causes of these horrors dooms characters and leads to their demise. Yet escapist fiction, and the potential for relief, communal belonging, and imaginative liberation that sometimes accompany it, offer characters hope against hope: a chance to elude, and sometimes even overcome, the horror of an impersonal cosmos. It is a testimony to the commitment of my core texts to the process of narrative escape that in the face of such horrors and such ultimate doom they still represent escapism time and again as a valuable, noble pursuit.

Among my core authors, Chabon is the closest to being purely Lovecraftian: the cosmic forces that crush his characters time and again are those of history, of major world events and of political and social change. Chabon's view of the world as fundamentally 'broken' (Summerland 444-5) appears grounded in a philosophy that is disconnected from immediate issues of political affiliation: Nazi Germany, American judges, secret agents and policemen, businessmen and scientists are all at different times the agents of his characters' doom. Díaz and, even more, Pynchon provide a more politicised take on Lovecraft's cosmic horror, in which the invincible forces of history and reality are tied to dictatorships, or to the agenda of international capitalism.¹⁴

The affinity I recognise between Lovecraft and my core authors thus originates from interestingly resonating notes among these texts. That is not to say that more explicit ties, and clearly identifiable line of influence, do not exist. This is especially true of Michael Chabon and Thomas Pynchon. The former has been vocal in his admiration of Lovecraft, listed at number three in a list of his favourite genre authors (*Yiddish Policemen Union* endpapers 3) and named explicitly in several of his works, as I will have occasion to

¹⁴ See David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History* (2012); Luc Herman and Steven Weisburger, *Gravity's Rainbow, Domination, and Freedom* (2013).

remark in the course of the thesis. As for Pynchon, very little criticism has been devoted to the many Lovecraftian elements and overtones that can be found in his fiction. The main exception remains Jeffrey L Meikle's 1981 essay 'Parallel Frequencies,' highlighting affinities between *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and Lovecraft's stories, most notably 'The Call of Cthulhu.' Critics have also remarked on the Lovecraftian overtones of a scene of Arctic invasion in *Against the Day* (see for instance Chabon, 'The Crying of 11 September'). I hope this thesis will point to other clearly Lovecraftian elements in Pynchon's fiction, in particular in *Bleeding Edge*.

Lovecraft is also referenced extensively in Díaz's *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. *House of Leaves*, both through its plot and its structure, imitates a form of horror that is very close to Lovecraft's own, in which 'outward rationalism collapses in the face of the unknown' (Joshi 115). (The same cannot be said of *The Keep*, which, while in many ways a horror novel, draws inspiration from the Gothic tradition of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries rather than from the supernatural and weird fiction of Lovecraft). Finally, in the case of Lethem, ties do exist, but they are exquisitely biographical: in the essay 'The Used Bookshop Stories' he recounts that, as a young man, he worked in a bookshop that apparently sold Lovecraft's books (*Ecstasy of Influence* 8).

Finally, I will argue that HP Lovecraft constitutes a particularly appropriate interpretative key to my core texts because of his peculiar position on the literary spectrum. On the one hand, Lovecraft believed firmly in an 'aristocracy of intellect' (Joshi 125) and was an unapologetic aesthete, convinced that literary pursuits should be divorced from commercial or personal gain: a very haughty view of literature as a gentlemen's pursuit directed 'to other gentlemen of sensitiveness and discrimination' (163). At the same time, virtually the entirety of his fiction was published in amateur publications or pulp

magazines, the former a popular form of expression moving outside the bounds of academia, commercial publishing, and other recognised institutions, the latter driven almost by definition by a wish to sell abundant copies by appealing to readers' simpler urges for action and titillation. (In this discrepancy, and in Lovecraft's unwavering refusal to tailor his work to appeal to popular taste, we find an explanation for why many of his most celebrated tales had troubled publication histories, and struggled to find a venue). A similar ambiguity applies to his literary status today. He is disparaged by many for his archaisms, the redundancy of his prose and its over-reliance on adverbs and adjectives, and the slow, clunky progression of his narratives: Chabon himself says that 'Lovecraft's style is the despair of the lover of Lovecraft' (*Maps and Legends* 114); Stephen King said Lovecraft 'can't write a scene; everything [is] very static' ('Stephen King on Twilight'); and Daniel José Older called him 'a pretty wretched wordsmith, an overwriter' ('On Butler and Lovecraft'), to name but a few examples. Yet Lovecraft is more studied than ever, a critical attention best represented, and perhaps legitimised, by his inclusion in the Library of America series. And his success across popular culture is indisputable: countless video and board games freely utilise Lovecraft's creations, which are referenced extensively in TV shows and Internet memes (Sederholm & Weinstock 1-2).

It is in this peculiar capacity to bridge literary and popular culture that much of Lovecraft's relevance to this thesis lies. He is a helpful point of reference in the discussion of texts that contextualise extensively the artistic ambition and aesthetic tensions inherent in popular culture; that operate re-evaluations of escapist fiction; and that occupy *themselves* a rather peculiar middle ground much like Lovecraft's. *House of Leaves*, while undoubtedly a work of supernatural horror, could hardly be accused of pandering to popular taste. Michael Chabon's works, while mostly falling in the genre of literary fiction

(at least in a superficial reading), might have received relatively little critical attention also because of their high enjoyability.

Lovecraft resonates with many of my core texts and authors for a variety of reasons that go beyond his poetics and texts, and I shall draw parallels between his works and contemporary American fiction extensively throughout my thesis. Before I begin my thesis proper by discussing my core texts' problematisation of narrative escapism, I shall discuss a feature I have touched upon briefly: the way my core texts engage with current debates on the value and nature of genre fiction and popular entertainment.

Escapism in Its Context

If my core texts are ambivalent in their valorisation of escapism, they are (generally) unwavering when it comes to their belief in the value of popular media. These American texts, indeed, are produced in a cultural context in which the high/low boundary so dear to Eco's Jorge of Borges has collapsed; or, when that is not the case, they present its collapse as desirable. An optimistic take on this topic is offered by Andrew Hoberek in 'Literary Genre Fiction' (Greenwald Smith 61-75), which points to the commercial and critical success of a few key novels, including *Wonder Boys* (1995) and *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) by Chabon and Lethem respectively, to describe the contemporary ascendancy of genre fiction into the acclaimed, established milieu generally granted exclusively to more straightforwardly realistic or experimental fiction. Whether we look at Lethem's use of superhero comic books as a medium through which the Brooklyn life of Dylan Ebdus is problematised in his *Fortress of Solitude* (2003), or at Junot Díaz's portrait of how Oscar de León's knowledge of nerd culture provides him with a unique key for

interpreting his native country's history, it is clear that the escapist and popular fiction discussed by these novels is held in the highest regard by their characters.¹⁵

An understanding of the shift in the way contemporary writers approach popular culture is crucial to any reading of my core texts. Popular culture, in fact, was already a prominent feature of much of the postmodernist literature¹⁶ that preceded, and influenced, the writers I discuss in this thesis. What is different in much contemporary fiction, as Hoberek argues, is that whereas postmodern writers used low culture with knowing irony, and thus still implicitly recognised the existence of a hierarchy, contemporary writers such as Chabon and Lethem see low culture as worthy of serious attention *in itself* ('After Postmodernism' 237-8). Comic books, to name but one form of escapist fiction, are not portrayed in my core texts as less insightful or aesthetically praiseworthy than any other medium. In his essay 'The Great Flattening,' Eric Sandberg considers this same trend within the oeuvre of Thomas Pynchon, an author whose career encompasses both the high water-mark of postmodernism and what is often referred to as the post-postmodernist era in which most of the authors I discuss have emerged. According to Sandberg, to appreciate the shift in the representation of pop culture one only has to compare *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) – where lewd limericks are cast in opposition to the poetry of Rilke, or to the music

¹⁵ On Chabon in particular, see Gordon Bigelow's 'Michael Chabon's Unhomely Pulp,' detailing how his 'critique [of genre fiction] is trenchant, but his pastiche is also generous in its praise of the genre's imaginative rigor' (318). For an insight into how this strand of his poetics is connected with another major one – his concern for Jewish themes – see Chabon's interview with Todd Hasak-Lowy ('The Language Deep, Deep in Chabon's Ear').

¹⁶ As with all matters concerning postmodernism, this is far from a universally shared view. See, as a possible objection, Ulrich Broich's belief that the intermingling of high and low culture was already a feature of intertextuality in some *modernist* texts (254).

of Rossini and Beethoven – to *Bleeding Edge*, where '90s pop culture is discussed at great length, and through a connoisseur's eye, without being opposed to any 'higher' cultural counterpart ('Pynchon's Pop Fiction'). Not that I, or any of the other critics whom I will cite in the course of this thesis, claims this shift between different conceptions of popular culture is clear-cut: we can indeed agree with Hoberek that what he calls Pynchon's turn 'from high postmodernist to genre archivist' is not so much a definitive break from his earlier work as 'a long-coming fulfillment' of certain aspects of it ('Postmodernism and Modernization' 342).¹⁷

It may also be inevitable that, as they elevate low culture to the hierarchical level of high culture, many of my core texts are also led to question whether the latter was ever really in any way superior. Pynchon's March Keller in *Bleeding Edge* says of high culture that it 'attracts the worst impulses of the moneyed, it has no honor, it begs to be suburbanized and corrupted.' (56) In his essay 'Trickster in a Suit of Lights,' Michael Chabon debunks the myth that genre fiction is peculiarly formulaic by identifying some of the most common formulas used by literary fiction.

Much has changed since the publication of Alistair Fowler's seminal study of literary genres, *Kinds of Literature* (1982). Fowler is sceptical of the tendency, still relatively recent in the early 1980s, to study popular texts and media, which, he claims, even their advocates regard as devoid of aesthetic value. In Fowler's view, academics do not study popular media because they are artistically or formally noteworthy, but simply

¹⁷ A position that I deem more coherent, cautious, and valuable than Nicholas Frangipane's clearer distinction between early and late Pynchon – and in particular between *Crying* and *Inherent Vice* – as representing significantly different worldviews. Frangipane's argument is supported by abundant textual evidence, but risks treating *Inherent Vice* as a symptom of a broader narrative trend rather than focusing on features inherent to it.

because they are popular (10). More recently, Culler too has pointed out one of the potential pitfalls of cultural studies. By analysing the case of an Open University course on Detective TV Series, he demonstrates the risk of treating 'pop' texts as mere cultural symptoms – so that the changing moral values of '70s and '80s police shows mirror changes in society's perception of the state – rather than as valuable cultural artefacts in their own right (*Literary Theory* 52).

The tendency to disparage popular culture is not entirely absent from my core texts. Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1994), for example, uses comic books as an extended metaphor for the paradoxes of the 1970s, but adopts a somewhat condescending attitude to the medium. Still, this is a tendency that has largely run its course. If we focus on comic books, often the escapist entertainment of choice in my core texts, scholars such as Hillary Chute, Marc Singer and Lee Behlman have identified Chabon's treatment of the medium in *Kavalier & Clay* as pivotal; no longer mere metaphors for social trends, comics is treated as a fully-fledged, dignified art form, with its own tensions and dynamics, as aesthetically ambitious and as commercially-oriented as any other art form. As Chute points out, Chabon situates the birth of the superhero comic book in the context of the Surrealist scene of 1930s New York City precisely so he can point to the crucial parallels between these two art forms, quintessential instances of low and high culture respectively. In so doing, Chabon's poetics align again with Lovecraft's: ST Joshi remarks on how the famous horror writer, while all his life a consumer of both canonical literature (Roman and Greek classics, eighteenth-century poetry) *and* of popular fiction, remained discerning in his tastes: 'Throughout his life Lovecraft vigorously defended the *literary* value of the weird tale (unlike some modern critics who misguidedly vaunt both the good and the bad, the aesthetically polished and the mechanically hackneyed, as representative of "popular

culture”—as if literary merit is determined by what masses of half-literate people like to read)' (53). It is ironical that Lovecraft's own aristocratic world view informs Joshi's prose here, perhaps moving him to remark not too kindly on the 'half-literate' state of mass consumers; but the fact remains that to Lovecraft, just as to my core writers, popular culture is to be praised selectively rather than universally, and for exquisitely literary and aesthetic reasons, rather than for its sociological utility or relevance.

Indeed, perhaps the paramount sign of the emergence of a new attitude toward popular culture is that pop culture itself is not regarded as an undistinguished continuum by those authors who are interested in defending it. Far from being a uniform mass where everything is equally worthy, popular culture is judged with the same discrimination that has been exercised with reference to high-cultural forms. *Kavalier & Clay* reflects bitterly on the downturn in the quality of comic books in the 1950s; *Oscar Wao* is sceptical of the shift from narrative-oriented role-playing games to mechanics-oriented card games in early-90s nerd culture; *Bleeding Edge* privileges the medium of video games over television. As such, these texts also reject one of the main criticisms aimed at popular culture: the idea that it is a passive form of entertainment, which does not require active participation from its readers and consumers. In an essay discussing the generic features of *The Keep* and of Colson Whitehead's zombie novel *Zone One* (2011), Alexander Moran remarks on how these texts 'tend to not see entertainment and textual ambivalence as mutually exclusive' (232), rejecting the idea that popular and genre forms must inevitably limit themselves to unchallenging structures. In my core texts, this re-evaluation is represented as a central concern in the lives of characters, who take great pain to extrapolate all possible meaning from their entertainments of choice, sometimes sacrificing – as in the case of Oscar De León, or Joe Kavalier – large parts of their lives to

this pursuit. The point is not so much that everything is deserving of attention, or that any cultural product is as valuable as the next, but that, in the words of *Kavalier & Clay's* Rosa Luxemburg Saks, 'no medium is inherently better than any other' (363).

It is finally worth remarking that these texts' energetic defence of popular and escapist texts does not necessarily correspond to a belief, in the texts themselves or in their authors, that the cultural world of today is eager or even ready to accept such a defence. In a joint interview with Michael Chabon, Junot Díaz expressed the following view on the state of genre fiction today:

We seem to think that things are changing because the people with privilege dabble across the board [...] I've noticed that genre fiction writers are more isolated than they've ever been. I think that they're less likely to win any prizes. Listen, we'll talk about Justin Cronin all day, and I could trot out 12 other novelists who've been writing zombie novels, but because they're genre writers, they're not going to get a f–king profile in *The New York Times*.

We're willing to talk about how one side is benefiting, how one side is taking these experiments, but this other side has been doing this for so long, and nobody wants to give them any love [...] I'm sorry, I don't give a f–k what the f–k my side of the equation is doing. ... It doesn't stop us from getting MacArthurs. I want somebody who's writing the Fantastic Four to get a MacArthur, get a Guggenheim. (Chabon and Díaz)

Díaz's view differs radically from the more optimistic one advanced by Hoberek, according to whom 'genre borrowing has become [...] respectable' (Greenwald Smith 68);

or rather, Díaz focuses on the other side of this equation: the idea that the re-evaluation and valorising of genre fiction corresponds to a form of cultural gentrification, one that is inevitably dangerous to the previous 'tenants' of the gentrified area, who risk being excluded from consideration and acclaim in favour of established writers stealing the tools of their trade. Díaz's remarks on MacArthur and Guggenheim grants are especially pointed, drawing attention to the fact that such important scholarships are still the exclusive domain of more canonically established writers, and as such exclude genre and escapist authors not just from recognition, but from a form of wealth. His specific mention of Justin Cronin, winner of a Pen/Hemingway award, who received critical and commercial acclaim with his *Passage* trilogy, points to the specific genre of post-apocalyptic fiction, possibly the sub-genre where gentrification – to carry forward my previous metaphor – has happened most widely and effectively, as argued by Chabon in his essay 'Dark Adventure' (*Maps and Legends* 96-108) and as detailed by Hoberek's 'The Post-Apocalyptic Present.'

Díaz's words are a useful corrective to broader optimism, as they remind us of the complexities of any discussion of the canonisation of genre and popular fiction. Günter Leypoldt analyses precisely the phenomenon described by Díaz through a close reading of both *Oscar Wao* and Kazuo Ishiguro's fantasy novel *The Buried Giant* (2015), and concludes that the rules for what elements of genre fiction can be accepted into the high-cultural spheres – literary awards, academia, coverage by prestigious magazines – invariably 'trickle down from high-cultural institutions in which the genre territories [...] have little to say.' One can thus understand a certain bitterness from genre writers: Jacob Weisman, the editor of *Invaders: 22 Tales From the Outer Limits of Literature* (2016), a collection of genre stories by 'literary genre' writers whose very title might have been

inspired by Chabon's notion of the borderlands, remarks in the introduction on how genre writers sometimes view such pursuits as the one he is embarking upon negatively: 'This is another book [...] telling us how we should write' (xiii). Chabon too expands on the notion of cultural gentrification by speaking of the way genre writers tend to be, naturally and understandably, defensive about having their territory colonised by writers generally associated with different cultural spheres: 'Pride and Resentment are the twin banners flown from the walls of all ghettos. We love being in; we want to get out' ('Geeking Out About Genres').

It is not hard to see why such resentment may accompany the idea of this type of appropriation. One of the key concerns of my core texts is highlighting how creators and consumers of escapist fiction have long been placed and *are still* placed in positions of inferiority precisely because of their commitment. Whether through *Kavalier & Clay's* exploration of the unfair working conditions of early comic book artists, with poor contracts and limited artistic freedom,¹⁸ or through *Oscar Wao's* reflection on how a passion for escapist fiction makes a pariah of its protagonist, these texts are always aware of the costs of escapism in economic, social and human terms.

By virtue of being structured elaborately as defences, problematisations and contextualisations of escapist and popular fiction, my core texts inevitably revolve around other texts, often from non-literary media including comic books and board, video and role-playing games. Some of the cultural artefacts my core texts engage with are fictional: they only exist within the context of these novels, and are used functionally, the way Aristotle's book on Comedy – a portion of his *Poetics* (335 BC) that does not survive – only exists in the diegesis of *The Name of the Rose*. This is the case, for instance, with

¹⁸ See Daniel Punday, 'Kavalier & Clay, the Comic-Book Novel, and Authorship in a Corporate World.'

Bleeding Edge's immersive escapist software, DeepArcher, part Internet chat room and part video game; or again with *Kavalier & Clay's* superhero comic book series, *The Escapist*.

Other intertexts exist in the unwritten world, outside the diegesis. These real-life texts, ranging from *Fantastic Four* comic books to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), are employed to contextualise my core texts, to better characterise their protagonists, and sometimes to borrow plotlines and characters. As such, my core texts all play extensively with intertextuality, creating vast intertextual webs to refer to and engage with countless different sources.

Because of this extensive dialogue with other fictions, my core texts include numerous instances of stories-within-stories, 'lost book' tropes, metalepsis, and intertextual references. Waugh argues that the basic principle of metafiction is 'simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction' (6). Self-conscious escapism adheres to this principle, making it a form of metafiction; but novels showing this tendency *stage* the process described by Waugh: their *characters* create a fictional world – be it the Gothic retreat of *The Keep*, the Escapist comic books of *Kavalier & Clay* or the moon-base model built in *Moonglow* – and subsequently reflect upon its creation. Consequently, a discussion of these texts' dynamics risks becoming confusing without a clear system of taxonomy. I will employ Gerard Genette's influential narratological distinction between multiple levels of diegesis, as articulated in *Narrative Discourse* (1972), and I will use the terms extradiegesis and extradiegetic to refer to the world of the narrator recounting the story of my core texts; of diegesis and diegetic to refer to the world the narrator is describing through his story, often but not always the same as that which she/he inhabits; and of metadiegesis and metadiegetic to refer to the world of

stories-within-stories, such as the worlds constructed by diegetic characters telling their stories, or by books and texts described, read or experienced in the diegesis (228). Finally, I will refer to the unwritten world – the one you and I share – as the realm of experience 'outside the diegesis.'

Even within this taxonomy there are of course ambiguities and paradoxes. Genette himself reflected, with reference to JL Borges and to Cortázar's paradoxical 'Continuity of Parks' that the existence of anything 'outside the diegesis' may be a myth: just as narrators in the extradiegesis are inevitably observed by us, there is no way of knowing whether a diegetic level still above ours may exist (236); an intriguing thought-experiment, even for readers with abundant common sense, and a distrust of such logical paradoxes. It is tempting to trace a line between this concept and the philosophical theories of Nick Bostrom, who argues that humans are likely to be living in a computer simulation ('Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?'); but without stepping into the world of metaphysics, the paradoxical concept of fictionality as ultimately inescapable works as a reminder of the way my core texts often render the idea of being 'outside the diegesis' paradoxical, by staging frequent instances of metalepsis through which characters 'climb' up or down from one diegetic level to another. The full implications of these shifts will be considered as I analyse my core texts; for now, it is instructive to consider two examples. The first one is that of The Escapist, the superhero who plays such a crucial role in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. After the novel's success, the publishing house Dark Horse created a full series of Escapist comic books, narrating the hero's adventures, featuring introductions and articles supporting the (make-believe) illusion that The Escapist is *actually* a superhero from the 1930s, as fictionalised in *Kavalier & Clay*. As such, the Escapist comic books have left the diegesis entirely and become part of the real,

unwritten world. A much more traumatic staging of the same process concerns the so-called Slender Man stabbings, in which two girls attacked a third in the Wisconsin woods to impress an explicitly fictional monster. Here, too, the monster has left the diegesis of its stories to enter the world 'outside the diegesis,' at least in the minds and actions of the attackers. The full implications of this episode, and the ways in which metalepsis is explored and studied in my core texts, will be the subject of the third chapter of this thesis, alongside a related process that is at work in many of my core texts, which I call generic contagion. I will provide a more detailed definition of this term later, but for now it should be understood to refer to a peculiar form of metalepsis that does not relate to the shift of a character or object from one level of the diegesis to another, but of a shift pertaining to an entire narrative world, with its implications, rules (of physics, of narrative), and traditions – a shift pertaining to an entire *genre*, leaving one level of the diegesis to infiltrate another.

One of the most interesting ideas engendered by the intertextual webs created by my core texts is the idea that these webs may be connected to a particular conception of the process of literary influence. Michael Chabon and Jonathan Lethem, in particular, have evolved parallel theories of influence that go hand in hand with – indeed, are often exemplified by – the way these writers employ intertextuality. Specifically, these authors approach literature as a continuum where appropriation and reference are not just instances or exceptions, but a *sine qua non* of the creative act. All novels, according to Michael Chabon, are sequels (*Maps and Legends* 45); while Lethem calls popular music an endless 'song-with-annotations' (*Ecstasy of Influence* 123), a concept we can easily apply to other media. This way of interpreting cultural production presents creation as a communal activity, to which creators and readers each contribute, and as such it points to a crucial concern of several of my core texts: how they construct potential 'imagined communities,'

to borrow a term from Benedict Anderson's 1983 study of the same name, built on a shared commitment to popular culture and entertainment. Hoberek remarks on the way 'genres are not simply literary forms, but are also structures for creating community among artists and audiences' (Greenwald Smith 73), as does John Joseph Hess, who cites Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue* as a text in which the communal potential of popular entertainment is extensively interrogated and problematised.

In the course of my thesis, and especially of its second chapter, I will discuss the communal dimension of escapism as explored in my core texts, and Chabon and Lethem's complex theories of literary influence. I will compare these writers' notions, in particular, with Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence: both Chabon and Lethem explicitly articulate their views in opposition to Bloom's. By contrasting these different theories – highlighting irreconcilable differences as much as their affinities – I will attempt to contextualise them within their respective historical moments, critical approaches, and theoretical conceptions of the role of entertainment and literature.

All the concerns of my thesis, including but not limited to the ones listed above, will be explored through close readings of my core texts. My aim is to analyse how these texts contribute to ongoing debates on popular culture, and help us reconsider fixed ideas of influence, intertextuality, metalepsis, and fictionality. The overarching inquiry of this thesis, though, leading all other questions and informing the way they are articulated, will be my analysis of these texts' conceptions of escapism: of what they tell us about the purposes, nature and dynamics of the escape into imagination and fictional worlds.

As part of this project, I will challenge Ryan's theoretical paradigm of interactivity as opposed to influence, developed in her study *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001). It seems to me, in fact, that my texts point extensively to several different ways – by no

means exhaustive, and by no means infallible – to solve the paradox, described by Ryan, according to which a text can help us immerse ourselves in its fictional world, or can make us interact with its features as a text, but can never do both at the same time. I will also develop Brian McHale's critique, first expressed in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1977), of Todorov's notion that the fantastic genre he describes in his study of the same name (1973) is a historically limited genre, and is absent from today's world. I will indeed recuperate several elements of Todorov's study and methodology in order to show how my texts, invariably positioned not just between different diegetic levels but, consequently, between different 'worlds' and different genres, share several characteristics with the fantastic, especially in the way they exploit a state of permanent uncertainty. Some of them, most notably *The Keep*, may even be read as instances of the fantastic in and of themselves.

For McHale, of course, this generic uncertainty and a state of tension between different worlds was a key feature of *postmodernist* texts. I will highlight how my texts conform to and distance themselves from several postmodern trends, and from so-called 'post-postmodern' ones too: I shall oppose especially firmly any umbrella definition that embraces contemporary writers as different as Chabon and David Foster Wallace, Díaz and George Saunders. I aim to demonstrate the distance between the 'new sincerity' of some contemporary American fiction and the stance, for instance, assumed by Michel Chabon in *Moonglow*, with its troubled yet compelling defence of fiction in spite – and precisely because – of its nature as a 'pack of lies' (430). I locate a basic fallacy, for instance, in the way Adam Kelly links Michael Chabon's belief in the power of entertainment to enable connections between writer and reader with similar beliefs on the basic pleasures of reading expressed by authors such as Saunders, Jeffrey Eugenides, and Richard Powers (Greenwald Smith 53; Kelly 145). While these similarities deserve to be explored, they

are, I would argue, more superficial and less significant than one might expect. Indeed, the idea that writing is about a pleasurable exchange between writer and reader is not only intuitively understood, but a universal one throughout literary history: even works that apparently challenge this assumption reveal, on close inspection, how they hold it in the highest regard, as one can infer by looking at a few instances of explicitly metafictional postmodernist texts. John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) has a character, in its main story, envisioning 'a truly astonishing funhouse, incredibly complex yet utterly controlled' (97); a dream of a perfectly pleasurable narrative. One finds very much the same idea in Italo Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979), translated into English as *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, where a self-conscious and frustratingly recursive narrative is employed to celebrate the pleasurable union between reader and text, represented by Calvino through the explicit metaphor of physical and marital love.

If anything, the *lack* of such a connection appears to be an anomaly rather than a rule, and while one encounters it in certain postmodernist fiction, it seems particularly characteristic of an author Kelly views as pre-eminent among 'post-postmodern' writers: David Foster Wallace, whose fiction is characterised by what David Brauner calls a 'knowing archness' (*Contemporary* 12). Wallace's belief that the pleasures of the text should be denied to the reader when they are denied to the characters (Max 70), and his claim that 'I do not feel even the hint of an obligation to an entity called reader – do not regard it as his favor, rather as his choice, that, duly warned, he is [sic] expended capital/time/retinal energy on what I've done' (145), appear to dismiss any notion of the reader's satisfaction. Indeed, while they relate to the early phase of his career, they also seem implied in his final, unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011), which presents what Ralph Clare calls an 'aesthetics of boredom,' and 'examines boredom in both [its] form and

content' (429), offering stimulating philosophical insight but inevitably compromising the pleasure of immersive reading.

What is original and revolutionary in Chabon's essay on entertainment is not his belief in the desire for connection at the heart of literature, or even the notion that this connection should be pleasurable, but rather the idea that one should recuperate and value *any* text engendering pleasure, no matter its generic or cultural status. By rejecting the notion of 'guilty pleasure' (*Maps and Legends* 2) Chabon invites a reconsideration of genre and popular literature, and of texts that are often seen as belonging to a different sphere from literary or 'high' fiction. This is a position I believe to be irreconcilable with the poetics of writers such as Wallace or Jonathan Franzen, who are focused on entirely different concerns even when not in direct opposition to Chabon's.¹⁹ Similarly, I challenge the reading provided by Jon Doyle of the writing of Chabon as embracing a form of simplistic sincerity:²⁰ his reading of *Moonglow*'s 'enraptured depiction of World War II's heroic generation' (264) stems from a misreading of the novel's Lovecraftian overtones and reflections, and of its plot. It ignores, most notably, how its protagonist has to choose ignorance over madness when confronted with the horror of twentieth-century history.

¹⁹ See 'David Foster Wallace on Commercial Literature and Reading' for Wallace's belief in the existence of a fundamental distinction between the purpose and concerns of genre and entertaining fiction on the one hand, and of the type of introspective and challenging fiction he was writing on the other.

²⁰ The same goes for his interpretation of *The Underground Railroad* (2016) as 'bleak yet eternally optimistic.' If great optimism indeed animates the novel, it is only so it can be crushed at every turn of the narrative, as characters get persecuted in every state they visit – in spite of the apparent safety of each – in ever crueler ways. If anything, I would argue that the closure of the novel, while not portraying the main character's demise, is still inserted in its narrative pattern of escape and persecution: the suspicion lingers in the end of Whitehead's text that the same horror that has chased the characters so far, and that still persists strongly in American society, may still persecute them once the narrative is over.

This startling need to limit one's experience of truth is echoed in another key passage of the novel, where a psychiatrist suggests to the protagonist that he may be better off *not* knowing the truth about his wife's bouts of schizophrenia. These scenes are inserted within *Moonglow's* extensive and multi-faceted reflection on the value of open discussion as opposed to secrecy; they are symptomatic of the broader complexity in Chabon's oeuvre; and betray the impossibility of ascribing them to any narrative current espousing sincerity as its main component. It is significant that Doyle's essay, while constantly relying on critical truisms, refuses to engage with the texts it dismisses.²¹

As I have been suggesting, it is not my thesis' intention to contribute to the debate, alive and well in criticism of contemporary American fiction, over whether such fiction is concerned with overcoming postmodern irony. I subscribe to Brauner's view that David Foster Wallace's influential take on the need to overcome irony – expounded in the essay 'E Unibus Pluram,' upon which Kelly ('New Sincerity' 133) and Doyle (260) base their reflections – 'exaggerates the influence of postmodernism' (Brauner, *Contemporary* 12) and, as I have briefly argued, of postmodernist fiction's disconnectedness with humane and emotional concerns; to say nothing of the fact that the sincere fiction Wallace's essay calls for 'already existed' in Wallace's time 'and continue to flourish' now (Brauner, *Contemporary* 12). Similarly, it is not the purpose of this thesis to associate my authors with any trend that has emerged in the wake of postmodernism. I wish instead to embrace the cautiousness expressed by Madhu Dubey when assessing the state of whatever current is supposed to follow postmodernism, a current whose features and nature are 'not yet evenly visible or explicable at the level of form' (368). A close study of my authors

²¹ Further statements on how Chabon withdraws 'into nostalgic, escapist fantasies' (267) and offer 'backward-looking nostalgic fiction' (267) later in the essay are essentially reiterations of this one point.

suggests the wisdom of such a conclusion: Junot Díaz, for example, is considered by different scholars postmodern (López-Calvo 87; Hanna 500; Bautista 51; Dubey 368, Graulund 32), post-postmodern (Scott), or not quite either (Lanzendörfer, 'Marvelous History' 139n; Miller 98). I shall then oppose any umbrella term that elides the complexities of my texts in order to create all-encompassing taxonomies.

My *modus operandi* in the course of the thesis, rather, will be inspired by works of contemporary criticism such as Alan Gibbs' *Contemporary American Trauma* (2014), Kelly's *American Fiction in Transition* (2013), and Kenneth Millard's *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* (2007). All these works consider a specific critical or literary topic they deem of particular relevance to contemporary American fiction: in Gibbs' case, the way trauma is represented through standardised formal devices in literature; in Kelly's, a specific subgenre of the novel; in Millard's, a theme that may also constitute a subgenre, or an alternative version of the (controversial) *Bildungsroman* (Millard 4). They contextualise these critical concerns historically and identify their relevance and relation to broader issues in literary criticism. Finally, they establish how their core texts stage their thematic concerns and employ their narrative devices and tendencies. Similarly, I will explore my core texts' contribution to the history of novels staging escapism and discussing it as a theme, and I will argue that their self-conscious escapism is connected to their broader reflections on ideas of influence, intertextuality, genre, and canon. Moreover, I will try to avoid any impulse to treat my texts as symptoms of broader historical changes – to see, for instance, their reliance on intertextuality as a consequence of the omnipresence of the Internet, and of the ubiquity of hyperlinks in it. The texts themselves, as we shall see, preempt such ideas. I shall begin, in the following chapter, by analysing and comparing the different ways in which these texts stage the process of narrative

escapism.

Chapter 1 – The Uses of Escape

Once our mental lives are filled with fear, anger, lust, disgust, and so on, the contemplative peace brought by a sense of beauty seems as if it would not be wholly lacking in practical value.

– Patrick Colm Hogan, *The Mind and Its Stories* (263)

The epigraph above summarises one of the conclusions reached by Patrick Hogan in his thorough examination of literary universals: that is, of tropes and narrative archetypes that can be found in cultures across the world. A crucial work in the field of cognitive literary studies, Hogan's *The Mind and Its Stories* (2003) suggests that a need for specific types of narrative might be biologically hardwired in human beings, and might serve very practical functions, not least providing 'a sense of beauty' able to transcend the limitations of life. It is a conclusion that calls to mind Umberto Eco's reflections on whether 'escape entertainments' might not serve a beneficial function, in spite – if not *because* – of what might be perceived as their technical and aesthetic limitations (*Role of the Reader* 121). Equally, it evokes John Cawelti's study of formulaic/genre fiction, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (1976), which advances the hypothesis – arguably confirmed by Hogan's later study – that certain narrative formulas are especially effective in fulfilling the human need for a satisfying escape from the harsh realities of life (6).

None of the characters peopling my core texts needs the data collected by cognitive literary studies, or the conclusions drawn by literary critics, to believe that certain stories – which will here fall under the umbrella-term of *escapist fiction* – serve a very practical purpose. These characters approach escapist fiction in order to understand the world, evade its limitations, and heal from traumas both personal and historical: it becomes a 'golden

key,' just like the magical device that grants superpowers to the metadiegetic Tom Mayflower, otherwise a lame young man, in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. Far from being a pernicious source of corruption, or a pastime to be indulged guiltily, the escape provided by storytelling is associated in these texts with boundless potential: an instrument that is all but magical, even if it always comes at a price.

In order to establish the parameters of further discussion in this thesis, this first chapter will highlight how my core texts represent the formative, liberating and therapeutic value of escapism, while at the same time self-consciously and ambivalently exploring its consequences, side effects, and dangers. Escapism is not defended exclusively in pragmatic terms: stressing the aesthetic and artistic value of popular fiction is also a key concern of my core texts, as I will demonstrate both through extensive close reading, and by discussing their position – and their authors' – in relation to discourses of 'high' and 'low' culture, and of hierarchical conceptions of genres.

'Getting Constructively Lost:' The Value of Escape

The creators of DeepArcher, the Deep Web location at the heart of Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013), expressly build it as 'a virtual sanctuary to escape to from the many varieties of real-world discomfort' (74). The ultimate escapist dream, DeepArcher is such a pleasant refuge that the novel's protagonist Maxine becomes increasingly compelled to inhabit it, especially in the hectic weeks following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Very soon, she becomes addicted to it. This apparently straightforward development – a character being lured into an addictive, escapist website – hides the almost paradoxical nature of this process.

A good starting point for any inquiry into what DeepArcher actually *is* would be to

consider its lexical components. The first, literal meaning of its name refers to a figure called 'The Archer,' which inhabits this website, and which Maxine witnesses as she stands on the edge of a precipice upon first logging in: 'Down the road behind, in forced perspective, recede the sunlit distances of the surface world, wild country, farmland, suburbs, expressways, misted city towers. The rest of the screen is claimed by the abyss—far from an absence, it is a darkness pulsing with whatever light was before light was invented' (75). DeepArcher is reached by leaving behind 'the surface world,' and rural and urban environments are equally renounced to achieve this immersion in a purely digital reality. The term 'surface world' also activates an immediate reference to the 'surface web,' constituted by the countless accessible websites most Internet users would be familiar with. DeepArcher, as the name again suggests, is explicitly located in the 'deep web,' accessed by hackers and by other figures on the edges of the Internet community – the geek-culture version of those counterforces and outcasts who are often the subject of Pynchon's fiction. Significantly, *Bleeding Edge* makes a compelling case for the Deep Web as a place of resistance to corporate control, in opposition to the highly corruptible Surface Web.

Similarly pertinent is the destination the Archer is facing: this primeval abyss points not only to the immense potential of DeepArcher, but to its nature as a force that pre-dates any form of control. The idea that the darkness of DeepArcher is full of 'whatever light was before light was invented' signals, first and foremost, the nature of even such a basic natural force as light as a human fabrication, with an implied inventor and purpose: one of the most common tropes in Pynchon's fiction is science's servitude to the dynamics of power, from rocket engineering in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) to cartography in *Mason & Dixon*. The pervasiveness of this form of control is represented in the implicitly negative connotations of darkness, generated by our inability to conceive a

time before light: the powerful consequences of control, which denies what lies beyond it even of terminology apt to define itself, is encapsulated by Pynchon in a single paradoxical line. Referencing the invention of light also evokes the opening lines of the Book of Genesis, arguably reinforcing the idea that the destination described might lie outside the domain even of God's control, or at least outside official, canonical narratives about God and creation.

But what *is* this destination, unnameable though it may be? To answer this question, we must refer to the word 'departure,' nested within the program's homophone name. The creators of DeepArcher, computer geniuses Justin and Lucas, have built their website as 'a virtual sanctuary to escape to from the many varieties of real-world discomfort' (74), juxtaposing a soothing fictional reality with the complexities and failures of the 'real' world. It is a veritable 'geeks' paradise' (319), and the ultimate escapist dream – a status that becomes clearer if we try to conjure up an image of this program. Consider: just exactly *what is* DeepArcher? Is it a Web chat, or an online video game? Is it made of text, or pictures, or video? Details abound in *Bleeding Edge*, so that we know that 'it's not a game [...] though it does have forerunners in the gaming area' (69); that it can boast terrific graphics, 'making Final Fantasy X, anyway, look like an Etch A Sketch' (75); that although these graphics are so life-like that they prompt Maxine to remind herself she is only looking at code (355), they can be interrupted by a paging window or dialogue box popping up in midair (76, 355); that characters in this world are avatars of the people controlling them, an eccentric haircut reduced to nothing but 'a polygon-busy GIF' (240); and that, ambiguously, their facial expressions *are and are not* limited by this fact: 'avatars do not do wistful, but Maxine catches something' as she is talking to a secretive friend of hers (357).

This accumulation of paradoxical details defies visualization. A computer graphics

expert, paradoxically, would be hard-pressed to create a visual representation of DeepArcher. The one detail we can solidly establish is the nature of DeepArcher as a *place*: people meet here, have conversations, and create or recreate the reality they want to inhabit. Different readers might visualise the website as a highly customizable sandbox reality, such as the one offered by the popular video game *Minecraft*, where players build Lego-like block structures in a virtually boundless world; as a more canonical video game of interacting elements; or as an exclusive, colourful chat room. We employ these images because, in order to make sense of a storyworld, we need to anchor our understanding of the novel to familiar terms we can elaborate upon. A useful notion in this context is Ryan's principle of minimal departure, which articulates how we reconstruct fictional worlds by drawing assumptions based on the information given in their texts, so that, for instance, 'the presence of the sky in fiction entails the presence of the earth [...] if a fictional world has people, it also has legs; if it has trees, it also has forests' (416). Through its ingenious use of imagery, *Bleeding Edge* subverts this principle – so that its storyworld continuously has to be reconstructed, as new details and revelations about DeepArcher challenge any straightforward interpretation of the website.

DeepArcher *is not*, ultimately, like any of the examples listed above. How would it be possible, if it were nothing but a peculiar chat room, for Maxine to start confusing the days she spends immersed in it with her everyday reality? If its graphics are bound by its avatars' limited forms of expression, how can Maxine be uncertain whether a certain fateful encounter happened in the world of DeepArcher or outside of it? Even admitting that these paradoxical scenes are nothing but a representation of Maxine's addiction to the world of DeepArcher does not make the subject of the website's representation any less cryptic.

DeepArcher is not so much a website or a game as it is an impossible, paradoxical

representation of the concept of escapism: of the process of retreating from a complex or disturbing reality into soothing fictional worlds. It is characterised by its idealistic origins as a way of defying the boundaries and obligations of everyday life; by its healing and redemptive potential, illustrated most clearly in the scene where Maxine finds her sons using the website to rebuild a pre-9/11 New York City in the aftermath of the attacks, in what Michael Chabon calls 'a lovely but improbable touch; clearly a parent's wish-kingdom for her children, not the children's own' ('Crying of September 11'); by its corruptibility to the dynamics of the market and the forces of capital, interested in turning DeepArcher – and escapism – into a source of profit; and, finally, by its addictive power, so that victims of its allure may end up forgetting where the line between fiction and reality lies. Like Lovecraft summoning up his 'Colour Out of Space,' Pynchon is pushing the potential of narrative by asking us to imagine something that we cannot physically conceive of.

I have mentioned DeepArcher's corruptibility to power, and the novel articulates this weakness as a conundrum faced by the website's creators: 'old classic dotcom dilemma, be rich forever or make a tarball out of it and post it around for free, and keep their cred and maybe self-esteem as geeks but stay more or less middle income' (37). The idea that these characters' dilemma is 'old' and 'classic' is ironic, especially in a novel set in 2001, when the Internet as a mass phenomenon was still relatively new; but hidden inside this irony is the idea, advanced extensively throughout the text, that the dilemmas faced by information entrepreneurs are the same posed by capitalism throughout history, and are as such perennial. Similarly, the notion that rejecting a proposed sale of DeepArcher would allow the creators to 'keep their cred [...] as geeks' situates their sub-culture directly in opposition to the forces of the market, elevating geek culture to a form of counter-culture.

In this way, it is possible to read DeepArcher as a metonymy of the entire Internet:

while originally part of a wave of idealism that is even compared to the cultural revolution of the 60s (116), it remains a highly corruptible tool, which can be exploited by the powers that be. Pynchon has narrated extensively the failure of the 1960s' cultural and social revolution, dedicating to the topic a significant portion of *Vineland* (1990) and *Inherent Vice* (2009). *Bleeding Edge* follows in their footsteps, and if the novel closes on a possibly hopeful note – with two different pairs of 'geeks' mounting an active insurrection against those forces that would control the Web – it is still rife with foreboding. One of its dedicated geeks, Eric Outfield, describes the Surface Web as 'a sorry picture' (428), with 'keyboards and screens turning into nothin [sic] but portals to Web sites for what the Management wants everybody addicted to, shopping, gaming, jerking off, streaming endless garbage' (432). We find in this passage the type of anti-governmental paranoia that is a staple of Pynchon's fiction; except that here, the role of the hidden power – of the capitalised 'Management' enslaving people to their exploited needs – is no longer played by the American government, nor by any of its official branches, but by the ineffable powers of the market: 'who knows, maybe even the CIA's scared of them' (399), the text reflects, puzzling over the very nature of its central antagonist, whose contours remain shrouded in mystery.

The ominous implications of the Internet's susceptibility to control are further explored in a conversation, steeped in sinister overtones, that Maxine has with her father, in which he foresees the rise of smartphones:

Everybody connected together, impossible anybody should get lost, ever again.

Take the next step, connect it to these cell phones, you've got a total Web of surveillance, inescapable. You remember the comics in the *Daily News*? Dick Tracy's wrist radio? It'll be everywhere, the rubes'll all be begging to wear

one, handcuffs of the future. Terrific. What they dream about at the Pentagon, worldwide martial law. (420)

The fact that this paragraph highlights the consequences of the impossibility of getting lost is not only significant in itself: it also points back to the original purpose of DeepArcher, whose experience implies an act of 'getting constructively lost' (76). Once more, the Internet becomes a place of either total freedom or total control, and the novel portrays and juxtaposes these opposing conceptions. Moreover, the exploitation of the Internet amounts to a perversion of its original purpose; and indeed, one of the main concerns of Pynchon's oeuvre is interrogating the ways in which areas of great freedom become ensnared by control, itself a term constituting 'a Pynchon signature' (Cowart 167).

Also relevant is the fact that the 'Web of surveillance' in the passage above is capitalised, a reference to the World Wide Web that is already a reality ingrained in most aspects of contemporary life. In this context, it is important to pay attention to *Bleeding Edge's* portrayal of and interest in popular culture, which constitute one of the basic components of the text on, first and foremost, a syntactic level, given the novel's extensive and ubiquitous intertextual references to all strands of pop culture (see Sandberg, 4-6). As such, it is relevant that the popular medium of comic books is mentioned as having first anticipated the epochal change described. Finally, possibly the most sinister implication of this passage lies in the idea that the dystopian scenario represented won't have to be forcefully imposed on people, who will instead submit to their imprisonment, lured by its fascinating potential. We thus get an implicit warning against the Web's, and by proxy DeepArcher's, powerful addictiveness.

As a corruptible online space with vast immersive and escapist potential, DeepArcher finds echoes in other contemporary American works. Mark Danielewski's *The*

Familiar #1 (2015) features a program called Paradise Open, still in its development phase, 'by which any timid heart might experience for an instant the sublime music of Time!' (378), and 'a place without- death!' (379). DeepArcher, too, as we shall see later in this thesis, has among its most peculiar features its apparent capacity to defy death: both, on an intuitive level, by offering a tool people can use to re-build a model of an indelibly damaged reality; and, more inexplicably, by being peopled by the resurrected avatars of characters who die in the course of the novel. Also, while the economic dilemma faced by DeepArcher's creators is always at the forefront of the novel's concerns, Paradise Open's creators also struggle to prevent their commercial interests contaminating the purity of their original intentions.

Parallels can also be drawn between DeepArcher and the OASIS in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011). A more straightforward, less ambiguous type of massive online video game, mixing fantastical and science fictional elements, the OASIS too can be read as a representation of unbound escapism, offering solace to the inhabitants of its novel's dystopian future. Even more significantly, the OASIS' well-intentioned purpose of providing the downtrodden with unlimited escapism is besieged, in Cline's novel, by forces of capital bent on exploiting it for their gain. This apparently straightforward plot – which may even appear self-contradictory, joining as it does a novel that relies heavily on intertextual references to consumer entertainment with a supposedly *anti-consumerist* message – hides a balance of opposing world-views and juxtapositions between commitment and escape, as argued by Tim Lanzendörfer (forthcoming).

All these fictional software programmes are effectively ways to stage the process of narrative immersion not as a mindless activity, but instead as the location of active pursuits, where characters can construct a new reality, re-shape their own, and alter the course of their lives and that of their peers. In the following section, I will focus on how

my core texts contextualise escapism in the same positive way, as a pursuit that, while never unproblematic, is highly valued by characters and grants them solace, healing, and insight.

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay: An Escapist Manifesto

A key feature of many of my core texts is the way their defence of escapism is articulated not simply (or at least not exclusively) in relation to everyday troubles and difficulties, but in the context of some of history's largest tragedies. Escapism is not merely a precious source of relaxation in a stressful modern world: it is a redemptive, even salvific force that can help characters cope with the most traumatic experiences. In what amounts to a true baptism of fire, escapist fiction, which might appear almost by definition to be 'non-serious,' is pitched against vast historical forces – war, genocide, terrorism, despotism – and represented as a safe refuge against them, and even as a tool that can be employed to counteract them.

My discussion of this tendency will take as a starting point Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. This Pulitzer-winning novel is an excellent case study for a variety of reasons, first and foremost because of how it pitches escapism in very clear terms against as vast a historical tragedy as the Holocaust, experienced by the novel's protagonist, Joe Kavalier. A young Jewish man, early in the novel Joe escapes occupied Prague for New York, only to remain powerless as his entire family back home is murdered by the Nazi regime.

With the possible exception of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, *Kavalier & Clay* has been the subject of more critical attention than any of my core texts, with many scholars focusing on the novel's problematic defence of escapism, and of the popular

media that are its vehicle. The struggle between escape and commitment at the heart of the novel is only the most explicitly articulated expression of a struggle that underlies the whole of Chabon's oeuvre, and which Dewey identifies as a tension 'between the sweet, centripetal pull of the imagination and the harsh, centrifugal pull of real life' (2). In the course of this thesis, I will articulate this tension in similar if crucially different terms as deeply connected with Lovecraftian horror, a genre to which Chabon has contributed a few stories. History in Chabon's oeuvre is an horrific, incomprehensible entity, a source of endless horrors against which human beings have no chance of survival. At the same time, narrative and art offer a 'golden key'²² to escape from the constrictions of this broken world: the hope that they offer is every bit as resilient as history is inescapable, in a never-ending struggle between the belief in a possible redemption and the frustration of that belief.

The main vehicle of escape in *Kavalier & Clay* is comic books, a new art form in the novel's setting, the New York of the late 1930s and early '40s. Cousins Sam Clay and Joe Kavalier establish a business and artistic partnership that leads to the creation of a plethora of super hero comic books, paramount among them *The Escapist*, a series focusing on an escape artist bent on liberating the oppressed people of the world. Through the artful blurring of ontological and diegetic barriers, Chabon's novel makes it clear that one of the *Escapist's* most impressive accomplishments is freeing the two cousins, his creators, from their respective prisons.

²² See Lovecraft's short story 'The Silver Key' and other narratives revolving around the character of Randolph Carter, most notably *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1943). In a writer so fond of hidden quotations, it is reasonable to see hints of Lovecraft in the name of *Kavalier & Clay's* fictional superheroes, the League of the *Golden Key*. The comparison is made more interesting by the novel's progressive shifting of the title to refer at first to the metadiegetic superheroes of Kavalier and Clay's comic books, and later to the novel's own diegetic characters.

Joe's work on the *Escapist* first and foremost eases the burden of his guilt, prompted by the fact that he alone is safe in the US while the rest of his family suffers in Prague. The successful comic book grants him the economic success he needs to buy his relatives safe passage across the Atlantic, while also helping him vent his frustration at his impotence through the sublimated violence of his art. The first issue of the *Escapist* comic book features a colourful cover on which the masked superhero punches Adolf Hitler on the jaw, a clear reference to the first issue of *Captain America*, by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon: Kirby is acknowledged explicitly as a crucial influence in the novel's 'Author's Note' (639), and, more implicitly, in the initials of Joe Kavalier. A startling image in peacetime America, the *Escapist*'s publishers are determined to reject Joe's Hitler cover, but he remains adamant and refuses to abandon it, standing by its explicit violence.

The potential for relief granted by violence sublimated in art is indeed a key point of reflection early in the narrative (150; 159). The *Escapist* series is so explicit in showing Nazis slaughtered by the titular hero that one character remarks, 'if I was a ten-year-old boy, I'd be amazed there was still any Nazis left over there in Germany, the way our friends here at Empire have been poundin' away at 'em' (208). Hidden in this humorous remark is the dehumanising power of such a take on fascism: Joe and Sam's enthusiastic and well-intentioned anti-Nazi motifs have an almost propagandistic effect on their target audience. Hillary Chute reads these passages as offering one instance of the novel's 'complex critique of fantasy,' reflecting fantasy's ambiguous status as an uplifting but also toxic force (283-4). The narrative itself problematises Joe's attitude toward drawn violence when, in a moment of doubt, the artist wonders if his muscular superhero is implicitly reinforcing a fascist world-view that exalts pure strength as the noblest of features (204).

This temporary impasse is soon overcome, once again, by escapist art. Joe leaves behind the violent first stage of his career – and the related hot-headedness that drags him

into several fights – to commit himself to new artistic enterprises. The first of these is a new superhero series of his invention, revolving around the adventures of Luna Moth, a pin-up magical goddess inspired by Joe's love interest, Rosa Saks. This innovative comic book features 'the first sex object [...] created expressly for consumption by little boys' (275), thus anticipating a later trend in the world of comic books; and its adventures revolve around 'spells and curses instead of bullets, torpedoes, and shells' (318), with the titular heroine '[fighting] in the wonderworld against specters and demons, and [defending] all us unsuspecting dreamers against attack from the dark realms of sleep' (318). We find in both Luna Moth and the Escapist a tension between sublimated ideals – freedom, good – and a pronounced insistence on physical actuality, on muscles in the Escapist's case and women's anatomy in Luna Moth's: significantly, the first feature of the latter character noticed by Joe and Sam's editors upon reviewing it is the size of her breasts (276). In the essay 'Secret Skin,' Chabon remarks on how the superhero genre is inherently concerned with representing, under ill-concealing costumes, 'the naked human form, unfettered, perfect, and free' (*Maps & Legends*, coda 19). Yet, in the case of the Escapist, his 'perfect and unfettered' body is a central feature of its escapist potential: when unaided by the golden key, the Escapist's alter ego Tom Mayflower is lame;²³ a trait with autobiographical implications, since Sam Clay too has 'the legs of a delicate boy' following a childhood bout of polio (4). The escapist's strong body also complicates the character's straightforwardly good nature, as it is employed largely to violent ends, to slaughter villains and enemy soldiers. Instead, the physical characteristics of Luna Moth are secondary to her mental, oneiric struggles. They constitute a strategy to lure young boys to the comic book, in an embodiment of the split commitment, to artistic integrity *and* to making money, that is

²³ Chabon might have modeled this feature of the Escapist's story on other superhero origin stories that see a disabled character acquiring superhuman strength and abilities, for instance Thor or Daredevil.

depicted in *Kavalier & Clay* as a central concern of escapist fiction. Moreover, while Luna Moth remains a 'sex object,' she is also the heroine of her story, and the saviour of her love interest, a 'big-shouldered, knuckle-chinned' (268) policeman whose physical attributes suggest muscles and fistfights. In this way, Chabon's metadiegetic character is consistent with the diegetic world he inserts her into – that of early-40's comic books – while still constituting a strong female figure, complicating if not dispelling the sexual politics of her comic strip.

The rejection of overt and muscular violence for a more metaphorical struggle, embodied in the shift from a macho superhero to a bookish magician woman, is accompanied by a change in the quality of Joe's artwork: influenced by Surrealism, Joe starts experimenting with the medium of comic books, so much that 'the standard three tiers of quadrangular panels [become] a prison from which he [has] to escape' (319). This passage encapsulates in the clearest terms the escapist potential not only of Joe's finished product, of his fictional creation, but of the very artistic process underlying that creation: the formal limitations of his medium are perceived as a prison by Joe, a suitable challenge for an amateur escape artist. Escape art is indeed a crucial referent throughout the novel: Joe's mentor, and the organiser of his eventual trip to America, is an escape artist with skills comparable to Houdini, the protagonist's childhood hero. Some of the novel's most salient passages, where its problematisation of escapism is discussed most clearly, are indeed articulated through parallels with Houdini as an artistic figure, as I shall argue later.

Joe's experimental tendencies are further encouraged by a fateful encounter with Orson Welles and his film, *Citizen Kane*, which – together with a temporary ban on all anti-Nazi propaganda in Kavalier and Clay's comic books – pushes Joe to focus 'not only on the superpowered characters [...] but also, almost radically for the comic book of the time, on the ordinary people around them' (368). The adverb 'radically' points to the

original nature of Joe and Sam's comics, highlighting a feature of the *Escapist* series identified by Chute in her analysis of the novel: how its development in the course of the novel comes to represent the evolution of comic books throughout the twentieth century, from their first instalments to their formal innovations to their ultimate realisation in the graphic novel form (285).

The redemptive powers of escapist creation are still rendered pointless by a crucial twist in *Kavalier & Clay's* plot, when tragic news from Europe prompts Joe to enrol in the Army, leading to twelve years of self-inflicted exile from Rosa and Sam. During the course of his exile, it is once more the medium of art and narrative, and of comic books in particular, that allows Joe to heal from his wounds. He dedicates himself to a long and ambitious comic book called *The Golem*, which, while making it increasingly hard for him to go back to his family (577-8), allows him to articulate an elaborate defence of escapism and escapist fiction. This defence constitutes one of the novel's most widely discussed passages, and is worth quoting at length:

He thought of the boxes of comics that he had accumulated [...] and then, in turn, of the thousands upon thousands of little boxes, stacked neatly on sheets of Bristol board or piled in rows across the ragged pages of comic books, that he and Sammy had filled over the past dozen years: boxes brimming with the raw materials, the bits of rubbish from which they had, each in his own way, attempted to fashion their various golems [...] The shaping of a golem, to him, was a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation. It was the expression of a yearning that a few magic words and an artful hand might produce something [...] exempt from the crushing strictures, from the ills, cruelties, and inevitable failures of the greater Creation. It was the voicing of a vain wish, when you got down to it, to

escape. To slip, like the Escapist, free of the entangling chain of reality and the straitjacket of physical laws [...] The newspaper articles that Joe had read about the upcoming Senate investigation into comic books always cited 'escapism' among the litany of injurious consequences of their reading, and dwelled on the pernicious effect, on young minds, of satisfying the desire to escape. As if there could be any more noble or necessary service in life. (582-3)

The passage touches upon all of *Kavalier & Clay's* key themes. Comic books are described as a humble and popular art form, made of cheap materials and exaggerated ideas, but nonetheless animated by ambitious aims: the pages of Sam and Joe's comics are filled with 'raw materials' and even 'rubbish,' and yet these materials are used to create a golem, a project that is not only magical, but even spiritual, considering how the figure is inextricably bound to Jewish folklore and Kabbalah (Unterman 86). The struggle between reality and imagination is represented in the starkest of terms, with reality being made of 'strictures,' 'ills' and even 'cruelties;' while imagination's basic weakness is highlighted by the 'vain' nature of the human wish to escape into it. The 'entangling chain' and 'straitjacket' of reality also call to mind another of the novel's recurring images, that of escape feats, themselves an attempt to defy the laws and obligations of nature. Henry Houdini in particular is the symbol of this liberating potential, and his feats are compared, later in the same passage, to the creation of golems.²⁴ Religion is finally invoked again in

²⁴ These ties between Houdini's Jewish origins and his escapist pursuits echo EL Doctorow's treatment of this historical figure, turned into a character in *Ragtime* (1975). Curiously, one of Houdini's features in the novel is his inability to 'distinguish his life from his tricks' (171): at one point, he insensibly insists a wounded worker, having miraculously survived an explosion, reveals the tricks he employed to do so (81-2). This confusion as to the precise location of the boundary between act and reality is a trait he shares with certain characters in *Kavalier & Clay*, and across my core texts, as I shall discuss in Chapter

the terms used to describe how comic books are persecuted: their 'pernicious' potential is included in the 'litany' of their side-effects, a term that configures the persecution of comic books in terms reminiscent of religious inquisition.

Escapism is contextualised in the most serious of terms: itself a noble, even spiritual pursuit, its persecution is equated to a 'holy war' waged against it. One is reminded of the first pages of *Telegraph Avenue* (2012), where a character questions the existence of God based on the impossibility of carrying one's vinyl collection in the afterlife (3) (a later chapter of that novel is titled 'The Church of Vinyl').

In a world scarred by wars and genocide, 'the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape from reality*, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf' (575, italics in the original): in this apex of Joe's defence of escapism we perceive the pessimistic connotations of his world-view, with its implicit representation of reality as a prison, from which escape is desirable. Joe reaches the same conclusions as Adam Phillips, who, in his study of escapism, focuses on one of the least-considered implications of the concept: that for escapism to exist in its negative connotation, there must exist 'a reliable account somewhere of what it is necessary for us to face up to,' and 'of what's so important about it' (27). Denouncing escapism as an immoral waste of mental energies implicitly invests the real world with supreme value; a notion that, to people who have suffered traumas such as Joe's, is revealed as entirely arbitrary.

The escapist powers of comic books are thus represented as a liberating, enlightening form of magic (576), able to subvert the dynamics of reality and of human thought to which we all are subjected; and still, in Chabon's Lovecraftian world-view, these wondrous powers have little hope of surviving the invincible magic of reality: 'The

true magic of this broken world lay in the ability of the things it contained to vanish, to become so thoroughly lost, that they might never have existed in the first place' (339). The idea of the 'broken world' further characterises Chabon's Lovecraftian, pessimistic world-view, a position he recuperates elsewhere in his writing (see Zoller Seitz 21), while the world's annihilating potential, especially if inserted in the context of a novel concerned with the Holocaust, cannot but call to mind the idea of historical revisionism. As such, this depiction of a denial of history as the greatest horror in the world's arsenal may be said to pre-emptively defuse a criticism moved against *Kavalier & Clay* by Alan Berger, who, while granting that Chabon's treatment of the Holocaust is as good a way as any of preserving its memory, believes that escapism, and the forgetting it entails, are 'the ultimate form of Holocaust denial' (88). *Kavalier & Clay* further pre-empt this point through Joe's reflection on how 'it was a mark of how fucked-up and broken was the world – the reality – that had swallowed his home and his family that such a feat of escape, by no means easy to pull off, should remain so universally despised' (576). These passages allude to the Final Solution organised by the Nazi regime, with its explicit aim of cancelling the history of Jewish Europe; but at the same time, they ascribe this perverse magic not to a specific foe – Nazi Germany, fascism – but to 'reality' itself. The struggle between the conflicting forces of the world transcends the political dimension, and acquires broader philosophical overtones: by making this 'broken world' the true antagonist of the novel, Chabon moves beyond simplistic depictions of Nazi Germany as the supreme evil of his novel, with America as an inherently superior alternative: American society, in fact, is portrayed as exhibiting some of the same anti-escapist, illiberal sentiments that characterised Nazi Germany, as we shall see shortly.

Lovecraftian pessimism is clearly identifiable in Chabon's depiction of reality as an invincible, inescapable force: compare Chabon's statements on the horror of reality with

Lovecraft's 'life is a hideous thing, and from the background behind what we know of it peer daemonical hints of truth which make it sometimes a thousandfold more hideous' (102), or again, 'the most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents' (355), the opening lines of 'Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family' and 'The Call of Cthulhu' respectively, both implicitly statements of the author's poetics. Here too we can recognise an implicit doom in the world's mystery and magic: a destructive force that maddens and condemns those who come into contact with it. Yet Chabon's fiction adapts the Lovecraftian trope in one crucial way: if it represents history and reality as cursed and inescapable, it also characterises the attraction of imagination and art as every bit as resilient as the destructive magic described in *Kavalier & Clay*.

Consider these few examples. Early in the novel, Joe and his brother Thomas are taken out to dinner to a magician's club to be cured of their infatuation with the exotic charm of the place. They are disappointed to see how mundane and unspectacular the club is. Even so, the narrative cannot help but add an old necromancer to the table close to theirs (38), casting the shadow of a doubt over whether the club's members are really nothing but cheap illusionists. Again, in Chabon's short story 'A Model World,' bookish Nate Shapiro eventually surrenders, as Dewey puts it, to 'an unspectacular adulthood in which nothing happens with awful slowness' (51), only to have his attention stolen in the story's closing line by the arabesques and alien shapes on a stamp from Israel (Chabon, *A Model World* 207). The attraction exercised by this exotic pattern calls to mind Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), where we find a character's fancy stimulated – though to a much more dramatic extent – by a similar occurrence. The magic and magnetism of the imagination cannot be ignored any more than the dark magic of reality can.

Two further episodes from the final pages of *Kavalier & Clay* further complicate the novel's unresolved tensions between reality and imagination. In one of these episodes, the Golem of Prague, which Joe helped smuggle out of his native city at the narrative's onset, finally reaches him at his American home. It is nothing but a heap of dust, and it has failed its sacred mission to protect the Jews of Prague. The well-intentioned magic that supposedly created it appears to have failed against the cruel magic of reality.

And yet two magical occurrences are hidden beneath this apparent failure. First, how exactly did the crate reach Joe? The stamps covering it can be used to reconstruct its journeys, tracing its origins back 'from Halifax to Helsinki, to Murmansk, to Memel, to Leningrad, to Memel once more, to Vilnius, in Lithuania, and finally [...] Prague' (599). Who shipped the golem's remains around, and how did they find Joe's Long Island home after more than a decade of wanderings? Second, and even more importantly, the crate with the Golem's dust is extremely heavy, whereas the creature was originally very light (62). Joe remembers the Jewish legend according to which 'it was the Golem's unnatural soul that had given him weight; unburdened of it, the earthen Golem was light as air' (611). Already hidden in this sentence's connotations is the paradoxical implication, apparently going against the grain of Chabon's association of art with salvation and reality with doom, that it was human manipulation and artifice that 'burdened' the Golem with an 'unnatural soul,' arguably corrupting an otherwise pure 'earthen' structure. In his essay 'The Escapist,' Behlman further reads this passage as a suggestion that the remains of the legendary creature might now be heavy with the souls of the lost Jews of Europe (107). The Golem was not able to save the Jews of Prague, but it managed to take on their suffering, and their lost souls; in a similar way, narrative and art (already equated with the Golem in the long passage quoted above) are unable to change history or save the European Jews, but can take on themselves the burden of representing their suffering. *Kavalier & Clay* leaves

unanswered the question of whether this wondrous feat is to be regarded as inadequate or miraculous.

Again: consider the scene in which Joe Kavalier visits the Cypress Hills cemetery in New York. Houdini is buried there, and the narrator remarks on the magician's failure to return, as he had promised he would, from his last entrapment, that of death (606). Once more, the positive magic of art and escapism seems unable to defy the cruel laws of reality. Or is it? While lying on the cemetery's grass, Joe is visited by the ghost of his old Czech mentor, Bernard Kornblum, who instructs him to go home and be with his family (608). Leaving aside issues of ontology and genre – it is not the first time a ghost steps into this supposedly 'realist' narrative – what this scene suggests is that defeating nature's laws *is* indeed possible; and if Houdini could not do so, then Kornblum, a superior escape artist, has managed to. This constitutes a happy coda to the tragic story of another Holocaust victim: Kornblum's demise in a concentration camp is hinted at by Chabon early in the novel, through a blood-chilling reference to his encyclopedic knowledge of European railroads (64). While he could not escape persecution, the escape artist comes back, similarly to the golem, to console and guide Joe.

The struggle between imagination/art/storytelling and the cruelty of reality is endless, and never resolved. Chabon's fiction never quite affirms the victory of one force over the other, and the small victories of imagination are always counterbalanced by the tragedies of history and reality, in a continuous cycle. What emerges from *Kavalier & Clay* is a powerful defence of escapism as a legitimate choice in the direst of circumstances, one that critics have read in various ways. Behlman reads a passage in the novel in which escapism is said to be a cure for Joe '*especially* right after the war' (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 575, italics mine) as an attempt on Chabon's part to limit the scope of his reflection on narrative's potential as a way of dealing with history, making of escapist fiction a

legitimate haven *only* in the immediate aftermath of a trauma, 'a safe refuge from the memory of the Nazi genocide and not a sufficient means of representing it directly' (Behlman 108). Dewey too finds the novel's final verdict to be in favour of harsh reality rather than escape: 'Chabon argues that art cannot console, cannot protect with happy endings and tidy resolutions' (87). We have already seen how Berger in particular is critical of Chabon's treatment of the Holocaust, and one of his key objections is that escapism, for all that it is portrayed as valuable in the novel, cannot allow anyone to escape the actual Holocaust (88). Yet I find it crucial in this context to refer to the novel's Golem: to the failure of its mission, but also to the magic that transferred into its body the souls of the lost European Jews. While this act does not constitute a reversal of the Holocaust, nor even the saving of a single person, this is not to say that it has no value.

Ultimately *Kavalier & Clay* can be interpreted as Chabon's own ambitious golem: helpless against the destructive forces of history, but nonetheless 'magical' in its presentation of narrative's wondrous potential, and in its desire to represent the suffering of European Jews. Much more nuanced than its elegant prose and fast-moving plot might suggest, the novel engages in a discussion on the value and controversies of popular entertainment, and many of its observations will be invoked in the course of this study. One of these is the way in which it presents comic books, its favourite vehicle of escape, not as a way of denying the Holocaust, but as part of the very set of values defended in World War II. 'What did we fight the war for,' one of the character bitterly reflects when confronted with news of public bonfires of 'pernicious' comic books, 'if when it's over they're going to be burning books in the streets of Alabama?' (586).²⁵

²⁵ In his final section, the book tackles the anti-comic paranoia in 1950s America, caused most notably by Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). In what *Kavalier & Clay* calls 'his fatal book' (408), Wertham, a psychiatrist, identifies comic books as exerting a corrupting influence on children, and as

The struggle between good and evil represented in *Kavalier & Clay*, and in the rest of Chabon's work, is not the fight between any two specific ideologies. The superior ideals that supposedly animated the American war efforts are shown as ultimately denied by American themselves, through a political act – the burning of books – quintessentially associated with Nazi imagery. Much later, *Moonglow* (2016) will return to this preoccupation, with its protagonist reflecting on how Nazi Germany might have metaphorically won World War II, if its values and *modi operandorum* thrive in today's world (396). The freedom of expression embodied in comic books, and the political charge carried by the denial of this freedom, thus acquire resonance beyond any discussion of artistic or aesthetic value.

Against the Day: Escaping the Pull of History

If *Kavalier & Clay* identifies the 'broken world' as the force that escapist art bravely opposes, then Thomas Pynchon's 2006 novel *Against the Day* offers an equally complex discussion of escapism that sees it as at once subservient to political and global powers, and as the platform for a rebellion against these same structures. Pynchon's sprawling narrative mixes genres and employs supernatural elements in an even more cavalier way than *Kavalier & Clay*. At the core of what is possibly the main narrative strand among the many carried on in parallel by the narrative are the Chums of Chance, a group of young adventurers who are also, bizarrely, the protagonists of a metadiegetic series of dime novels.

Every bit as ambiguous as the Chums' diegetic status – to which I will return – is *Against the Day's* own genre. Bernard Duyfhuizen (71-80) and Graham Sleight (255)

promoting, among other things, delinquency and homosexuality.

argue convincingly that the novel is in fact a pastiche of late-nineteenth-century/early-twentieth-century popular genres, from the Western to the spy story, from Lovecraftian horror to the time-travel science-fiction story. All of these popular forms are joined together in what Lethem appropriately calls an 'Utterly Centrifugal' narrative ('Pynchonopolis') to contextualise the historical tragedy of World War I, used as a case study of a broader "world narrative" that for Pynchon, writing in post-9/11 New York [...] is still being written' (Duyfhuizen 79).

Speculative and fantastical elements are used abundantly in a novel that presents a Lovecraftian conflict similar to *Kavalier & Clay's*, and that discusses 'the nearly unbearable conditions of cosmic struggle between darkness and light proceeding, inescapably, behind the presented world' (1074). The description of this conflict as 'unbearable' and 'inescapable' already represents it in absolute terms, while reference to its occurrence 'behind the presented world,' besides complicating the generic reading of *Against the Day* as a supernatural novel, can be interpreted as an allusion to the covert costs of everyday transactions and political systems. The adverb 'inescapably' again suggests that this struggle at the heart of reality is impossible to evade, although the novel's ending may seem to counterbalance, or at least complicate, this point. Having *escaped* the orders of their overlords, the Chums create a utopian floating city, and 'fly toward grace' (1220) in the closing sentence, away from the world's conflicts and concerns and aiming for a state with clear religious and spiritual overtones.

The main difference between *Against the Day's* Manichean world-view and *Kavalier & Clay's* is that, whereas Chabon locates his invincible horror in history and reality, Pynchon offers a more heavily politicised view, which attributes dark powers to the enterprise of world capitalism. Anarchist Webb Traverse summarises the narrative's view on dark magic: 'Maybe *capitalism* decided it didn't need the old magic anymore [...]

Instead of turning lead into gold, they could take people's sweat and turn it into greenbacks, and save the lead for enforcement purposes' (88).²⁶ Associating capitalism with an 'old' magic, the alchemical belief in the possibility of turning lead into gold, implies that capitalism too is a form of magic, a 'new' one, dark and ominous. While its explicit purpose is to turn labour into money, the reference to lead being used for 'enforcement purposes' points to a connection between capitalism and policing, entwining this economic system with control and authority. Capitalism's dark, ritualistic pursuit of profit, the passage suggests, is even more remunerative and convenient than the magic of alchemical transmutation.

Much like the novel's generic status – and like *Bleeding Edge's* DeepArcher – the existence of the Chums of Chance is something of a logical impossibility. They appear 'real' enough at the beginning of the novel (if one suspends disbelief regarding their Vernian airship, their talking-dog companion, and their journeys to the centre of the Earth), but they do not age as the decades pass, remaining in a perpetual adolescence. The dime novels chronicling their thrilling adventures are known and appreciated by the other characters in *Against the Day*, but it is unclear whether the boys *originate* from such metadiegetic adventures, or if the novels simply chronicle their brave acts around the world. *Against the Day* complicates the Chums' status from the very beginning by introducing them in the text within the context of the Chicago World Fair, which, as the narrator points out, 'possessed the exact degree of fictitiousness to permit the boys access and agency. The harsh non-fictional world waited outside the White City's limits' (40). This key line problematises the complex dynamic between the written and unwritten world in *Against the Day*: the 'fictitiousness' of the fair, and the 'harsh non-fictional' reality of the

²⁶ For a thorough analysis of *Against the Day's* engagement with economic theories that critique economic liberalism and neoliberalism, see Sean Carswell's essay 'The New Alchemy.'

outside world, are in fact deeply related to Pynchon's anti-capitalist critique, which sees the World Fair as a cover-up or facade used to mask the costs and crimes of the capitalist system. Reference to the 'White City' recalls the 'White Metropolis far away' that is the originating place of *Gravity's Rainbow's* diabolic 'They' (340), in a representation of capitalism that highlights how those that reap the fruits of the system inhabit an ontology whose symbolic purity is entirely disconnected from the system's brutal nature. The implication of *Against the Day's* characterisation of the World Fair is that the Chums of Chance are a product of the capitalist market, both in their nature – in spite of their artistic value or lack thereof, dime novels and pulp fiction are by definition consumer goods – and in the ideology they represent. Indeed, early in the novel the Chums are the explicit agents of the American government. However, what would appear to be a straightforward critique of escapist fiction as both a product and a tool of capitalist systems of belief is complicated throughout the novel by the Chums' self-questioning, and by their decision to escape the implications and limitations of their predicament.

At first uniformed champions of America's interests all over the world, the Chums of Chance become increasingly preoccupied, as the novel progresses, with the role they might be playing in spite of themselves in the global conflict they see approaching. These reflections reach a climax in one of the novel's central speeches, in which Miles Blundell, a member of the Chums who often acts as their conscience, wonders if the young men dying in the trenches might not have been just like them once, and whether they did not regard the World War as 'their own grand "Adventure",' and themselves as 'juvenile heroes of a World Narrative' (1150). The purpose of this poignant passage is to question whether the Chums' adventures might not have contributed to instilling in the youths dying in Europe a toxic lust for violence, the same concern that troubles Joe Kavalier when he suddenly notices the fascist ethos inherent in his violent superheroes. The reference to the

capitalised 'World Narrative' equates the Chums' adventures with the colonial ambitions and imperialist pursuits of world superpowers, reinforcing the image of the Chums as servants of the system. Consequently, popular narratives are exposed as a potential tool for exerting influence on the masses and supporting the interests of governments and armies.

But this is not the novel's final word on the topic. As the Chums realise the sinister aims of the forces directing their missions, they decide to distance themselves from their leaders, and to take a more active role in the larger narrative of *Against the Day*. While they are no more able to stop World War I than Chabon's Golem of Prague could save the Jews of his city, they *can* and do help some of the novel's characters survive the narrative's troubled events, and reach a bittersweet ending.

During a critical passage early in the narrative, young Reef Traverse becomes fascinated with one of the Chums' novels, so much so that for a few days 'he enjoyed a kind of dual existence' (241) inside and outside the world of the adventure. These are painful days for Reef, who has just recovered the body of his father Webb from the frontier outpost where he was murdered. The escape offered by the dime novel, which Reef reads 'out loud to his father's corpse, like a bedtime story, something to ease Webb's passage into the dreamland of his death' (241), has a strong therapeutic effect on him. He finds himself looking at the sky, and even believes 'he saw something familiar' in it (242), but whether he is seeing the Chums' airship, something else, or is simply delusional, is a question left unanswered. Reef puts vast hope in the Chums' pursuits, 'as if those boys might be agents of a kind of *extrahuman justice*, who could shepherd Webb through whatever waited for him, even pass on to Reef wise advice, though he might not always be able to make sense of it' (242, italics in original).

The escapist power of the Chums' adventures is highlighted powerfully in these pages, most notably by the mention of how they grant Reef a 'dual existence,' effectively

giving him a chance to alternate between the sorrow of his daily toiling and an implicitly happier life. Their power is so tangible it instantly blurs his perception of the divide between these metadiegetic stories and his diegetic reality, moving him to look for the novel's characters in the sky. Their stories also become a bizarrely collective experience, reconnecting Webb, a curmudgeon and temperamental father, with his son, through an inversion of roles in which it is the younger man who reads the old one to sleep – a metaphorical slumber 'into the dreamland of his death.' The act of immersing himself in these escapist fantasies arguably gives Reef a frame of reference to make sense of his father's death, turning it into an act of falling into a deep sleep. This implication is also echoed in Reef's explicit hope that the Chums' may 'shepherd Webb through whatever waited for him,' and even more, in the hope that the Chums may provide a form of 'extrahuman justice' – of justice from outside the failing, pernicious world of human affairs. Ultimately, Reef believes that fiction, in spite of its occasionally perplexing and cryptic passages – of which he is 'unable [...] to make sense' (242) – may bring forth the justice that is outside his reach in his reality, where his father was executed by the thugs of a corporate mogul because of his anarchist activism. It is precisely this hope, as doomed as it is powerful, that is articulated time and again in self-consciously escapist texts.

It takes several decades for Reef's hopes to come true, and the Chums have to reconsider their priorities and aims first (622-4), but it is eventually revealed – in a fleeting passage, easy to miss in such a dense novel – how the boys on their airship *are*, in fact, 'invisibly but attentively keeping an eye on the progress of Reef's family exfiltration from the Balkan Peninsula. [Their] task at this juncture was to steer everyone to safety without appearing to' (1089). The Chums of Chance, and the popular fiction of which they constitute almost a metonymy, are here shown to have turned from the hidden servants of a malevolent system to hidden defenders of the system's victims: the text's insistence on how

they act 'invisibly' and 'without appearing to' stresses the quintessentially imperceptible nature of their role, characterising them as agents of the invisible struggle between good and evil that is said to be carried forward beyond apparent reality – with all its implications in terms of politics, philosophy, spirituality, and conspiracy.

What, then, is the novel's final judgement on popular fiction? What role can escapism play in a novel that deals with the grimmest of themes, and which asks the question 'if you are not devoting every breath of every day waking and sleeping to destroying those who slaughter the innocent as easy as signing a check, then how innocent are you willing to call yourself?' (97).²⁷ This role is best explained in another of Miles Blundell's reflections. The Chum compares his group's journeys around the world, both in the novel *Against the Day* and in the fictional series within it, to a symbolic pilgrimage:

As the Franciscans developed the Stations of the Cross to allow any parishioner to journey to Jerusalem without leaving his church-grounds, so have we been brought up and down the paths and aisles of what we take to be the all-but-boundless world, but which in reality are only a circuit of humble images reflecting a glory greater than we can imagine – to save us from the blinding terror of having to make the real journey, from one episode to the next, of the last day of Christ on Earth, and at last to the real, unbearable Jerusalem. (283)

What this passage conveys is the sacredness of fiction's mission as a way of elaborating truths about a world that is often 'unbearable,' whose terror makes those who

²⁷ The passage, with its almost comically exaggerated insistence on a need to invest 'every breath of every day waking and sleeping' (97), is arguably simultaneously stressing the guilt implicit in inaction, while poking fun at an excess of zeal on the part of the novel's anarchist characters.

witness it blind. In these descriptions of reality as unapproachable and maddening, even more than in their monsters and dark magic, resides the truly Lovecraftian legacy of texts such as *Against the Day*. Furthermore, the extensive references to Christian imagery and religious belief in the passage constructs escapism as a spiritual pursuit, as also happens in *Kavalier & Clay*, and abundantly across my core texts. *Against the Day*'s final scene, and the fact that the Chums 'fly toward grace,' thus acquire further spiritual implications: it is as if the novel's heroes, having completed their sacred quest, ascend to the status of pop-cultural 'saints;' or at least strive 'toward' it. The image of the 'circuit' reflecting a greater glory also recalls a key scene in Pynchon's canon: the passage from *The Crying of Lot 49* when Oedipa Maas compares the inner workings of a radio to the pattern of the streetlights around her, and reflects upon the existence of hidden circuits and lines of power that might convey secret messages, and influence her life in mysterious ways (15-6).

Control and power are inescapable in Pynchon's fiction; and, in fact, the sacredness of fiction's consoling purpose is as corruptible as *Bleeding Edge*'s DeepArcher. The Chums of Chance constitute a problematisation of one of the key concerns of late Pynchon novels: the way popular culture might serve political interests bent on war and oppression, and might be nothing more than what, in the words of *Bleeding Edge*'s Eric Outfield, 'the Management wants everybody addicted to' (432). The romanticisation of risk in dime novels, which might have deluded so many young soldiers into thinking war would be an adventure, is only one example of this process. Impresarios and showmen in *Against the Day* stage such shows as 'African Antics' (182), 'Wogs Begin at Wigan' and 'Roguish Redheads' (1008) to feed their audiences' racism and tap into their worst impulses. One of the novel's characters remarks on how popular literature 'pickles your brain for you' (175): the man speaking here is not only a ruthless detective, who uses such insight to persecute the weak and oppressed people he is paid to keep under control; it is also easy to read

significance in his lapsus, which transforms 'picks' into 'pickles,' the humorous implication being that dime novels turn the reader's brain into mush, a variation on the old belief in the noxious effect of popular fiction.

In the context of such a problematic dynamic, *Against the Day* as a whole and the Chums' story within it in particular can be said to work as a grand rehabilitation of popular genres. The Western strand of the novel does not pitch brave cowboys against vicious bandits or Native Americans, but anarchists against government officials,²⁸ corporate overlords, and their ruthless thugs. Time-travelling is not a way of exploring primitive communities or wondrous future landscapes, but the means for late-nineteenth-century boys to witness the horrors of the twentieth century and beyond, and for future crooks to exploit the limited resources of the world. Even Lovecraftian horror is given a political spin: Michael Chabon argues that a key scene in the novel, where 'a primeval thing out of Lovecraft'²⁹ ('The Crying of September 11') wreaks havoc on a polar town, is clearly a

²⁸ In yet another example of the ambivalence of Pynchon's fiction, described extensively by Hanjo Berressem, it is never clear in *Against the Day* who exactly the 'true' Americans are. In one crucial passage, an investigator is disoriented when he realises that, underneath their beards, anarchists look as American as the rest of the country, suggesting that they might be less a foreign threat than a movement inherent in American ideals (56). Yet, later, a child of oppressed miners answers the question of 'What It Means To Be An American' with: 'It means do what they tell you and take what they give you and don't go on strike or their soldiers will shoot you down' (1210), thus equating American identity with the very opposite of that freedom that is often seen as the country's foundational ideal.

²⁹ Chabon and Pynchon have both drawn inspiration from the classic Lovecraftian novel of polar horror, *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), itself a piece of 'fan-fiction,' based as it is on Poe's Antarctic adventure, *Gordon Pym* (1838). *Against the Day*'s chapters on the alien horror recovered from the Antarctic wastes are echoed by *Kavalier & Clay*'s section 'Radioman,' where an estranged and bereft Joe Kavalier is alone in Antarctica, and faces a faceless enemy who pushes him to the edge of madness (435-6). John Campbell's *Who Goes There?* (1938) is also invoked in certain pages of 'Radioman' (see 437).

commentary on 9/11, and on America's reaction to that tragic event.

Against the Day develops extensively one of the key concerns of Pynchon's oeuvre: how to balance one's personal life with an awareness of historical struggles and global dynamics. At the beginning of Pynchon's career, *McClintic Sphere in V.* (1963) answered the question with the aphoristic 'keep cool, but care' (366). *Vineland* (1990) articulates the same point in clearer terms through activist Sasha Gates: 'Maybe we all had to submit to History, she figured, maybe not – but refusing to take shit from some named and specified source – well, it might be a different story' (80). The boisterous, no-nonsense tone of this passage hides a clear invitation to stand up to the injustices of the system on a daily and personal basis. The point that *Against the Day* makes in both subtle and overt ways is that popular and escapist fiction can indeed help characters face these everyday challenges: how it does not have to be the passive servant of any master narrative, but can indeed help one navigate the world and its lesser and greater horrors because of its enlightening potential, and the inventive freedom it grants.

Moonglow and The Keep: Liberating Imagination

Self-conscious escapism portrays storytelling as a way of coping with a world that is often too unbearable to accept as it is. This point is reiterated in Michael Chabon's most recent fictional work at the time of writing, *Moonglow*, a novel and faux-memoir where storytelling forms part of a rich thread of recurrent imagery, alongside narratives games. Among these, one that impresses the narrator – a fictional alter-ego of Chabon – when he is a child is a storytelling card game in which his grandmother would take three cards from a deck of tarots, and build a story based on them. Reminiscent of postmodern staples such

as Calvino's *Il Castello dei Destini Incrociati*³⁰ (1969) or Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*,³¹ where tarots play a crucial role, this game deserves closer consideration for two main reasons.

First, through this diegetic game Chabon showcases the poetics of storytelling he articulates, most notably, in his essay 'Fan Fictions,' focusing on the importance of influence in the creation of narrative. *Moonglow*'s narrator admits that 'the stories I remember tend to be the ones I re-encountered in the plot of a film or in a book of folktales' (24): his grandmother's stories are not 'original' in the strictest of senses, but retellings and adaptations of the tales she has internalised throughout her life. Later, when she spends a period of time in a mental asylum, and organises the staging of a play there, she adopts the same technique to write the show by copying an obscure novel (344n). In a display of documentary-like zeal that paradoxically ends up highlighting precisely the novel's fictionality, Chabon uses footnotes to trace many of his grandmother's sources (344n, 24n, 25n), a device he also employs on occasion in *Kavalier & Clay*, and which again occurs in the comic book series *The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist* (2004), based on Chabon's metadiegetic character. What is of particular relevance to this

³⁰ Translated into English as *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, the novel is composed entirely through the same device detailed in *Moonglow*: in each chapter, a different story is constructed starting from a series of cards drawn randomly from a tarot deck. On Calvino's influence on Chabon, see *Maps and Legends* 13; 136.

³¹ *Moonglow* alludes frequently to Pynchon's novel. Both novels employ the V2 rocket as a literary symbol, and describe the horrors of the working camps of Peneemünde. At one point, Chabon references the day when 'a V-2 had fallen on the Rex Theater in the middle of a showing of *The Plainsman*, killing or injuring nearly a thousand people' (166), precisely the event that is described at the very beginning, and possibly at the very end, of *Gravity's Rainbow* (Herman & Weisburger, 218; Weisburger, 285). *Gravity's Rainbow* is also discussed explicitly on several occasions in the course of Chabon's novel.

discussion is how some of *Moonglow's* stories turn out to be eerily difficult to locate for the narrator. Two different books (25n; 118), one set of pictures (319), and a fateful set of notes by his grandmother's psychiatrist (353) are among the items that complicate the narrator's reconstruction of the web of narratives from which his grandmother built her stories. All these missing elements would seem to tip the narrative into the Lost Book trope that can be found time and again in my core texts, a key plot element in *Oscar Wao*, *House of Leaves* (2000), *S.* (2013), and in several of Pynchon's novels, not to mention *Il Nome della Rosa*. What the missing pieces of this puzzle point to is the fluidity of the storytelling experience, where no clear boundary can be drawn between one story and another: a central tenet in a novel that, like the rest of my core texts, is extensively intertextual, demonstrating how every story is born of another one; how, to quote 'Fan Fictions,' 'all novels are sequels' (Chabon, *Maps and Legends* 45).

Even more intriguingly, the narrative card game plays a crucial role in *Moonglow's* plot, as it represents the first surfacing of a broader process in the narrator's grandmother's life. As is revealed in a shocking twist, she has been using storytelling since her youth to cope with a traumatic experience, and most of what she has told others – including her husband – about her childhood in her native France is nothing but fiction (355). Storytelling is, to her, a coping mechanism to avoid facing the horrors of her past. The process of narrative creation is thus represented as life-changing and potentially redemptive for the narrator's grandmother, but also as disempowering and disorienting for her significant others, and, ultimately, as damaging to her mental health.

The clearest example of storytelling's destructive power in the grandmother's life is provided by the Skinless Horse, a demonic hallucination³² that plagues her and causes fits

³² In the kind of generic complication that is ubiquitous in my core texts, *Moonglow* never explicitly excludes, and at times even suggests, the possibility that the Skinless Horse might be more than just a

of inexplicable behaviour. Still, the narrative's characters do not necessarily reduce the Skinless Horse to a mere symptom, and her husband cannot help but admire it:

My grandfather often felt frustrated or baffled by my grandmother's illness, but when it came to the origins of the Skinless Horse he thought he understood [...] There was a voice like that in everyone's head, he figured; in my grandmother's case it was just a matter of degree. You could almost see the Skinless Horse as a clever adaptation, a strategy for survival evolved by a proven survivor. If you kept the voice inside your head, the way most people did, there could really be only one way to silence it. (84)

The grandfather's pragmatism, widely discussed in the novel, emerges here in relation to his wife's condition: impatient with stupidity and hesitation, he is ready to appreciate what he sees not as a mental health issue, but as a 'clever adaptation.' The idea of the Skinless Horse as a 'strategy' turns the hallucination into a burst of clever, if involuntary, pragmatism, making it all the more admirable to the crafty grandfather – and raising a further possibility: that the grandfather's conception of the Skinless Horse as a 'survival strategy' may itself be a strategy, developed to cope with an illness that is otherwise 'frustrating' or 'baffling'. Also implicit in the passage is the idea that horror fiction, which exercises precisely this externalisation of deep and troubling concerns, is a noble and even necessary pursuit – another 'clever,' and useful, strategy.³³

hallucination. This feature of the novel will be explored further in Chapter Three.

³³ Elsewhere, Chabon articulates this defense of horror in clearer terms: see his essay 'The Other James,' where he describes the key concerns of ghost-story writer MR James as 'the breathtaking fragility of life, of "reality", of all the structures that we have erected to defend ourselves from our constant nagging

Of course, all of the above is cast under a cruelly ironic light by the revelation, occurring late in the novel, that the narrator's grandmother is not, in fact, a 'proven survivor' at all: that while she experienced traumatic events in Europe, including the act of rape that led to the birth of her daughter, her identity as a Holocaust survivor was her invention. It thus becomes impossible to establish up to what point the text is supporting, or critiquing, the constructive value carried by the grandmother's 'survival strategy'. Arguments in favour of and against it are endlessly complicated in the course of the text. '*You're right, I told a story*' is *Moonglow's* grandmother's excuse every time someone finds a flaw in the continuity of her stories about her life, or realises that what she is recounting could not possibly have happened (426). The line between play and seriousness is blurred and unclear, and life can turn into 'mere' storytelling at the grandmother's (and the narrator's) convenience.

It is no coincidence that this supposed 'memoir' opens with a disclaimer in which Chabon affirms that he took whatever liberties he wanted with the events told. A great desire for malleability in the creation of one's own story lies at the heart of *Moonglow*. As ever in Chabon, the escape granted by narrative is no easy solution to anybody's problem, and even the narrator's grandmother – who shows a remarkable ability to shape her own life according to her stories – leads an existence marred by mental illness, so much so that her own daughter wonders if she was ever really happy (426). Yet the desire to rely on the liberating potential of imagination endures, as represented for instance in the grandfather's passion for model rockets. The models built by the old man provide an alternative to the chaos and troubles of his life: one of these includes, nested within it, a miniature replica of his own family, their faces featureless: 'you could imagine smiles into those blanks. You

suspicion that underlying everything is chaos, brutal and unreasoning. It is hard to conceive of a more serious theme, or a more contemporary plot, than this' (*Maps and Legends* 119-20).

could write any kind of story across them that you pleased' (427). The two verbs 'imagine' and 'write' are used here as synonyms, in spite of the generally personal nature of the former act, and the generally public or at least outward-directed nature of the latter. As such, a further implication of the passage may be to provide an idea of writing as a means of addressing individual difficulties; and even more significantly, to highlight the importance of the imagination in shaping a person's public persona. This point is indeed stressed throughout *Moonglow*, notably in the prominent role the grandmother's stories, and its narrator's, play in shaping their characters' personality.

The soothing powers of the escape into imagination are also a key concern of Jennifer Egan's inventive novel *The Keep* (2006). Half Gothic novel, half prison narrative, the book is largely set in and around a European castle that is being turned into a luxury retreat of a very peculiar kind. Howard, the man behind the castle's renovation, firmly believes in the human need to cultivate one's imagination. 'Think about medieval times,' he tells Danny, the novel's protagonist; 'people were constantly seeing ghosts, having visions – they thought Christ was sitting with them at the dinner table, they thought angels and devils were flying around. We don't see these things anymore. Why? [...] And then I got it: *imagination*. We've lost the ability to make things up' (44-5). This passage works on two levels, one narrative, and one thematic. While characterising Howard's fixity of purpose when it comes to his work, it also suggests the rather imprecise, sketchy nature of his reflections: the idea that in general 'medieval times' people harboured the kind of extreme superstitious beliefs he ascribes to them seems based largely on unquestioned preconceptions. The implication here, as later developments in the plot will confirm, is that Howard's motives and approach to his job may not be as carefully thought-out as he would like to believe. This side of Howard's personality becomes even clearer if we compare him to another Egan character, Thomas from *Look at Me* (2001). A visionary entrepreneur like

Howard, Thomas is chasing a goal that is at once the opposite of his, and eerily similar: creating a website to allow people living in an abstracted information society to reconnect with more genuine human experiences (200). In the course of the novel, Thomas is eventually revealed to be more interested in product placement opportunities and in his own creative whims than in capturing in electronic form the authenticity of any real person. Both texts call into question the honesty and commitment of their visionary characters.

As is the case across self-consciously escapist texts, imagination is an ambiguous force in *The Keep*. On the one hand, Howard sees it as redemptive, almost holy: '*Imagination!* It saved my life. I was a fat kid, adopted, I didn't have many friends. But I made things up. I had a life in my head that had nothing to do with my life' (45). Once more we encounter the belief that escapism, rather than offering a mere distraction, allows people to live a fully-fledged 'second life' away from the limitations and strictures of a difficult reality; while equating the imagination with 'making things up' – also referenced in the previous citation, with its belief that modern people are unable to 'make things up' (45) – points to the liberating powers of an act with implicitly negative connotations. The terminology Howard uses, in fact, offers a reminder of fiction's quintessential non-truthfulness, and an embrace of it for precisely this reason. Yet the pull of imagination, and Howard's desire to chase its call, are also what push him into danger: first, when he is just a child, and his cousins play a trick on him to get him lost in a dark cave (14-7); and later, when, chasing his desire to 'shed the real/unreal binary' and embrace his thirst for adventure, he is trapped by a mad woman in the castle's dungeon (193).

In *The Keep*, imagination and escapism are once again a gate to a deeper knowledge of what goes on in the world, and keys to interpret a reality that is otherwise impossible to cope with. Howard's childhood experience with the salvific effects of

imagination is a representation of that power. Another one, even more macroscopic, is the novel *The Keep* itself, a supernatural Gothic novel inserted within the framing device of a prison's creative writing class, and which constitutes a way for its narrator to cope with the murder that made a convict of him.

A concrete, physical representation of the powers of insight granted by imagination can be found in one of the novel's locations: the castle's pool. First, the pool grants young Danny a glimpse of the hidden horrors of reality, in what is the novel's most Lovecraftian moment: the pool's smell 'got him thinking just for a second [...] that normal life was thin, it was flimsy: a flimsy thing stretched over another thing that was nothing like it, that was big and strange and dark' (70). It is a belief encountered time and again throughout self-conscious escapism that real life, when accessed without the mitigating filter of any narrative or belief, is a maddening and evil creation, described here as 'big,' thus difficult to face in its entirety; 'strange,' thus disorienting; and 'dark,' thus frightening and sinister.

Yet in the novel's conclusion, another character – having escaped to the castle to experience a retreat from everyday life – gains access through the same pool to the childish excitement she had previously forgotten (242), the excitement that has shortly before been described as the capacity to hear 'something else, barely there, so shadowy I tried not to scare it away by paying too much attention' behind the everyday noises of traffic and life (231). This is, again, arguably a variation on the Lovecraftian representation of an invincible reality: if the world is a dark, impenetrable mystery, it is also possible for characters to encounter similar mysteries of a more positive, even redemptive nature. Imagination provides so strong a second view and second hearing in *The Keep* that one of the prisoners in its frame narrative even builds a radio, filled with nothing but trash, that supposedly allows him to hear the voices of the dead; and if he might be deranged, the same cannot be immediately said of the narrator himself, who grows less and less sceptical

of his friend's instrument – perhaps because of his own personal experience with the boundless magic of storytelling.

Imagination is not just a caprice for rich adventurers in *The Keep*, but a basic and physical need. When Danny meets a strange woman living in the castle's keep, and the two of them get into an odd conversation about sarcophagi and noble families, he experiences a strange feeling:

What she was saying did something to him, filled up his brain with kings and knights and guys fighting battles on horses. That stuff had always seemed unreal to Danny, like it only existed in books or games, but here was a lady who was linked to all of it [...] This excited Danny in a way that felt like hunger. It was *physical*. He had to know more, had to keep her talking. (86)

Through an act of storytelling, the fantastical elements related by the old woman become so 'real' – thus leaving the realm of 'books or games' and allowing Danny a fuller, deeper immersion – that his appreciation becomes a compulsion, and he 'has' to know more: to reach narrative satisfaction. We are reminded once more of the idea of escapism as not so much an intellectual whim, but as a basic human need, vehemently described as 'physical' and even compared to hunger. This passage would thus seem in opposition to the argument articulated by David Shields' *Reality Hunger* (2010), in which he provides a manifesto 'for a burgeoning group of interrelated [...] artists in a multitude of forms and media' (3) who question the fictionality of what is considered 'real' across contemporary American culture, and embrace a new desire for authenticity based precisely on the acknowledgement of the inevitably fictional elements present in narratives of any kind. There are aspects of *Reality Hunger* that are relevant to my core texts: Lethem gave the

book an enthusiastic blurb; Shields' chapter on the paradoxical nature of memoirs as inevitably relying on invention (56-62) echoes some of the themes of *Moonglow*. At the same time, what my core texts' characters experience is, if anything, a hunger for *imagination*, usually in the form of escapist fictional artefacts. As such, Shields' belief that "fiction"/"nonfiction" is an utterly useless distinction' (63) is incompatible with the poetics of many of my core texts. Their metadiegetic escapist texts are powerfully salvific and enlightening *precisely* because they are fictional, and removed from reality. Chabon's questioning of the possible degree of authenticity of any 'factual' account in *Moonglow*, and his depiction of the inevitable contamination that happens in memory between actual and fiction-mediated experiences, does not equate to a final collapse of the fiction/nonfiction barrier. Indeed, the novel's grandmother is a disturbing example of the troubles that might ensue once that distinction is forgotten. The prominence *Reality Hunger* gives to authenticity, ultimately, aligns it with other contemporaneous studies of American fiction concerned with ideas of sincerity, and puts it in opposition to self-conscious escapism. I will return to this opposition later in my thesis.

The imaginative Gothic story told within *The Keep* is so compelling that one of the prisoners in its frame narrative physically attacks the narrator when he refuses to disclose how the events unfold, frustrating his fellow convict's need for imaginative escapism (58-61). Imagination is such a powerful force that characters are sometimes surprised it is not *all-powerful*, as when the narrator describes the feeling 'of wanting something so badly you can't believe the force of your wanting won't make it be there, won't make it come back' (77). A lack of imagination bores people, and makes them basically 'dead' – or so Howard believes (45). He also knows who is to blame for today's imagination-deficiency: the entertainment industry, to whom we have granted the task of stimulating our fancy, which has atrophied from under-use (45). This defence of imagination as an active, playful

process is typical of my core texts, with their privileging of active and free play over more passive forms of entertainment.

Just as escapism and popular culture, most notably the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (12), are said to have saved *The Keep's* young Howard from his grim childhood, so the escape provided by storytelling can free the novel's narrator from his prison cell and hopeless life. He himself is astonished by the enchantment that makes it possible for mere words to be liberating, and become true sources of escape: 'After Holly³⁴ mentioned that door in our heads, something happened to me. The door wasn't real, there was no actual door, it was just *figurative language*. Meaning it was a word. A sound. But I opened it up and walked out' (19). Once more, escapism's physical dimension – the almost synaesthetic capacity of immersive fiction to generate concrete satisfaction and trick, or delude, the body – is referenced in a very clear metaphor, one that is further complicated by the novel's peculiar status. Writing about *Against the Day*, McHale observes that 'we find threaded throughout the novel assertions that would normally be taken metaphorically but might just as plausibly be literal here, given the peculiar norms of this novel's world' ('Pynchon's Postmodernism' 107). The same is also true of *The Keep*, indeed of all my core texts, given the peculiar forms generic contagion assumes in all of them. Considering the multiple borderline-supernatural events occurring in the novel, with its dead-broadcasting radio and old women mysteriously becoming young again, how can we affirm with certainty that the door in the passage above does not refer to some fantastical form of transmigration, or even to a metaleptic intervention by the narrator into the metadiegesis of his story? Overall, these ambiguities testify to the powerful and pervasive potential of the escape into imagination, to its physical and concrete dimensions, and to its capacity to overcome limitations.

³⁴ The convicts' creative writing teacher.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and The Ice Storm: Through the Escapist Lens

We have seen how self-conscious escapism presents fiction not just as a way for characters to abandon their reality. Just as often, it constitutes a 'golden key' to better face this reality, a way of coping with a world that otherwise appears meaningless and incomprehensible. Among the texts that explore this concept most extensively is Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, revolving around the difficult life and untimely death of Oscar De León. Early in the novel, Oscar is characterised by the narrator as 'a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man' (6), at once making explicit his commitment to these genres and identifying what might otherwise be considered a childish pastime as a serious pursuit. Oscar's nerdy passions distance him from common Dominican male stereotypes, and make a pariah of him throughout the novel (30, 49, 180, 278, 295). This supposed deficiency of character is portrayed as so inexplicable that Yunior, the novel's narrator and very much a typical (in his own terms) Dominican macho male, feels compelled in the novel's first sentence (excluding its prologue) to begin his description of Oscar by emphasising 'how *very* un-Dominican' he was (11, italics in original), situating Oscar's commitment to genres in opposition to his racial and national background from the very start.

What makes this opposition paradoxical is that it is precisely Oscar's passion for popular genres that grants him a unique understanding of the very concrete, terrible horrors of his native Dominican Republic, and of its history. Both Daniel Bautista (44-5) and María Blanco reflect on this contradiction, and on the way Oscar uses escapist and genre fiction 'to comprehend the distance between his situation as one of many Dominicans

living in the USA, and the strange, often hallucinatory, progress of Antillean and Dominican history that provoked this journey away from the homeland in the first place' (65).

Oscar's interpretative powers acquire more than symbolic resonance in the novel: thanks to his encyclopaedic knowledge of science fiction, Japanese animation, and superhero comic books, he is able to gain not simply a deeper understanding of his ancestral country, but to use his knowledge to heal his people from the curse – called *fukú* in the novel – that has plagued them since time immemorial. Tragically, the manuscript containing his solution to the *fukú*'s curse is lost in the mail after Oscar is murdered by a love rival; but is it truly impossible to reconstruct Oscar's lost manuscript? Another, similar lost book is mentioned earlier in the novel:³⁵ 'an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime' (245), written by Oscar's grandfather Abelard Luis Cabral, who, although not explicitly a 'nerd,' is every bit as bookish as his grandson. Defining the volume as an 'exposé' already situates it in the realm of political scandal and counter-narrative, arguably contrasting these concrete and worldly concerns with the decidedly other-worldly

³⁵ The loss of both manuscripts casts one of the longest supernatural shadows in a novel whose ontological and generic status is ambiguous to say the least. The loss of Abelard's manuscript is described as suspicious by Yuniór: 'Strange that none of Abelard's books, not the four he authored or the hundreds he owned, survive [...] All of them either lost or destroyed [...] You want creepy? Not one single example of his handwriting remains. I mean, OK, Trujillo was thorough. But not one scrap of paper with his handwriting? That was more than thorough. You got to fear a motherfucker or what he's writing to do something like that' (246). Oscar's manuscript is lost in no less mysterious circumstances: all the rest of his correspondence from the last period of his life reaches his friends, but not the fateful manuscript, which looks as if it 'got lost in the mail, or [Oscar] was slain before he put it in the mail, or whoever he trusted to deliver it forgot' (334). The aura of mystery around this event calls to mind the struggle described throughout the novel between the forces of good, represented by the alien-magical Mongoose, and the evil Faceless Man.

implications of the dossier's 'supernatural' subject.

Yunior seems to dismiss Abelard's lost manuscript as nothing but a rumour, 'only a story, with no solid evidence, the kind of shit only a nerd could love' (246). But is he – or the text – really dismissing Abelard's manuscript so easily? Yunior's characterisation of the lost manuscript as 'the kind of story only a nerd could love' is a crucial statement in a narrative that deals extensively with the suffering of Oscar as a social pariah, a condition originating precisely in his peers' inability to understand his 'nerdy' passions. Such a nerdy story might be exactly what is needed in a place such as the Antilles, characterised early in the novel by the almost aphoristic, rhetorical questions 'what more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?' (6), which interweave inseparably the opposing narrative strands – personal and epic, fantastic and historical, Dominican and 'nerdy' – that run through *Oscar Wao*.

Even more importantly, it is possible that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is itself the lost book of Abelard, and perhaps, of Oscar himself. After all, *Oscar Wao* is 'an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime' (245), and 'the kind of book only a nerd could love,' as only a nerd (or at least someone dedicated enough to *become* one, or assume the point of view of one, in the course of the reading experience) could appreciate the full scope of Díaz's intertextual play in the novel. While the extent of the dense intertextual web woven through *Oscar Wao* will be explored in detail in Chapter Two, it is worth mentioning here how most of Oscar Wao's genre and nerd culture references are left unexplained, as documented by Sean O' Brien in his analysis of the text. Throughout the novel, readers have to decide whether they are content with what meaning they can infer, or prefer to research the references' source further. It is also worth remembering that Oscar's cure to the fukú would constitute a form of zafa, or counterspell (7), and Yunior makes it clear from the novel's outset how *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* itself is a

zafa of sorts (7).

Textual evidence in the novel would suggest that identifying these three books – the diegetic texts written by Abelard and Oscar, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, existing outside the diegesis – as one and the same is a plausible hypothesis. As he is being led to his execution, Oscar is certain that the process he has begun to put an end to the fukú cannot now be stopped (322); and he later visits Yunior, the novel's narrator, in odd and prophetic dreams (324-5). Whether Oscar's research will be brought to completion by his niece, for whom Yunior is preserving all of Oscar's beloved books, games and manuscripts (330-1); whether it will be or has been completed by Yunior through *Oscar Wao*, as much an exposé of the horrors of the Trujillato as it is its narrator's way of coping with his guilt about the role he played in Oscar's misery; or whether it is the act of reading the text that finally brings the lost manuscript to light, by filling in the many blanks left in the novel – in its plot, in its web of references, or the actual blanks that occasionally break the text – is left, in yet another instance of these blanks, to each reader to establish.

Escapist fiction thus confers navigational powers in a world that is often more absurd and disorienting than the supposedly absurd metadiegetic scenarios represented in it. This is also one of the points advanced by Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1994), where the superhero comic book series *Fantastic Four* is used by the narrator, Paul, as a way of making sense of his dysfunctional family. For Paul, *Fantastic Four* comic books provide an escape from the harshness and complications of adolescence, as they do after a traumatic night spent with a young woman, when the latest issue of *Fantastic Four* is 'enough to lift Paul Hood from the murky bog of self-recrimination' (193). The adjective 'murky' is especially significant here, considering how Paul's recriminations throughout the book pass through his adolescent sexual urges, and reach an apex of anxiety in a scene involving his own bodily fluids. Escapism lifts the character out of a mysterious bodily

existence, and into the abstract, rarefied world of storytelling.

The comic book is 'like a desert oasis to him,' a place for 'deviants and losers and mutants and the loveless [...] Paul Hood's people' (192): notice the communal dimension, the sense of belonging implied here. Yet if these comics reverberate so clearly in Paul's consciousness, it is because they seem to perfectly represent the 'corny melodrama' of his life in suburban New England, so much that he feels 'entrapped in the monthly serializations of [...] kitschy superheroes' (194). As much about its historical setting – the 1970s – as it is about the microcosm of Paul's family, *The Ice Storm* conflates time and metaphor in its last paragraph, and describes 1973 as 'that *annus miserabilis* where comic books were indistinguishable from the truth' (279).

While Paul's feeling of being stuck in a 'monthly' comic might point to the cyclical – or even perennial – nature of his suffering, the novel's reference to 1973 as a year indistinguishable from comic books is proof of *The Ice Storm*'s ambivalent attitude toward the medium of comics. Moody's novel never seems to take its intertexts too seriously, and at times goes to great lengths to show their inner absurdities (192-4), perhaps in an effort to highlight the inconsistencies of the year, the decade and the family they are compared to.

That is not to say that *The Ice Storm* does not explore in a nuanced way the problematic but redemptive potential of escapist fiction. The influence of comic books on Paul extends to the way he conceives of storytelling, as is made explicit in the novel's very presentation of its events. Each of the novel's parts follows the parallel lives of the four main characters by dedicating a separate chapter to each, in a way that is compared to the progression of different narrative stands in a single issue of a comic book: 'That story was connected to this one just as events were linked in the world of Marvel Comics – where *The Submariner #67* was folded between two panels in *F.F. #140*, which itself contained

information primarily available in *F.F. Annual #6* (83). The implications of this passage relate to the interconnectedness of the characters' existence, and to the broader connection of everything to everything else that is a tenet of postmodernism, illustrated here through the 'linked' world of Marvel comics. However, the references to crucial episodes 'folded between two panels' in a specific comic book issue, also hint at the difficulty of accessing the deep reasons for an event or behaviour, just as the characters in *The Ice Storm* – followed by the narrator inside their most private reveries – all live inner lives virtually inaccessible to their family members.

Marc Singer analyses the way comics are used by Paul as a reflection on continuity, orchestrated in order to compare and contrast 'the inevitable restoration of the [Fantastic Four's family] with the already irreversible dissolution of the Hood family' (281). This kind of reflection is made possible by the nature of the narrator: a lover of popular and 'nerd' culture,

Paul was a garbage head! A loser, as they were called among stoners [...] Decipherer of obscure lyrics. He and his roommate had parakeets named Aragorn and Galadriel.³⁶ He had pored over *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the pronouncements of Michael Valentine Smith.³⁷ He had black-light posters and tapestries and he burned incense and wore wire-framed glasses and played military strategy games. (Moody 85).

These references make Paul's status as a social pariah clear: even other sub-cultures – 'stoners' – apparently exclude him from their social circle. His nature as a 'decipherer'

³⁶ Characters from the popular fantasy saga *The Lord of the Rings*.

³⁷ The protagonist of Robert E. Heinlein's science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

and as someone who 'pores over' certain 'pronouncements' highlights the seriousness of his pursuit, equated with an exegetic quest, a search into hidden knowledge; a feature also suggested by his fascination with 'obscure lyrics' and 'black-light posters.'

The implication of this passage is that Paul observes the world through what T.S. Miller calls 'the lens of genre fiction,' a concept developed in the context of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, but crucial to the analysis of all the novels studied here. The idea of the 'lens' indicates the way a character or narrator's passion for popular genres alters the way he sees the world. Note for instance how Paul, having just read an issue of *Fantastic Four* on a train stuck in the middle of a blackout, is scared by someone coming his way, and expects 'the kinetic bad guys of comic books' (198). A crucial reflection in the novel is also conveyed through this kind of lens: to try and make sense of his neurotic family, Paul identifies each of them with a character from *The Fantastic Four*. His father, for instance, is compared to The Thing, alien and different from the other heroes (80). Not surprisingly, he is also the one member of the family who seems unreceptive to popular and nerd culture: Paul's sister 'lived for the Saturday night horror films – *Chiller Theater* and *Creature Feature*' (131); and his mother too has read both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (153). Paul's father, on the contrary, 'hated comic books, of course. The idea that hard-earned Schackley and Schwimmer dollars might trickle down the hands of the Marvel Comics Group needled him' (84). The fact that an adult man's dislike of comics is glossed with an 'of course' once again points at the impropriety of escapist fiction, and the poor regard in which it is generally held, as does the reference to the 'Marvel Comic Group:' comics are not referenced through their series' titles, but through the official name of their company, making them not so much a work of art or entertainment, but a consumer product sold by a specific brand for the explicit – and, to Paul's father, despicable – purpose of making a profit. Paul's father thus represents a stereotypical and prejudiced, if

not entirely unfounded, notion of escapist fiction. And this cannot help but contribute to his inability to connect at any significant level with his son, or in truth with any member of his family, to whom such entertainments are significant.

Still, Paul's father is far from the only character to harbour such prejudice in my core texts. If so far I have highlighted how these texts represent the process of escaping reality into fictional worlds, debate the benefits of such a choice, and argue for its healing potential, in the next section I will explore how they simultaneously complicate these representations of escapism by staging some of the dangers and pitfalls this pursuit entails for their characters.

'Like Having Bat Wings:' Escapism's Double-Edged Sword

The Fortress of Solitude: No Easy Escape

While recognising a need for escape, and the potential for it granted by popular fiction, not all my core texts feature characters ready to embrace such a possibility. Far from an easy solution to one's personal problems, escapism can instead be portrayed as a burden and a trap. This is the case in Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003), where Dylan, the novel's protagonist, finds it impossible to fully embrace the salvific potential of popular media. The miseries of his young life – his mother's elopement, his bullying, his difficult friendships – constitute the narrative bulk of a novel that touches upon the impossibility of escapism in the complex racial context of gentrification. In its very last paragraphs, Dylan poignantly realises how he has been unable throughout his life to surrender to his passion for escapist media because this would have meant admitting a need for escape:

I considered now that what I once loved in [Brian Eno's *Another Green World*] and certain others – *Remain in Light*, “O Superman,” *Horses* – was the middle space they conjured and dwelled in, a bohemian demimonde, a hippie dream. And that same space, that unlikely proposition, was what I'd eventually come to hate and be embarrassed by, what I'd had to refuse in favor of soul, in favor of Barrett Rude Junior and his defiant, unsubtle pain [...] *Another Green World* was [...] too fragile, too yokeable – I wanted a tougher song than that. I knew stuff B. Eno [...] didn't, and I couldn't afford to carry them or their naïveté. (507-8).

This is a highly revealing passage, where Lethem employs the metaphor of popular music³⁸ to discuss the process of gentrification at the heart of the novel: the 'bohemian demimonde' and 'hippie dream' he mentions are precisely the kind of world his parents hoped to create in Brooklyn. But there is another side to this: the woman who owns the building where the family lives, and who has orchestrated their arrival into the borough, has explicit gentrification plans in mind, which survive well beyond her: the Brooklyn of the nineties, pictured in the last pages of *The Fortress of Solitude*, is peopled by sly landlords pushing prices up to create areas of wealth impregnable to struggling families. The parallel here between gentrification and escapism stresses Dylan's guilt at his fascination with pursuits of the imagination, with 'unlikely propositions' that he comes to hate; his only alternative is instead to embrace the more down-to-earth, direct pain of soul music. This decision is directly connected to the peculiar dynamics of Dylan's upbringing:

³⁸ Lethem has written extensively on the topic as both critic and journalist, including in a book-length study of Talking Heads' *Fear of Music* (2012) where he discusses the nature of the album as a 'Science Fiction Record,' although in an explicitly dystopic rather than escapist key (82-3).

throughout his teenage years, he has to contend with the rough and complex racial situation of the borough's school system, and of its street life. The humiliation he is forced to endure grants him access to 'stuff Brian Eno didn't know' (possibly another in-joke for music connoisseurs, considering Eno's reputation as a savant and guru), and as a result, it alienates Dylan from his imagination and its potential.

An example of Dylan's inability to accept his need for escape is provided by the comic book *Omega the Unknown*, whose young protagonist is bullied by his peers, the way Dylan too is on a daily basis. Dylan does not allow himself to appreciate this detail, or find solace in it, since it would mean admitting to his status as victim: 'Hell, maybe even the geniuses up at Marvel Comics knew you were in hell. Didn't matter, didn't help, because you weren't allowed to know it yourself, not really. There wasn't any connection between you and the poor, helpless kid in *Omega the Unknown*, not that you could permit yourself to see' (82). The way this passage is phrased – with the connection between Dylan's life and the comic book character's implicitly recognised, but still denoted as one he can't 'permit' himself to see – calls to mind the unwritten but rigid laws of the street that Dylan has to follow throughout his adolescence, especially regarding 'yokin' – bullying and pestering to obtain pocket money. The passage's reference to 'hell' also reveals the full implications of Dylan's troubled life, and echoes Oscar de León's description of his high school years as a 'moronic inferno' (19).³⁹

These same reasons render Dylan unable, for a long time, to make friends with young Arthur Lomb, the only other white kid in his Brooklyn school, who shares his interest in comic books and chess, and is as bullied as he is (111). As an adult, Dylan carries on this refusal by committing himself both aesthetically and professionally to soul

³⁹ This description inserts the novel at the end of a literary chain: *The Moronic Inferno* is the title of a 1986 collection of essays by Martin Amis, who borrowed the title from Saul Bellow (xi).

music, with its 'defiant, unsubtle pain' (508) that constitutes almost the opposite of an escapist stance. He writes liner notes to (fictional) soul records (293-305); he is working on a movie script about an innocent African American convict who forms a soul band while in prison (322-8); and his music collection is defined by his girlfriend as 'the Ebdus collection of sad black folks [...] A million whining moaning singers, ten million depressed songs, and five or six happy songs – which remind you of being beaten up when you were thirteen years old' (315-6). Defining the records as the 'Ebdus collection' highlights the almost exploitative nature of Dylan's pursuit, appropriating the suffering of a troubled minority to dramatise and make sense of the collector's troubles. The idea that even the happy songs only serve as reminders of Dylan's misery also has the double effect of pointing to the obsessiveness of Dylan's concern with his childhood, and of stripping from these events the aura of significance with which he invests them: referring to Dylan's bullying as 'being beaten up when you were thirteen years old' rings with an almost dismissive note, and might be a strategy, employed by Dylan's girlfriend, to deconstruct the 'privileged sanctuary' (317) that keeps Dylan's obsession with his past suffering alive.

Yet the most essential, even metaphorical example of Dylan's refusal to accept escapism is represented by Doily's ring. For a five-hundred-page novel that occasionally describes in painstaking detail very quotidian acts – the painting of a single movie frame, a game of skully on a Brooklyn sidewalk, how to shoplift spray paint – *The Fortress of Solitude* spends surprisingly little time on the fact that it contains *an actual magic ring*, able to grant its owner either the power of flight or of invisibility. Dylan only uses it very sparingly, and crucially enough, never in Brooklyn. Just as he is only able to embrace forms of escapism when away from home (punk carelessness in Manhattan, post-punk sophistication at Camden), he can only embrace magic when far away from the grim reality of his native borough: unsurprisingly, he first flies with the ring during a brief

vacation in Vermont (180). When he *does* use the ring to fight crime in Brooklyn, it is his friend and mentor Mingus Rude who does the flying, with Dylan reduced to the status of a mere sidekick.

A similar rejection of escapism can be found in a crucial passage of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. After a moment of romantic disappointment, Oscar abandons his passion for popular genres, a decision that leaves him depressed and suicidal. As he is about to take his own life by jumping off a bridge, he is confronted by a supernatural vision: a golden mongoose. Yunior observes of this event, 'dude had been waiting his whole life for something just like this to happen to him, had always wanted to live in a world of magic and mystery, but instead of taking note of the vision and changing his ways the fuck just shook his swollen head' (190). His refusal to embrace his beloved world of magic almost costs Oscar his life; but it is only a momentary weakness, which he will later ascribe to the fukú's influence: 'It was the curse that made me do it' (194), thus employing the world-view granted to him by his genre commitment – Miller's 'lens of genre fiction' – to cope with even such a traumatic experience. As Díaz has said of his character, 'Oscar is a million things that are fucked up, but he's one thing that is really quite beautiful, really quite luminous, and it's that Oscar's always Oscar' (Díaz, 'Junot Díaz, Diaspora, and Redemption' 37). This single redeeming feature allows him to embrace his passion for escapist genres even when it makes his life hard, which is most often during the novel; and it is precisely what will allow him to find his solution to the fukú curse in the novel's bitter conclusion.

Dylan, on the other hand, is a completely different character. His counterpart from *Oscar Wao* is not the title character but Yunior, the narrator, a 'closet nerd' (Miller 95) who decides to hide his passion for popular genres for the sake of social acceptance (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 21). Unlike Yunior, Dylan never meets his Oscar, and is never able to freely

embrace his dedication to popular genres. Considering his pained final reflection in the last paragraphs of *The Fortress of Solitude*, in which he admits that he 'couldn't afford to carry [the] naïveté' (508) of imaginative and oneiric music, it appears that escapism as a choice remains inaccessible to him to the last.

Escapism & Isolation

Social isolation is one of the greatest dangers involved in the pursuit of fiction as represented within self-conscious escapism. An excessive fascination with imagination is seen as an inherent flaw rather than a conscious choice; furthermore, it does not elicit sympathy, but instead makes those suffering from it impossible to approach and relate to. 'You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like?' asks the narrator of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: 'Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. Ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest' (22n). This humorous passage highlights, through the language of comic books so dear to Oscar, the dilemma that haunts him from childhood: the same escapism that allows him to navigate his world is what condemns him to be a social pariah. What, to a fan of comic books, might look like a desirable situation – 'being an X-Man,' a superhero – is revealed instead to be a dreadful curse, one whose causes are not even the cursed one's fault: being smart and a person of colour are not decisions one makes, while being bookish, especially in the context of a passion for escapist literature, is the result of a deep-seated passion. The text expands on this shortly afterwards: 'What is clear is that being a reader/fanboy (for a lack of a better term) helped him get through the rough days of his youth, but it also made him stick out in the mean streets of Paterson even more than he already did' (22n). Characterising Oscar as a 'reader' points to a feature of escapism, its

nature as an intellectual pursuit, that is irreconcilable with the very physical image of Dominican machismo that his novel's Dominican characters, chief among them its narrator, take to be the norm. The lack of a proper term to identify Oscar's commitment also points to the quintessential otherness of his condition, so peculiar and so alien to societal norms it lacks even a specific definition; and the novel, indeed, never hides how Oscar occupies the lowest rungs of his neighbourhood's social structure, only marginally above 'the handicapped kids and [...] Joe Locorotundo, who was famous for masturbating in public' (17). All his life, this dedication prevents him from gaining the acceptance of his peers, but the pull of his passion is as strong as its damaging effects. Even in college, where he is as excluded as always, 'he wanted to blame the books, the sci-fi, but he couldn't – he loved them too much' (50). If a desire to escape into imaginative worlds might be hard-wired into all humans, and especially prominent in some of them, nevertheless it is 'often linked to a sense of failure' (Phillips 6), that is, to a handicap, an inability to function correctly.

Oscar is also an example of how a commitment to escapism can distance a character from his ethnic and social background. I have already noted how the other Dominican characters in the novel refuse to recognise him as one of them, so far removed is his personality from the stereotype of the Dominican male. A similar process, with more sinister overtones, happens to the characters of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, and in particular to Joe Kavalier.

Chabon's novel touches upon the Jewish origins of many comic book artists, including Superman's creators (77-8). Their ethnic background is even shown as influencing their creations: Sam Clay comments, semi-ironically, 'they're all Jewish, superheroes. Superman, you don't think he's Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing his name like that. Clark Kent, only a Jew would pick a name like that for

himself' (585). Notice how Sam discusses comics with an almost scholarly dedication – analysing them as works of literature for further themes and reflections nested within them. Yet the novel also highlights how uncomfortably these Jewish elements would have sat in the culture of the industry's early days. Joe Kavalier's first drawn superhero is a rendition of the Golem of Prague, which is promptly rejected by his future publishers because of its Jewish connotations (86). In fact, the broader parable of Joe's arrival in America is shadowed by the possibility that, in order to feel integrated in his new society, the boy might have to reject part of himself; if not his religion specifically, then his broader identity as a Jewish Czech man. One of the eeriest passages in this context is the one where he finally reaches New York City after a perilous journey, and feels 'as if he weighed nothing at all' (66). This passage calls to mind the Jewish figure of the Luftmensch, one of the archetypes of Yiddish literature, a dreamy person who feels separate from the concerns of everyday life: although indeed a hard worker, it is true that Joe is peculiarly susceptible to the pull of fantastical worlds, from escape art to comic books. The observation also alludes to the figure of the Golem, which, as previously mentioned, is very heavy at the end of the novel, but as light as air at the start, as there is no soul weighing it down. Is Joe's weightlessness a signal that his soul too has been left behind, now that he has reached the land of his escape?⁴⁰ After all, Joe starts shedding his cultural identity, by adopting an American attitude and manner of speech, even before he has left Prague (17, 71). '*See you in the funny papers*' is the last thing Joe

⁴⁰ The construction of America as a 'land of escape' is articulated throughout Chabon's novel. Consider for instance how Joe's little brother Thomas mispronounces New York's Statue of Liberty as the 'Statue of Liberation' (59); a curious mistake, in a novel so concerned with the idea of escape, both physical and artistic (through both escape artists such as Houdini, Kornblum or Joe Kavalier himself *and* escapist fiction). The pun is made more curious when it is later re-used in the context of the fictional Empire City in the Escapist comic book, implicitly an alternative version of New York (123).

says to his parents before leaving them forever (19), which is peculiar both for obvious reasons (his future in the comics industry), and because it is later implied that Joe uses this idiom without knowing what it means, as he is not even aware at this point of what a comic book is (73). The guilt Joe feels in hindsight about such a flippant farewell foreshadows his future misery.

Joe's cousin Sam Clay can be seen as a victim of escapism too, although his sacrifice is closer to Oscar Wao's than to his cousin Joe's. If it is true, in fact, that Sam too has to discard his surname, Klayman, for the gentilised Clay, in his case the process appears closer to the transformation from common nobody to brave hero that is a staple of superhero comic books. Rather, his dedication to escapism exerts a different toll on Sam. His fictional creations, the Escapist and his extraordinary colleagues, change Sam's life, as significantly as they do Joe's, turning him from a dreamy, bullied young man – a 'little skinny guy [...] who believes there's life on Alpha Centauri and got the shit kicked out of him in school' (94) – to rich comic book writer. It is the realisation of all of Sam's dreams, and his chance to access the kind of life he has dreamed of.

Sam's description of himself immediately points to the very physical dimension of his wish to escape, with the double reference to his poor physical condition and experiences with bullying highlighting Sam's self-consciousness in this regard. Repeatedly throughout the text we find mention of Sam's stubborn, and supposedly failed, attempts to develop a stronger physique than the one left him by childhood polio. This wish of his is interconnected with his longing for his father, a vaudeville artist called the Mighty Molecule, whose showmanship focused on displays of great strength. Joe plays a crucial role in granting Sam the 'golden key' to escape from his unpromising life, and to turn his imaginative dreams – about 'life on Alpha Centauri' – into a business, both through his

prodigious artistic talent, and because of the inspiration he offers Sam.⁴¹

Yet an equally prominent role is played, later in the narrative, by Tracy Bacon, the actor who plays The Escapist in the radio serial based on the superhero, and who soon becomes Sam's lover. The two characters of Bacon and the Escapist are eerily interchangeable: Tracy Bacon 'looks exactly like the Escapist' (300), and Sam, in a clear display of the reach of his imagination, oddly comments that he '*sounds* just like Tom Mayflower' – the Escapist's true identity (300, italics mine). A dedicated fan of escapist fiction and the pulps (4), Sam is the one character in the novel whose fiction addiction is so strong it can occasionally blur his perception of the world. Not even Joe, with his passionate defence of escapism and comic books, ever has problems recognising the ontological and diegetic barriers separating comic books characters from his world, the way Sam occasionally does. Finally, just as the Escapist's character grants Sam economic and professional escape from his humdrum Brooklyn life, so Tracy Bacon allows him to fully embrace his homosexuality.

The couple's love story ends in tragedy when they are discovered in the course of a police raid on the Long Island home where they are vacationing. Tracy Bacon is beaten by policemen, while Sam is raped by a federal agent, and later, unable to cope with his shame, decides to break up the relationship. What condemns Sam in this scene is not so much prejudice against homosexuality, still described in all its ugliness in the novel: it is *prejudice against escapist fiction*. The housemaid who calls the cops on Sam and his friends is the sister of Carl Ebling, a young man obsessed with the Escapist who believes

⁴¹ Most obviously, the Escapist is primarily an escape artist, just as Joe trained to be in Prague. More specifically, the Escapist talks the way Joe does (71; 132), and the inspiration for the character comes to Sam as he observes his cousin's physical prowess (112-3). Another crucial and explicit model for the Escapist is Sam's absentee father (105; 112-3), who died during the boy's childhood.

himself to be a comic book villain, and who is sent to jail after he attempts to plant a bomb at a Bar Mitzvah. The woman decides to call the cops on Sam and his friends not because of their sexual orientation, but to punish Sam specifically, whom she blames for her brother's madness, convinced as she is that the comic books Sam writes are a cheap way of corrupting the weak (409). She even asks Sam, who is being taken away by the police, 'how does it feel, Mr. Clay, to make your living preying off the weak-minded?' (413), thus once more supporting the stereotypical view of comic books as pernicious, crude commodities aimed at inferior intellects.

This same distrust of escapist fiction later condemns Sam once more, as it leads to the historical campaign against comic books by 'the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency' (613), in the course of which Sam is publicly exposed as a homosexual. Yet in one more spin of Chabon's cycle of escape and entrapment, this moment of public shaming becomes for Sam an occasion to finally live his life openly; yet another golden key to his freedom, one he might find in California, the land of Los Angeles and Hollywood, where the pursuit of escapism through narrative – in the form of television and movies – is a colossal business and recreational pursuit (623).

Escape and Redemption: Mark Danielewski's House of Leaves

The idea that books and narrative might grant access to extraordinary powers and vast dangers is present across Mark Danielewski's oeuvre. A few characters in *One Rainy Day in May* (2015), the first volume in his ambitious series *The Familiar*, discuss an event they have heard about: a woman has died in a local bookstore while 'flipping a book' (256). What interests the novel's main character, a precocious child, is the role played in the event by the book the woman was reading: 'Do you think [...] what she was reading made the

difference? [...] Do you think a book could do that?' (256). The child is, understandably, reminded of her father's saying that 'reading is risky business' (257).

The cursed or lost book is a well-established literary trope, but Danielewski's work is its *ne plus ultra*, most notably in *House of Leaves*, a complex collection of impossible and lost texts. The way the novel breaks diegetic and ontological boundaries, and its nature as a text that consumes the reader while it is itself consumed (Hayles 802), will be discussed later. What is relevant here is the idea, central to the text, that the escape into fiction and texts might be a dangerous, even lethal pursuit, but that the pull of fictional worlds might also yield different, salvific results.

With its various fonts, unconventional page formatting, coloured inks, pictures, and further typographical oddities, *House of Leaves* can be called a Chinese-box novel, constituted by a framed narrative that glosses, through footnotes, appendixes and intermissions, a text titled *The Navidson Record*. Yet another instance of the 'lost book' trope that is so common in my core texts, *The Navidson Record* describes frame by frame the film of a supposedly famous director called Will Navidson, documenting the exploration of a haunted house that does not seem to obey the rules of Euclidean geometry. Johnny Truant, narrator and author of the frame narrative to *The Navidson Record*, specifies in his introduction that the Record itself – the movie discussed in the study he glosses – does not appear to exist, nor do many (though not all) of the secondary sources quoted by Zampanò, *The Navidson Record's* original author (Danielewski, *House of Leaves* xix-xx). Even more than *Kavalier & Clay* or *Moonglow*, and similarly to George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), *House of Leaves* exploits its status as a fictional documentary and the mixing of fictional and non-fictional sources to problematise the truth-value of its content.

As an extensive exploration not just of the mysterious house, but of themes of

isolation and solipsism, *The Navidson Record* details how its protagonist's obsession with the house separates him from the rest of his family, and takes a toll on him that is both physical and psychological. At the peak of his obsession, Navidson immerses himself in the ever-changing, dark halls of the house; he only survives because of Karen, his wife, who overcomes her claustrophobia and personal traumas to save her husband from the labyrinth.

The process thus allegorised in the novel might appear quite straightforward. Having immersed themselves in the horrors of the haunted house – an experience that mirrors the reader's own immersion in what is often an unnerving horror novel – the couple can overcome their marital and personal problems, which at the narrative's outset threaten to pull them apart. Considering how the house claims the lives and limbs of several characters, the escape into its horrors is as dangerous as it is redemptive. In her analysis of the labyrinth trope in the novel, Natalie Hamilton reaches a similar conclusion, drawing a parallel between the characters' exploration of the haunted house and their wanderings inside their own psyche (5): both Navidson and his wife Karen have experienced traumas they refuse to discuss with each other, and the survival of their relationship depends on their ability to reach a mutual understanding, just as their physical survival in the house depends on their capacity to find each other in its maze. The metaphorical nature of the house's labyrinth is further highlighted by how, for instance, the couple is able to find each other inside it by focusing on their love, which is enough to dissolve the labyrinth entirely (Hamilton 7).

A similar process happens inside *House of Leaves'* frame narrative. Johnny Truant, a young junkie turned editor when he gets his hands on the mysterious *Navidson Record*, develops a peculiar obsession with the book, and is apparently haunted by a mysterious creature that might or might not be a projection of his psyche. For most of the narrative, it

appears that his work on the *Navidson Record* is driving him to insanity; in the introduction – written on Halloween in 1998 – he warns readers against immersing themselves in the world of the book, and mentions the nightmares that will start haunting them if they do not pay heed to his warnings (xxiii). Yet his disturbing immersion in *The Navidson Record* ultimately allows him to confront some of his personal traumas, mostly related to the problematic figure of his mother and to his troubled youth. Working on *House of Leaves* is a therapeutic exercise for Johnny, as it enables him to confront the full horror of his past. Conor Dawson – who reaches conclusions similar to Hamilton's in considering *House of Leaves*' genre elements mainly as metaphors for trauma – does not hesitate to identify the creature stalking Johnny with 'the various traumatic motifs' he drags with him from his past (291). Still, redemption is eventually possible, and by the narrative's conclusion Johnny appears to have rid himself of both the creature and his traumatic past: in a passage dated 1999 we discover that he has met several people who have been positively influenced by his work on *The Navidson Record*, and that he is now able to enjoy 'sleep no longer disturbed by the past' (514). This association of the past with the source of Johnny's nightmares – with the nightmares themselves – points to the nature of *House of Leaves* as a novel peopled by characters with traumatic personal histories, which either the house itself or the *Navidson Record* at once exacerbate and allow them to overcome.

Yet this interpretation may be rather reductive in the context of a book that problematises the dynamics of escape and redemption. *The Navidson Record*, for instance, complicates any simple reading of its plot by questioning exactly how 'happy' the novel's ending might be (526-7): Will Navidson and his wife be reunited and together, but the haunted house has taken a terrible toll on their physical and mental health. Similarly problematic is the novel's use of horror and supernatural elements, and the tendency

among scholars to dismiss them as psychological manifestations rather than actual phenomena in the fictional world of the novel. Consider, in this regard, the figure of the minotaur, the creature that stalks the ever-changing halls of Navidson's house's labyrinth. That the minotaur's name is constantly presented under erasure is explained by Hamilton by referring to the fact that 'it is almost as if there is no need for a physical beast, because each character has his or her own psychological demons with which to contend' (12). Another possibility is hinted at by Caroline Hagood, who reflects upon one of the key concerns of the novel, the idea that 'to name is to invent a story about that which is named, not to learn its real story [...] therefore, naming is a sort of colonization of shadow, or the incomprehensible, by forced enlightenment' (92). Consider instead Katherine Hayles' hypothesis, according to which the minotaur is indeed a presence, not so much a creature as an embodiment of erasure: 'There's nothing there. Beware', Navidson himself says of the house on Ashtree Lane (4). Only if we read 'nothing' as a substantive does this passage make sense, a negation converted into the looming threat of something' (Hayles 788). Hayles' explanation is the only one that takes into account the possibility that the minotaur – and the other horror elements of the narrative – might be an actual presence in the novel's world, rather than a manifestation of the characters' psyche, or a way for Danielewski to articulate a philosophical idea. This tendency to explain away the minotaur, the haunted house, and other such phenomena as psychological manifestations goes hand in hand with a tendency among scholars to downplay the generic elements of *House of Leaves*. Hayles herself does this when she says of *House of Leaves* that, although 'camouflaged as a haunted-house tale, [it] is a metaphysical inquiry worlds away from the likes of *The Amityville Horror*' (779).

Just as it is impossible to reach a definitive explanation for *House of Leaves*' many supernatural elements, so it is left to the reader to decide the full extent of the salvific

effects of narrative immersion on the novel's characters. Like the characters they read about, Danielewski's readers have to navigate *House of Leaves*' many difficulties in order to reach enlightenment, meaning, and salvation. Among the book's challenges we can count its upsetting content, its chronological and textual intricacies, and even the sheer complexity of its formatting, which arguably places *House of Leaves* in the canon of ergodic literature, described by Espen J. Aarseth in *Cybertext* (1997) as literature where 'nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text' (1). Whether these challenges lead to actual rewards remains open to debate: Dawson, for instance, denies this possibility, claiming that if indeed the characters in both the central and frame narrative reach a better understanding of their traumatic experiences through their own labyrinths, still 'the dark enlightenment of self-knowledge born of trauma entails an insurmountable isolation in *House of Leaves*' (296). The text itself questions the value of Navidson's pursuit – and, consequently, of the reader's – early in the narrative, through the quotation that opens Chapter II of *The Navidson Record*: 'The labours of men of genius, however erroneously directed, scarcely ever fail in ultimately turning to the solid advantage of mankind' (8). This statement is attributed to Mary Shelley, who is indeed its author; but she is speaking through the character of Professor Waldman, the man who convinces Victor Frankenstein to proceed with his questionable experiments. Shelley's *Frankenstein* and its tragic outcome leave little doubt as to the actual wisdom of the Professor's words. We are left wondering whether the 'labours' of Navidson, genius director, and those of the other creators involved in *House of Leaves* – not least the reader – lead to the benefit of mankind, or even just to their own.

Ultimately, the outcome is left open-ended. If it is true that *House of Leaves*, with its creative fonts and formatting, cryptic references, and obscure passages, mirrors the experience of its characters, then the ultimate value of their pursuit is determined by how

scarring, or redemptive, the reader herself finds the novel's experience. While it is arguably misleading to dismiss, or under-read, the novel's generic elements – as a fictional Stephen King reminds us in the novel, 'what we sometimes forget is that Ahab's whale was also just a whale' (361) – any close reading of the text will pick up on the potential for good and ill that is inherent in books throughout Danielewski's oeuvre. As articulated, again, in *One Rainy Day in May's* discussion of the 'The Bookstore Girl' incident: 'If one book might cause The Bookstore Girl's death, did it not follow that another book might cure [someone else's] infirmity?' (257).

Discussing my core texts' staging of escapism's potential without touching upon its risks, and vice versa, is impossible: they are two sides of the same coin, both inherent in self-conscious escapism's ambiguous, nuanced treatment of the process of narrative immersion. At the same time, there are certain elements on which these texts are generally unanimous, and unambiguous. Such common ground can be encountered in their defence of those popular media they portray as the privileged means of their characters' escape. It is to the texts' articulation of this defence that I will turn in the final section of this first chapter.

'No Medium Is Inherently Better:' Defending Escapism

Self-consciously escapist texts could hardly make a case for the healing, illuminating, and redemptive powers of escaping into fiction without addressing the aesthetic and artistic value of those media – comic books, genre fiction, role-playing games etc. – that are often the vehicles of such an escape. In this section, I will explore how the authors of my core texts articulate the claim that no medium is inherently 'better' or 'worse' than any other, both in their fiction and non-fiction.

Broadly speaking, this reaction against traditional hierarchies of genre and media is structured around three general principles, to which my core texts subscribe in a more or less uniform fashion. First and foremost, these texts advance the idea that escapist media are animated by the same impulse toward innovation and ambition that is at the heart of more canonically recognised narrative forms. Secondly, they affirm a belief that high art and literature are ruled by the same economic concerns, and are limited by the same generic conventions, as genre and escapist fiction. Finally, these texts react against one of the most common objections raised to the opening of the canon to popular narrative forms: that the advocates of such forms are aware themselves of the inferior nature of their objects of study, which implies a disregard for aesthetic value, and results in giving attention to any popular form, for the sake of its popularity rather than because of any intrinsic quality.

Having explored the authorial strategies used to articulate these points, I will consider how it might be possible to remain aware of escapist fiction's peculiar aims and dynamics while dealing with it in a critical context. I will argue for a media-conscious and genre-conscious approach, which would enable the analysis of these texts to be conducted with narratological tools relevant to their nature and aims, and would make it possible to avoid judging these works on the basis of aesthetic criteria they do not adhere to.

The Ambitiousness of Escapism

Few books represent the full ambitiousness of escapist fiction as extensively as *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, which narrates the evolution of comic books as a medium with specific strengths and limitations. Both of the comic creators at the heart of the novel, while destined to become famous within the boundaries of a humble medium,

are no strangers to high culture. This is especially true of Joe Kavalier, a former student at Prague's Academy of Fine Arts, who impresses the duo's first employers with his artistic education (86); but Sam Clay too, though a passionate fan of pulp culture, has faithfully read his canonical fiction, being 'an omnivorous reader with a self-improving streak, cozy with Stevenson, London, and Wells, dutiful about Wolfe, Dreiser, and Dos Passos, idolatrous of S.J. Perelman' (4). The writers listed to illustrate Sam's 'self-improving streak' are not a random selection, especially since it is soon revealed that Sam's true passion is for 'those two-bit argosies of blood and wonder, the pulps' (4). Stevenson, London and Wells are all, in fact, arguably genre writers, though their status, at the time in which the novel is set, is as far removed as possible from that of pulp fiction. The text might here be pointing out the way in which literary fiction's status is more dependent on preconceptions about its value than on quintessentially generic reasons.

Indeed, Dewey's claim that the union of Joe and Sam is like that between 'an old-school novel of psychological realism [Sam] and an unapologetically spectacular comic book [Joe]' (84) appears to oversimplify things. If it is true that Joe is a more energetic and action-oriented character than Sam, it is equally true that Joe comes from a higher social milieu, and that Sam is well-versed in the world of pulp fiction and popular culture, of which Joe is completely ignorant. At the same time, the opposite claim, that Joe represents high culture while Sam stands for pop culture (expressed by Chute, 283) is equally reductive: as we shall see, Joe is much more confident than Sam in the potential of popular art. Overall, the two figures appear to be complementary, rather than antithetical.

Even more interesting than their backgrounds is their evolution throughout the text. Having introduced their Escapist into the world of late-'30s superhero comic books through a first display of innovation – the violent, explicit cover where he punches Hitler on the jaw, a provocative image in the pre-war historical context (153) – the creators never

stop trying to reach new heights, though they approach their goals from different perspectives. Joe takes artistic ambition as a challenge, yet another escape feat to be pulled off (253). In a chilling passage close to the novel's beginning, we are informed that Kornblum, Czech escape artist and Joe's teacher in Prague, decides to terminate the boy's studies as he believes him to be 'one of those unfortunate boys who become escape artists [...] for dangerously metaphorical reasons. Such men feel imprisoned by invisible chains – walled in, sewn up in layers of batting. For them, the final feat of autoliberation is all too foreseeable' (37). The allusive tone here circles around Kornblum's suspicions of Joe's suicidal behaviour without addressing them directly, thus shrouding them in an aura of unspeakableness and foreshadowing later unexpected and impulsive decisions on Joe's part – including his multiple attempts, alternately botched and successful, to join the army and the war effort.

Compared to Joe's enthusiasm, Sam's attitude appears defeatist. A passionate comic book writer with serious artistic ambitions, one of the ghosts that haunts Sam throughout the novel is the idea that he shall never accomplish his dream to be 'something more than the hack scribbler of comic books for a fifth-rate house' (543).⁴² Scattered throughout *Kavalier & Clay* is the story of Sam's doomed novel, *American Disillusionment*, of which eleven pages exist at the narrative's outset (7); which has turned into a single 'oft-revised' chapter years later, once he is an established comic book writer (295); and which is eventually mentioned, after twelve years have passed, as a 'cyclone which, for years, had woven its erratic path across the flatlands of his imaginary life, always on the verge of grandeur or disintegration, picking up characters and plotlines like houses and livestock'

⁴² This passage comes from the last part of the novel, 'The League of the Golden Key.' At this point in the plot, Sam is no longer a successful and admired comics creator, having fallen from grace after several failed attempts at finding employment outside the comics industry.

(543). The image of the novel as a tornado points to the enthusiasm sustaining it, allowing it to pick up characters and plotlines, while simultaneously signalling how its writing is not entirely under Sam's control, and is likely outside the scope of his artistic means. Chabon might here be tapping into his own experience as a writer: after his debut novel was published, he began working on a sprawling and ambitious novel called *Fountain City*, on which he worked for five years before realising he would not be able to complete it. The experience is detailed in his essay "Diving Into the Wrecks" (*Maps and Legends* 145-50), and fictionalised in *Wonder Boys*; there too, significantly, an abundance of storylines and characters in the novel Grady Tripp is working on is taken to be the sign of a writer who has lost direction, rather than the product of an inspired creator.

A model of Sam's own failure, and perhaps an omen of it, is represented by his first editor, George Dempsey, who shows both a profound distaste for comic books, television, pulp fiction, and other popular forms (156-7; 286; 623) and a commitment to his job as writer and editor of such escapist fiction: he has a list of two hundred and forty-five titles for pulp novels that he is using to pen as many action-packed works (221).⁴³ Himself a failed writer, George even tries to mitigate Sam's ambitions with these words of wisdom: 'There is only one sure means in life [...] of ensuring that you are not ground into paste by disappointment, futility, and disillusion. And that is to ensure, to the utmost of your ability, that you are doing it solely for the money' (285). George's diction is significant here: consider the note of finality in his reflection, which defines greed not as a natural temptation one should indulge in, but as a positive quality that should be pursued 'to the utmost of your ability.' His reference to the way disappointment might 'grind' an artist 'into

⁴³ Curiously enough, the hugely prolific and often criticised children's writer RL Stine, most famous for the *Goosebumps* book series, has revealed he works in a similar way: he comes up with a title for each of his books, and develops the narrative starting from that point (Stine).

paste' also rings with an almost ironical note, in the context of a discussion on 'pulp' fiction: it is as if writers as humans have to avoid falling prey to what already happens to their artistic creations.

Sam's problem is arguably not an excess of ambition. Rather, he appears to be judging his own success as a writer on the basis of canons and values that posit that comic books are a low art form, while the kind of 'massive autobiographical novel' (7) *American Disillusionment* is supposed to be is the height of artistic expression; so that if he is a failed 'literary' writer, but a talented comic book writer, he remains a failure. He is committing the mistake, which will be discussed further later in this chapter, of seeing different media as belonging to a rigid hierarchy, and of judging one medium according to another's aesthetic criteria. Once more, it is Joe who saves him, with his ambitious graphic novel *The Golem*: Sam is taken aback by the idea of a 'comic book novel' (543), with the revolutionary implication, nested within its very name, of bringing together a popular and an established medium: a concept so radical that the contemporary world has adopted the more conservative term 'graphic novel' to refer to such texts. *The Golem* reignites Sam's ambitions,⁴⁴ as he is able to realise that artistic success can be achieved even within the boundaries of the medium he belongs to. As a revelation, it follows decades of blindness and prejudice: significantly enough, after he and Joe watch *Citizen Kane* – the film that, perhaps more than any other, elevated the popular medium of film to the status of an art form – Joe proposes they use it as inspiration, and start experimenting with their creations. Sam appears sceptical: 'I don't know, Joe [...] I'd like to think we could do something like that. But come on. This is just, I mean, we're talking about *comic books*' (363). The

⁴⁴ Perhaps in an attempt to underline Sam's importance in the Kavalier & Clay artistic partnership, Chabon has Joe drawing the entirety of *The Golem*'s panels during his years of self-inflicted exile, without filling with text a single one of the story's speech bubbles.

stuttering hesitancy of his speech suggests that his might not be a strong, unmoveable opinion; but that he is open, and even willing, to be persuaded of the contrary. His opposition has to pass through the procession of 'but come on,' 'this is just,' 'I mean,' and the final '*comic books*,' whose italicization suggests the blind prejudice on which Sam bases his objection. And it is to this objection that Rosa Saks, Joe's girlfriend, replies with the aphoristic line 'no medium is inherently better than any other' (363), an egalitarian motto that points not so much to a philosophy of 'anything goes,' where every text is equally valuable, but rather, to a rejection of judgements based on unfounded assumptions and on ideas of 'inherent' limitations.

Rosa's role in *Kavalier & Clay*'s discussion on the potential of comic books is not confined to this intervention. As a surrealist artist, and daughter of a patron with a penchant for experimental art forms, her family is in many ways a metonymy – as explored by Chute (288) – for the whole of high art as it relates to popular forms. It is another of the techniques employed by Chabon to rehabilitate superhero comic books: 'high artists' themselves see them as valuable artifacts. This is the case with Rosa's father (235); but also with Orson Welles, who, on meeting Sam, proclaims: 'Great stuff, the Escapist' (358). An auteur from the world of cinema appears here to be recognising another, coming from an equally popular art form, with equally vast potential.

Kavalier & Clay's defence of escapist genres and medias is thematised extensively and explicitly throughout the novel. At the opposite end of the spectrum, we find *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which articulates similar points in a more understated way. The novel, in fact, is so subtle in its defence of popular genres that many reviewers' and critics' interpretations of it diverge substantially from Díaz's own.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The most notable example of this is Henry Wessells, who, in his review of *Oscar Wao*, goes so far as to condemn it for the way it mocks popular genres, assuming the novel to be endorsing the narrator's

I have already discussed how several scholars have made the case that *Oscar Wao* is a work of magical realism; yet its fantastical and marvellous elements – magical mongooses, infallible curses, faceless men – arguably originate from the tropes of genre fiction, most notably of horror, science fiction and fantasy. Díaz expresses this point most clearly when he says that 'most readers are more comfortable with making the argument that the fantastic elements they encounter in my novel are magical realism/marvelous. But the text makes a very strong argument that things like the mongoose are either the marvelous of fantasy literature or the marvelous of science fiction' (Díaz, 'Junot Díaz, Diaspora, and Redemption' 34). This argument is articulated most notably through the novel's peculiar intertextual web, which will be discussed extensively in the next chapter; suffice to say here that it is indeed crucial that Oscar, the novel's 'nerdy' protagonist, 'a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man' (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 6), is exclusively and unapologetically in love with popular fiction. His commitment is to quintessentially escapist forms of narrative and entertainment. He is never mentioned as having a penchant for, or interest in, Latin American magical realism, for example; although a Spanish speaker, he is not recorded as reading postmodern Latin Americans such as Borges or Cortázar, whose fiction may be characterised as displaying genre elements. Most crucially, despite Oscar's passion for apocalyptic fiction (the narrator informs us that 'no apocalyptic movie or book or game existed that he had not seen or read or played – Wyndham and Christopher and Gamma World were his absolute favorites;' 23), not once is it suggested that he might be a fan of the famous works of JG Ballard, Thomas Pynchon, or even Philip Dick in this genre.⁴⁶ A possible reason for this might be found in Díaz's intention for the novel 'to teach

dismissals of Oscar's passion. Far from praising his narrator's point of view, Díaz has been clear that he sees him as 'Trujillo with a different mask' (see Díaz, 'Junot Díaz, Diaspora, and Redemption' 36).

⁴⁶ Although he does not share the literary status of Ballard or Pynchon, Dick's inclusion in the unofficial

you to see along a science fiction way, or, in fact, a fantasy way,' something that, according to the author, many readers refuse to do, sympathising with Oscar but ultimately rejecting his 'nerdy' views on the world (Díaz, 'Juot Díaz, Diaspora, and Redemption' 34-5). In this sense, it is crucial that Oscar's worldview does not fit neatly into any established high cultural form, be it magical realism, postmodernism, or the works of acclaimed 'genre' writers such as Philip Dick. Readers who choose to read the novel from a high-cultural perspective – say, as a work of magical realism – will have to do so by ignoring Oscar's own point of view, the way his peers do all his life in the novel's world. The novel grants readers chances for this by including high-cultural references alongside pop-cultural ones: Oscar, for instance, is at one point described as 'a Caliban' (170); while a severe beating is compared to 'one of those nightmare eight-a.m. MLA panels: endless' (299). It is thus even more significant that high cultural forms are never employed when discussing Oscar's tastes or perspectives. Arguably, readers who decide to dismiss the inherently generic nature of *Oscar Wao* will fail to recognise one of its key suggestions: that 'nerdy' and popular genres may grant their readers an interpretational power as worthy of consideration as any other medium.

Genrifying Literary Fiction

Bleeding Edge features a character who expresses this striking view on high cultural forms: 'Culture, I'm sorry, Herman Göring was right, every time you hear the word, check your sidearm. Culture attracts the worst impulses of the moneyed, it has no

canon of the Library of America can be seen as part of a wider effort to elevate this science fiction writer into the ranks of 'serious' American literature; see Latham (100) and Harris-Fain (36-7) on the changing fortunes of Dick within criticism.

honor, it begs to be suburbanized and corrupted' (56). The speaker here is March Keller, left-wing activist, conspiracy theorist, and sworn enemy of 'the Newspaper of Records.' That such a character might feel so strongly about culture⁴⁷ as to be compelled to agree with Herman Göring is indeed startling;⁴⁸ and so is the tone of her speech, which inserts high culture within the heavily-politicised discussion carried on in Pynchon's novels. March is not necessarily the most consistent character in *Bleeding Edge*, as highlighted by Sascha Pöhlmann in his essay on the novel (8); yet she does not seem to have a problem with the popular end of the cultural spectrum. Later in the text, she uses Pokémon cards as a way to bond with her estranged grandchildren (131). Her specific reference to high culture's tendency to be 'suburbanized' and 'corrupted' is thus particularly relevant in a novel that condemns the unsustainability of the kind of lifestyle that allows Americans to keep 'a yard in the burbs' (340); and to which technology, in the context of which the word 'corruptible' assumes further connotations, is so central.

Bleeding Edge's attack on high culture is more of an exception than the rule in my core texts, although there is also an instance from *House of Leaves*, where award-winning

⁴⁷ This statement comes from a discussion between March and Maxine, the novel's main character, about New York City's Lincoln Center, 'for which,' according to the narrator, 'an entire neighborhood was destroyed and 7,000 boricua families uprooted, just because Anglos who didn't really give a shit about High Culture were afraid of these people's children' (55).

⁴⁸ *Bleeding Edge* misattributes the famous line to Göring; its true origin is to be found in the 1933 play *Schlageter*, by Nazi writer Hans Johst. One character, rejecting cultural ideals in favour of armed intervention, states, 'Brüderlichkeit, Gleichheit... Freiheit... Schönheit und Würde! [...] Und einmal, mitten im Parlieren: hände hoch! Du bist entwässnet [...] Nein, zehn Schritt vom Leibe mit dem ganzen Weltanschauungssalat [...] Wenn ich Kultur hore... entsichere ich meinen Browning!' (26). ('Fraternity, equality ... Freedom... Beauty and dignity! [...] And then, in the middle of the parley: Hands up! You are disarmed [...] No, let them keep their distance with their whole ideological hodgepodge [...] When I hear the word culture... I release the safety on my Browning!' Translation mine).

photographer Will Navidson is tormented by the memory of the dying girl he photographed 'for his fuck pulitzer prize' (392), again questioning the supposed integrity and nobility of high cultural forms. More typically, these texts tend to critique high culture and 'literary'⁴⁹ fiction from an artistic and aesthetic perspective; and one of the strategies most often employed on this front is that of suggesting that all distinctions between 'literary' and genre fiction are arbitrary and artificial.

Michael Chabon is, arguably, the writer who has articulated his thoughts on the matter most extensively, in particular in his introductions to two McSweeney's anthologies he has edited, the *Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales* (2003) and the *Enchanted Chamber of Astonishing Stories* (2004). Both of these anthologies are self-proclaimed attempts to revitalise the popular-genre short story in America, whose literary landscape is dominated by 'the contemporary, quotidian, plotless, moment-of-truth revelatory story' (6).⁵⁰ Both introductions were then fused together in an edited, final version, in the essay 'Trickster in a Suit of Light,' which opens Chabon's *Maps and Legends* (2008). He affirms here:

⁴⁹ The term will be put between inverted commas in the following discussion to highlight its problematic nature.

⁵⁰ The extent of their success remains doubtful. In a *Wired* interview, Chabon admits, 'I don't think it worked. If you take a quick look at the [...] so-called "literary" outlets for short fiction, I don't see a whole lot of ghost stories, and sea stories, and pirate tales being presented in the literary context' ('Michael Chabon Attacks Prejudice Against Science Fiction'). Kasia Boddy puts her finger on the main issue with these anthologies when she observes that, rather than tapping into the potential of their genres, many of their stories 'turned an encounter with a mummy or a sea monster or extreme poverty into an opportunity for their protagonists to learn about their own shame, responsibility, loss, or "terrors of inadequacy"' (109), thus following in the (supposedly) exhausted dynamics of the literary short story even while masquerading as entertaining yarns.

Whether through willfulness, ignorance, or simple amour propre, what tends to be ignored by serious writers and critics alike is that the genre known (more imprecisely than any other) as 'literary fiction' has rules, conventions, and formulas of its own: the primacy of a unified point of view, for example; letters and their liability to being read or intercepted; the dance of adulterous partners; the buried family secret that curses generations to come; the ordinary heroism of an unsung life. (10)

The concerns exposed in this passage are central to Chabon's fictional and non-fictional output. The 'imprecision' of literary fiction's status is a topic he returns to throughout *Maps and Legends*' essays, as when he discusses the 'serious' and 'contemporary' nature of the fiction of horror writer MR James (120), or when he argues that the fiction of Cormac McCarthy belongs to the adventure genre (95-108). The essay on McCarthy, 'Dark Adventure,' also approaches with a wary eye genre snobbishness by analysing the case of post-apocalyptic fiction, which, although by and large a sub-genre of science fiction, has lately become an established 'literary' genre:⁵¹ 'the post-apocalyptic is also a mode into which mainstream readers may venture without risking the stain of geekdom' (97).

Notice also how Chabon imbues literary fiction's tropes with a generic aura: they deal with 'intercepted letters,' 'curses,' 'secrets' and 'heroism' – all elements one would expect in an adventure novel more than in 'genreless' fiction. The artificiality of literary

⁵¹ One is reminded of Alistair Fowler's call to be wary of rigid hierarchies of genre, as today's low culture could be tomorrow's canon (233). On the specific topic of post-apocalyptic fiction's critical success, see Andrew Hoberek's article 'The Post-Apocalyptic Present.'

fiction's conventions is occasionally mocked in Chabon's writing too, as when he recalls – in *Manhood for Amateurs* (2009) – the day when he and his brother got lost on a beach. 'In a short story, the character of the younger brother would have been obliged to experience an epiphany about his brother's fallibility, would perhaps see him as having passed irrevocably into the flawed world of adulthood' (102); but indeed this is not the case, no matter what the conventions of so-called 'realism' dictate. Several studies exist on the artificiality of literary realism, but one that is particularly pertinent to this discussion is Cawelti's treatment of the topic in *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*. Aware that generic conventions are what make many people criticise genre fiction, Cawelti affirms that indeed, without a certain degree of standardisation, artistic communication would not be possible (8), thus dismantling the belief in the uniqueness of literary fiction, and in its independence from conventions. Not that this is a truth universally acknowledged: among the opponents of this point of view, one might cite James Wood, who affirms in *How Fiction Works* (2008): 'Realism [...] cannot be a genre; instead, it makes other forms of fiction seem like genres. For realism [...] is the origin' (247).

Whether 'literary' fiction is or is not a genre, the hope still exists that we might identify a frame of reference that could be acceptable to these conflicting views on the topic. Before we discuss such a frame, though, it is necessary to address one last claim that self-consciously escapist texts work to deconstruct: the belief, as expressed by Fowler, that not even those endorsing popular culture truly believe in its value, as they are themselves ready to admit its inferior nature: 'Our age has a great appetite for studies of writing that is hardly worth studying. Thrillers, detective stories, science fiction, advertisements, pop poetry, pornography: these and other kinds of *Trivialliteratur* are accorded a weighty treatment that nevertheless avoids, somehow, questions of value. In fact, some critics openly express their greater interest in the typical than in the valuable' (10). The almost

mocking 'somehow' reveals the particular bias of this perspective, as does Fowler's grouping within a single continuum of fictional genres, the almost-oxymoron of 'pop poetry,' and the categories of advertisement and pornography.

That certain advocates of popular culture might themselves appear sceptical of their favourite media is, indeed, occasionally the case. We have seen how Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* is particularly merciless in exposing the inner contradictions and absurdities of the comic books it refers to, and exploits exactly these ridiculous features to articulate a critique of 1970s America. Yet this remains more an exception than the rule among my core texts: Singer, for instance, highlights the true originality of Michael Chabon's treatment of comic books: 'Unlike Cantor, Lethem, and even Moody, Chabon does not ultimately reject comic books as a means of signification. Instead, he argues that they house a valuable but overlooked mode of representation' (287). *Oscar Wao* arguably stages precisely the conflict between these two worlds, as it contrasts Yunior – who clearly appreciates and is knowledgeable about 'nerd' culture, but sneers at it to preserve his social status and machismo – with Oscar, unapologetically in love with his favourite media.

Even granting the originality of my core texts in this regard does not entirely dispel the suspicion that the escapist media they represent may remain inherently inferior to high cultural artifacts. We have seen in the Introduction how this suspicion is inevitably tied to negative stereotypes associated with the idea of escapism; stereotypes that, undoubtedly, stem partially from the assumption that advocates of popular texts approach these texts a-critically, believing them to be universally good; or, as Lethem puts it, 'the snobbish grudge against pop culture was that those who cared for it cared for all of it equally' (*The Ecstasy of Influence* 134). Instead, my core texts vehemently oppose any a-critical conception of popular culture. Just as pop genres and medias are not inherently different from literary fiction and high culture, so they can withstand the same kind of close

analysis, and are subject to aesthetic rules of their own. Again Lethem makes the point effectively: 'Couldn't I talk about comics as an intoxicant while expressing exhaustion at the measly narrative or visual chops in the '70s comics that had intoxicated me?' (*The Ecstasy of Influence* 134). *Kavalier & Clay* does exactly that: a profound elegy to the superhero comic book, it also decries the drop in the quality of the genre's plotlines caused by its waning popularity in the early 1950s (507-8). *Oscar Wao*, likewise, is critical of the shift from narrative-based to mechanics-oriented games in early '90s nerd culture, represented by the success of collectible card games (269-70). In 'The Splendor of Crap,' Chabon 'proclaim[s] for all time the splendor and goodness of crap entertainment' (*Manhood for Amateurs* 83), but distinguishes between valuable instances of the genre, which have 'the powerful quality of being open-ended, vague at its borders,' and thus foster the imagination (80), and more recent derivatives, which are so pervasive and effectively pre-packaged as to make children unable 'to operate in an imaginative world' (82). Indeed, the choice of title for the essay might be a tongue-in-cheek comment on the joys, but also on the invariably inferior quality, of this latter variety of popular entertainment. Chabon's preoccupation recalls Howard's from Jennifer Egan's *The Keep*: he too believes that people's imagination today has become atrophied because we have completely delegated the task of creating escapist realities to the entertainment industry (45). And a concern similar to Chabon's reflection on 'crap entertainment' is expressed by Stephen King in his afterword to *Salem's Lot* (1975), where he discusses his mother's distaste for 'trash,' her discrimination between 'trash' and 'bad trash,' and his own hope that his American rewriting of *Dracula* might fall into the former rather than the latter category (745-51).⁵²

⁵² King's introduction to *Salem's Lot* provides a curious anecdote in the context of the discussion outlined here. King explains how his agent liked the novel when he submitted it to him, but warned the author that if he published it, people would call him a horror writer (xiii). Concerned more with making a living than

In this context, Lethem's rhetorical question in the essay 'Against "Pop" Culture' appears understandable: since the boundaries between high and popular culture are so blurry, are they really necessary? 'Couldn't we just say culture?' (135).

The Distinctiveness of Escapism

Indeed, some would argue that these boundaries, separating high and popular art, literary and genre fiction, cannot and should not be dissolved. Junot Díaz's *Oscar Wao*, for instance, highlights the existence of these very perceptible boundaries: 'science fiction is science fiction, at least because the mainstream establishment perceives it as such. Instead of working the margins, crossing boundaries, or trying to show that none ever existed in the first place, Díaz insists that sf and the mainstream were and are separate' (Miller 105). Although a prominent advocate of the need to abolish genre limitations, Chabon too is aware of their resilience: 'Pride and Resentment are the twin banners flown from the walls of all ghettos. We love being in; we want to get out. We are at home; home is not the world. Endogamy weakens us over time' ('Geeking Out About Genres With Michael Chabon'). The image of genre fiction as an artistic 'ghetto' is a common one in the context of these discussions, and is employed here to point to a form of 'pride' that may be engendered by belonging to precisely these marginalised contexts.

If these boundaries between high and low, 'literary' and escapist genres do exist –

with issues of genre, King resigned himself to his fate. The belief that genre fiction and 'literary' fiction are thus entirely different entities, and are separated by anything more than externally-imposed tags, is once again questioned. As King observes: 'I was indeed typed as a horror writer, a tag I have never confirmed or denied, simply because I think it's irrelevant to what I do. It does, however, give bookstores a handy place to shelve my books' (xiii).

independently of whether this separation is desirable or not – a new question arises: can we apply the same critical criteria to all these different genres, thus effectively denying the existence of a difference?

Up to a certain point, it might seem that we can. There is, for instance, one point where the positions of Chabon, Cawelti, Wood and even Alistair Fowler seem to overlap: the importance of originality. Within a specific genre, be it literary realism, horror, or sci-fi, there exists some fixed form that, in Wood's words, 'is not dead, but [...] is always dying' (230). The greatest of all literary works 'display a parallel awareness of [their] genre's history and conventions, and derive equivalent power and capacity to delight from flouting, mocking, inverting, manhandling, from breaking or ignoring the rules' (Chabon, *Maps and Legends* 11), be these the rules of 'literary' fiction, as is the case with writers 'from Jane Austen to Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie to Steven Millhauser' (Chabon 11), or those of fantasy, with China Miéville (10) or Terry Pratchett (Chabon, *Enchanted Chamber* xi). 'A literary work,' argues Fowler, 'may willfully depart from its conventional *langue* in a comprehensive way, as no ordinary speech act departs from the grammatical system of a natural language. It is the height of literary creativity, indeed, to subsume or challenge tradition through such departures' (49). Then again, for such innovations and departures to exist in the first place, a narrative convention must be already established (Cawelti 8). Conventions and standards, moreover, form the basis of another crucial feature of literature: intertextuality, a strategy that is exploited extensively across self-conscious escapism, and which will be discussed in detail later in the thesis. Hess, indeed, believes that genre fiction's heightened dependence on intertextuality is the reason Michael Chabon is so interested in it (32-3).

How, then, might we reconcile these two, apparently conflicting views: the idea that high and popular fiction, or 'literary' and genre, mimetic and escapist, are necessarily

different and yet are ruled by the same tensions and dynamics?

This has been a perennial question throughout literary history. When Dante decided to write his *Divine Comedy* (1321) in the Tuscan dialect instead of Latin, the conventional language of high literature, he, too, was making a point – carefully articulated in *De vulgari eloquentia* (1305) – on the nature of 'low culture'. Different generations, writers and critics are bound to provide different answers. Fowler remarks on how changes in the perception and organisation of genres are the norm in the literary world, rather than a revolutionary occurrence (233). Among treatments of genre fiction, Cawelti's offers a possible solution to the problem of separating 'mimetic' and 'genre' by highlighting their purposes. He argues that a key difference between mimetic and escapist fiction is that the former category aims to shed light on life's hidden motives and impulses, while the latter confirms our existing beliefs about life, and about what is good and right (26). It is immediately easy to see, at the same time, how we might easily short-circuit this distinction. What of HP Lovecraft, whose most fantastical tales – those inspired by Lord Dunsany's fiction, and revolving around dreamscapes and oneiric visions – are almost literally escapist, dealing with dreamers retreating from the world in invented, fantastical locales; yet are not concerned with reinforcing pleasant beliefs, but with detailing the hidden functioning of reality? 'The Silver Key' is perhaps the clearest case of this ambiguity: at times almost an atheistic, anti-social philosophical treatise, the story revolves around a character experiencing the pointlessness of life in 'a blindly impersonal cosmos' (400), and retreating from it in flights of fantasy and the memories of his youth.

Whether we accept or reject Cawelti's distinction, it is crucial to remember how, even though possibly problematic, it is not tied to any notion of value. It would be wrong, that is, to believe that the purpose of 'mimetic' literature is of a higher order than that of 'escapist' fiction, least of all from an aesthetic perspective: much of Cawelti's *Adventure*,

Mystery, and Romance is devoted to explaining just how complex, ambitious, and admirable the dynamics underlying the creation of escapist fiction are.

Starting from this distinction, but moving beyond it, what I believe is needed to escape this constant cycle of value judgements is a media-conscious approach of the kind proposed by Ryan and Thon in their introduction to *Storyworlds Across Media* (2014): 'a narratology that, among other things, provides a theoretical frame within which medium-specific models from literary and film narratology, from comics studies and game studies, and from various other strands of narratological practice may be critically reconsidered, systematically correlated, modified, and complemented to further illuminate the forms and functions of a variety of transmedial strategies of narrative representation' (92). Even more than a *media*-conscious narratological approach, undoubtedly of use in a contemporary artistic landscape where storyworlds exist and influence each other across film, game and literature (see Vint 120, Jagoda 150), is a *genre*-conscious approach: one able to recognise how different genres operate according to different aesthetic criteria in order to achieve different narrative ends. Or, as expressed in *Kavalier & Clay*: '[with comic books], half-bad is maybe better than beautiful [sic]' (89). Just as narrative immersion or plot have to be sacrificed in specific 'high-literary' cases, so must aesthetic lustre be sacrificed in certain escapist forms. Ignoring that this is a difference in *purpose* rather than quality leads to the same fallacy Sam Clay falls prey to: by judging all art using the standards of literary fiction, he sees comic books as an inherently inferior form – that is, until Joe Kavalier's *The Golem* allows him to understand that even within this medium, and even while drawing on its legacy of generic conventions and standards, it is possible to achieve greatness.

This approach is in no way original or revolutionary. Passionate fans of genre and escapist fiction have been proposing it for a long time. In his essay on horror fiction,

'Supernatural Horror in Literature,' Lovecraft wonders: 'Who shall declare the dark theme a positive handicap? Radiant with beauty, the Cup of the Ptolemies was carven of onyx' (1098). Rather than apologetically assuming that a genre's archetypes constitute failures, these can be interpreted as clever strategies used to produce valuable artefacts within that genre's context. Or, as Cawelti argues, 'there are different kinds of artistry rather than a single standard in terms of which all fictional creations should be judged' (299).

While they articulate different strategies to achieve their aim – collapsing the boundaries between high and 'low' art; recognising how the distinction, with its deceptive tags, does not imply a hierarchy – my core texts recognise the need to recuperate popular and escapist cultural forms, and to recognise their artistic value. Paramount among the strategies they use to achieve this end is their engagement with these texts through vast intertextual webs, and their representation of popular culture as the possible source of a renewed idea of community. It is to these strategies that I will turn in my second chapter.

Chapter 2 – Keys to Escape

In the course of the previous chapter, I discussed in passing some of the narrative strategies employed by self-consciously escapist texts to stage their narratives of escapism, and to articulate the ways in which these narratives are both redemptive and problematic. Among these formal devices, perhaps the most crucial – and certainly the easiest to identify – is their reliance on a very explicit form of intertextuality. My core texts describe scenes and events, articulate jokes, and characterise their protagonists by referring to other texts. More often than not, these intertextual references are left unexplained, with the text relying entirely on the reader's existing knowledge of these secondary or 'inter' texts, or at least on their willingness to research obscure sources. This is the case, for instance, when Díaz describes a scheming character as 'a shelob in her web' (*Oscar Wao* 139), alluding to the monstrous spider from *The Lord of the Rings* (1955) to characterise her cunning; or when a *Telegraph Avenue* character dressed entirely in yellow is hailed by a friend as 'Uma Thurman!' (215), a reference to the iconic attire worn by the actress in the movie *Kill Bill* (2003).

Intertextuality is a complex literary term, open to different interpretations and to misunderstanding. First coined by Julia Kristeva, the term in its original context was not primarily concerned with issues of homage or influence (15), and deals instead with the presence, in 'a given text,' of 'several utterances, taken from other texts' (36); or, to put it differently, with the way in which 'any text is the absorption and transformation of another' (66), thus positing a fundamental, inescapable law of writing and literary meaning-making. As Eco points out in the clearest of terms, 'no text is read independently of the reader's experience of other texts' (*Role of the Reader* 21). His character Adso da Melk explores the same concept in a somewhat more naïve guise in *The Name of the Rose*: 'Sino ad allora

avevo pensato che ogni libro parlasse delle cose, umane o divine, che stanno fuori dai libri. Ora mi avvedevo che non di rado i libri parlano di libri, ovvero è come se parlassero fra loro' (289).⁵³ Once more, intertextuality is an inevitable implication of the reading act, rather than something texts actively 'engage in.' This position is encountered throughout criticism, so that Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' also mentions how 'the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture' (*Image Music Text* 146). While there are dissenting voices, with Michael Riffaterre's 'The Self-Sufficient Text,' for instance, aiming to downplay the universal importance of intertextuality – even as it concedes that this claim 'runs counter to the tradition of criticism' (39) – it is not my purpose to argue that any text can (or should!) exist without inevitably activating and relying on a variety of connections.

Rather, I will argue that certain texts rely more *explicitly* on intertextuality, by overtly drawing attention to their intertextual connections. Similarly, they can employ connections that are more or less obscure. As McHale argues in the context of postmodern intertextuality, 'there are a number of ways of foregrounding [...] intertextual space and integrating it in the text's structure' (*Postmodernist Fiction* 57), paramount among them an explicit borrowing of characters from established literary texts – a practice my core texts engage in abundantly, but that I will defer my discussion of until Chapter Three.

This premise does not entirely dispel ambiguity from my approach. Just as it is technically possible to question the notion that metafiction is a peculiarly postmodernist phenomenon by pointing to its use in *Don Quixote*, and throughout literary history, so one might deconstruct the claim that a heavy reliance on intertextuality is a feature of

⁵³ 'Until then I had used to think that books dealt with those matters, be they human or divine, that could be found outside books. I now understood that books often discuss other books; it is, in fact, as if they were in conversation' (translation mine).

contemporary fiction by considering, for example, *The Divine Comedy*: it is hard to imagine a more explicitly intertextual text. Ulrich Broich, who discusses intertextuality within the context of postmodernism, admits that it is 'a general phenomenon to be found in the literature of all ages;' but at the same time, he argues that 'there are some epochs which produced a more highly intertextual literature than others, and intertextuality might well be called a hallmark of Renaissance and Baroque literature, but not of romanticism and nineteenth-century realism' (249). Linda Hutcheon, whose essay 'Historiographic Metafiction' is among the most influential texts on the topic, also acknowledges a basic difference between conceptions of intertextuality in Medieval and modern literature and in the contemporary era (4), connected with developments in the way history is conceived as inevitably bound to historiographic recountings of it. Jonathan Lethem makes a similar point, but one more attuned to the specific concerns of this thesis, when he states that 'perhaps anyone's writing is ultimately bricolage, a welter of borrowings. But of the writers I know, I've been the most eager to point out my influences, to spoil the illusion of originality by elucidating my fiction's resemblance to my book collection' (*Disappointment Artist* 147). This self-exegetic passage marks Lethem's reliance on intertextuality as a matter of *degree*; the word 'eager' suggests that – in spite of the description of intertextuality as a 'spoiling of an illusion' – for Lethem the desire to draw parallels between one's oeuvre and art is a positive commitment. Indeed, much of Lethem's essay collection *The Disappointment Artist* (2005), and several pieces in *The Ecstasy of Influence*, discuss his passionate, even obsessive collecting of books, records, and movies.

Lethem's conception of intertextuality will inform my approach to analysing how it works across self-conscious escapism. Among the issues I will address in this chapter are the purpose of these intertextual references, and their degree of obscurity. I will also explore how my core texts' heavy reliance on intertextuality is connected to their thematic

and formal concerns.

Intertextuality has been used at times as evidence of the literary-historical status of certain texts. Manfred Pfister, for example, argues that the main difference in the way modernism and postmodernism intertextualise with popular culture lies in how modernist works tend to place these texts in an inferior hierarchical position to high culture, while postmodernism rejects such value judgements (218-9). Hoberek offers a different approach when he describes the difference between the 'self-consciously "literary" appropriation of popular genres' typical of high postmodernism and the 'newer tendency to confer literary status on popular genres themselves' in authors such as Chabon or Lethem (238). Sandberg reaches conclusions similar to Hoberek's within the context of Thomas Pynchon's oeuvre (3-4). One of the questions I will address in this chapter is how my core texts, often interested in re-evaluating popular artefacts and popular culture, engage with their escapist sources – and whether this constitutes a break with postmodern tendencies.

Finally, Phillips believes that the process of quoting can be a way of using other people's lines in order to get away from one's own: a textbook case of escapist tendencies (19). Yet while such a desire might then seem to belong most naturally to texts that concern themselves so extensively with escapist characters, I believe my core texts employ intertextuality not to retreat from commitment, but instead to establish human and social connections. Taking my discussion of intertextuality as a starting point, I will explore the way my core texts employ their reliance on a shared canon of texts to create 'imagined communities' – some of these abstract, some actual groups composed of readers and scholars. This notion will allow me to consider my texts' approach to the idea of 'fan fiction,' a central feature of the poetics of both Michael Chabon and Jonathan Lethem, and the concept around which Chabon structures his theory of literary influence.

'That Story Was Connected to This One:' Intertextuality and Escapism

Hardcore Nerds: The Model Reader in Oscar Wao

Intertextuality in self-consciously escapist texts serves first and foremost a descriptive function. Escapist fiction and popular genres are used to characterise a text's storyworld, and to delineate the features of its characters. Among my core texts, none employs intertextuality in this way more extensively than *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which constitutes an excellent case study of how intertextuality manifests itself across my primary sources. In a novel that references countless texts from different media, cultures, and time periods, the question of whether these references are *explained*, or left to the reader to decode, becomes crucial to our understanding of the type of Model Reader constructed in Díaz's text.

Widely theorised in different forms throughout literary criticism – see for instance Wayne Booth's definition of the implied reader⁵⁴ – the concept of the Model Reader is proposed by Umberto Eco in *The Role of the Reader*. The Model Reader does not correspond to any single person, but remains purely theoretical, a function of a written artefact: the model addressee of a text, as we can reconstruct it from the text itself. On a first, macroscopic level, a text's Model Reader will be a person who knows the language the text is written in; but they will also be able to recognise its use of literary styles or

⁵⁴ Booth's implied reader, as defined in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), shares several features with Eco's Model Reader. Both models posit how an author inevitably creates an 'image of his [sic] reader' within a text (138). The main difference lies in how, while Eco approaches this theoretical reader as a purely textual function, Booth considers the implied reader as possessing a perspective that the actual, physical reader must assume in order to achieve 'the most successful reading' (138).

formal conventions (7). A layman English speaker, for example, might be unable to understand an academic article on Molecular Biology, or the text of an interactive fiction game, even if written in English.

More specifically, literary texts inevitably presuppose a specific type of audience, and some texts 'make evident their Model Reader by implicitly presupposing a specific encyclopaedic competence' (7). Eco gives us the example of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), which makes explicit in its first pages that its readers (should) possess a knowledge of chivalrous tales, and of their dynamics (7). *Waverley* also specifically constructs its readers in gender-specific terms (Scott 24), since women constituted the majority of novel readers in early nineteenth-century Britain. If *Waverley's* Model Reader can be inferred from these clues found in its opening pages, what image do we see emerging from *Oscar Wao*? And what role does intertextuality play in establishing this theoretical figure?

Díaz's novel is intertextually involved with two major sources: the history of the Dominican Republic, and nerd/geek culture – as in, genre fiction, comic books, role-playing and board games, Japanese animation, etcetera. Consider this passage from the novel's first chapter, describing Oscar as a child: 'You should have seen him, his mother sighed in her Last Days. He was our little Porfirio Rubirosa. All the other boys his age avoided the girls like they were a bad case of Captain Trips. Not Oscar' (12). Rubirosa, a notorious Dominican playboy and a member of Trujillo's dictatorial regime, is invoked to characterise Oscar's nonchalance among young girls, and an indulgence towards, possibly even an admiration of, the excesses of the dictatorship, among certain Dominicans, represented by Oscar's mother's longing sigh. 'Captain Trips,' on the other hand, is the apocalyptic disease that wipes out most of humanity in Stephen King's novel *The Stand*

(1978),⁵⁵ and it is used here comically to exaggerate Oscar's peers' aversion to girls. The main difference in the way these sources are used is discussed extensively by O'Brien in his essay 'Some Assembly Required:' *Oscar Wao's* narrative is supported by an extensive apparatus of footnotes, many of which expand details of the plot, and explain its most obscure references. Yet these explanations almost exclusively clarify Dominican history and culture (O'Brien 90). The passage quoted above, for instance, features a lengthy footnote explaining who Porfirio Rubirosa was, while there is no guidance to help uninformed readers understand what Captain Trips is, nor its cultural provenance. What does this double standard suggest about the kind of Model Reader generated by the text?

It is doubtful exactly what reader Yunior, *Oscar Wao's* narrator, has in mind for his story. He is aware, for instance, that his audience may not be familiar with the history of the Dominican Republic: the novel's very first footnote is sardonically addressed to 'those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history' (2n), remarking how little relevance Santo Domingo is considered to have in other cultures. It is also arguable that he might be writing with American readers in mind: in a different footnote, he asks, 'you didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the U.S. occupied Iraq either' (19n). If references to the Dominican Republic are heavily glossed because Yunior assumes his audience to be ignorant of its history, does this imply that nerd-culture references are left unexplained because he is writing with a 'nerdy' audience in mind?

The novel's prologue would appear to invalidate this possibility, since Yunior doubts Oscar would have liked the way he is representing his life story: 'He was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that that was the kind of story we were all living in' (6).

⁵⁵ King is mentioned multiple times in the novel; Oscar's literary ambitions include the dream that he might one day become 'the Dominican Stephen King' (27).

True enough, we are later told that Abelard Luis Cabral's lost book is 'the kind of shit only a nerd could love' (246), and we have already seen how *Oscar Wao* and Abelard's lost book might well be the same text. Indeed, any reflection on the nature of Yuniors audience is inevitably complicated by his own self-confessed status as a 'closet nerd' and as an unreliable narrator: for example, he often recollects in detail events he had no way of witnessing first hand, and could not have reconstructed through witnesses, such as Oscar's attempted suicide (190-1), or his beating and eventual murder in Santo Domingo (298-9, 321-2).

Yet unexplained intertextual references do not necessarily make a text inaccessible to uninformed readers. Eco explains how any text '*creates* the competence of its Model Reader' (7): to use as an example the *Oscar Wao* passage we just discussed, readers who are not familiar with Stephen King's oeuvre may not recognise the reference to *The Stand*, but they will nonetheless be able to infer that 'Captain Trips' is some kind of disease, and that it is used here in the service of hyperbole.

Let us see how this process works in a peculiarly complex passage, worth quoting here at length, from the novel's last chapter.

He managed to send mail home before the end. A couple of cards with some breezy platitudes on them. Wrote me one, called me Count Fenris. Recommended the beaches of Azua if I hadn't already visited them. Wrote Lola too; called her My Dear Bene Gesserit Witch.

And then, almost eight months after he died, a package arrived at the house in Paterson. Talk about Dominican Express. Two manuscripts enclosed. One was more chapters of his never-to-be-completed opus, a four-book E.E. 'Doc' Smithesque space opera called *Starscourge*, and the other was a long letter to Lola, the

last thing he wrote, apparently, before he was killed. In that letter he talked about his investigations and the new book he was writing, a book that he was sending under another cover. [...] This contains everything I've written on this journey [...] (It's the cure to what ails us, he scribbled in the margins. The Cosmo DNA.) (333)

The only reference to the Dominican Republic to be found in this passage, other than a passing geographical one, is to the so-called 'Dominican Express' – a self-explanatory joke ridiculing the country's postal system. Much more complex are its several references to nerd cultural artefacts. The two found in the second paragraph are more or less obscure, but their significance is not difficult to infer. A reader unfamiliar with the works of E.E. Smith may fail to grasp what type of book Oscar is writing, but the text provides us with enough clues to reconstruct a reasonable idea of the kind of text it may be: we know it falls into the 'space opera' genre, and that at four books of length it is no small, unambitious project. Even the word 'opus,' combined with the series' title '*Starscourge*,' suggest a work of epic proportions and themes. Similarly enough, readers unfamiliar with the anime series *Space Battleship Yamato* will fail to identify it as the source of the reference to the 'Cosmo DNA,' but the text informs them that this item is a cure to the problems that ail Oscar's countrymen – namely, the curse of the fuku.

Yet this simplistic explanation inevitably downplays the amount of information that is lost through an uninformed reading of the passage. Readers who are not in the know will likely fail to realise the full extent of the extended metaphor offered throughout *Oscar Wao*, comparing the curse of the fuku with the fallout from an apocalyptic event – namely, the discovery of America by European colonisers. Santo Domingo is defined in the very first page of the novel as 'the Ground Zero of the New World' (1), a term originating in the vocabulary of nuclear war. Díaz's descriptions of Oscar's condition as an outsider

sometimes tap into this extended metaphor, and he is often described as a mutant (22n; 267; 271) – further reinforcing, simultaneously, a comparison with the characters from the *X-Men* comic books (22n). Unloved and unaccepted wherever he goes, Oscar's sense of displacement is compared to an exposure to 'debilitating forms of radiation' (268). Nuclear warfare is also invoked in the novel by direct reference to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: the event is associated with strange dreams on the part of Socorro, the wife of Abelard, Oscar's grandfather. In her sleep, she sees the Faceless Man 'standing over her husband's bed [...] Standing over her children too' (236-7). This reference links the imagery of nuclear warfare with the figure of the No Face Man, arguably the novel's main antagonist and an oft-mentioned incarnation of evil that Yuniór, Oscar, Oscar's mother and his niece all have to confront at different times in the text (135; 298; 325; 330). The language of nuclear warfare is also used to describe the scar on the back of Oscar's mother, acquired during her time as an enslaved child in Santo Domingo, which is compared to 'a bomb crater, a world-scar like those of a hibakusha' (257).

In the context of the persistence of such metaphors in the novel, its mention of the Cosmo DNA is clearly not arbitrary: in the anime series *Space Battleship Yamato*, the Cosmo DNA is a futuristic device able to cleanse Earth from the poisoning radiation that scars it in the aftermath of a nuclear conflict. Oscar is apparently hoping that the noxious radiation of the fuku might similarly be cured by what he has unearthed in the course of his investigations.

Furthermore, Lola, Oscar's sister, is called a 'Bene Gesserit Witch,' a reference to Frank Herbert's science fiction novel *Dune* (1965) – an important intertextual node in *Oscar Wao*, and an especially resonant one: with its cult following, and the disappointing history of its ridiculed film adaptation, it offers a synecdoche of the nerd culture so dear to

Oscar. *Dune* also inspires Yunior's nickname in the passage: 'Count Fenris.'⁵⁶ Yet while Oscar's form of address for Lola is entirely benign – the Bene Gesserit are a group of wise, powerful women in Herbert's novel – his recasting of Yunior might arguably be a back-handed compliment. *Dune*'s Count Fenring is a cunning and ambiguous character, described as a man who 'seldom did anything he felt to be unnecessary, or used two words where one would do, or held himself to a single meaning in a single phrase' (329); a description that is not necessarily flattering, and that sounds peculiarly appropriate for Yunior, such an unreliable and ambiguous narrator throughout *Oscar Wao*.

We can indeed see how Díaz's novel constructs its Model Reader: scattered as it is with the most varied references to the world of nerd culture, at no point in *Oscar Wao* does an unexplained cultural reference make the text incomprehensible – something which cannot necessarily be said of *Bleeding Edge* or *Telegraph Avenue*. This deceptive accessibility allows readers to approach the novel without deepening their knowledge of nerd culture in any way; but those who choose this option will miss many of its nuances, and fail to appreciate its full scope. In this sense, the extended reference to nuclear war detailed above is meaningful for one additional reason: the post-apocalyptic and post-nuclear genres of science-fiction are personal favourites of Oscar's. 'No apocalyptic movie or book or game existed that he had not seen or read or played – Wyndham and Christopher and Gamma World were his absolute favorites' (23; see also 27; 42). It is a favourite obsession he is unable to indulge in, as his friends do not share his enthusiasm (28). Once more we are confronted with the key issue of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: whether or not we identify with Oscar enough to be willing to step into his shoes,

⁵⁶ The *Dune* character discussed here is called Count Fenring rather than Fenris. Extensive research has not unearthed any character who may be identified with the name of 'Count Fenris.' The proximity of another reference to *Dune* makes it likely this is a misspelling on Yunior's or Díaz's part.

and embrace his own dedication to his beloved genres, in order to understand his world view – and his story – as fully as possible. Depending on any individual reader's willingness to research those references they find obscure, each reading act becomes a way of showing or denying Oscar sympathy for his beloved pursuits.

Intertextuality and Community: the Case of Telegraph Avenue

Considering how much his passion for genre fiction, comic books and games makes a social pariah of Oscar De León, *Telegraph Avenue's* central theme may seem somewhat paradoxical: Chabon's novel presents a world where popular culture is able to bridge the chasms that separate different people and ethnic groups living together in a single community – specifically, the Telegraph Avenue neighbourhood between Oakland and Berkeley, in California. Movies, comic books, games and, most notably, music, comprise the foundations of the characters' cultural world. The novel's protagonists, Archy and Nat, have built their record store with the express aim of turning it into a meeting point for their community. Archy expresses this view in a crucial speech that is worth quoting at length:

There's sort of a, what, an *ideal* that I know Nat and me always had in mind for this store [...] on the old Silk Road, you know, between Europe and China. It's all tribes and deserts, and then you've got this long, hard journey, take you a couple of years to get there if you go quick. It's a hard road, it has bandits, sandstorms. You carrying the light of all the civilisations back and forth, but all around you, the tribes just want to keep up their warring, and killing, and keeping track of what makes them better than everybody else. Like you know how every tribe's name,

when you translate it, turns out to mean 'the people,' like nobody else but them is really *human*? But you keep on because you are trying to earn a little cheese, right, and you spreading the collective wisdom back and forth. Forging that Creole style. And every so often, every few hundred miles, maybe, you got these oases, right, these caravansaries, where they all get together and chill, hang out, listen to good music, swap wild tales of exaggeration. Nat, man, you know what I'm saying, right? That was kind of our dream. The Brokeland Creole dream'. (374)

This passage highlights the sanctity of the pursuit of finding a haven in the warring landscape of a conflicted world: the 'warring and killing' of the desert's tribes has an obvious correlative in the ethnic and social tensions of modern-day America. Indeed, *Telegraph Avenue* elevates the love of music to a religious enterprise: one of its sections is emblematically titled 'The Church of Vinyl,' while Archy's atheism is based on the impossibility of carrying one's record collection in the afterlife (4). The tone of this passage calls to mind the Lovecraftian struggle often found within Chabon's oeuvre: the world is seen as a place of chaos, an inhospitable land of 'hard road, bandits, sandstorms,' peopled by groups who embrace a merciless attitude toward one another, and see themselves as the only true human beings on the planet. Yet the bleakness of this environment serves only to highlight the magnitude of entertainment, and music in particular, as tools able to bridge the differences between these groups – between the warring bands of this mythical Silk Road, and between the ethnic groups of the mixed, varied Telegraph Avenue communities described in the novel.

Telegraph Avenue embodies this shared ideal – what Hess, in his essay on the novel, calls 'a "utopia" of shared interests' (34) – first and foremost in its free mixing of both genre elements and cultural references, which turns the novel into a virtual melting

pot:⁵⁷ 'Archy Stallings's discussion of "Brokeland Creole" follows Chabon's own style by synthesizing a variety of popular forms to communicate between different entertainment languages and audiences' (Hess 41). Troy Patterson reaches similar conclusions when he states that '*Telegraph Avenue* is not exactly a genre novel, but it is manifestly a novel about genre, with Chabon offering sundry Vulcan salutes, lovingly crafting nods to supernatural classics, and referring to references to references [sic] to movies that weren't very good.' Chabon himself has said that the creative process behind the novel was characterised by a high level of playfulness, and that he was able to 'integrate all of my influences and passions - it's a naturalistic novel, but I'm free to incorporate influences of crime fiction, magic realism and martial arts fiction' ('Michael Chabon Talks of *Telegraph Avenue*'). Indeed, if at first sight *Telegraph Avenue* may appear to move away from Chabon's genre novels of the 2000s, a closer reading reveals it to be a synthesis of the first and second phases of his career, and of all the genres he had previously tackled; a claim that could also be extended to *Moonglow*, the novel that Chabon published next.

Yet one should not take *Telegraph Avenue* as an unapologetic defence of popular culture's redemptive potential. If anything, the novel complicates such a straightforward reading, starting with its plot: the 'oasis' Archy and Nat have created to bring together people from all walks of life is, throughout the novel, on the brink of failure, and is eventually closed down. The friends spend most of the narrative arguing over what to do with the shop, which becomes a source of distress rather than a place of bonding. This crisis reaches its peak in a crucial reflection by Nat, which uses complex intertextual imagery to discuss more than the characters' relationship:

⁵⁷ The record of the same name, by Booker T. & The MG's, is mentioned at one point in the novel; ironically, it plays during a moment of tension between Jewish Nat Jaffe and African-American Gibson Goode, as the latter is interested in buying out the former's store (273-4).

For years [Nat's] life had been balanced like the world of legend on the backs of great elephants, which stood on the back of a giant turtle; the elephants were his partnership with Archy [...] and the turtle was his belief that real and ordinary friendship between black people and white people was possible, at least here, on the streets of the minor kingdom of Brokeland, California. Here along the water margin, along the borderlands,⁵⁸ along the vague and crooked frontier of Telegraph Avenue. Now that foundational pileup of bonds and beliefs was tottering, toppling like the tower of circus elephants in *Dumbo*. Not because anybody was a racist [...] It just turned out that a tower of elephants and turtles was no way to try to hold up a world. (410-1)

The references scattered through this virtuoso passage mirror the greater complexity of the novel at large. The elephant *Dumbo* is invoked both to provide a visual representation of the collapse of Nat's dream, and to satirise his own glorious vision of the 'great elephants' with a caricature lifted from the world of Disney's movies – and from a movie, in particular, featuring characters with allegedly racist overtones.⁵⁹ The image of a world balanced on the back of elephants marching on top of a turtle is a reference to Terry Pratchett's fantasy Discworld series, whose first volume, *The Colour of Magic* (1983), describes a fantasy universe built in precisely this way. Fantasy – or at least mythical –

⁵⁸ The metaphor of characters' escapist concerns as the 'empire' they inhabit, with capitals and borderlands of its own, is also used abundantly in *Wonder Boys* (see 273-4, 303, 366), and in Chabon's paratextual thanks to his editor and agent.

⁵⁹ The crows in *Dumbo*, who are dressed in attire associated with 1940s African American fashion and are voiced by African American actors, play on the segregationist Jim Crow laws of the southern United States. The 'leader' of the movie's crows is called Jim.

overtone is also implicit in the description of Brokeland as a 'minor kingdom,' a place of legend rather than a location belonging to the mundane, everyday reality of contemporary America. Yet the most crucial line in the passage is the one used to describe the precise location of Nat's dream. Mentioning the 'water margin' calls to mind Archy's speech about a desert oasis, while referring to a location 'along the borderlands' evokes the subtitle of Chabon's collection of essays, *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands*. This implicitly expands Nat's doubts about the potential of a life built out of the materials of fiction and entertainment into a reflection on the poetics of the novel's author, commenting here on his oeuvre at large without disrupting narrative immersion. In this sense, the 'Telegraph Avenue' that is evoked in this passage is as much the geographical setting of the novel as *Telegraph Avenue*, the text. At the same time this passage questions the personal life choices of Nat as a character, and the larger purpose and value of Chabon's fictional and non-fictional oeuvre: both character and 'author' here contemplate the kind of despair caused by the crushing forces of history, often encountered in Chabon's narratives.

Is the novel's final outlook a negative one, then? Hess reads *Telegraph Avenue* this way, and points to the metaphor of the record store as a way for Chabon to describe how popular culture, at the same time as it bridges the distance between different people, creates new barriers to separate them. The many forms of pop culture 'atomize the audience for these forms, constructing "self-reflexive and hermetic" universes of personal vision that inhibit communicative possibilities' (43). Being a vast and fragmented universe, popular culture invites its fans to take those bits of it they most enjoy, with the result that there is no clearly defined canon; which may complicate, rather than foster, any chance of finding common ground between fellow fans. *Telegraph Avenue* offers a few examples of this type of phenomenon: for all that Brokeland Records is an oasis of peace and shared

world views, it is still not free from prejudice, and not all music genres are accepted in the record store: 'Wander into Brokeland hoping to sell a copy of *Point of Know Return* or, say, *Brain Salad Surgery* (Manticore, 1973), they would need a Shop-Vac to hose up your ashes.' (87). Archy even criticises his son's preferred form of entertainment, video games, by asking him '*what would happen if you read an actual Marvel motherfucking comic book one time?*' (264), an ironical take on the trope of the stern parent telling their children to 'go read a book.'

In this context, the question most pertinent to this chapter is what reading of *Telegraph Avenue* its web of intertextual references would seem to support. Do these references create a shared context that favours successful communication – even the simplest of literary relationships: that between an author and a reader – or do they inhibit or hinder communication?

Close reading of the novel shows how *Telegraph's Avenue's* intertextual web is easily the most extensive and most cryptic in Chabon's oeuvre. Unlike *Oscar Wao's* references, which focus on a few specific areas of knowledge (the history of Santo Domingo and nerd culture), *Telegraph Avenue* alludes to popular artefacts and texts from a broad array of niche subcultures, from martial arts and Blaxploitation movies to nerd hobbies and games; from the world of collectibles and numismatic to that of jazz and funk music, perhaps the novel's key cultural source, so much so that it is referenced in an almost scholarly way: every album mentioned is reported together with its record label and year of publication. This attentiveness allows Chabon to remark on the cultural importance of these artefacts for the characters, who revere them as objects of study and worship, rather than as a mere pastime.⁶⁰ Chabon's novels operates upon its readers, as all novels do, to

⁶⁰ The same phenomenon can be found in Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice* (2009), with its many references to film.

suggest what Model Reader it creates, thus arguably *transforming* the reader into, or at the very least showing them, precisely the kind of pop-culture fanatic that would make for a model inhabitant of Chabon's utopian Berkeley.

In this sense, anyone not familiar with role-playing games might still understand a reference to that cultural sphere when a nerdy young man is described as someone who has never faced a problem that 'could not be ameliorated by rolling a handful of twenty-sided dice' (114). Yet other references appear to stand halfway between the domain of intertextuality and that of the 'Easter egg' – a piece of bonus content left inside a text to reward readers in the know, or dedicated enough to track it down. An instance of this can be located in the Shakespearean overtones of the names Titus and Julius, Archy's and Nat's sons respectively, whose meeting will cause several minor tragedies to befall the novel's characters. Similarly, Pynchon fans will recognise a reference to the writer's fictional worlds in Chabon's description of two characters smoking weed coming from Vineland County (387) – a fictional Californian region found in Pynchon's *Vineland*. Some readers, for instance Dewey (128), might perceive a trace of Chabon's own *Gentlemen of the Road* (2007) in Archy Stalling's speech about life on the Silk Road among merchants and marauders. Others may reasonably assume Cochise Jones' pet parrot to be the same bird who is at the heart of the murder-mystery *The Final Solution* (2004), a theory Chabon apparently confirmed at a public reading ('Michael Chabon, 'Moonglow').⁶¹

The point is that *Telegraph Avenue* is deliberately constructed to make the idea of

⁶¹ While Chabon will be discussed extensively in the course of this chapter as the one among my core authors who indulges most extensively in intertextual references to his own texts, he is far from alone: Pynchon's novels share a few key families and characters (Pig Bodine, the Traverses, the Cherrycokes), while Lethem's Perkus Tooth, from *Chronic City* (2009), makes an appearance in *Dissident Gardens* (2013).

complete understanding unattainable. By touching upon so many different cultural worlds, and by hiding so many references in the very texture of his writing, Chabon has created a novel engineered to challenge even the most eclectic reader, in an extended game of elusive allusions.

But what is the purpose of this structure? Is the novel advancing the case of popular culture as a false middle-ground, bound by its own dimensions and ephemeral nature to remain obscure? To try and answer this question, we must consider two key elements of the novel, both to be found in its closing pages.

It is first and foremost worth remarking how the fate of Brokeland Records, abandoned by its owners in the novel's conclusion, only apparently constitutes the death of Archy's dream of a shared cultural space. The defunct store's place will be taken by 'a trading card store called Mr. Nostalgia's Neighborhood' (464-5). Archy admittedly has no interest in collectibles, but still realises that 'the merchandise was not the thing [...] it was all about the neighbourhood, that space where common sorrow could be drowned in common passion as the talk grew ever more scholarly and wild' (465). Notice, once again, the reference to the 'scholarly' nature of people's passion for pop artefacts, revered as the most sacred of texts rather than as mere escapism or 'entertainment'. Indeed, Chabon's essay 'Tricksters in a Suit of Light' makes it explicit that his commitment to entertainment is not to be taken as a rejection of art's potential, but as a desire to highlight the capacity of entertainment to foster successful communication, and ultimately, to bring people into contact with realities other than their own (2-5).

In the closing pages of *Telegraph Avenue*, Archy even makes a mental note to visit Mr. Nostalgia's Neighbourhood soon, to 'see how they put the world together, next time around' (465), a passage that calls to mind Nat's bitter reflection on their own attempts to 'try to hold up a world' (141) balanced on the back of metaphorical elephants, and offers a

counterweight to its defeatist emphasis by adding a touch of hope to it. In a further reiteration of Chabon's cycle of hope and defeat, the collapse of Archy and Nat's dream is not the end of the text's argument in favour of popular culture's ephemeral, but significant, value: another shop will attempt to create an oasis of shared ideals against the world's destructive powers.

This crucial passage provides a key to understanding *Telegraph Avenue's* broader web of intertextual references. In this novel, being a fan of a specific cultural phenomenon is not as important as a readiness to appreciate another person's cultural obsessions and penchants, and to employ these passions as a way of creating common ground. Although uninterested in memorabilia, Archy is still determined to visit Mr. Nostalgia's Neighborhood, and to recreate inside it the type of oasis that could be found in Brokeland Records. In this sense, the 'dark areas' of knowledge every reader will inevitably meet in their reading experience with *Telegraph Avenue* can hardly be considered a negative by-product of the ephemeral cultural status of the novel's intertexts. Rather, the novel's Model Reader is not an unlikely compound of anecdotal knowledge from various pop-cultural sources: it is instead someone able to take all sorts of references, be they to texts they know or not, as tools used to create a shared common ground of communication between text and reader.

As such, the question of how valuable popular culture is as a shared common ground is one *Telegraph Avenue asks*, rather than answers. Each individual reading of the novel, by activating (or failing to activate) its intertextual web, will force individual readers to either content themselves with a partial understanding, or to research those areas that they find obscure. Similarly, their openness to navigating a narrative world whose references may occasionally be unfamiliar will determine whether they find the idea of a reality where popular culture and its many grey areas constitute a viable common ground

or not.

Telegraph Avenue thus constitutes the expression of Michael Chabon's broader views on art and pop culture, as expressed in *Manhood for Amateurs*, where he states that 'every work of art is one half of a secret handshake [...] art, like fandom, asserts the possibility of a fellowship in a world built entirely from the materials of solitude. The novelist [...] flashes his or her bit of mirror, not on the chance that the signal will be seen or understood but as if such a chance existed' (5). This view supports both readings of popular culture in the novel: its unifying powers *are* doomed to fail, but they *do* exist, if only in the minds and hearts of its fans. This 'flashing of the mirror' is executed not out of pragmatism, in order to obtain a specific result, but to chase a utopian vision, possibly delusional. The very idea of art as a 'secret handshake' expands, while also complicating, the concept of pop fandom as a cultural common ground. A secret handshake, in fact, ascribes those familiar with it to a shared, exclusive dominion: enthusiasts of a specific work of art may be seen as belonging, perhaps without knowing it, to the same domain, thus highlighting the untapped potential for unity implicit in entertainment. Yet a secret handshake, by definition, has to remain exclusive: sharing it widely defeats its very purpose. As such, art is both uniquely positioned to be, and peculiarly hindered from becoming, a shared common ground.

One concrete example of the type of connectedness fandom can offer is given, again, in *Telegraph Avenue*'s last pages: Julie and Titus, by now grown distant and having terminated their tentative relationship, can still meet and be friends in the world of an online video game (463). Fandom appears powerfully stronger than personal issues and political beliefs, an idea that we encounter in the character of *Kavalier & Clay*'s Carl Ebling: an anti-semitic self-proclaimed Aryan, who has made of Sam and Joe his mortal enemies, he is nonetheless a passionate fan of their fictional creation, *The Escapist*. His

dossiers on the comic book as Jewish propaganda trace the evolution of his commitment, and the positive influence exercised by the superhero on the young man almost manages to dissolve his hate: 'the striking thing was the way, as he went along, month by month adding another entry to his dossier on Empire, Ebling's tone of dismissive scorn and outrage moderated and then vanished altogether [...] there was no real purpose being served by the Ebling memorandum except the exegesis [...] of ten months of pure enjoyment. Carl Ebling was, in spite of himself, a fan' (203). Here, too, superhero comic books are worthy of scholarly attention. Carl's 'exegesis' refers, in very clear terms, to 'ten months of pure enjoyment:' the enjoyability of escapist entertainment, sometimes associated with its 'corrupting' effects, is here cited as a source of joy for the character experiencing it – one whose consequence, incidentally, is to turn a Nazi sympathiser into a fan of Jewish artistic outputs: the idea that Carl becomes a fan 'in spite of himself' highlights the powerful lure of popular entertainment.

Before I discuss further the ways in which self-conscious escapism operates to create 'imaginary communities' of readers, it is worth mentioning how Chabon's reflections on the paradox of pop culture, inherently exclusive *and* shared, calls to mind Jane Smiley's discussion of the very form of the *novel*, which, she claims, embraces precisely this kind of paradox – a paradox which is also at the heart of Western liberalism: 'if you look at a novel or a democracy one way, it is the tale of one person. If you look at it another way, it is a tale of a group. Neither the person nor the group ever gains permanent ascendancy: the two coexist' (173). In this sense, *Telegraph Avenue's* representation of the possibilities and limitations of popular culture is a reflection on the broader dream of peaceful democracy: when Nat dreams 'that real and ordinary friendship between black people and white people was possible' (411), his hopes tap into the tradition of utopian idealism in American culture, while at the same time serving as a reminder of the historical intractability of race

relations in the US. *Telegraph Avenue* can indeed be read as one of Chabon's most political novels – as signified by the cameo appearance of a pre-presidency Barack Obama as a character (158).

Finally, in the course of this section I have referred several times to the supposedly ephemeral nature of popular culture. A possible objection that can indeed be made to my core texts is that, since so much of their form and content is dependent on intertextual references to popular sources, their accessibility and aesthetic value is bound to the (ephemeral) legacy of such content. In response, I will refer to Cawelti's defence of works of art referring to time-bound cultural phenomena: 'just as there is an artistry of universality, there may be an artistry of the moment, and [the] difference between the two may be more complex than a matter of superior opposed to inferior art' (300). This is another way in which my core texts articulate their defence of popular genres: not only do they invariably embrace Cawelti's view on the relevance of the 'artistry of the moment'; by intertextualising with these pop artefacts and engaging in a dialogue with them, they contribute to renewing these works' relevance, especially since they do not simply mention these works in passing, but encourage their readers, to a considerable degree, to actively research them. My core texts thus foster the survival of those works they depart from, further reinstating their nature as the creation of passionate 'fans.'

The 'Imagined Communities' of Popular Culture

Telegraph Avenue is not the only one among my core texts to work toward fostering a form of community between readers. If Chabon's novel discusses a model world where people can overcome racial and class boundaries thanks to their shared love of popular culture, then most of my core texts – through their vast intertextual webs –

work actively to build 'communities' of readers, and to expand the reading experience from a quintessentially solitary pursuit into a shared one.

Thematically speaking, several of these texts insist on the importance of communal belonging. That is the case with *Bleeding Edge's* discussion of geek culture, equated with a spontaneous but organic movement reminiscent of the 'hippy' cultural revolution of the 1960s. March Keller comments on this subculture – 'these kids are out to change the world. "Information has to be free"—they really mean it' (116) – remarking on its genuine spirit and ambitious scope. *S.* by Dorst & Abrams also creates a world where readers form communities – and collide with opposing ones – on the basis of their interpretation of a peculiarly cryptic text, in a novel that stands halfway between campus narrative and international thriller.

Even more than thematically, it is on the level of *form* that these texts operate to highlight the value of community. Heavily intertextual novels such as my core texts invariably implicitly invite readers to research the most cryptic references scattered throughout them. We have seen how *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which presents its world through the 'lens' of someone who uses popular genres and nerd culture as tools 'through which they can view and better understand their experiences' (Miller 95), allows readers to follow its extended metaphors and intricate imagery only if they acquire a degree of familiarity with its sources. This idea is not enough, in itself, to elevate the text to the realm of ergodic literature, which requires a reader's intervention in order to be appreciated (Aarseth 1): a book such as *Oscar Wao* can be read and understood, with an admitted loss of nuance, even without a reader's willingness to research its references. At the same time, the reader's willingness or refusal to research obscure popular artefacts ties in, as we have seen, with the thematic concerns of a novel that focuses extensively on the social isolation of its protagonist, caused largely by his peers' refusal to engage with his

passions.

Also crucial to this discussion is the fact that my core texts, as works of the twenty-first century, have been created by writers fully aware of how the Internet⁶² and its search engines are at their readers' disposal. The Internet in fact provides the first way these texts contribute to create a certain type of 'community of readers.'⁶³ Websites abound, in fact, to help readers decode the most cryptic passages of my core texts. That is true of Abrams' and Dorst's *S.*, a novel that 'quickly begat websites that gathered avid readers to share its secrets, attack its codes, and devote untold hours into reading *S.* again and again' (Regier 161). Readers of the book have to mediate between two parallel texts – a novel represented by the text in their hands, and a story unfolding in the notes scribbled by two characters in conversation in the book's margins. This original formal presentation makes of *S.* almost a physical representation of the power of fandom, seen here as life changing (the notes' writers eventually fall in love with each other) and as the key to greater exegeses. As the notes' writers influence each other's readings, they are able to crack some of the novel's secrets, while also encouraging one another to rejoice in the novel's escapist potential, portrayed here as salvific. Karen Hellekson has described how the act of scribbling in the margins constitutes a foundational feature of fan culture (153); and it is not surprising that such a celebratory text has itself generated further real-life fan groups. Paramount among

⁶² I capitalise the term throughout my thesis, following Lethem's habit in his essays.

⁶³ My core texts are discussed here as intrinsically supportive, through their intertextual webs and cryptic references, of a way of approaching books that includes the communal dimension provided by digital technology. It is still worth highlighting the paradox at the heart of this condition: several of these texts, in fact, are more-or-less explicit celebrations of the book as material object in the age of e-books and digital culture. Sara Tanderup describes precisely this paradox in the context of Dorst and Abrams' *S.* Moreover, while this does not automatically imply any grudge against digital culture, until 2012 Thomas Pynchon was famously reluctant to publish his book catalogue in digital form (Bosman).

these is 'Thoughts on "S" [sic],' a vast website curated by Brian Shipman, dedicated to analysing and dissecting the many obscure passages and secrets hidden within Dorst and Abrams' novel. Mark Danielewski's experimental works are widely debated and decoded in the seventeen-year-old MZD Forum. Yet the most popular of these websites are probably the Pynchon Wikis, a collection of online encyclopedias whose purpose is to explicate the most challenging passages of the writer's works. Far from being a marginal discourse or a way of 'cheating' one's way through Pynchon's most difficult pages, the PynchonWiki project has met with widespread academic approval, and *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* recommends these websites to its readers (Dalsgaard et al 2). They are even compared to easily accessible versions of the Pynchonian scholarly journals that existed in past decades; and as such, they point to a paradox lying at the heart of Pynchon's works. Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale argue:

Pynchon seeks community with his readers [...] His books are notoriously difficult, sometimes to the point of hermeticism [...] but there's another side as well. The very difficulty and apparent unfriendliness of Pynchon's novels create a sense of solidarity and, yes, community among Pynchon's readers – a sense that we are all participating in a collective enterprise of reading wherein no one of us could succeed without the help of the others. (7-8)

This apparent conundrum allows us to see why self-conscious escapism, while occasionally cryptic, may still foster idealistic communities: hermeticism, rather than scaring readers away, may instead create solidarity between them, thus turning the reading of any single novel from an individual to a collective pursuit. The idea that 'no one of us' can succeed at cracking these difficult texts also reinforces the point made earlier, when I

described *Telegraph Avenue* – possibly Chabon's most Pynchonian novel – as engineered to elude the knowledge of any individual reader. The Pynchon Wikis thus appear to be not so much a shortcut to access without pain the 'gist' or plot of Pynchon's works, but a natural by-product of their nature. In his thorough analysis of the *Gravity's Rainbow* wiki, Simon Peter Rowberry remarks on its limitations – among them, a lack of thoroughness in how contributors acknowledge their sources – but still concludes with the optimistic belief that, 'through careful use of the “many eyes” of the Wiki's users and with the right level of enthusiasm' (21), its issues may be resolved, and the website's quality may be further improved.

The wish to create a community of readers, seen by Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale as implicit inside Pynchon's fiction, would appear to be a peculiarly visible by-product of a characteristic that Chabon believes is at the heart of great popular art: 'the powerful quality of being open-ended, vague at its borders,' with 'room for you and your imagination in the narrative map' (*Manhood* 80). Notice, once more, Chabon's interest in the 'borders' of entertainment, where he himself locates his own artistic output, and the relevance of the map as an image central to his poetics. By leaving ample space for the reader to construct elements of the narrative and discover its secrets, my core texts fulfil what Chabon considers one of the key functions of art:

Every work of art is [...] a challenge that seeks the password, a heliograph flashed from a tower window, an act of hopeless optimism in the service of bottomless longing. Every great record or novel or comic book convenes the first meeting of a fan club whose membership stands forever at one but which maintains chapters in every city – in every cranium – in the world. (*Manhood* 5)

Clearly perceivable in this passage is the air of adventure that surrounds Chabon's vision of the pursuit of art and narrative, turned into a quest featuring 'heliographs' and 'passwords,' the ingredients of a spy story. As is often the case with self-conscious escapism, the pursuit of escape through narrative assumes a grandiose dimension. It is worth remembering how Chabon elsewhere states that he reads 'for entertainment' and writes 'to entertain. Period' (*Maps and Legends* 2); yet at the same time this pleasurable pursuit taps into a profound human desire that is invested with philosophical overtones. There are echoes here of *Against the Day's* reflections on the religious, mystical function of narrative as a way of approaching the secrets of the world, or of *Kavalier & Clay's* problematisation of the magic of art as a tool for opposing the horrors of history. Indeed, the paradox at the very heart of Chabon's oeuvre is effectively summarised in the passage above: the optimism of art's quest for meaning and unity is 'hopeless,' and the metaphorical clubs 'stand forever at one;' yet at the same time the urge to pursue this desire for unity taps into a 'bottomless longing,' and the clubs remain alive 'in every cranium,' as long as there are people who enjoy a specific work of art. As elsewhere in Chabon, the question of which force is victorious – the destructive force of isolation and history, or the unifying power of art – remains unanswered. The tone with which this struggle is depicted suggests that it is a perennial feature of reality, rather than something that can possibly be transcended or resolved.

Chabon's description of this potential for communal belonging intrinsic in all works of art resonates eerily with certain passages of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), a seminal study of the rise of nationalism. Just as the 'fan club' described by Chabon is bound to remain an abstraction more than a concrete concept, so Anderson says that nationalism creates communities that are first and foremost '*imagined*' because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet

them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (6). Indeed, the type of communal belonging to be found in a shared passion for fiction assumes once again the most serious overtones, and points not so much to any national idea, but to the literary concept of the 'Republic of Letters.' Texts such as *Telegraph Avenue* demonstrate how commitment to this 'imagined community' is not so much a matter of being passionate about a specific genre or text, as a broader commitment to and interest in the pursuit of popular entertainment in general.

The main difference between this concept of fiction as a source of 'community' and older interpretations of the ideal of the 'Republic of Letters,' for instance Goethe's welcoming of the 'age of world literature' (Moretti 148), is that my core texts do not seem particularly concerned with bringing together fictional works from different countries and national traditions. If any such tendency is present in these novels (and it is – see *Oscar Wao's* canon of nerd culture, composed of American, British and Japanese texts), it is subordinated to the creation of a 'community' built on texts hailing from all cultural strata, from all genres, and from popular and high culture equally. It is indeed no coincidence that Chabon's essay 'Secret Handshake,' which I have repeatedly cited in this chapter, begins by discussing the world of comic books, specifically the early years of Marvel Comics' fan base, and then expands its argument into a broader consideration of the value of all art. It is a technique Chabon employs again in 'Fan Fictions,' where the stories of Sherlock Holmes are used to elaborate a universal theory of influence, about which I will have more to say shortly. Hoberek appears correct in pointing out the 'tendency to confer literary status on popular genres themselves' (238), which he discusses with particular reference to the oeuvres of Lethem and Chabon, as one of the foundational attributes of much contemporary fiction.

Two further factors makes my core text's insistence on the concept of the 'imagined

community' particularly relevant. These texts have all been written in the age of the Internet, which offers an accessible tool to actualise any potential community or fan club, and give it a virtual dimension. Secondly, the call for active and collective participation is often implicit in them: it becomes an observable textual component. We have seen the ways in which *Oscar Wao* and *Telegraph Avenue* challenge their readers to research their sources. Tanderup observes, of *S.*, that 'reading of course always implies interactivity: making connections, filling in blanks. However, what makes *S.* a particular case is the fact that a call for participation is directly inscribed in the work' (168). Interactivity and participation are fundamental features of my core texts, 'inscribed' within their pages.

Relevant to this discussion is the role played by blanks in *Oscar Wao*, both on a textual and narrative level. The key feature of the novel's supernatural, eerie antagonist, after all, is that he has no face: he is an incarnation of absence.⁶⁴ And textual blanks abound in the last portion of Díaz's novel: Yunior's description of Oscar's demise ends with a simple 'Oscar –' (322); and the narrator offers as the cause of his failed relationship with Oscar's sister his inability to express his feelings for her, represented by dashes in the text (327; 329). Larger 'blanks' also contribute to the novel's plot: Oscar's manuscript with the cure to the fuku, for instance, or his grandfather's account of the Trujillo regime, both of which are 'lost manuscripts' whose presence casts a shadow over many of the novel's events. Considering all this, it is no surprise that in Yunior's dream of Oscar, the young man is holding up a book whose pages are blank (325); a vision that inspires both hope and dread in the narrator. The presence of so many blanks calls for a reader able to fill them, and to do what Yunior hopes Oscar's nephew will do: find a cure to the fuku by

⁶⁴ As such, we are reminded of Hagood's take on another supernatural antagonist, *House of Leaves*'s minotaur, as a representation of nothingness; see the section 'Escape and Redemption: Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*' in Chapter One.

using all of Oscar's books and games and comics (330-1) – almost literally, since, as we have seen, any reader hoping to successfully decode the entirety of *Oscar Wao* (Yunior's own counterspell, see 7) will need some familiarity with the literary and cultural artefacts so beloved by Oscar.

Fan Clubs

The concept of the 'fan club' used by Chabon to discuss his poetics is more than a passing reference. It is a model that finds interesting echoes in the works of the other authors whom I discuss in the course of this thesis. Before I move on to discuss how 'fan fiction' is conceived by my core authors, it is worth exploring some instances of how literary texts can create 'imagined communities' or 'fan clubs.' I shall do so by considering how this model dates back to two canonical genre writers: HP Lovecraft and Arthur Conan Doyle.

Among the least noted of Lovecraft's innovations as a writer is the way his fictional creations transgress ontological barriers, and the borders between fiction and reality. He often amplifies the trope, common in horror literature, of presenting narrated events as 'fact,' in order to heighten a story's frightening potential. Horror throughout history has been peculiarly reluctant to reject the literary convention, common in eighteenth-century fiction, of structuring itself in the form of an epistolary collection, a found manuscript, a retrieved diary, or any other such document that may have plausibly originated in the unwritten world. This reluctance is evident both in early cases of fantastic literature (for example, Potocki's self-explanatory *Manuscript Found in Saragoza*, 1815) and in contemporary works such as *House of Leaves*, whose internal critical apparatus grants the book a convincing, eerie semblance of verisimilitude. Danielewski's novel can even be

seen as the textual equivalent of the hand-cam horror movie, a popular sub-genre of horror cinema.

Himself a devoted curator of horror fiction who authored an acclaimed essay on the genre, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature,' Lovecraft's innovation on this claim of verisimilitude is to be found in the way he handles intertexts in his works. Many of Lovecraft's stories rely on references to the literature of the past and his own era, so that, for instance, a character in a state of temporary madness is led to recite 'the modernistic *Waste Land* of Mr. T. S. Eliot' (573). Among the most specific cases of this type of intertextuality are Lovecraft's references to Poe in *At the Mountains of Madness*: very much a so-called spiritual sequel to Poe's *Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*, the novel is based on the premise that the mysterious noise heard by Poe's characters in the conclusion of *Gordon Pym* may be the call of a monster. Bruce Kavin, concerned with the intersections between cognitive psychology and literature, highlights the originality of this treatment, and the possibilities it offers for the way we approach fiction: 'Since Lovecraft's and Poe's works are both approached by the reader as fictions, these speculations create in the reader's mind the possibility that they are equally *not* fictions but instead forbidden texts, keys like the *Necronomicon*⁶⁵ to unknown regions' (189).

Even more interesting is the way Kavin articulates the almost religious reverence implicit in this type of treatment, which turns classic fiction – and *genre* fiction – into a key to understanding the darkest elements of reality; a treatment we are by now familiar with, since it is also applied by Pynchon and Chabon in their works. Kavin claims that

Lovecraft turns the canon of horror literature into something more closely resembling the canonized books of the Bible: a series of pseudohistorical glimpses

⁶⁵ A fictional tome of magical and forbidden knowledge, widely mentioned throughout Lovecraft's oeuvre.

into the ways the supernatural impinges on ordinary reality, to be consulted for their 'accuracy' as much as for their beauty. It is one thing to set a fiction like the *Necronomicon* at the heart of one's fiction, and quite another to set there the actual and accepted works of Poe. (189)

With their heavy reliance on popular culture, self-consciously escapist texts offer precisely this type of approach. Nerd culture in *Oscar Wao* and dime novels in *Against the Day* become precisely the kind of artefact found in Lovecraft and described by Katwin – something to be consulted as much for its 'accuracy' as for its beauty. It is yet another way in which my core texts re-evaluate escapist fiction: commonly considered a type of literature exclusively reserved for entertainment, it is represented here not only as able to deal with the most weighty of themes, but as key to understanding and accessing the secrets of the world.

This claim to verisimilitude employed abundantly by Lovecraft, and by Chabon, calls to mind another canonical genre writer: Sherlock Holmes' creator Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle is discussed extensively in Chabon's essay 'Fan Fictions,' where one feature of the Holmes' stories is given particular prominence: the idea, implicit in their frame narrative, that they are narrated by Watson as truthful reports of events that actually happened. This treatment is combined with a certain reliance on the concept of the 'lost manuscript' (also beloved of my core texts), as Watson often refers to apocryphal stories of Holmes that are too scandalous or inappropriate to be published (42), in order to infuse the text with that open-ended quality Chabon believes to be crucial to effective popular narratives (*Manhood* 80). Thanks to their 'blanks' and missing links, Chabon argues, Holmes' stories invite readers to take an active role, and to contribute to the enriching of their fictional worlds. More than this, Conan Doyle's stories are to be considered the origin

of the very phenomenon of fan fiction in its modern form, where fans of a certain text write their own sequel to or revision of it (Chabon, *Maps and Legends* 43).

Thanks to this peculiar, inbuilt 'open-endedness,' texts such as Doyle's stories – and indeed, my core texts – extend a hand toward the reader, and take the first step toward the construction of a space in which the reader may take an active role: that of contributor, not simply interpreter. If this type of communal conception is possible, it is because of a peculiar notion – shared by Lethem and Chabon – that elevates the artistic output of fans and amateurs, who are equated with creators in a continuum without barriers. I shall now discuss how the idea of fandom is quintessentially entwined, in these writers' poetics, with a radical view of literary influence.

'Influence Is Bliss:' Literary Influence and Fan Fiction

Chabon and Lethem versus the Anxiety of Influence

Throughout a series of essays and articles, Michael Chabon and Jonathan Lethem have articulated parallel ways of reading the process of literary influence that are in direct opposition to more canonical, antagonistic theories. The main target of both authors is Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, which depicts the process as a parricidal struggle between generations of artists, with younger writers trying to overshadow their predecessors and to render them obsolete. Chabon and Lethem instead conceive influence as a joyous collaboration, whose origins can be found in a generation's admiration for their artistic forefathers. This positive view of influence is at the heart of both writers' poetics, and expresses itself in their fiction too. More importantly for the subject of this thesis, the idea of 'influence as bliss' goes hand in hand with my core texts'

approach to intertextuality, and with their efforts toward re-evaluating popular and escapist fictions.

In the essay 'To the Legoland Station,' Chabon speaks of artistic creation by noting how 'the inventive mind at work [makes] something new out of what you have been given by your culture, what you know you will need to do the job, and what you happen to stumble on along the way' (*Manhood* 57). For Chabon, influence is closer to free play than to a form of conflict, and is a largely involuntary pursuit – an original output is the product of something that is 'given' and something that is 'stumbled on.' In the same essay, he discusses the process of playing with Lego bricks, where children use any brick available to build their models, combining bits and pieces without caring much about their source, mixing '*Star Wars* kits [...] with Lego dinosaur jaws, Lego aqualungs, Lego doubloons, Lego tibias' and more (57). Other than calling to mind the free play engaged in by the protagonist of the *Toy Story* saga,⁶⁶ this description anticipates an early scene in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013), a text to which Chabon dedicated an extensive review ('Crying of September 11'): two young children are playing with a Melanie's Mall, the toy reproduction of a 'suburban girl idyll' (68) where 'it only makes sense to shop at if you have a car and a driveway and a garage next to a house in the burbs' (51). These children disregard the toy Mall's intended purpose and introduce into it 'a number of four-and-a-half-inch action figures, many from the cartoon show *Dragonball Z*' (68). By mixing toys from different and varied sources, the children exercise their free play, and in so doing they

⁶⁶ Chabon's essay 'To the Legoland Station' is actually critical of the first *Toy Story* movie, casting its antagonist Sid in a negative light because of his anarchic tendencies when playing with his toys (55). While Chabon's reading remains valid, it is possible to see the source of Sid's wickedness in his destructive rather than free tendencies, especially considering how later chapters in Pixar's saga see protagonist Andy stage equally anarchic scenarios, involving toys of different types.

not only disregard normative gender roles – Otis, a boy, is 'strangely intrigued' by the mall, while his playmate Fiona dresses the doll Melania 'in cape and ammo belts' (69) – but also free themselves of the toy Mall's insidiously sinister purpose, which is, as the text implies, to turn them into the perfect consumers of the future. Artistic creation, when ruled by this type of free play, can have similarly liberating effects.

Chabon's view of creativity as based on the use of available materials, no matter their source or status, immediately calls to mind the way self-consciously escapist texts mix, through free and extensive intertextuality and constant quotations, all sorts of fictional genres. Far from being a mere distraction, escapist fictions become a founding component of other works of art. When used within this process, such genres and media are not any more or less noble than high art: it is doubtful whether it is any more possible to create a hierarchy of such foundational materials than to create a hierarchy of Lego bricks.

Chabon's poetics of influence also starts from an egalitarian premise: that the process he describes is a *universal* one, shared equally by popular and high culture – another similarity that contributes to the blurring of the distinction between these two categories, a major concern of Chabon's oeuvre. The universality of Chabon's theory is one of its most innovative elements: not even Bloom made such a claim for his anxiety of influence, as we shall see. As he explains in the essay 'Fan Fictions,' focusing on Conan Doyle's life and on the fandom generated by his famous fictional detective, Chabon believes that 'for at least the past forty years – since (take your pick) the French New Wave, or the Silver Age of Comics, or rock and roll's British Invasion – popular media have been in the hands of people who grew up as passionate, if not insanely passionate, fans of those media: by amateurs, in the original sense of the word' (*Maps and Legends* 43-4). Characteristically, Chabon uses examples from across the cultural spectrum, from the

relatively canonical world of art-house cinema to the popular cultural spheres of rock and roll music and comic books. Equally important is his emphasis on the role played by enthusiasm in the creative process: thanks to their 'insane passion,' and by exploiting what Chabon has described as the open-ended quality of great popular fiction (*Maps and Legends* 44; *Manhood* 80), creators contribute a new work to the never-ending process of storytelling. In his study of enthusiasm as a key concept in American Literature, David Herd remarks on how the enthusiast 'is a circulator of thoughts, a person who keeps ideas and values moving' (5). There is a clear connection here with the idea of the fan as someone who is so invested in a specific narrative as to be compelled to expand it, by contributing their own imaginative efforts in what amounts to an act of sharing – at the very least between author and fan, and possibly between a larger community of fans. While the words 'fanatic' and 'enthusiast' are discussed here within the realm of artistic and literary creation, they both originate, at least partially, in religious contexts (see Herd 3-5), which invests them with serious and almost sacred overtones. Even more relevant to the concerns of this thesis is the conviction, which according to Herd 'American writers [...] took extremely seriously,' that 'in enthusiasm resides the possibility of knowledge' (6). Even when motivated by an escapist-oriented passion for their media of choice, the commitment of fans and enthusiasts to their favourite work might give them access to insight into the world and history – a position, as I have been arguing, that is central in many of Chabon's texts. With yet another touch of the dogmatic and para-religious, he condenses the entirety of 'Fan Fictions' into the aphoristic line: 'All novels are sequels; influence is bliss' (*Maps and Legends* 45).

Yet what may so far appear as a theory of popular or contemporary culture is, indeed, a theory of culture *tout court*. Chabon mentions the open-ended nature of fiction as a feature of 'all enduring *popular* literature' (*Maps and Legends* 44, italics mine), a view he

deems crucial to his 'theory of what makes great *mass* art' (*Manhood* 80, italics mine). And yet, hidden inside this apparently limited claim, is a much more all-encompassing view of literary influence. Placed with strategic slyness in the last paragraph of 'Fan Fictions' is the next step in Chabon's theory, which turns it from a local into a universal phenomenon: 'There is a degree to which, just as all criticism is in essence Sherlockian, all literature, highbrow or low, from the *Aeneid* onward, is fan fiction' (*Maps and Legends* 44). Here, the classics are invoked to corroborate the idea of influence as bliss, and to extend Chabon's theory, arguably, to the whole of literary history.

Self-consciously situating his theory of influence in opposition to Bloom's, Chabon explains that Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence 'has always rung so hollow to [him]' (45). In this and other respects, Chabon's views mirror those of Jonathan Lethem's seminal essay on cultural influence, 'The Ecstasy of Influence,' whose very title implies a reply to Bloom. It is an irony presumably not lost on Chabon and Lethem that in order to support their joyous views of influence, they engage in very much the sort of parricidal struggle described by Bloom.

Chabon and Lethem both discuss how artists recombine the cultural materials at their disposal to create new content, in a process that is more collaborative than competitive. The purposes of the two essays are far from identical: 'Fan Fictions' is primarily concerned with the historical importance of Conan Doyle's fandom within literary history, whereas Lethem's 'Ecstasy of Influence' primarily focuses on the issue of copyright in the US, and its incompatibility with the principle of free creation. Nonetheless, there is much common ground between the two writers' poetics of influence. Lethem, like Chabon, describes influence through 'sampling' as a contemporary phenomenon, while at the same time sketching its universality and its importance throughout literary history. Collage is foregrounded as a quintessential form of our culture,

ruled by television and mass media (97-100); and Lethem gives a practical example of this by describing the importance of influence and appropriation in the history of a very contemporary art form: cartoons (97). Yet on the same page, almost as an afterthought, he adds as a second example 'the remarkable series of "plagiarisms" that link Ovid's "Pyramus and Thisbe" with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, or Shakespeare's description of Cleopatra, copied nearly verbatim from Plutarch's life of Mark Antony and also later nicked by T.S. Eliot for *The Waste Land*' (97). The highest of literary genres – early modern drama, high modernism, classical poetry – are deployed to illustrate Lethem's theory of 'plagiarism,' and they too are juxtaposed with an example of popular culture: the cinematic musical.

There is further common ground in the two essays, and in Chabon and Lethem's poetics more broadly, in the way that they address the question of the Internet. Both of them appear conscious that the cultural practices they are discussing – namely, sampling/plagiarism in Lethem's case and fan fiction in Chabon's – are widely regarded as contemporary phenomena, influenced by and bound to the rise and diffusion of the worldwide web. Yet they also insist, perhaps in an effort to highlight literature's foundational value, that these phenomena have their origins in the earliest forms of art. In his essay 'The Afterlife of 'Ecstasy',' a commentary on how 'The Ecstasy of Influence' was received, Lethem stresses how the Internet was never the subject of his discussion, but that he was concerned instead with 'what Internet and sampling culture happened to make (even more) obvious: the *eternal intertextuality* of cultural participation – of reading, writing, making things from other things' (*Ecstasy* 122). Here the phrase 'eternal intertextuality,' inherent not just in 'reading' and 'writing' but in all types of artistic processes – 'making things from other things' – makes it explicit how, for Lethem, intertextuality transcends specific historical and cultural conditions.

Like Lethem, Chabon affirms literature's precedence over the Internet when he claims that Sherlock Holmes' fandom 'led directly [...] to the contemporary, largely Web-based phenomenon that has devotees of various television programs, cartoons, and film series presenting their own prose versions of adventures, histories, and sex lives of characters from *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*' (*Maps and Legends* 43). Even more explicitly, he argues that what he calls the 'Sherlockian Game anticipated, and helped to invent, the contemporary fandom that has become undistinguishable from contemporary popular art; it was the Web *avant la lettre*' (44). It is tempting to read this defence of fan fiction as a cunning way of highlighting the importance of literature – and, in particular, of the literature Chabon writes, studies and enjoys – in the contemporary cultural world, and its foundational role within such a crucial cultural phenomenon as the Web.⁶⁷

Chabon is far from alone in pointing out the fundamental value of fan fiction in cultural history. A considerable amount of criticism has been devoted in the last few decades to the topic. One of the most active scholars in this field, Karen Hellekson, argues that 'fans have always been engaging with texts, often in transformative ways by literally scribbling in the margins, rewriting scenes, and crafting new endings' (153). This might call to mind, to take a famous canonical example, George Eliot, whose earliest writing efforts consisted of her rewriting of the ending of Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814; see Twomey). It is in fact very easy to find literary works that can be read as fan fictions, or as 'sequels' to illustrious 'prequels,' to use Chabon's effective terms. Just as his debut novel *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* can be seen, as Dewey argues convincingly (24), as a fan-

⁶⁷ Chabon is not alone in advancing this type of argument. See Michael Witwer's claim, not necessarily supported by evidence, that 1970s role-playing games laid the foundation for social networks and other fundamental Web phenomena in his biography of *Dungeons & Dragons*' creator Gary Gygax (230).

fictional rewriting of *The Great Gatsby* (1925), so we can read Ugo Foscolo's *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1802) as a work of fan fiction based on Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1773); not to mention such canonical examples as Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Joyce's *Ulysses*; or, as Chabon himself argues, the *Aeneid*, a fan's riff on the *Iliad* ('Incroci di civiltà 2017').

Indeed, if fan fiction studies is a relatively new branch of literary criticism, plenty of critical attention has been dedicated throughout history to what can be read as a peculiar form of fan fiction: parody. Michael Bakhtin famously claims that parody, with its disruptive and regenerative force, is a quintessential ingredient of the success of the novel as a cultural form (5-6), one that guarantees its survival throughout time. And Lethem too points to the fundamental role played by parody in today's world, where we are often 'born backward into an incoherent realm of texts, products, and images' (100), so that we discover source texts through their parodies. At least in this sense, Lethem's claim to the universality of the phenomena he discusses would appear unquestionable. How many more readers have read *Don Quixote* (1615) than the knightly romances it parodies; or again, Henry Fielding's works, as opposed to the object of his satire, the Sentimental novel?

It is worth stressing once more that it would be mistaken to regard Chabon's and Lethem's theories of influence as identical, or to focus exclusively on their affinities. A major difference between their approaches is that, while Chabon's definition of fan fiction points to a specific and observable phenomenon – that of writers who, through their admiration for the art they most enjoy, create a new version of that same art – Lethem's description of influence refers to a feature of art that is harder to locate: 'appropriation, mimicry, quotation, allusion, and sublimated collaboration consist of a *sine qua non* of the creative act, cutting across all forms and genres in the realm of cultural production' (97). More broadly speaking, Lethem has been vocal in his attempts to distance himself from

Chabon, with whom he is often associated as part of a new literary movement (see Hoberek 236-7), one differing from postmodernism while also incompatible with the 'new sincerity' of writers such as David Foster Wallace, George Saunders, and early Dave Eggers. In Lethem's essay 'Against "Pop" Culture,' whose second half is dedicated to exploring his literary influences (and to showing how they were formative to his experience as a writer and critic), he specifies how 'it shouldn't be too hard to figure out that Michael Chabon and I really weren't formative influences on each other. It's math, literally. Look for common denominators instead' (*Ecstasy* 137). He expanded on this same point in a recent interview, published in the Italian translation: 'Credo che questa vicinanza sia un po' sovrastimata [...] Non posso dire di essere stato ispirato da Chabon: certo, abbiamo delle cose in comune per l'età, ammiro molto le sue capacità ed è un connazionale, però più che un riferimento letterario è un amico [...] Sicuramente i miei libri sono meno di intrattenimento dei suoi, le mie storie sono più contorte' ('Leggo Tante Scrittrici').⁶⁸

At the same time, if only because of what Lethem calls 'common denominators' – shared cultural and literary influences, points of contact between their poetics – it can still be illuminating to consider their works, and my other core texts, in light of their theories of influence. Indeed, the more closely we look at these theories as a joined theoretical framework, the more their similarities tend to emerge. When Lethem argues, for instance, that 'most artists are brought to their vocation when their own nascent gifts are awakened by the work of a master [and] are converted to art by art itself' (*Ecstasy* 97), he is pointing

⁶⁸ 'I believe that our similarities have been exaggerated [...] I can't say Chabon inspired me: we certainly share a few things because of our age, I admire his skills and he's a compatriot, but he's a friend more than an influence [...] My books are certainly less entertaining than his, my plots are more intricate' (translation mine).

once more to the concept of books talking to other books that we can find in Eco's theories of intertextuality. More importantly for the purposes of this thesis, Lethem is here embracing a view of art that places the highest importance on the influence of other art, rather than on a form of commitment to the real world. In this sense, he is embracing an aesthetic rather than political view of the nature of the craft.

Even more crucial to this discussion is how Lethem focuses, in his essays, on the importance of fandom within the artistic process. If Chabon believes artists to be first and foremost 'insanely passionate' fans or 'amateurs, in the original sense of the word' (44), Lethem too in 'The Afterlife of "Ecstasy"' reflects on the visceral passion for art that is at the heart of the process of influence in his personal experience: 'I felt influence, and thrilled to it, with my body, and did so before I knew it had a name' (*Ecstasy* 123). He proceeds to recollect his

buzz at detecting the throb of the forgotten Victorian poems parodied in Carroll's *Alice*, or how it felt to surmise the existence of Edward G. Robinson from a Bugs Bunny aside, indicating occult histories waiting to exfoliate themselves to your curiosity. Never mind the intertextual erotics of twentieth-century popular music, that vast song-with-annotations. (123)

Inscribed in this passage are most of those concepts, shared by Chabon and Lethem's theories, that are crucial to my analysis of self-conscious escapism. High and popular cultural sources are mixed freely in the examples provided, to show influence and its dynamics as transversal to divisions based on genre and canonical hierarchy. The 'buzz' and 'throb' of the process suggest its visceral, unconscious nature, not so much a planned intellectual pursuit as an almost biological need, a natural step in the evolution of the artist.

As a step, it is anchored in a deep commitment – what Chabon calls 'insane passion' – for the artist's medium of choice.

The passage even endows the process of influence with the overtones of a quest. If Chabon prefers to use the visual metaphor of the map, as when he talks about writers working 'across the borderlands' of fiction, or equates the thrill of fan fiction to that given by 'those marginal regions named and labeled on [Tolkien's] books' endpaper maps' (*Maps and Legends* 44), Lethem uses his reference to 'occult histories' to represent the same urge to explore, one shrouded in almost mythical, fantastical overtones.

Finally, popular music is described as a 'vast song-with-annotations,' an alternative to Chabon's aphoristic 'all novels are sequels' (*Maps and Legends* 45) that uses the framework of popular music. The 'intertextual erotics' of this medium highlight the importance of the process of decoding in order to achieve a thorough, even (physically) pleasurable understanding of any text at hand: Lethem is talking here about pop music, but many other pop media – from comic books to genre fiction – are arguably based on the same intertextual dependency.

It is not hard to see how these theories of influence and intertextuality shed light on many of the discourses at the heart of self-conscious escapism. The late fiction of Thomas Pynchon, for instance, or Díaz's *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, are careful to stress the importance of the treasures (and dangers) that can be found by treating the most escapist of fiction in a very serious way, and by engaging in the never-ending discourse this type of fiction carries on. These texts embrace several of the theoretical points argued by Chabon and Lethem: how the creative process is born out of a deep commitment and passion for previous art; how this passion cuts across all divisions and cultural strata, emphatically demonstrating the arbitrariness of hierarchies; and how this pursuit is quintessentially escapist in its nature. As we have seen, one does not dedicate oneself to the study of

cultural artefacts to gain any political or social understanding, but out of a love for these works of art; or, to use Chabon's term of choice, to be entertained (*Maps and Legends* 1-3). Yet this pursuit does not signify a rejection of worldly commitments, but is instead sometimes shown as a legitimate, even political choice *in itself*. The pursuit of escapist art may not be characterised by deep social commitment, but pointing out the need for such escapism already recognises the existence of social problems. It is possible to read the works of Michael Chabon, I would argue, as peculiarly apolitical; and yet his texts are critical of several episodes in recent American history. This is even more evident in, say, Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*, with its indictment of capitalism and of its corruption of escapist media; or in *Oscar Wao*, with its sustained, polemical denunciation of the Trujillo regime in Santo Domingo.

The last sections of this chapter will explore how the notions of influence and fan fiction discussed above are represented in Chabon's oeuvre. Before I leave this discussion of my theoretical framework behind, however, I must consider a crucial feature of Chabon's and Lethem's theories: their existence, at least partially, in opposition to Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*.

On close inspection, the three theories would appear less divergent on many crucial issues than might be expected at first glance. Bloom is careful, for instance, to point out how past masters re-emerge in the works of their successors 'never by mere imitation,' but through the process of 'misprision' (xxiv), and Chabon too highlights – especially in his fiction – the difference between 'mere imitation' and constructive influence. We shall see a few examples of this distinction shortly. The main difference between these theories is that, to Bloom, the process of misprision is necessarily 'antagonistic' (xxiv); whereas both Lethem and Chabon, as we have seen, describe influence as a joyous collaboration. Truly talented writers, in Bloom's Oedipal theory, inevitably 'kill' their forebears, showing how

these predecessors 'had failed to go far enough' in the process of artistic creation (14).

On close inspection, though, it appears possible to reconcile Chabon's and Bloom's theories. We have seen how Chabon goes back, in his examples of influence, to the Greek classics and to the very origins of Western literature. Yet the anxiety of influence described by Bloom is a historically confined phenomenon, one whose origins are located, in different editions of his text, either in Romanticism (first edition of *The Anxiety of Influence*, 1973) or in Early Modern drama (subsequent editions). Other epochs and other authors do not necessarily, in Bloom's view, conform to his neo-Freudian paradigm. Bloom describes, for instance, how "'influence", to Nietzsche, meant vitalization' (*Anxiety* 50), or again how Goethe 'believed himself literally incapable of creative anxiety' (51). Probably the clearest example of a lack of anxiety is Dante, moved by his precursor Virgil 'only to love and emulation' (122), hence Virgil's central role as a character within the *Divine Comedy* (1320). Indeed, a scholar keen to reconcile Bloom's anxiety of influence with Chabon and Lethem's theories of influence need only point to the historical dimension of the phenomenon, and claim that today's literature has reached a new harmonious phase.

This hypothetical shift may owe much to the foregrounding of the creative process that is a central feature of the postmodern era. Consider Eco's notorious definition of the postmodern ethos as that

of someone who loves a learned woman, and knows that he cannot tell her 'I love you madly,' because he knows that she knows (and she knows that he knows) that these phrases have already been written by [Italian romance novelist] Liala. Still, there is a solution. He can say: 'As Liala would say, I love you madly.' Having avoided any false innocence, having stated how it is now impossible to speak

innocently, he will still have said what he wanted to say: that he loves this woman, though in an age of lost innocence. (*Nome della Rosa* 529, translation mine)⁶⁹

This passage is itself endowed with much of the playfulness and parody (the original Italian even rhymes at one point with the quality of a tongue-twister) that is a crucial feature of postmodernist fiction. Here too, moreover, a writer from the world of popular culture is used to discuss a broad theoretical concern. Considering how pervasive this ethos is in today's literary world, it would appear impossible to sustain a climate of hostility and anxiety towards one's literary forefathers; and the process described by Bloom, according to whom the 'killed forefathers' start to appear as *influenced* by their successful heirs (*Anxiety* 15-6) is inevitably complicated in texts where intertextual references and direct quotations are not only the norm, but are constantly foregrounded. A more open, co-operative model of intertextuality between 'equals' appears as much a necessity as a choice in a cultural world ruled by such dynamics.

The Case of Moonglow: Influence and Intertextuality

During a pivotal scene late in *Moonglow*, the narrator – here still a child – reflects on how 'the world, like the Tower of Babel or my grandmother's deck of cards, was made out of stories, and it was always on the verge of collapse' (378). By juxtaposing a humble,

⁶⁹ 'di chi ami una donna, molto colta, e che sappia che non può dirle 'ti amo disperatamente,' perché lui sa che lei sa (e lei sa che lui sa) che queste frasi le ha già scritte Liala. Tuttavia c'è una soluzione. Potrà dire: 'Come direbbe Liala, ti amo disperatamente.' A questo punto, avendo evitata la falsa innocenza, avendo detto chiaramente che non si può più parlare in modo innocente, costui avrà però detto alla donna ciò che voleva dirle: che la ama, ma che la ama in un'epoca di innocenza perduta.'

domestic image, that of a game between a child and his grandmother, with a reference to one of the most iconic episodes in the most canonical of all texts – a technique, we have seen, that Chabon is fond of – the author summarises in aphoristic form two fundamental concerns of his poetics. The first one is a belief in the foundational role played by storytelling in our universe.⁷⁰ The second, central to this thesis, is the function played by stories in the creation of more stories: the way narrative creation and literary influence originate from and consist of a fluid process of quotation and rewriting, a web of references that ties all fiction together.

Crucial to *Moonglow's* contextualisation of Chabon's ideas on literary influence is the character of the narrator's grandmother, an actress and Holocaust survivor. As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that she has invented much of her personal history, collapsing the distinction between fiction and experience. If her powers of invention allow her to cope with her traumatic past – her husband goes as far as to call them 'a strategy for survival evolved by a proven survivor' (84) – they also have debilitating effects on her sanity, even leading to bouts of schizophrenia, and to a years-long confinement in an asylum.

The very texture of *Moonglow* calls to mind the narrative strategies used by the grandmother to invent her fictional self, and to make up the stories she tells young 'Michael Chabon,' and that are said to have been a conscious and subconscious influence on his fiction (24). *Moonglow* is a 'world made out of stories' in two broad senses: it is made up of a series of intertwined stories, each one falling into a particular literary genre;

⁷⁰ 'Every universe, our own included, begins in conversation,' says the narrator of *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier & Clay* (119); while *Telegraph Avenue* shows a world built, through a system of lore and belief, 'like the world of legend on the backs of great elephants, which stood on the back of a giant turtle' (410-1).

and it is a highly intertextual novel, constructed from a web of countless references, some more explicit than others.

This form allows Chabon to play with genres even more freely than in *Telegraph Avenue*, which assumed at times the tone of a martial arts adventure, family saga, or love story. Chabon's fictional alter ego listens to the story of his grandfather's life during the old man's last days, and each episode from this story seems to belong to a different genre. The story of the narrator's grandmother's obsession with the hallucinatory 'Skinless Horse' is narrated in the manner and using the tropes of gothic fiction; in one of the narrative strands, an adventure story, the grandfather hunts for a giant snake in the Florida glades; elsewhere, he crosses wartime Germany looking for German scientist Wernher Von Braun in what amounts to a spy story. Interspersed in all these narratives are elements of a science fiction story, as represented by the characters' passion for space travel and their metaphorical desire to escape the problems of Earth by going to the Moon. Even the novel's frame narrative, with Chabon's alter ego researching the true origins of his grandmother, resembles a Lovecraftian tale, one building up to the obligatory dark secret casting terrible shadows on the narrator's origins.⁷¹ All of these stories become so much more peculiar because they are inserted within the context of what is arguably the most realist of all narrative genres: non-fiction. *Moonglow*'s structure serves a precise purpose in a novel that time and again poses the question of whether fiction may sometimes be more

⁷¹ Tellingly, in the type of Lovecraftian tale described here – for example 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth,' 'The Rats in the Walls,' 'The Tomb' etc – the revelatory dark discovery is followed by the narrator committing suicide, becoming an alcoholic or an addict, or embracing the evil within himself – and occasionally doing all three at the same time. The drastic measures 'Chabon' is driven to in *Moonglow* are these: he was thinking about turning his grandparents' story into a novel, but now, having discovered this dark secret, he must write non-fiction instead: 'Sometimes even a lover of fiction can be satisfied only by the truth' (356).

useful than non-fiction when it comes to approaching the many unspeakable experiences its characters have to face.

Moonglow's peculiar intertextuality is worth considering at length. The novel's status as a supposed memoir means Chabon can be candid in the way he discusses *Moonglow's* intertexts: they can be presented as works that were useful or enlightening to the novel's characters. *Moonglow's* main intertext – or its main 'prequel,' to use Chabon's terms – is arguably Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*: Chabon even affirmed that *Moonglow* is, 'on one level, *Gravity's Rainbow* fanfic' ('Your Questions Answered On Sequels and Scrambled Eggs'). Within *Moonglow*, Pynchon's masterpiece is mentioned as a book that helped the narrator visualise the horrors of the German camp of Peenemünde, where his grandfather fought and of which he is unable to speak (247-8). Salinger's 'For Esmé – with Love and Squalor' (1950) is employed in a similar context, and is mentioned as a text that helps 'Michael Chabon' understand his grandfather's battle fatigue upon his return from World War II (315-6).

Yet these texts, beyond their supposed usefulness to the novel's characters, are also intertexts of *Moonglow* as a whole. Chabon's work, for instance, continues *Gravity's Rainbow's* fascination with the image of the rocket as a figure of love and death, bound inextricably to both the dream of space flight and to the destructiveness of war. Chabon's novel is rife with rocket imagery, as V-2 rockets and later space rockets are central to more than one of its storylines, and are mentioned throughout the text. A fellow convict during the grandfather's time in prison survived a V-2 attack while in London (288); the prison warden has a model V-2 on his desk (301); and the impact of a V-2 is at the origin of the narrator's grandmother's troubled history during the war (355). Rockets are used five times within rhetorical figures (3, 27, 234, 340, 390), a frequency surpassed only by that of moon imagery in the book.

Indeed, these over-determined, omnipresent images are only one of several ways in which *Moonglow* problematises its own fictional/non-fictional nature. The author even jokes about it in a conversation where the narrator's grandfather invites 'Michael Chabon' to 'make a story' out of his life, to 'make it mean something' (241). 'Start with the night I was born,' the grandfather says; 'there was a lunar eclipse that night [...] I'm sure it's a perfect metaphor for something' (241). 'Chabon' replies to this proposed moon metaphor with the laconic observation: 'kind of trite' (241).

Another way in which the novel's intertexts serve a dual function can be discovered by considering the reading preferences of 'Chabon's' grandfather. He is generally sceptical towards fiction, which he sees as 'a waste of time more profitably spent on nonfiction' (248). Yet he makes an exception for works that present an 'artful packaging of big ideas,' a category that features both 'hard science-fiction' and Thomas Mann's 1924 novel *The Magic Mountain* (248). The first group includes Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity* (1953), mentioned in the novel as a text the grandfather holds especially dear (287); while *The Magic Mountain* provides him with a system of belief during his youth (136). If these texts are used to characterise 'Chabon's' grandfather, they also contribute to one of the novel's main concerns: that of disrupting canonical categorisations, by reflecting on the equal value of fiction from both ends of the literary spectrum.

Less conspicuous examples of intertextuality also abound: one only needs to consider the opening pages of the novel. *Moonglow's* title (in itself a reference, as suggested by the novel's 1940s/'50s setting, to the homonymous song made popular by Benny Goodman) is followed by the epigraph 'there is no dark side of the moon, really. Matter of fact, it's all dark.' These words are ascribed to Wernher Von Braun in an almost comical instance of misattribution, one already foreshadowed by the phrases' implications. Fans of Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* will recognise these words as part of the

background noise from the song 'Eclipse.' But how does this epigraph tie in with the novel's main discourses?

First, wary readers will know from the very beginning that they should be doubtful about the truth-value of this supposed memoir. The epigraph is only one example of the novel's bizarre paratextual apparatus: its copyright notes specify how 'any resemblance to actual events, locales, organisations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Scout's honor.' The novel appears to have two dedication pages: the first one addressed 'to them, seriously,' and the second one simply 'to them' (np). While there is no explanation of this double dedication, I suggest that it may be a way to signal how *Moonglow*, as a memoir (dedicated 'to them') is contained within the frame of a novel (dedicated 'to them, seriously'), and thus remains solidly fictional. Even within the diegesis, the fictional 'Michael Chabon' introduces his text with a note stating: 'In preparing this memoir, I have stuck to facts except when facts refused to conform with memory, narrative purpose, or the truth as I prefer to understand it' (np). Cumulatively, these comical devices would appear designed to remove any possible doubt that *Moonglow*, in spite of its pretence of non-fictionality – necessary to achieve the novel's atmosphere, and to problematise many of its reflections – is indeed fiction and should not be misread as anything else.⁷² Even the novel's acknowledgements carry on this idea, mentioning a list of people who, '*if they existed*, would have been instrumental to the completion of this work' (429, italics mine); while the novel's non-fictional sources are not 'to blame for this pack of lies'⁷³ (430).

⁷² Chabon has some experience with readers misjudging the truth-value of his works. In the essay 'Golems I Have Known,' he reminisces about a fan of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, an unambiguously fictional book, wondering why she had missed the (imaginary) skyscrapers described in the book during her visit to the city of Sitka (*Maps and Legends* 209-10).

⁷³ See the use of the phrase 'pack of lies' at the close of Chabon's essay 'Golems I Have Known' (*Maps and Legends* 210), also concerned with blurring the line between fiction and experience.

Since we have touched upon *Moonglow's* factual value, it is worth remarking in passing how its paradoxical nature does not conform to the definition of autofiction as fiction that respects the autobiographical contract ('Autofiction'). Critics and reviewers have committed the mistake of reading the novel as 'blur[ring] the line between memoir and fiction' (Hudson 298); yet autobiography has little to no place in *Moonglow*. The life story of the narrator, the fictional Michael Chabon, plays a marginal role in the text; while the story of the protagonist, the narrator's grandfather, is pieced together joining disparate sources, including childhood memories from Chabon's maternal great-uncle (*Moonglow* 429). *Moonglow* is as factual as hand-cam recorded horror movies, such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999); that is to say, not at all, although both *pose* as factual in order to further their narrative aims. In the case of a movie such as *The Blair Witch Project*, that aim is to augment the narrative's frightening potential by facilitating audiences' immersion through a relatively convincing reproduction of real, largely unedited footage. In *Moonglow*, Chabon inserts a version of himself into a world of his own creation to further complicate the novel's discussion of the blurred, ineffable line dividing fact and fiction; and he does so without any attempt to establish a 'biographical pact' with the reader about telling the truth. His author's note is very explicit on this front. If we do wish to leave the text behind and engage in literary biography for a moment, we can at best point to an interview where Chabon listed as one of his strongest regrets the fact that he did not attend his grandfather's funeral as a young man ("I Have a Socialist Approach to My Regrets"). As such, *Moonglow* – showing a fictional Chabon assisting his grandfather during the final stages of his illness – may be construed as the very opposite of biography: as make-believe at its most wish-fulfilling.

Moonglow's epigraph, beyond contributing to the novel's fiction/non-fiction discourse, also constitutes an important node of its intertextual matrix. *Gravity's Rainbow's*

first part also opens with a quotation by Wernher Von Braun, this one discussing the scientist's belief in life after death; a quotation that is echoed in *Moonglow's* very last sentence, which mentions 'that great eschatologist Wernher Magnus Maximilian Freiherr von Braun' and his thoughts on the afterlife (428), locking the two novels in a circular structure and arguably defying a simple prequel-sequel dynamic, though not in the antagonistic way theorised by Bloom. The form of intertextuality we encounter here appears closer to that theorised by Marko Juvan as able to disrupt 'cause and effect logic, and boundaries between texts' (n.p.). What makes this process peculiarly paradoxical is the fact that the disruption of cause and effect is precisely one of the main philosophical concerns of *Gravity's Rainbow*, as embodied in that novel precisely by the hellish V-2, which flies so fast it hits its target before one can experience its arrival.

Moving on to the epigraphs of these novels, it is worth remarking that *Gravity's Rainbow* too uses a comical (mis)quotation, this time to introduce its fourth part, featuring the epigraph 'what?' – ascribed to Richard Nixon. And if we focus instead on the *content* of *Moonglow's* epigraph, another Pynchon novel becomes apparent as a reference: *Against the Day* (2006). Pynchon's saga opens with Thelonius Monk's epigram 'It is always night, or we wouldn't need the light.' Both this epigraph and *Moonglow's* come from the world of twentieth-century music, and both play on the concept of perpetual darkness. *Against the Day* can indeed be considered a major intertext beyond this cursory reference: its narrative structure, made of several strands intertwined with one another in a non-linear way, each one ascribable to a specific literary genre, closely resembles *Moonglow's*.

The novel's first pages offer a glimpse of how *Moonglow* is so steeped in intertextual references as to make it impossible to trace a complete map of its references. If we are to make sense of this peculiar structure, and to fully understand the way the novel's form is married to its theme and content, we must return to the character of 'Chabon's'

grandmother.

I discussed in Chapter One how the young narrator and his grandmother used to play a game where she would construct short narratives based on cards drawn from a tarot deck. As an adult, the narrator is able to understand that these stories are created by joining together the most disparate and heterogeneous of sources, from Bible stories to old movies, from folktales to the grandmother's personal experiences.

The origins of some of these tales are easy to locate for the attentive reader. The story of Moses' grandmother paddling 'anxiously down the Nile after his basket *because she could not let him out of her sight*' (372, italics in the original) seems to be based on her own relationship with her grandson. Not only is the Biblical myth altered so that it is Moses' grandmother, rather than his mother, who consigns him to the waters of the Nile; much earlier in the narrative, the narrator reflects on how his grandmother '*will not let [him] out of her sight*' (27, italics in the original) during a trip into town. Yet another story concerns 'a hapless escape artist named Paree Poudini' who has 'himself sealed and thrown into the Hudson River' (372), a clear reference to Harry Houdini, who is of course an important point of reference in Chabon's *Kavalier and Clay* – and a central character in EL Doctorow's novel *Ragtime* (1975), another text that blurs the lines between (historical) fact and fiction.

Other tales are harder to locate, and the narrator himself appears to have difficulty finding his grandmother's sources. He encounters some of the stories from his youth 'in the plot of a film or in a book of folktales' (24), but even then the search is far from enlightening. He traces the origins of a particularly disturbing tale back to a John Collier story that later turns out never to have existed: 'Either the encounter with my grandmother's borrowing came in the pages of some other collection or author, or else it happened in a dream' (25n). This either/or structure, with its ultimate indeterminacy and its

juxtaposition of equally obscure alternatives, is curiously a typically Pynchonian formulation: in the following chapter I will analyse its recurrence in *Bleeding Edge*. Intertextual 'borrowings,' as *Moonglow* calls them, do not have clear boundaries and are sometimes even involuntary: 'Chabon' himself confesses that parts of his grandmother's stories, themselves inherently composed of different elements, 'have consciously and unconsciously found their way into my work' (24). This recalls Lethem's notion that 'appropriation, mimicry, quotation, allusion, and sublimated collaboration consist of a sine qua non of the creative act' (97): the boundary between artistic creations, between originality and imitation, is less straightforward and readily traceable than we may tend to think – and than copyright owners, argues Lethem, would want us to believe.

Consider the complex provenance of one of the many stories offered in *Moonglow*, that of a play organised by the narrator's grandmother during her stay in an asylum. The narrator is ready to identify the source of the play as Rudolf Erich Raspe's *Gulliver Revived* (344n) – itself a text that borrows from Swift's canonical satire – and to argue that this was also a source for one of the stories his grandmother told him as a child (357). What he fails to realise is that the story, concerning a journey to the Moon and a meeting with a Moon princess, also has a number of parallels with an escape fantasy shared by his grandparents (100), and with a science fiction tale read by her future husband in his youth (12).

Moonglow's submerged references are plentiful. The storyline detailing the hospitalisation of the narrator's grandmother, for instance, includes the detail that she and her daughter are mesmerised and startled by the asylum's wallpaper, which is said to be 'a source of anxiety and at times abject terror to many of Greystone Park's inmates' (346n), clearly an implicit reference to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper.' The hidden figures in *Moonglow's* wallpaper also refer to another of its intertexts, *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream (1595), as they resemble 'a crowd of bloody-mouthed faces, ass-eared and staring' (346, italics mine). That this is an allusion to Bottom with his asinine head is confirmed by the earlier mention of 'a picture-book painting of Bottom and Titania' (84) as one of the possible causes of the grandmother's obsession with a demonic figure called the Skinless Horse – apparently resembling a horrific man-equestrian hybrid (83-4). We can even find a reference to Chabon's own oeuvre⁷⁴ in one of his grandmother's stories, about a clown who 'woke up one morning and found that his skin had turned paper-white and his mouth had twisted into a permanent grin' (24) – a detail reminiscent of Chabon's horror story 'The God of Dark Laughter.' In this instance, Chabon does not quite kill his influences but invents them, and becomes one of them.

Other references are found outside the context of the grandmother's stories: when a character is said to be building a model rocket to replicate in small scale his dream of space flight, his project is compared to that of 'a group of exiles re-creating a lost homeland in a few city blocks' (158). Those familiar with Chabon's oeuvre will spot a reference to the Verbov family from *The Yiddish Policemen Union* (2007), who recreate faithfully their Ukrainian shtetl in their Alaskan exile (106). A reference to a luna moth may call to mind the homonymous character from *Kavalier & Clay* (191), while that to a 'family of musical dwarfs who had survived Auschwitz' (191) may remind the reader of characters from *Love and Treasure* (2014) by Ayelet Waldman, Chabon's wife – a novel that itself counts the aforementioned 'The Yellow Wallpaper' among its intertexts.

The type of storytelling favoured by 'Chabon's' grandmother also has an interesting parallel in the novel in the form of the model-building so dear to her husband. 'Chabon's'

⁷⁴ This is not unique to *Moonglow*: see for instance the passing reference to 'Yuggogheny cannibal cults' in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (231). These cannibalistic cults are first mentioned in the Lovecraftian horror story 'From Under the Black Mill,' collected in *Werewolves in Their Youth* (1999).

grandfather's commitment to model rocketry is a source of pride to him, and something verging on mania: a love interest of his spots a 'naked obsessiveness' that leaves her 'appalled' in the range of his toy rockets collection (410). Like his wife, the grandfather too builds these models out of any material at his disposal: his LAV One moon base model, the creation of his that he holds most dear – and the only one he keeps close during the final days of his life (50) – features as its basic component the plastic lid from a takeaway cup of coffee (392); the rest of it is built by 'pillaging N- and British OO-scale model train kits' (70).

It is not just the composite nature of the creative process that allows us to draw parallels between the grandfather and grandmother's obsessions. The *purposes* of these obsessions too appear very similar on close inspection. The grandmother's stories allow her to cope, through imagination, with her traumatic past, and to construct an acceptable history for herself. The grandfather's models allow him to imagine a better world after his wife's untimely death: 'He remembered the promise he once made to my grandmother: that he would fly her to find refuge on the Moon [...] He had not been able to keep his promise [...] but maybe, he was thinking, there was a way to make it happen in his imagination, where my grandmother lived on' (393-4).

Both of these creative processes show the redemptive power of imagination, crucial within a poetics such as Chabon's that constantly highlights the vast potential of the escape into fictional worlds. The similarity between these processes, and the empowering nature of storytelling, is once again represented in a reflection by *Moonglow's* narrator, close to the novel's ending. Looking at the LAV One moon base model, and at the blank faces of the model family sitting within, he realises how 'you could imagine smiles into those blanks. You could write any kind of story across them that you pleased' (427). The narrative focus is once more on the liberating power of storytelling, even in the face of the

most terrible personal and historical tragedies.

In its inextricability, *Moonglow's* intertextual web and its reflections on the nature of literary influence are inseparable from the novel's thematic concerns. Does non-fiction actually enjoy a more privileged relation to truth than fiction, when reality is so often the province of the unspeakable and unlikely? And if fiction from all different sources plays a crucial role in shaping our own personality, and reality as we experience it, is it really possible to separate it neatly from the realm of the factual? These questions have no easy answer, but they are thoroughly explored in a novel that offers a compelling case for different sides of the debate.

Influence and Imitation in Kavalier & Clay

Written several years before 'Fan Fictions,' *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* anticipates some of the ideas Chabon would later incorporate into his discussion of the concept of literary influence. Paramount in *Kavalier & Clay's* treatment of influence is the sustained, problematic distinction between two models: inspiration and theft. The lack of artistic quality in early comic books, for instance, is ascribed to 'a bad case of the carbon copies. Everything was a version, sometimes hardly altered at all, of a newspaper strip or pulp-radio hero' (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 77). Uninspired imitation, here characterised as a disease one can get 'a bad case' of, produces uninspired art, 'lacking purpose or distinction' (77). The turning point in this uniform landscape is provided by the arrival on the scene of a renowned superhero: Superman. Consider how Chabon portrays the creation of the Man of Steel:

The writer, Jerome Siegel, had forged, through the smelting intensity of his

fanatical love and compendious knowledge of the pulps and their antecedents, a magical alloy of several previous characters and archetypes from Samson to Doc Savage, one with its own unique properties of tensility, hardness, and luster. (77)

Originality is not absent from the picture – Superman is endowed with his 'own unique properties' – but influence plays a crucial role too: the character is born out of its writer's passion for existing literature. Siegel's love is '*fanatical*;' he is an 'amateur' in Chabon's sense of the word (*Maps and Legends* 44); and even more importantly, Superman – who may even be read as a synecdoche for superhero comic books – is inserted at the end of a literary legacy that includes the Bible and pulp fiction, polar opposites on the spectrum of literature, on both a chronological and canonical level.

The use of metallurgical metaphors, and of verbs such as forging and smelting, highlights the 'magical,' alchemical nature of this process – one that is mirrored in the origins of the novel's own fictional superhero, the Escapist. The love of its writer, Sam Clay, for literature both high and low (Chabon, *Kavalier & Clay* 4) is combined with details from his and his collaborators' own lives. The mysterious stranger who saves the life of Max, the Escapist's uncle, speaks in the same 'polished and British' accent 'with a cowboy twang' (132) used by Joe Kavalier during one of his first conversations with his cousin (71); while the Escapist's sidekick, Alois Berg, a man of great physical strength and huge size, calls to mind Sam's estranged father, a vaudeville actor and performer (98-108). Even more importantly, the conviction motivating the Escapist, 'that freedom was a debt that could be repaid only by purchasing the freedom of others' (131), is the same that animates its illustrator Joe during his years in New York, filling him with determination and rage. Only by guaranteeing his family a safe passage to America, and by effectively buying their freedom, will he be able to shed his guilt at having been awarded such

freedom.

Originality is not central to the Escapist's origins: Joe and Sam's editors accept the idea of publishing their comic book only because the boys assure them they can give them a Superman (88) and replicate that comic book's success. It is the artists' intuition that motivates them to avoid a simple process of copying – to avoid, in fact, all concerns about originality and similarity in the first place: 'no matter what we come up with, and how we dress him, some other character with the same shtick [...] is already out there, or is coming out tomorrow, or is going to be knocked off from our guy inside a week and a half' (94). In a world where imitation is so widespread, being the first to come up with a particular idea assumes little value. Instead, the artists choose to invest in giving their superhero a convincing backstory and a motive (94); in this case, the love of liberty and hatred of tyrants.

There is a fine line in the novel between theft and 'artistic borrowing' – and in several cases it is unclear on which side of it the characters stand. When Sam shows his portfolio to his and Joe's future editors, he boasts of his vast knowledge of comic books: 'I've studied this stuff. I know how it's done [...] I can do it all' (87). The narrator adds: 'what he meant, more precisely, was that he could steal it all' (87). Is Chabon making a point here about the nature of artistic creation, and the inevitability of theft in it? Possibly; but it appears more likely that Sam, still an inexperienced writer, is at this stage of his career only capable of theft rather than true invention. The same point is developed in *The Escapists* (2009), a comic book mini-series based on the fictional characters from Chabon's novels. Detailing the lives of aspiring comic book artists as they revive The Escapist comic books in the twenty-first century, the series concludes with a remark – spoken here by an adult Tom, Joe's son – to the effect that 'the best way to honor' the comics' creators 'is to create something of your **own**' (155, bold font in original). A

necessary stage in an artist's evolution is departing from their idols and developing a personal creation.

A more detailed exploration of literary influence within *Kavalier & Clay* would need to take into account other instances of it within the novel: for instance, the importance of past literary models (from Lovecraft and Poe to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Superman comic books) in the novel's 'Radioman' section, set in Antarctica. Different fictional worlds also intrude upon each other in *Kavalier & Clay*, with reference to a ship called 'Miskatonic' (488), for instance, signalling a potential borrowing from Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, where a barque of the same name appears (725). What appears clear is that intertextuality in *Kavalier & Clay* is inextricably tied to Chabon's theory of influence as an act that taps freely into multiple sources, both fictional and biographical, thus foreshadowing topics that are explored more widely in *Moonglow*.

Nor have we exhausted the complex dynamics of literary influence staged in *Kavalier & Clay*. The cover of *The Escapist's* first issue, showing the superhero punching Hitler on the jaw, is also 'borrowed without apologies' – or at least without acknowledgement – by Chabon, in a clear reference to the first issue of *Captain America*. Is this instance influence or theft? We must remember that while Chabon offers no direct reference to the influence of *Captain America* on the *Escapist's* cover, he also mentions Jack Kirby (one of *Captain America's* creators) as one of his main influences in the novel's acknowledgements (639). The process of influence is far from straightforward, and there is no clear line between theft and quotation, reference and sleight-of-hand. Sam is not the only character in the novel whose artistic output largely employs 'borrowings' of sorts. Joe and Rosa, the novel's other young artists, also borrow from the world of art: Rosa is said to 'mine' cookbook illustrations for her collages and surreal landscapes (252), while Joe is

inspired by the world of cinema in his creations (253).

Intertextuality in *Kavalier & Clay* – and across self-conscious escapism – is inextricably tied to ideas of literary influence and fan fiction. Only a thoroughly benign view of influence could produce texts built upon such intricate intertextual webs; texts that, while contributing a new chapter to the never-ending 'song-with-annotations' of popular culture, also offer companions to their favourite popular media, be they early superhero comic books (*Kavalier & Clay*), genre literature and role-playing games (*Oscar Wao*), nineteenth and early-twentieth century popular fiction (*Against the Day*), early 00s nerd and Internet culture (*Bleeding Edge*), and so on. Yet such a profound commitment, and the blurring of ontological barriers engendered by these intertextual, shared universes, also have unsettling consequences. While in my first chapter I discussed some negative effects associated with a dedication to escapism in my core texts, in the course of the following chapter I will discuss how such dedication may easily generate a type of confusion, both staged and thematised in my texts, which I call generic contagion.

Chapter 3 – Escape and Ensnarement

In the course of the previous chapter, I discussed how self-conscious escapism's formal and thematic features highlight the fundamental role of intertextuality and influence in the process of literary creation. The line between fan fiction and literature is blurred; 'art and fandom,' according to Chabon, 'coincide' (*Manhood for Amateurs* 5). The boundary between texts, between so-called 'prequels' and 'sequels,' is thus inevitably problematised.

The borrowing of characters from established canonical works is a staple of literary creation, as I argued in my discussion of Lethem's theory of plagiarism. Yet a more fluid approach to the appropriation of ideas, settings and various narrative elements from a writer's contemporaries appears solidly anchored in the idea of fandom, a concept that deserves particular attention for the way it differs from other models relating to different historical epochs. Chabon locates the origins of fandom as a creative force in 'the French New Wave, or the Silver Age of Comics, or rock and roll's British Invasion' (*Maps & Legends* 43-4), which is to say, in the 1960s; but Karen Hellekson believes that 'the current model of participatory fandom evident in Western culture has been structured by the patterns of interaction created by the science fiction fandom that began in America in the mid-1930s,' and which grew out of such pulp magazines as '*Startling Stories*, *Wonder Stories*, and *Weird Tales*' (153), thus pointing to the early twentieth century as the historical moment where fandom in its modern conception originated. A well-known example of fandom from this age is the Lovecraft circle, a group of friends and correspondents including pulp writers HP Lovecraft, August Derleth, Clark Ashton Smith and Robert Bloch, who would borrow settings and mythologies from one another's stories, in a constant cycle of reference and appropriation.

In many ways, my core texts behave similarly. We have sketched in the previous

chapter *Moonglow*'s extensive matrix of references to Chabon's previous fiction, and beyond; and how characters in *Telegraph Avenue* smoke marijuana from Vineland county (387), a fictional location from Pynchon's homonymous novel. The character of the mongoose in *Oscar Wao*, central to many of the novel's key scenes, is borrowed, as Díaz has acknowledged, from the young adult novel *Flight to the Lonesome Place* (1971) by Alexander Key (Díaz, "Diaspora and Redemption" 34).

Fiction constantly emerges from other fiction, and it should come as no surprise that in these texts – conscious of this process while also themselves *fictional* – diegetic boundaries often become disrupted. Metadiegetic fictional worlds, from comic books to computer games, influence the lives of diegetic characters in strange ways. Through complex forms of metalepsis – the process through which textual elements shift from one diegetic level to a different one – my core texts stage migrations from the metadiegesis to the diegesis, or from the diegetic level to the extradiegetic. And it is not only characters, items, or other isolated features that shift to a higher diegetic level: often, it is a metaphorical invasion, with lower diegetic levels exporting their very *genre*, contaminating otherwise realist narratives with hints of the supernatural.

I have already touched upon this topic in my first chapter, when I discussed how self-consciously escapist texts highlight the dangers of losing oneself in escapist fictional worlds. In the course of this chapter, I will further explore this feature of my core texts from a structural and thematic perspective. How does the generic ambiguity of my core texts contribute to our understanding of their nature as works of literature, and to their engagement with central literary concerns?

Later in the chapter, I will also consider a real-life case in which a fictional phenomenon – that of the collective mania associated with the video game character of the Slender Man – influenced real-life events, even leading to an attempted murder: a peculiar,

extreme example of metalepsis. I will analyse how my core texts can shed light on instances in which fictional characters and features 'cross' diegetic barriers and become, effectively if not factually, a reality.

Before I proceed with my discussion, I will explore how these peculiar forms of displacement and disorientation are portrayed and problematised in my core texts, focusing in particular on Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*. As I analyse the way these texts disrupt the barriers between diegetic levels, often as a way of staging a disruption of a further, overarching barrier, that between the written and unwritten worlds, I will refer to Brian McHale's identification of this tendency as a quintessential feature of postmodernist fiction. Keeping in mind the dynamics of postmodernism is vital, I argue, to our understanding of how my core texts distance themselves from – and carry on the legacy of – preceding fiction.

A Note on Generic Contagion

In her 1978 narratological study *Transparent Minds*, Dorritt Cohn develops the concept of 'stylistic contagion' to define a specific type of narration, 'where psycho-narration verges on the narrated monologue, marking a kind of mid-point between the two techniques where a reporting syntax is maintained, but where the idiom is strongly affected (or infected) with the mental idiom of the mind it renders' (33). I shall borrow the term to denote a different type of process, which I have called generic contagion.

The term contagion carries a number of connotations that are helpful in the context of the process I wish to identify. First, it denotes a process that is involuntary and accidental. As the case of Maxine from *Bleeding Edge* exemplifies, the type of exchange between diegetic worlds that is portrayed through the device of generic contagion is never

willed or intentional: it is an infection, rather than an act of summoning.

Second, stylistic contagion, as defined by Cohn, refers to the process whereby the characters in a work of fiction end up 'influencing' the narration, and the narrator's voice, to the point where the narrator's idiom is 'strongly affected' by them. In this sense, stylistic contagion might function as a narratological term for a well-known phenomenon – that of 'characters getting out of hand' (Nabokov) and imposing their own will on a narrative, artfully and extensively exploited by Luigi Pirandello in his play *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921).⁷⁵ Similarly enough, generic contagion occurs in texts where the obsession of certain characters for fictional worlds ends up influencing the nature of the broader narrative, generally if not exclusively through metalepsis and other exchanges between the metadiegetic and diegetic levels.

Just as the stylistic contagion described by Cohn seems to be the consequence of a profound authorial investment in the imagined consciousness of a fictional other, so the generic contagion I trace in these novels represents a commitment to understanding and staging escapism, with its immersive and alienating potential.

The concept of contagion in texts concerned deeply with the idea of escapism also raises an interesting lexical paradox that offers more insight into the many-faceted nature of narrative escape. The term escapism immediately evokes images of prisons and flight. The threat of contagion is normally countered by the use of quarantine – but generic contagion may be defined as the consequence of an *excess* of escapism, of a wish to leave the confinement of an oppressive reality. Indeed, generic contagion in texts such as *Bleeding Edge* is not so much embraced by the characters experiencing it, as it is feared and resisted. As such, the term allows us to reflect on another feature of escapism, one that

⁷⁵ Translated in English as *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Other important instances of this peculiar type of metafiction include Felipe Alfau's *Locos* (1936) and Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939).

is explored extensively in Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* (2016): the idea that even escapism itself, and the supernatural realities it engenders, can become, with its alluring charm, another prison.

Finally, I recuperate an element of the term contagion – an implied danger – that is absent from Cohn's use. The perils of losing contact with reality are problematised extensively in texts such as *Bleeding Edge*, as is the ease with which characters can slip from their established reality into new, disorienting ones.⁷⁶

In this chapter, I use the term generic contagion to refer to a staging, within literary texts, of a certain form of metalepsis: a migration of a textual element from one diegetic level to a different one. The generic status of these texts remains, ultimately, a matter of debate: they might be variously categorised as literary fiction, fantasy fiction, or slipstream fiction. What is relevant for the purposes of this discussion is the way in which these texts appear to play self-consciously with generic conventions, introducing speculative elements and direct references to genre tropes into their narratives. These elements, often supernatural, are introduced into the texts as a consequence of their characters' commitment to escapist fictions: it is as if this commitment engenders a contamination by way of which elements from the metadiegetic fictions beloved by the characters alter the rules, and generic status, of their – diegetic – reality. Grady Tripp, the protagonist of Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys* (1995), provides an explanation of how this process works when he describes the way the lives of a writer's characters 'at first reflected but in time came to determine [the] very course [of the writer's life]' (234).⁷⁷ While Tripp speaks here

⁷⁶ This should not suggest that these new realities are invariably dangerous. Atwood's *Hag-Seed* and Jennifer Egan's *The Keep* both portray the uplifting consequences of escaping into one's imagination through forms of generic contagion.

⁷⁷ While *Wonder Boy's* status as a realist novel is never in any doubt, and thus we cannot speak of generic

of writers, generic contagion just as often refers to characters who are *consumers* of escapist realities: just as the popular culture that is so often the tool of narrative escapism is, as its name implies, a product of 'the people' in the broadest sense of the term, so Maxine, for example, with her investigations of *Bleeding Edge's* DeepArcher, helps to shape the very website she explores, thus representing escapism as akin to the process engendered in the Barthesian model of 'writerly' reading, where the reader is 'no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text' (3).

In the following section, I will analyse the consequences of generic contagion on all narrative levels. The process will be further defined and categorised as I approach several of my core texts individually, asking in what ways generic contagion is implicated in their thematic concerns and their structural peculiarities, such as their highly intertextual nature.

'Real? Computer animated?' Generic Contagion in Contemporary American Fiction

'666, which tends to recur:' the case of Bleeding Edge

Just as *Moonglow* constitutes a perfect case study of the role played by influence and intertextuality in self-conscious escapism, so Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* exemplifies

contagion in that novel, we still encounter throughout it instances of how a character's fictional obsessions are both influenced by and *come to influence* their life. Tripp, a novelist, writes largely about characters '[escaping] from their terrible errors of judgment by crawling into caves and vaults and basements or else [covering] them up [...] by laying them in the ground' (235). *Wonder Boys* goes to great lengths to detail Tripp's fear of commitment, and his inability to fully dedicate himself to any of the different women he loves. Writing and marijuana addiction are his tools to escape the world.

these texts' peculiar generic status, the ways in which generic contagion is staged within them, and how these structural features relate to their broader literary concerns, most notably to their representation of escapism.

Bleeding Edge narrates a peculiar period in the life of its protagonist, fraud investigator Maxine Tarnow. In the months immediately preceding and following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the New Yorker Maxine goes through a series of disconcerting experiences, and is confronted with several inexplicable phenomena, most of them apparently supernatural. She witnesses, among other things, what may or may not be a monster; meets a man who may be a time-travelling agent; and has conversations with friends who were murdered weeks before. The Pynchonian ambiguities and suspended judgments that make up so much of the novel's prose shroud these events in an aura of doubt, one in which many possibilities – not least, the chance that Maxine may be hallucinating or delusional – coexist. Before I proceed to discuss the functioning of generic contagion in the novel, I will attempt a mapping of *Bleeding Edge's* generic status, which will allow us to understand the ways in which the novel's staging of contagion alters its own structure, and influences its concerns.

Bleeding Edge's cryptic nature and mysterious plot are foreshadowed by its Donald Westlake epigraph: 'New York as a character in a mystery would not be the detective, would not be the murderer. It would be the enigmatic suspect who knows the real story but isn't going to tell it.' Quoting a master of crime fiction already has generic implications: the epigraph warns readers of the insolubility not just of the novel's plot's mysteries, but, I would argue, of its structural ones too.

The debt to the conventions of detective fiction implied by the epigraph is reinforced by the opening pages of the novel. Documentary director Reg Despard asks for the help of Maxine, fraud investigator and private eye, as he believes something dubious is

going on at the dotcom company he works for. The exchange between the two sets the stage for the narrative to take any of a variety of generic routes. Mysteriously, the information Reg is looking for 'won't be anyplace any search engine can get to' (10), the first reference to the fact that the novel's setting will move well beyond the 'Surface Web' with which most Internet users would be familiar. Reg's company apparently hides 'a purpose on earth written in code none of us can read. Except maybe for 666, which tends to recur' (11) – a joking reference to the occult that will be developed extensively throughout the text. Its price/earnings ratio is described as 'approaching the science-fictional,' (10) while its CEO, Gabriel Ice, 'has deep resources,' and might be connected to the mob, or to forces even more powerful (11). Starting from these premises, the narrative might have become a techno-thriller; a science-fiction detective story in the style of Philip Dick; a horror story; or a hard-boiled crime novel. Typically of Pynchon, it touches upon all of these, yet peculiar emphasis is given to the occult side of Maxine's investigation, with *Bleeding Edge* tipping more than once towards the horror genre.

Among the most prominent Gothic elements in the novel is the Deseret, a fictional apartment building that is the location of a bizarre military operation, casting terrible doubts on the nature of 9/11; the scene of a murder; and, as is suggested on numerous occasions, might be a haunted house (29, 365). Maxine and her friend Heidi are said to have been obsessed with the building since their youth: 'other buildings might be haunted, but this one seemed itself the undead thing, the stone zombie, rising only when night fell, stalking unseen through the city to work out its secret compulsions' (27-8). The women's obsession, and in particular Maxine's, casts the building in the role of antagonist, while the passage showcases Pynchon's quintessentially ambiguous style: the use of verbs such as 'might' and 'seem' inevitably makes the narrated events questionable, suspending judgement on their significance, as often happens in Pynchon, who delights in

'present[ing] the reader with a series of alternative explanations for his character[s] predicament without committing himself to any of them' (Brauner, *Philip Roth* 72). The word 'compulsions' is also significant: if it is a metaphorical force of evil, the apartment building remains at the mercy of forces beyond its control, anticipating how others among the novel's antagonists are said to obey dark forces that make them victims or slaves as much as culprits.

Once Maxine finds her way into the building, she is forced to confront 'the infamous Back Elevator, a legacy from earlier days, rumored to possess a mind of its own. In fact, Maxine has come to believe it is haunted, that Something Happened in it years ago that never got resolved' (142). 'Come to believe' is a common formulation in Pynchon, investing the text as it does with the uncertainty that permeates much of his fiction: the phrase not only casts doubt on the subject of this belief, which is left ambiguous and unconfirmed, but also implies that the person holding the belief may be delusional. Moreover, 'come to believe' implies that, while the conviction emerges gradually, the act of reaching it may have been predetermined, an inevitability: a peculiarly paradoxical predicament, considering how 'theories of predetermination, of election and preterition [...] tend to play the part of black Stetsons in Pynchon novels: they serve to identify their bearers as irredeemable and villainous' ('Crying of September 11'). Implied in these formulations are fragments of those world-views that are pitched in constant battle with each other throughout much of the author's oeuvre.

The Deseret's occult aura is given new meaning when Maxine learns that it is partially owned by Gabriel Ice, the novel's main antagonist and the CEO of hashslingrz, a dotcom company that is dubiously involved with the US government, the Middle East, and Israel. As is the case with the Deseret, hashslingrz and Gabriel Ice are constantly referred to through occult terminology, in an extended metaphor that highlights their hellish features,

and Ice's satanic character. Pynchon creates this metaphor both through direct horror references, and by using everyday language with ambiguous meanings, working through a process of accumulation that sometimes seems on the verge of tipping the novel's events fully into the domain of horror fiction.

Consider these instances: Maxine wonders whether she should begin her investigation with the company's accounting books, 'just to see how *ritually slaughtered* the public numbers are' (37; italics mine). Once her investigation has started, she realises that 'somebody's taking money out of hashslingrz and starbursting it out again all over the place to different mysterious contractors, some of whom are almost certainly ghosts' (42). This is accounting terminology; yet the boundaries between the different meanings of the word 'ghost' are soon after on the verge of collapsing, to largely humorous effects. In investigating this irregularity, Maxine is determined 'to keep going no matter what, until she can actually stand in the haunted space and try to summon the ghost vendor out of its nimbus of crafted silence' (43). Having reached the physical location of the 'ghost firm,' Maxine hears noises coming from the empty cubicles, and reflects: 'Ghost vendors indeed. Has she entered some supernatural timewarp where the shades of office layabouts continue to waste uncountable person-hours playing Tetris?' (43). A key word in this passage is 'uncountable,' a term that is used on two other occasions in the novel: when Maxine is exploring a military base, and has the impression she is staring at 'uncountable levels' down a vertical shaft, soon before she encounters a monster (194); and when the Internet is discussed as a site of curses, and the 'uncountable cross-motives of the cyberworld' are mentioned (345). In all these instances, Pynchon uses the term to refer to supernatural events; but the word also calls to mind 'unaccountable,' with its double implication: that the events described are inexplicable and beyond comprehension, thus pertaining to the domain of an unspeakable, unintelligible supernatural sphere; and that they are connected

to entities that cannot be asked to justify themselves, moving as they do in the shadow-world created by the Internet, beyond the reach of governments or the public. At the same time, and in an ambiguous twist, this idea of the uncountable/unaccountable also taps into the realm of the unquantifiable, of what cannot be assessed and thus exploited by the forces of the market: the horror of the concept, as such, may be simultaneously sinister and redemptive, as is the mysterious, but boundlessly free, Deep Web.

Hints about the monstrous nature of Gabriel Ice are provided most notably through his connection to the mysterious Montauk Project, described by left-wing activist March Keller as 'every horrible suspicion you've ever had since World War II, all the paranoid production values, a vast underground facility, exotic weapons, space aliens, time travel, other dimensions' (117). The possibility that the Montauk project may be more than a cover up for unethical research, and may pertain to the supernatural sphere, is not so much suggested as *confirmed* in one of the novel's most enigmatic passages. As Maxine visits Gabriel Ice's summer retreat, only a few miles away from the Montauk Project's location, she finds a hidden door in the wine cellar that leads her to a long corridor heading 'toward the abandoned air base with the big radar antenna' (193). The underground rooms Maxine finds at the end of the corridor serve an ambiguous, mysterious purpose, although some clues are given concerning their function: the place 'smells like bleach, as if recently disinfected. Concrete floors, channels leading to drains set at low points. Steel beams overhead, with fittings whose purpose she can't or doesn't want to figure out' (193).

While the visual elements of this passage call to mind operation rooms, and infuse the scene with sinister overtones, the real dimension of the location's horror is occulted (and thus, arguably, amplified) by the narrator's refusal to go into detail in his description of the room's 'fittings,' focalised as its perspective is through Maxine. The ambiguity over whether she 'can't or doesn't' want to linger on these details also suggests she may not be

aware of which of the two is the case, thus betraying the unintelligible, Lovecraftian nature of this horror. And Lovecraft is invoked again by the settings' peculiar dimensions, and by its disturbing of standard geometry: Maxine finds 'shadows where they shouldn't be' (193), and at one point, 'her coordinates all at once shift ninety degrees, so that she can't tell now if she's staring vertically down uncountable levels or straight ahead down another long hallway' (194). This is reminiscent of Lovecraft's story 'The Call of Cthulhu,' and its description of a city where geometry obeys strange rules, and 'one could not be sure that the sea and the ground were horizontal' (Lovecraft 376). The chapter ends with Maxine encountering a monster (194), whose nature constitutes one of the novel's many unexplained mysteries.

While characters such as Ice are portrayed with Satanic overtones, *Bleeding Edge* casts doubt over whether he is a source or victim of evil, or both. The narrative appears in fact more critical of the capitalist system that generated Ice than of Ice himself, a reflection echoed in Maxine's wish to one day witness a version of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* where the antagonist is not Scrooge, but the system of Victorian capitalism that 'hustled him over the years for his soul' (395). After their tense confrontation, Maxine even ponders Ice's future with more pity than contempt, which she directs instead toward 'the Death Lords he works for' (475); a capitalisation that, once more, turns the phrase into a reference to fantastical or science fictional tropes. Pynchon's concern with the hidden costs of capitalism approaches the grotesque when Maxine dreams of 'a shopping mall which she understands has been deliberately designed to look like the aftermath of a terrible Third World battle [...] here at these carefully distressed outdoor cafés sit yuppie shoppers out having a cheerful cup of tea, ordering yuppie sandwiches full of arugula⁷⁸ and goat

⁷⁸ A food also mentioned in Egan's *Look at Me* as inevitably associated with the wealthy, so much that Egan's protagonist ponders 'the existence of a biological link between eating arugula and earning money' (195).

cheese' (196). The hidden costs of extravagant Western wealth are, it is implied here, not necessarily hidden at all, but only wilfully ignored: this passage recalls one of Pynchon's most quoted formulations, from *Gravity's Rainbow*, about how 'a million bureaucrats are diligently plotting death and some of them even know it' (20).

Other characters and situations in the novel are also cast in a supernatural light, including gentrification, the former mayor of New York Giuliani, the fictional deliveryman Marvin the kozmonaut and government agent Nick Windust. Supernatural explanations of events are a clear possibility in the novel, often making more sense than rational explanations – a fact of which the text itself is very aware, as we shall see. This impasse between logic and myth is typical of fantastic fiction, as theorised by Tzvetan Todorov: in texts torn between a rational and supernatural explanation, the existence of the supernatural – if unlikely according to the laws of logic – would make more sense than a rational explanation defying verisimilitude (46). To use the effective definition of horror writer MR James, 'it is sometimes necessary to keep a loophole for a natural explanation, but I might add that this hole should be small enough to be unusable' (quoted in Todorov 26). The fantastic as codified by Todorov is a historically-confined genre, one limited most notably to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and absent from later fiction; yet the survival of the fantastic in contemporary literature, and in particular in postmodernist fiction, has been pointed out before, most notably by McHale (75).

These instances should suffice to expose *Bleeding Edge*'s problematic and uncertain generic status. Yet to understand how this uncertainty connects to the novel's thematic concerns, we must address the role played in it by the fictional, metadiegetic computer program DeepArcher, to which Maxine becomes addicted. DeepArcher represents the key cog in the machine of the novel's generic contagion, the catalyst of many of the novel's generic shifts, and as such is central to the current discussion.

In Chapter One, I discussed how DeepArcher can be interpreted as a paradoxical representation of the very process of narrative immersion and of the escape into fictional worlds. The question I set out to answer now is how this website influences, and precipitates, *Bleeding Edge's* inexplicable, supernatural events. If many of the novel's strange events do not appear directly connected with the website, the possibility is still presented – and articulated several times – that Maxine, having immersed herself in the escapist, borderline-magical reality of DeepArcher, has either become unable to distinguish between escapism and reality; has had her perception of reality influenced by her experiences in virtual reality; or is confusing time spent inside the simulator with that spent in her everyday, diegetic – rather than metadiegetic – reality.

The distinctions between these scenarios are not clear-cut, and our interpretation is bound to depend on the extent to which we understand *Bleeding Edge's* narration to be focalised through Maxine's blurred perspective. It is first vital to acknowledge that Maxine picks up a trace of DeepArcher's frightful potential even before her first immersion. As the website's creators Justin and Lucas introduce her to the concept of Avatar, a person's alter ego in the virtual world, she reflects: 'Somebody told me also that in the Hindu religion avatar means an incarnation. So I keep wondering – when you pass from this side of the screen over into virtual reality, is that like dying and being reincarnated, see what I'm saying?' (70). Immediately Maxine confronts the idea that the Internet may be so powerful as to subvert the very laws of nature. Also significant is her awareness that immersing oneself in virtual reality is an act of 'passing' from one side of the screen to the other: not necessarily a metaphor one would use to describe an everyday surfing of the Web. What is peculiar here is that Justin and Lucas not only deny, but appear indifferent, to the issues raised by Maxine. 'They don't do metaphysical,' comments Justin's wife (70). The novel may be poking fun at a tendency to let one's imagination run free when it comes to virtual

reality; equally, there is the powerful suspicion that the text may be highlighting how DeepArcher's very creators may not be fully conscious of their creation's potential, a common trope in science fiction, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963). This passage is all the more significant because DeepArcher's potential as a place of resurrection is transformed from a bizarre hypothesis into a concrete possibility after the tragedy of 9/11.

The 'magical' nature of the Internet is again alluded to repeatedly throughout the novel. At one point, a Latin American 'sorceress' details the Internet's

strange affinity for the dynamics of curses, especially when written in the more ancient languages predating HTML [...] the fates of unreflective click-happy users are altered for the worse – systems crash, data are lost, bank accounts are looted, all of which being computer-related you might expect, but then there are also the realworld inconveniences, such as zits, unfaithful spouses, intractable cases of Running Toilet, providing the more metaphysically inclined further evidence that the Internet is only a small part of a much vaster integrated continuum. (345)

The ambiguity of the language in this paragraph represents in microcosm the broader comparison between the Internet and occultism scattered throughout the novel. What are these languages 'predating HTML,' exactly? Is the text referring to early programming languages, or to obscure, arcane tongues? The victims of the Internet's power are called 'unreflective click-happy users:' the danger of the Web's vast power lies in underestimating it, and this recalls the novel's foreshadowing of a total surveillance state coming into being because of the masses' fascination with information technology. Finally,

the idea of the 'vaster integrated continuum' referenced here is picked up again in the novel through an allusion to the Global Consciousness Project (342), a study conducted to establish whether collective human thought can influence the behaviour of computers, thus proving the existence of a collective consciousness. Although *Bleeding Edge* represents the results collected by the Global Consciousness Project during 9/11 as significant, and hence supports Pynchon's supposed interest in what Cowart defines as 'transcendent alternatives' to an a-mystical view of science (5), these results have since been widely criticised, and it is worth remarking that they are not unanimously accepted by the scientific community (Berman).

Maxine's husband further remarks on the Internet's powers when he wonders why kids do not believe in Santa Claus, whereas 'nobody has any trouble believing in the Internet, right, which really is magic' (398). And the magical potential of the Internet will become all the more alluring after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers. As the event is still unfolding, Maxine wishes 'to be someplace else, even a meretricious geeks' paradise like DeepArcher' (319); and several people will soon share the same wish. While she is exploring DeepArcher, to which she becomes increasingly addicted, Maxine begins 'to pick up a chill sense that some of the newer passengers could be refugees from the event at the Trade Center' (357). Being 'newer passengers' means that these characters' thirst for escapism is subsequent to, and likely engendered by, the very events of the Trade Center, while their nature as 'refugees' would appear to invest their quest for escapism with legitimacy. But it is not only survivors who people this digital world: 'genuine casualties' inhabit it too, 'brought here by loved ones so they'll have an afterlife' (357): avatars are recreated using old pictures, and they are 'animated in GIF loops, cyclical as karma, pirouetting, waving, eating or drinking whatever it was they were holding at the wedding or bar mitzvah or night out when the shutter blinked' (358). This virtual afterlife seems to

be the representation of what Justin and Lucas, its creators, wanted to achieve: a place that is 'timeless [...] a refuge. History-free' (373), at least until its inevitable corruption, precipitated by the forces of capital and the market. Maxine further reflects on the 'mysterious exemption from time which produces most Internet content' (428) when she witnesses the city of 'Zigotisopolis,' the virtual reproduction of pre-9/11 New York city that her sons have built inside DeepArcher.

Yet the striking possibility that DeepArcher's magical powers might go beyond these virtual, symbolical resurrections cannot be easily dismissed. DeepArcher's resurrecting powers are first foreshadowed when Maxine spots a man called Lester Traipse walking down the street shortly after she has learned that he has supposedly been murdered (199). She immediately tries to rationalise the event as a peculiarity of New York City: 'In NYC it is not uncommon to catch sight of a face that you know, beyond all argument, belongs to somebody no longer among the living, and sometimes when it catches you staring, this other face may begin to recognise yours as well, and 99% of the time you turn out to be strangers' (199) – a scene that calls to mind Junot Díaz's belief in the science-fictional nature of New York City (quoted in Miller 95) as a place where inexplicable occurrences abound. Much later, once several other potentially supernatural episodes have been experienced by both Maxine and her friends, a link will start to emerge between these events and DeepArcher, first identified by Russian geeks Misha and Grisha:

Just before moving on to further shenanigans, the torpedoes draw Maxine aside. 'DeepArcher – you know it too. You've been there.'

'Um,' nothing to lose, 'see, it's only, like, code?'

'No! Maxine, no!' with what could be either naïve faith or raving insanity, 'it's real place!'

'It is asylum, no matter, you can be poorest, no home, lowest of jailbirds,
obizhenka, condemned to die—'

'Dead—'

'DeepArcher will always take you in, keep you safe.' (373)

Notice how the geeks talk about DeepArcher with an expression of either 'naïve faith' or 'raving insanity.' The former recalls March Keller's comparison of computer geeks and their idealism with the counterculture movements of the 1960s (116); while the latter points to the ever-present chance that the Internet is not so much a magical place, as one able to corrupt people's minds and compromise their grip on reality: a typically Pynchonian either/or. That both characters believe in the profound value of such a shelter is made explicit, as is their belief in its supernatural powers: such a place 'will always take you in,' even if you are *dead*. Misha and Grisha here point to another peculiar feature of generic contagion: it is not simply a way for a novel to stage the workings of a troubled mind, unable to distinguish reality from fiction any more; it is a clash of fictional worlds, in which the implications of different genres – among these, that resurrections may be possible, and that the supernatural may exist – invade an otherwise realistic narrative.

How exactly DeepArcher achieves its resurrections is never specified, but Maxine confronts the consequences of such a possibility more than once. Lester Traipse is not the only supposedly-deceased character she meets in the website: Nick Windust is here too (427-8; 406-7), an agent with whom Maxine establishes a brief relationship in the novel, and who is later murdered in mysterious circumstances. No straightforward explanation is given for these encounters, although several hypotheses appear plausible. Collado-Rodríguez reads these scenes as somewhat metaphorical, a demonstration of how 'information, turned into electric pulses in the new virtual reality, brings with it intimations

of immortality' (235). Maxine herself remains ambivalent, conscious that, in the case of Windust, 'either he was speaking to her from the other side or it was an impostor' (411), a reiteration of one of Pynchon's favourite rhetorical structures, 'either/or,' used twenty-two times within the novel⁷⁹ and charged with peculiar overtones in Pynchon: like the formulation 'come to believe,' an either/or predicament implies the presence of two mutually exclusive predicaments, and denies the presence of nuances or third options. While especially relevant, as a formulation, in a novel that revolves so extensively around the world of computers – with their reliance on the binary system of 0s and 1s – this particular phrase also has other implications: rigid views of opposing options, and either/or predicaments in general, are contextualised in more or less starkly negative terms in Pynchon's oeuvre, and as such all these occurrences hide a potential level of irony – the idea, present *in absentia*, that nuanced or coexisting possibilities may always be possible.

The novel's progression only complicates events further: Windust's Web profile is constantly updated with new information, 'all strangely nonnegative when not outright eulogy material' (427). Maxine is aware that 'DeepArcher doesn't do resurrections, thanks for pointing it out' (426); yet she is not ready to exclude a supernatural explanation for these events. Considering who might be manipulating the documents, 'the first author to suspect here would be Windust himself, trying to look good, except this is insane because Windust is dead. Either it's Beltway tricksters out on maneuvers or the Internet has become a medium of communication between the worlds' (427). The alternative possibilities the novel has made us used to are presented once more; the more these cryptic situations keep accumulating, the less likely rational explanations become, to the point at which Maxine openly reflects that 'there are always secular backup stories [...] but at the same time

⁷⁹ 7, 84, 87, 109, 115, 131, 151, 169, 170, 180, 183, 203, 216, 222, 252, 265, 324, 368 (twice), 373, 402, 411, 421, 427.

there's no shame in going for a magical explanation' (441). Nor is the situation any different when Maxine meets Lester Traipse, whom she, uncannily, had already seen in an earlier scene as a ghost through a power outlet (259). She decides to put her scepticism on hold: 'instead of assuming it's a Lester impersonator with an agenda, or a bot preprogrammed with dialogue for all occasions, she sees no harm in treating him as a departed soul' (427). 'Sees no harm' implies echoes of the idea that 'there's no shame' in looking for occult explanations: the supernatural is justified in the novel first and foremost by its innocuousness: by admitting it as a legitimate explanation for the narrated events, the text is already arguably lending it credibility.

Why is this generic contagion so central to the novel? The text's disorienting use of supernatural elements, in fact, echoes Maxine's disorientation as she is confronted by them, a disorientation that is directly connected to her addiction to the escapist potential of DeepArcher. Soon after her first 'immersion,' she asks her friend Vyrva, the wife of one of DeepArcher's creators, 'how's everything down in DeepArcher?' which the narrator glosses with a defensive 'only trying to be sociable, understand...' (135), arguably functioning as a revelatory red-flag of her deep interest in the website. Maxine's degree of addiction to DeepArcher increases after 9/11, and Joseph Darlington details the increasing fascination held by the Web after the catastrophe by linking the phenomenon to Fredric Jameson's notion of the postmodern utopia as one set in space, not time (Darlington 248), a space that the Web – in Pynchon's case, DeepArcher – can offer: 'The dream of DeepArcher, the digital totality, the departure from history, was not hampered by 9/11. On the contrary, it was only in the shadow of the event and its aftermath that the Web's true potential to territorialize humanity's everyday life could come to be realized' (250). Darlington's idea of the Web as a place where human life is 'territorialized' makes more sense if we think of the fictional 'Zigotisopolis,' built by Maxine's sons; and if we also acknowledge that the

idea of a 'history-free' space is part of DeepArcher's appeal (373).

The effects of this fascinating potential on Maxine are described in very vivid terms. She has to remind herself that what she experiences in DeepArcher is 'only code' (355), and the more time passes, the more 'she can't stay out of DeepArcher [...]. Not addicted exactly, though one day she happens to be back out in meatspace for a second, looks at the clock on the wall, does the math, figures three and a half hours she can't account for' (426), with echoes of the parallel detailed before between unaccountable and uncountable. These unaccountable hours may be read as surrounded by an aura of dread, or by a redemptive one: by time spent outside the quantifiable dynamics of control, in a place of total freedom. In this context, the text inevitably casts doubt on all its bizarre occurrences. What if these events are only happening in the world of DeepArcher? This doubt is even implicitly raised by the text, when Maxine witnesses a garbage can top roll for an entire block, wait for the light to go green, and cross the road; or, even stranger, when a friend of hers offers her an invisibility ring that would appear to be working. 'Real? Computer animated?' the novel wonders (430).

It is crucial to notice that a bizarre state of immersion in virtual worlds is not a prerogative of Maxine in the novel. It manifests itself initially in the case of Gabriel Ice, specifically through a reminiscence of Ice's college experience: a young computer genius who spends most of his college years in 'a tubelit clustergeek existence' (125),⁸⁰ Ice was 'often unsure if he was awake or dreaming in REM, which might have accounted for his

⁸⁰ Whether Gabriel Ice is supposed to represent any specific public figure remains doubtful, although the novel seems to be poking fun at the social network Facebook. Consider the fleeting mentioning of 'some Deep Web directory for spooks called Facemask,' described as 'displaying the kind of merciless humor also to be found in high-school yearbooks' (Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* 108), a possible reference to Facebook's origins as a college directory. The text even refers to the concept of 'friends, in the pre-Internet sense of the term,' another possible reference to the popular website (281).

early conversations with Tallis,' his future wife, 'which she remembers nowadays as "unusual". She was his dream girl, literally [...]. She went around anxious about what might happen if he ever got a good night's sleep and saw her, the real Tallis, without the tubal overlay' (125). Ice's dazed condition may be the same as Maxine's, and arguably representative of that which inhabitants of post-9/11 America may be unconsciously experiencing on a mass scale. Also significant is the term 'clustergeek,' itself a word that seems to come from the very realm of geek culture it is addressing and describing. Through terms such as these, Pynchon is able to inhabit geek culture throughout the novel in order to describe its dynamics and peculiarities.

All these ideas must remain hypotheses. Although Pynchon presents a political point of view in the novel through his extended metaphor of capitalism as a dark religion, he does not provide a solution to the enigma of 9/11, or to that of the novel's generic status. Conspiracy theories based on the idea that the US government itself was behind the attacks are represented as every bit as absurd, and potentially true, as official versions of the event. Simple counternarratives are seen as a relic of the past, obsolete in a world that has turned even more sinister (399). The ultimate inconclusiveness of any attempt to solve *Bleeding Edge's* countless supernatural phenomena highlights and represents the fundamental uncertainty that enshrouds the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in the novel's perspective.

'The Escapist Can't Fly:' Generic Contagion in Kavalier & Clay

If *Bleeding Edge* uses generic contagion to represent a world where the boundary between a virtual and real existence has become blurry, *Kavalier & Clay* does the same to represent the experience of characters committed to another form of escapism: that of

superhero comic books. Entire chapters of the novel are narrated through the lens of pulp fiction, an acknowledged key influence on Sam Clay and on his comics (4). While the first of these chapters is set (almost) entirely in the metadiegetic world of the comic books created by the novel's protagonists, the second shows how one of their creations has 'escaped' its metadiegetic world, and become an actual threat to them. These chapters – the eighth in Part I and the fifth in Part IV – may even be read as metaphors for the two sides of escapism as represented in *Kavalier & Clay*: the immersive, consoling and empowering potential of escapist narratives such as superhero comic books; and the threat that they may turn into an addictive drug, with the capacity to weaken an individual's grip on reality.

In the eighth chapter of Part I, the birth of the Escapist character is represented as a liberating process, one that delivers into the hands of Joe Kavalier and Sam Clay a key to freeing themselves economically, and realising their artistic aspirations. The Escapist's origin story is described in detail, and when, having acquired his powers, he and his sidekicks proclaim their commitment together, their voices 'can be heard clearly by a couple of young men who are walking past, their collars raised against the cold October night, dreaming their elaborate dream, wishing their wish, teasing their golem into life' (134).

The creative powers of make-believe are stressed in this passage, with its reference to Sam Clay and Joe Kavalier 'wishing their wish.' We are reminded of the text's notion that 'every universe, our own included, begins in conversation' (119), with its potentially ambiguous 'our:' what universe is the narrator referring to? Kavalier and Clay's fictional superhero mythology? The novel *Kavalier & Clay*? The broader, extra-diegetic universe? The fact that the cry of these superheroes, living in the metadiegetic Empire City, is 'heard clearly' by Sam and Joe, as if the stroke of genius behind the Escapist's creation is not quite something they *invent*, but something they experience, suggests that it may not be

possible to maintain clear demarcations between these different universes. As such, we may read this choice of words as a first reflection on the nature of the creative act as a piecing-together of sources, rather than the spontaneous creation of something from nothing. Sam and Joe themselves stress the importance of making their character *interesting* rather than *new* (94-5). The reference to the Escapist as a golem, a mythical creature, emphasises the magical nature of the storytelling act, with the passing reference to the cold October night reinforcing this point, and suggesting the consoling, (physically) warming effects of narrative and creation. Yet golems, according to myth, typically escape their creator's control, and become a destructive force: the dangerous side of escapism, it would seem, is already hidden within this apparently triumphant scene.

Finally, in a detail that is most relevant to the blurring of fiction and reality that, we shall see, is a constant in *Kavalier & Clay*, fiction is created using details from the character's own world. We have seen in previous chapters how many details of the Escapist's world, both minor and major, mirror details from Sam and Joe's lives, together with further details borrowed from the world of fiction. Most notably, the superhero's belief that 'freedom was a debt that could be repaid only by purchasing the freedom of others' (131) mirrors Joe's determination to use his American life to win passage to the US for the rest of his family. The idea of freedom as a 'debt,' indeed, already foreshadows the terrible guilt that will ensue at his inability to repay it.⁸¹

The *other* chapter in which Chabon employs the same technique, shifting the

⁸¹ One is reminded of Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), a movie that is relevant to our discussion because of its extensive reflection on escapism (here, into dreams) and on the way escapist worlds can become addictive, toxic, and eventually indistinguishable from reality. *Inception* protagonist Dom Cobb even reflects on how, when building one of the film's paradoxical dreamscapes, one should never copy locations from the actual world, as that is the easiest way to forget what is real and what is fictional; a warning that Sam and Joe – and later, in *Moonglow*, the narrator's grandmother – fail to heed.

camera eye from the diegetic world of the novel to the metadiegetic realm of the Escapist's characters, is less straightforward, and requires close attention. This later episode follows Carl Ebling, a Nazi sympathiser and dedicated fan of the Escapist comic books, engaged at this stage in the narrative in a violent feud with Joe Kavalier.

The fifth chapter of Part IV begins within the metadiegetic world of the Escapist comic books. First, we get a brief list of the series' villains, followed by a description of the nefarious Saboteur, and of his lair. As the Saboteur leaves his den to emerge onto the streets of New York City, it becomes increasingly clear that he is, in fact, Carl Ebling himself, on a mission to plant a bomb at a Bar Mitzvah where Joe Kavalier is performing as a stage magician. That Ebling is delusional, and convinced of his identity as the Saboteur, is implied in the following passage:

the sheet of paper on which the contours of Carl Ebling's mind have been drawn is like a map that has been folded and carelessly refolded too many times. The reverse shows through; the poles meet; at the heart of a ramifying gray grid of city streets lies an expanse of virgin blue sea. (331)

Notice the image of the map,⁸² so central to Chabon's broader poetics (see Dewey 1-2), with its continuous insistence on the metaphor of the borderlands. Whether the shift in Carl's personality is due to mental illness, or to a game of make-believe that has got out of hand is left unclear, but the adverb 'carelessly' suggests a voluntary activity, one he has engaged in recklessly; as such, there is a strong suggestion that his delusion is born of his

⁸² The same metaphor is used in *Summerland* (2002) to represent the thoughts of a character falling asleep: 'they began to meld and entangle themselves in one another, like the sections of a map being carelessly folded' (265).

excessive commitment to escapist narratives.

The simile of the map that has been folded too many times may in fact highlight precisely this idea: that Carl has started to conflate different domains of his psyche – most notably, his flights of fancy and his experiences, his imagination and his reality. Different areas overlap in this deformed map, just as fiction and reality overlap in Carl's world-view and imagination. Equally significant is the 'expanse of virgin blue sea' that has become unreadable, signalling all the confusion of a mind that has lost its points of reference, and cannot navigate the world. For Carl, escapist entertainments have lost their purpose – that Pynchonian idea of 'getting constructively lost' – and have gotten him simply lost, without guidance. It is also crucial to observe that Carl's obsession is heavily anchored to the fictional world of the Escapist. He has not adopted a fictional identity for himself, one that he has borrowed from Joe and Sam's creation: rather, he is *inhabiting* their fictional adventures.

To understand this fine, but important, distinction, let us consider the narrator's description of the Saboteur's powers, and of his den. This chapter, in fact, is focalised through the eyes of fandom: we have previously seen how Carl, in spite of his hatred of Jewish artists, is a true scholar of comic books, science fiction, and of the Escapist's adventures (202-3). The text reveals how, 'as the Escapist's power has increased, so has the Saboteur's, until the latter can walk through walls, leap thirty feet straight up, and befog men's minds so that he may pass unseen among them' (329). It is unclear whether this Saboteur is a product of Carl's imagination, an identity he has borrowed from the world of the Escapist's comics, or a combination of the two. The mention of how the villain can 'pass unseen' among people may, in fact, be a reference to Carl's job as a waiter, which makes him metaphorically invisible to many people at his workplace.⁸³ At the same time,

⁸³ One Escapist comic-book story – from the series produced in the unwritten world – employs a similar

this reference to the parallel evolution of the villain and superhero's powers appears to be chronicling the narrative evolution of the Escapist comics, as Kavalier and Clay make their stories increasingly Byzantine and daring. As such, the reference is imbued with the same scholarly enthusiasm one finds in the description of the comic book's villains. Less ambiguous is the description of the Saboteur's lair, which he '(implicitly) shares with Renata Von Voom, the Spy Queen, his girlfriend' (329). It is doubtful whether somebody can 'implicitly' share a bed in a personal reverie. Rather, Carl has clearly confused his own life with the narrated life of the Saboteur, as read in the Escapist's comic books, to the extent that – as he leaves his home – he steps not into the streets of New York, but those of Empire City (330), New York's analogue in the series, with its 'Statue of Liberation' and 'needle-tipped Excelsior Building' (123), fictionalised versions of the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building respectively.

The full extent of Carl's mania is revealed later in the text, as it becomes increasingly clear that he is mentally unstable. When the narrator details the charges that are pressed against him after the attempted Bar Mitzvah bombing, we are informed that he is accused of a number of crimes that had gone unsolved 'until the Saboteur confessed' to them all (337). The ambiguous text may be focalised through Carl's perspective as that of someone convinced of being a comic-book villain, or it may be making fun of his split commitment. The ambiguity is resolved (in favour of the first hypothesis) later when we experience the trial from a different perspective, that of Carl's sister Ruth. We are informed that Carl 'much of the time seemed to be under the impression that he was a costumed villain in a comic book' (403). Ruth's language here strips what Ebling sees as his mission of its pretensions to significance: contemplated from an external perspective, Carl's dream

character: 'Hail and Fear Well,' by Wolfman, Staton and Sikoryak, focuses on a lonely janitor with Nazi delusions, working on a terrorist attack in Washington (Barreto et al 91-112).

of grandeur is simply a form of delusion. Even more significant is how this delusion is so thoroughly integrated with Carl's personality it becomes *hard to notice*: he 'seemed' under the impression of being someone else, but must apparently have behaved sensibly enough for his obsession to remain hidden from others.

Generic contagion is thus used in the text to represent Carl's mania, the extent of which has a larger resonance in the context of the novel because of how it offers a clear parallel to the narrative of another character: Joe Kavalier himself. Just as the Saboteur 'is every bit the dark obverse of the Escapist' (328), so we can find clear parallels in Carl and Joe's descent into the world of escapist narratives. After his traumatic experience in World War II, Joe comes back home and lives estranged from his partner Rosa and their son, in a state of isolation that is fuelled and supported by his commitment to comic books, which, as he sees it, are 'helping him to heal' while at the same time making it 'much harder for him to return himself, even a little at a time, to the orbit of Rosa Saks Clay' (577). The metaphor of the orbit calls to mind space flight, and a body who has escaped gravity and its pull, an act with liberating *and* ominous implications. During this secluded phase of his life, Joe resides in an office in the Empire State Building – very much a secret lair, just like the Escapist's, a hidden room in the significantly-named Empire Palace Theatre (130). When finally he chooses to announce his return to his life, Joe does so by staging a grand event: donning an Escapist costume and jumping from the top of the Empire State Building. Sam, who is summoned to the scene during the event, betrays how deeply he himself is absorbed in the world of the Escapist: as he tries to convince Joe not to jump, he is finally pushed to say, 'you know damn well *the Escapist doesn't fly*' (538). Here Sam does not appeal to Joe's reason, or urge him to think about the son he would be leaving behind. Rather, he points out to Joe/the Escapist that his plan is *inconsistent* with the rules of the fictional world they both created. This is not the first time Sam himself seems to

lose sight of the Escapist's fictional nature (see 367): he is as much a victim of escapist immersion as Carl and Joe.

Chabon discusses this phenomenon in a joint interview with Junot Díaz, where they comment on the real-life consequences of spending protracted periods of time inside fictional worlds: 'You're not going to be in the world as much as a normal person,' Díaz argues; 'It's OK [...] But let's be real: you give up a lot of s-t to keep your nose in a book for 16 years [...] I don't even have a full bill yet' (Chabon and Díaz). Much of their fiction, it might be argued, is concerned precisely with the extent and nature of this 'full bill:' with the consequences, at once liberating yet damning, often unpredictable, of dedicating large amounts of a person's life to the pursuit of escapist art and fictional worlds. Díaz's invitation 'let's be real,' in fact, is powerfully ironic.

Sam's uncertainty before Joe's exploit calls to mind a passage in *Moonglow* in which the narrator's grandfather is discussing his wife's nervous breakdown with the psychiatrist who has been treating her. The characters discuss the monstrous Skinless Horse that so obsesses her, and the psychiatrist asks the husband how he would react if he discovered that the woman's mania was not caused by a mental illness. The grandfather's immediate, instinctive response, which he has to stop himself from asking out loud, is: '*Was the Skinless Horse Real?*' (349). The first instinct of even such a rational, non-impressionable old man is to believe in the supernatural. We are reminded, first, of *Bleeding Edge*'s observation that 'there are always secular backup stories [but] there's no shame in going for a magical explanation' (441); and secondly, of Todorov's reflection on how, in stories of the fantastic, supernatural explanations often make more sense than logical (but improbable) solutions.

Generic contagion, and the difficulty many characters experience in distinguishing between fantasy and reality, cast multiple shadows over *Kavalier & Clay*'s vast range of

speculative elements. Paramount among these is the Golem of Prague, a mythical figure who reaches Joe Kavalier in the novel's conclusion after having travelled mysteriously around the world. Other bizarre occurrences are scattered throughout the novel: Joe meets or is haunted by several potential ghosts, more or less rationally explicable, including his father's (182), his mother's (323), and his mentor's, twice (431; 608); these incidents are all the more striking, considering how, in an early passage in the novel, his own secret visit to his home is compared to a ghost's visitation (59). Rosa and her father are both said to experience strange visions (228; 252); the house where they live, once the location of a murder committed by a lepidopterist, is infested with strange moths (248; 251). In all these cases, the barrier between the fantastical and real is thin, and made thinner by a narrative that plays time and again with the contagion between reality and storytelling that seems to occur after protracted periods of time spent inside fictional worlds.

Hag-Seed

So far, we have considered texts in which generic contagion is used to paint fictional worlds peopled by characters rendered unable to distinguish between reality and imagination by their commitment to escapist fictions: characters, that is, suffering from more-or-less diagnosable forms of delusion. The same applies to Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* (2016), a retelling of *The Tempest* (1611)⁸⁴ revolving around a disgraced theatre director staging a production of the play for a course he teaches inside a prison. What makes *Hag-Seed* particularly relevant to our discussion is the way it problematises, even

⁸⁴ Part of the Hogarth Shakespeare series, which consists of a number of established novelists offering fictional rewritings of Shakespeare plays, *Hag-Seed* is as much a work of fan fiction as many of my core texts.

more than *Bleeding Edge* and *Kavalier & Clay*, the healing potential of generic contagion: in *Hag-Seed* it is the side effects of the phenomenon, and the protagonist's delusions that figments of his imagination may be, in fact, *real*, that allow him to overcome a traumatic experience.

The novel follows Felix, a theatre director fallen from grace who, after the death of his infant daughter, finds himself craving an escape, both physically and in terms of entertainment. He retreats from civilisation in a remote shack by a farm, while his literary tastes also come to reflect his escapist desires: he rejects classical works, filled with 'too much real life [...] too much tragedy' (39), in favour of the escapism offered by children's literature. As he starts teaching a theatre course in prison, the cathartic potential of acting provides a form of escape for his inmate students too; yet these different forms of escape are not without their cost. One of Felix's flights of fancy consists of pretending that his infant daughter is in fact alive, and living with him in his shack. It doesn't take long for this fantasy to blur his perception of reality:

One day he heard her singing, right outside the window. He didn't daydream it, the way he'd been semi-daydreaming up to then. It wasn't one of his whimsical yet despairing fabrications. He actually heard a voice. It was not a consolation. Instead, it frightened him.

'This has gone way too far,' he told himself sternly. 'Snap out of it, Felix. Pull yourself together. Break out of your cell.' (47)

Notice the physical, perceivable nature of Felix's auditory hallucination. The delusions of fiction are so real he is able to give a voice to the child he has invented. This detail is particularly resonant considering the importance played by auditory

hallucinations, singing, and music in *Hag-Seed's* Shakespearean source. Singing, moreover, is hardly a sound that can be mistaken, especially in the isolated context where Felix lives: a cough or a single word may have implied his mishearing of a natural sound, while singing implies an articulation that gives greater heft to his hallucination. The episode is reminiscent of similar auditory phenomena in *Kavalier & Clay*, when Sam Clay somehow knows what his fictional Tom Mayflower sounds like (300) – and of the (metaphorical?) moment when he and Joe 'hear' the cry of their fictional creation coming to life (134). The reference in this passage from *Hag-Seed* to 'semi-daydreaming' is also mysterious: how can someone 'semi' daydream a presence, precisely? The implication seems to be that Felix had already started to believe in his reverie before he heard his daughter sing.

The consequences of Felix's make-believe frighten him, as he realises he needs to 'break out of his cell.' His escapist expedient has *itself* become a prison. The word choice here highlights another connection with the novel's source, since Prospero's rooms on his island are also ambiguously called a cell in Shakespeare's play. This is but one way in which the text seems to support Felix's own interpretation of *The Tempest* as a play about imprisonment. As an assignment, the director asks his students to identify all instances of entrapment in the play: they find eight (125), to which he contributes a ninth in the form of the play itself (275).

That the play – meaning, here, the diegetic staging of *The Tempest* at the heart of *Hag-Seed's* plot – may reinforce the characters' confinement is suggested by a few key passages, for instance when one of the convicts, asked to recite a few lines, bursts out in a monstrous string of insults, as if possessed by the play itself (153). Even more, it is through generic contagion that the blurring of the line between reality and imagination is represented in the novel.

In the novel's closing chapters, a group of theatre operatives who wronged Felix in the past is invited to witness his *Tempest* inside the prison; and he and the convicts take advantage of this opportunity to scare these men by staging a riot. Throughout the riot scene, the text ambiguously posits the idea that Felix might have forgotten that he and his convicts are staging a game of make believe; and might instead have become convinced that his students are actually goblins and spirits of the type mobilised by Prospero in Shakespeare's play.

Generic contagion is also at play in the novel's final pages, when Felix is confronted by his daughter's spirit. Is she an actual ghost? Or a figment of Felix's imagination, created by his addiction to escapism? And how does this influence *Hag-Seed's* realism and its genre? As ever in texts which stage generic contagion, it is impossible to reach a final answer, both in terms of the characters' perception and of the novel's generic status.

Shaped by Genre: The Familiar

Many of my core texts' characters model their personalities on their escapist passions. Sam Clay from *Kavalier & Clay* would be a clear example; and we have seen in the course of Chapter One how generic contagion is at play in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, filled with speculative elements including faceless men, magical mongooses, and tenacious curses. I discussed Miller's belief that the novel is narrated through 'the lens of genre fiction' (95), that is, from the perspective of somebody who interprets the world using the tropes and plot dynamics of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Generic contagion, as such, can be a way of focalising an act of storytelling through the perspective of somebody who may not necessarily be delusional; but more simply, who has their

world-view – at times, literally, the way they see the world – shaped by a commitment to a specific fictional genre.

A few instances of generic contagion of this sort can be found in Mark Danielewski's *The Familiar*. Each novel in this ongoing series is divided into several chapters following the life of different characters and employing different generic conventions. The tone, register, style, and even font of every storyline is different, as signalled by the different colours that mark them; and some of these storylines appear influenced by specific genres. One of these, for instance, revolves around a detective called Özgür, investigating a number of murders in Los Angeles. The text makes explicit how the early reading habits of Özgür, a self-confessed fan of hard-boiled detective fiction, constitute a formative experience, to the extent that they shape his career choices. The passage in which this revelation occurs is worth quoting at length:

Not to mention re-reading Chandler, Hammett, Philip K., friends since he moved to the US as a teenager [...] The great hawkshaws had taught him English and maybe even to love Scotch [...] And if he began as a posture, the overcoat, the trilby, standing just like the characters of his immigrant reveries might have stood, until eventually he no longer resembled a caricature of Marlowe, but if anything Marlowe looked like a caricature of him. When had this happened? When had the idea of a peace officer become this reality outstripping the fiction that had gotten him filling out an application to the Police Academy? (Danielewski, *The Familiar #1* 173-4)

These writers, who accompany Özgür to this day through his re-readings, are described as 'friends' of a lifetime, a term that highlights their importance in the detective's

life; indeed, they teach him language and, 'maybe,' they transmit to him a certain code of behaviour. The adverb is vital here: it is impossible for Özgür to say whether his passion for Scotch is innate, or a legacy of his 'friendship' with hardboiled detective fiction. Also crucial is the shift described in this passage, one that calls to mind the pattern described by Chabon in *Wonder Boys*. If at first he is imitating these characters, who people his 'reveries,' after a while their identity becomes indistinguishable from his own: fiction comes to shape his life.

Such an instance of contagion between diegetic levels shows how the phenomenon is not a prerogative of writers. Like Carl Ebling in *Kavalier & Clay*, Özgür is no artist, but a passionate fan of a specific literary genre; in this context, Chabon's notion of influence as a process steeped in the idea of fandom seems pertinent. For Chabon, creators are first and foremost passionate fans; and conversely, fans are accorded the status of creators, since fan fiction and serious literature form a continuum. The process of cultural creation becomes a collective endeavour, without a neat and clear separation between creators and consumers of entertainment.

One final feature of Danielewski's passage worth remarking on is how its representation of the influence of fiction contributes to our discussion on another level too. The influence of past fiction on these characters is, inevitably, a discussion of its influence on the fictional work that contains them. As such, the idea that 'Marlowe looked like a caricature of' Özgür calls to mind Bloom's notion, expressed in *The Anxiety of Influence*, that through misprision 'strong' poets and artists make their past masters look as though they are, paradoxically, influenced *by* them. Similarly, in this passage Özgür is no longer modelled on Marlowe, but vice versa; which speaks volumes both in terms of the character's relation to his identity, as shaped by fiction; and of Danielewski's contribution to and investment in the tropes of detective fiction.

It is thus significant that the novel, in a clear case of generic contagion, uses extensive police jargon while portraying the life of Özgür and his investigations. Consider this paragraph from the third *Familiar* volume:

It's only Monday, and Friday can't get here fast enough. And if the uncleared cases stacking up aren't another good reason to pull the pin, Captain Cardinal hasn't even gotten started. Though here's another start. Already the third casebook today. Cold as the coroner's crypt. (115)

The paragraph's style is heavily reminiscent of the telegraphic, short sentences of hardboiled detective fiction, engineered to stage the detached, analytical frame of mind of a hardened investigator. Similar in effect is the use of synecdoche to substitute 'case' with 'casebook,' as if to focus the detective's job, and his having to deal with murdered people, on a colder, less emotionally-invested object, the 'casebook', once more signalling the character's distance from the victims of the case at hand. Similes also abound in Özgür's sections of *The Familiar*, as we can see here with the case 'cold as the coroner's crypt,' an image that is once more connected to the world of murder investigations. Idiomatic expressions in a colloquial register, such as 'pull the pin' or 'can't get here fast enough,' also reinforce the ways in which the passage is tainted by generic contagion: not only is the text focalised through the character's perspective, but it also acquires the genre-bound register of the fiction he so enjoys.

Özgür is a fan of Philip Dick, and of the movie *Blade Runner* (1982) (Danielewski, *The Familiar #1* 173), which combines noir and science fiction in much the same way as *The Familiar*. The science fiction side of the series emerges most notably in the storyline following Cas, or 'The Wizard,' a woman in possession of a mysterious and powerful orb,

part technological wonder and part magical artefact. At one point during the third volume in the series, we get a detailed description of Cas' bookshelf,⁸⁵ and we see how it features, alongside 'stacks of manga beside towers of VHS tapes' (712), an extensive collection of classic science fiction novels and critical texts on the genre, together with books on and from the counter-culture of the 1960s, as well as Dashiell Hammett's canonical noir novel *Red Harvest* – reinforcing the ties between science fiction and detective fiction. Considering Cas' passion for genre fiction and comic books, it is not surprising to find her narrative sections filled with scientific jargon of the type one might encounter in a work of pure science fiction. In spite of the connotations of her name, 'Wizard,' the text does not attribute her orb's powers to the supernatural, as a fantasy narrative would, but tries to give it a detailed if obscure technological provenance: 'An Aberration is the reason for Clip #1. It's the reason for many of the other Clips too. Especially #6. A Clip is defined by ratification: >= 99.99%' is a typical example of the specialised obscure jargon which recurs in Cas' sections (Danielewski, *The Familiar* #3 702). It is no surprise, then, that there is an abundance of science fiction, but no fantasy, in Cas' personal library.

The use of fonts in the series also contributes to its staging of generic contagion. Besides allowing readers to distinguish more easily between *The Familiar's* many storylines, the novels' fonts provide commentary on the text: Özgür's font is Baskerville, suggesting a reference to Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes novel, *The Hound of the*

⁸⁵ Patrick Lucanio's *Them or Us*, J. O. Bailey's *Pilgrims Through Space and Time*, Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Gene Wolfe's *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, William Gibson's *Count Zero*, L. Ron Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth*, Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture*, R. Buckminster Fuller's *Utopia or Oblivion*, Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan*, Stanislaw Lem's *The Investigation*, Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*, C. G. Jung's *Psyche & Symbol*, *The Edogawa Rampo Reader*, Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*, Eugene Zamiatin's *We* (712).

Baskervilles (1902). Cas' font is Apolline, possibly a reference to the Greek mathematician Apollonius of Perga, famous for his discoveries in mathematics and geometry; both sciences that are applied extensively in Cas' sections, with their detailed descriptions of how her orb works.

Before moving on to the next section, it is crucial to mention how generic contagion, if widespread, is not universal in my core texts. Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*, for instance, is a good example of a novel in which generic contagion *does not* happen, or rather, only happens in a peculiar form. In Chapter One I argued that *The Fortress of Solitude* thematises extensively its protagonist's inability to find solace in the escapist fictions he holds dear, as he cannot admit his need for an escape. The narrative does occasionally make concessions to his world-view as a fan of genre fiction: his afternoons with his friends in Brooklyn would make his life in Manhattan, where Dylan has a significantly different group of friends, 'unlikely as Neptune and Vulcan' (221), signalling how distant that side of his life feels when he is back in his native neighbourhood. But here, too, *Star Trek's* fictional universe is mentioned only to be dismissed as 'unlikely.' To understand fully the inverse type of generic contagion happening in *The Fortress of Solitude*, one need only consider the first passage in which Dylan, having acquired a magic ring, is shown flying: the episode only takes up two paragraphs, and sees Dylan getting a splinter in his heel as he lands, and getting his cloak soaked in the water of a lake. The novel is so concerned with Dylan's daily humiliations in Brooklyn – with the constant bullying he is subjected to, his friends' negligence, his inability to understand the complex dynamics of street life – that he does not so much look at the world through the lens of the supernatural, as look at the supernatural through the lens of his own humdrum reality.

The Slender Man Phenomenon

Considering how extensively self-consciously escapist texts thematise the permeability of the barrier between the written and unwritten world, and consequent shifts between different worlds, it might be useful to focus briefly on a real-life instance of a blurring of the line separating fantasy from fact. In order to do so, I will analyse the Slender Man phenomenon, and its related mythos. This pop-culture sensation has already been the object of a thorough study, Shira Chess and Eric Newsom's *Folklore, Horror Stories, and the Slender Man* (2015); and it is invested with wide, increasing cultural relevance (see Chess & Newsom 36-7; 121-2). The Slender Man myth is also, in its conception, a quintessentially communal effort, one whose origins can be found in a thick web of fan fictions. As such, we can see clear parallels with my core literary texts, which structure themselves – often explicitly, as in Chabon or Díaz – as fan fiction.

The Slender Man is a fictional monster created in online communities, web forums, and fan fiction databases, and later popularised by video games and web series. It is a faceless creature that stalks its victims and, in different iterations of the myth, either kidnaps them, drives them to madness, or murders them.⁸⁶ The creature made headlines all over the US in May 2014, when two twelve-year-old girls stabbed a third one in the Wisconsin woods in order to 'impress' the supernatural creature (Chess & Newsom 2); a case that precipitated widespread media panic, and led to some people drawing further connections between the creature and other attempted crimes (3-4). In many ways only the latest in a series of media scares where dangerous, even mind-controlling potential, has

⁸⁶ Although any claim of direct inspiration would be hard to prove, the Slender Man shares several uncanny features with the Faceless Man, the main supernatural antagonist in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

been attributed to niche cultural products, from heavy metal music to role-playing games (see Witwer 143-51) to the comic book moral panic of the 1950s,⁸⁷ the Slender Man phenomenon still deserves particular attention because of certain peculiarities related to the character itself, and to its Internet origins. In their study of the mythos surrounding the Slender Man, Chess and Newsom link its popularity to its narrative malleability (starting from its featureless face, the Slender Man functions as a blank canvas for all sorts of stories, from graphic horror to bizarre love tales/father-figure relationships); to its pervasiveness throughout different media, from video games to film; and to its origins on the Web. Provocatively, Chess and Newsom suggest that the Slender Man, while fictional, can be so persuasive as to move young girls to attempt murder by stating that 'the Slender Man story is real because the Internet has made it real' (120).

What does this mean, precisely? One of the possible explanations for how a fictional creature – one whose origins, unlike other popular monsters such as Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster, can be clearly traced to an online forum – can exercise such a powerful influence on real-life events is the tulpa model. As Chess and Newsom explain, a tulpa is 'a creature created from the imaginations of people through magical acts [...] if enough people around the world genuinely believe in something, the thought-form can become an entity in the real world' (119); or, to employ the more effective terms of a web user quoted in their study, a tulpa is 'a creature made flesh by enough people thinking about it' (119). Chess and Newsom make explicit how the idea of a tulpa originates in 'spiritual and magical writings,' and refers to a supernatural phenomenon (119). Yet they concede that one need not believe in the supernatural to see how a *figurative* tulpa effect has taken place in the Slender Man's case. If, they argue, the Wisconsin stabbing can be considered 'the most overt example of the Slender Man being brought to reality' (121),

⁸⁷ See Chapter One.

other, less extreme occurrences can also be tied to a tulpa effect, most notably the widespread popularity achieved by the myth in mainstream media: the popularity of the Slender Man has, effectively, given its myth a certain ever-increasing traction. Nor has this popularity waned since Chess and Newsom's study was published: a Slender Man motion picture, laconically titled *Slender Man*, was released in the summer of 2018. An implicit consequence of this increase in popularity is the way the myth has slipped out of the hands of its original creators, who were never a clear-cut, definite entity to begin with, but rather a composite group of Internet users. Because of these peculiar characteristics, the legend of the Slender Man 'was never one that could be controlled' (123), as demonstrated most violently in the case of the Wisconsin stabbing. Nor is the Slender Man the first instance of a popular cultural creation taking on a life of its own. To refer back once more to Lovecraft, and to the circle of his fellow pulp writers from the 20s and 30s, the fictional *Necronomicon* – a book of forbidden lore mentioned ominously in many stories by Lovecraft, and by other contributors to *Weird Tales* and pulp magazines – is now marketed in a variety of editions, usually posing as props or imitations of the original, hideous tome. Leif Sorensen reads the transformation of Lovecraft's volume from fictional to real 'as evidence of the power of his citation method' (518), where the fictional *Necronomicon* and other invented texts are mentioned by a variety of different writers, each new instance granting more faux-verisimilitude to the volume. This method, as I discussed in my second chapter, shares several similarities with the connected worlds and intertextual webs encountered across self-conscious escapism.

Indeed, there are clear parallels between the Slender Man case and certain central features of these American texts. These novels, in fact, do not simply show the inherent dangers of escapism, and of rejecting reality in order to escape into fictional worlds; they highlight the complex, unforeseeable consequences of the fan-fictional, collective nature

of the creative act. Fictional creations are constantly escaping the control of their creators, often turning against them, in a constant retelling of the Frankenstein/golem myth that is amplified by the composite, explicitly intertextual nature of these texts, as if they themselves were Frankenstein's monsters. The Escapist in *Kavalier & Clay* becomes a source of obsession for Carl Ebling, which leads to an attempted bombing, and later – because of Ruth Ebling's vengefulness at her brother's imprisonment – to a tragic turn of events for Sam Clay, leading to his rape, and to the end of his relationship with Tracy Bacon. The Skinless Horse in *Moonglow*, a 'survival strategy evolved by a proven survivor' (84), shifts from a tale told to exorcise trauma to an actual monster, at the very least (though perhaps not exclusively) in its creator's mind, stalking her and driving her insane. *Bleeding Edge*, with its denunciation of capitalism and its broader political critique, focuses on the economic and social implications of how these escapist realities tend to escape their creators' control; so that when the DeepArcher software emerges from the deep web, it inevitably attracts the interest of the dangerous forces of the market. Chess and Newsom too, as they study how the Slender Man myth is migrating from web communities to mainstream media, reflect on how the latter 'want to find ways to appropriate something that is clearly popular' (123). In *House of Leaves* the Frankenstein trope is curiously inverted, so that a horror story that has traumatised its curator, Johnny Truant, does indeed escape him, and reaches a broader audience; yet instead of causing further damage, it is transformed from traumatic experience to cult cultural artefact, with a dedicated fan following.

Can the tulpa model that the authors of *Folklore, Horror Stories, and the Slender Man Myth* apply to the Slender Man phenomenon also help to explain or explain away the fantastical overtones of my core texts, so filled with hints of the supernatural? While there are of course different nuances across self-conscious escapism, the tulpa model, according

to which supernatural phenomena become real as a consequence of people's belief in their factual nature, is not sufficient to explain the supernatural elements in my core texts. In fact, one of the points repeatedly stressed in these novels is the idea that the existence of magic and of the supernatural is unrelated to one's belief in it. We find this idea reiterated in *Oscar Wao*, where Yunior reflects on how 'it's perfectly fine if you don't believe in these "superstitions" [...] Because no matter what you believe, fuku believes in you' (5). The implication here is that whether certain aspects of the narrative are read with a sceptical or open mind, scepticism won't be enough to cancel or refute their supernatural connotations.

Moonglow features similar reflections when the narrator compares his grandfather's scepticism of superstition to his grandmother's. The grandmother is wary of lucky charms and similar expedients not because she doesn't believe in bad luck: far from it, 'she knew that bad luck could never be fooled' by simple stratagems (19). Her paradoxical attitude toward the supernatural is, in fact, comparable to Yunior's: she states that she does not believe in magic, 'but that, surprisingly enough, magic worked even if you did not believe in it' (21). A clear and observable proof of the tangible nature of the supernatural as disconnected from characters' belief in it can be found at one point in *Moonglow*: the narrator's grandfather is searching his house after his wife has built a gruesome totem to the Skinless Horse. He believes someone may have broken in and attacked his wife; there are traces of blood around the house. He finds no intruder; 'yet even after he had searched the house from cellar to attic, finding no sign of intrusion, he could not shake the feeling that there had been someone in the house' (198). We may argue that a tulpa effect could be at work here, so that the grandmother's obsession with the Skinless Horse has invested it with a reality that makes it a perceivable presence even to the grandfather. Still, being a no-nonsense character, hard to impress and with no penchant for daydreaming, someone who considers most fiction 'a bunch of baloney' (248), the narrator's grandfather is the

least likely character in the novel to believe in the supernatural. The tone of the passage clearly suggests a concrete presence: 'even' after a thorough search, he cannot 'shake the feeling' (198). No solution, in the end, is offered to the dilemma.

Kavalier & Clay also reflects extensively on the unseen but 'real' magic of everyday life: both the magic of fiction and of the escapism it grants (576), and the dark magic of the world, able to consume its contents and leave no trace of their existence behind (339). Jennifer Egan's *The Keep* features a similar reflection on the spontaneous magic of fiction through its narrator's astonishment at the escapism granted by storytelling: when his writing teacher mentions the metaphor of stories as a door to access other realities, Ray reflects on how 'the door wasn't real, there was no actual door, it was just *figurative language*. Meaning it was a word. A sound. *Door*. But I opened it up and walked out' (19).

Collapsing the Fictional/Factual Divide

We have seen how the concept of the tulpa effect is not enough to account for the way self-consciously escapist texts employ supernatural elements, and often collapse the barrier between the written and unwritten world. This process is made all the more complex by the transfictional nature of these novels: Pynchon's works all appear to take place in the same shared universe, as do Chabon's, with the two authors' 'multiverses' overlapping in at least one instance, in *Telegraph Avenue*. In such a context, it becomes exponentially harder to recognise a disruption of boundaries: such disruptions are, simply put, all too common in my core texts.

As we approach this chapter's conclusion, we are left to contemplate the implications of the idea that the line separating stories from reality may be blurrier and less

easily identifiable than the conventions of realist fiction, and of fiction reading, would suggest. One need not embrace the supernatural to entertain such a concept. Let us focus again on a tangible consequence of this blurring: the fear generated by the Slender Man phenomenon. Several studies exist on this type of readerly response: in *The Mind and Its Stories* (2000), for instance, Patrick Colm Hogan draws on Sanskrit artistic theory to distinguish between 'bhava,' an emotion proper, and 'rasa,' defined as 'an aesthetic feeling [...] an emphatic version of an emotion or bhava' (81). Hogan provides a working example of the distinction between the two categories by pointing out that, when experiencing fiction, we may fear for its characters if they are confronted with a monster; but we do not feel bhava, fear proper, and flee the movie theatre or drop our book. Rather, we experience 'emphatic [sic] fear,' or rasa (81).

While offering us a useful distinction, this model is far from exhaustive. When watching a Slender Man web series, we may experience rasa as we fear for the life of its characters; but rasa can hardly account for a fear that is disconnected from our enjoyment of a fictional work. I can testify to experiencing feelings of unease when driving in the dark countryside after enjoying Slender Man fiction; but a famous case would be the diffused shark-phobia that followed Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1979). In *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, Richard Gerrig analyses this phenomenon, pointing out how the movie's depiction of a killer shark, murdering swimmers close to the beach, caused widespread fear of entering the water 'despite the most responsible efforts of the popular press to correct mistaken notions' about the likelihood of a shark attack (16). Gerrig's treatment of the case is helpful, but his focus is on how our experience of *Jaws* distorts our perception of a specific risk. For instance, he presents evidence of the fact that the movie had a stronger impact on lifeguards, since, to them, '*Jaws* did not so much manufacture a fear as present vivid evidence to confirm one that preexisted' (197).

The limitations of Gerrig's approach become apparent if we try to translate his approach to the Slender Man case. First, we need to acknowledge the supernatural nature of the phenomenon discussed here: killer sharks, if rare, do exist; Slender Men do not. Closely related to this factor is the explicitly *fictional* nature of Slender Men, and of similar phenomena one finds scattered across self-conscious escapism. Such evidence should render real-world fears – and gestures such as the Wisconsin stabbing – nonsensical.

However, Gerrig's study can still be helpful to our discussion. In *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, he offers convincing evidence to debunk what he calls 'toggle theories of fiction,' according to which fiction and non-fiction are experienced differently from one another. Gerrig's view that fictional worlds can influence our opinions, beliefs and values in much the same way as non-fictional events is echoed, for instance, in *Moonglow*, where the world of the characters is built on stories from all possible sources; or in *Oscar Wao*, with its fantastical representation of the history of the Dominican Republic.

If we attempt to address the idea of fiction's influence on the real world without breaking into the realm of cognitive psychology – which is beyond the remit of this thesis – inevitably we are led back to our original topic: the concept of escapism. It may be that the texts I have discussed exert such a powerful influence as a matter of *degree*, rather than *nature*: they are so immersive that they make it difficult for readers to detach themselves from the experience of immersion. This is true of metadiegetic, fictional texts, such as the Escapist comic books or *Bleeding Edge*'s DeepArcher software; but not exclusively.

Slender: The Eight Pages (2012), a video game that contributed significantly to spreading the popularity of the Slender Man myth, offers in fact a peculiarly immersive experience. The game is played from a first-person perspective, with the screen showing what the player's character is currently seeing. There is no data on the screen to distract

users from narrative immersion, and remind them they are playing a game; no bar, say, showing the state of their progress. There is no music in the game, except for a loud sound that is played each time the titular antagonist appears on screen. As such, the game is orchestrated to focus on immersion rather than on the ludic aspect of the experience. Indeed, 'winning' the game – as one does by collecting eight pages scattered around the game area – is notoriously difficult, and, arguably, beside the point. The ludic element of *Slender* is so irrelevant that retrieving all pages leads not to any conventional closure (a still image or cutscene, for instance, providing an ending to the narrative), but to no outcome at all: players keep wandering until they eventually encounter the Slender Man, and lose.

If we look for a literary analogy to this type of powerful immersive experience, we might turn to *House of Leaves*.⁸⁸ Hayles refers to this feature of Danielewski's text when she describes how the novel 'threatens always to break out of the cover that binds it. It is an artifact fashioned to consume the reader even as the reader consumes it' (802). To explain this feature of the text, she points to its nature as a Chinese-box narrative, made of several metadiegetic storylines, each one following a character consumed by *House of Leaves*: Zampanò, the book's curator, found dead in mysterious circumstances; Johnny Truant, rendered obsessive by the text; and Navidson, moved to re-enter the haunted house that almost killed him, and later, when he is lost in the house's maze, to burn all of his matches to read the metadiegetic *House of Leaves*. Already inscribed in this type of structure is the suggestion that the next person to be consumed by the text will be the reader herself. As a metafictional game, *House of Leaves* calls to mind *Gravity's Rainbow*, whose concluding paragraphs offer a diegetic jump, with the events presented throughout

⁸⁸ *S.* is another example of this kind of text, but I have chosen Danielewski's novel here because of an affinity in genre with the Slender Man mythos.

the book so far turned into a film experienced by characters in a movie theatre that is about to be hit by a rocket – perhaps originating, uncannily and metadiegetically, from the film itself. The novel's closure, with the narrator's addressee – a 'you' that inevitably points to the reader – annihilated by the rocket, seems to highlight the fact that the threat of a missile attack is still present in the extradiegetic world: published in 1973, *Gravity's Rainbow* was written at a tense moment of confrontation within the Cold War, and in a climate of rising global danger.

As an immersive experience, *House of Leaves* is arguably even more well equipped than *Slender* to captivate its audience. The book does not merely represent horrific happenings, but claims itself to be the cursed *source* of these happenings. As such, *House of Leaves* would appear to counter Ryan's paradox of immersion as opposed to interactivity, articulated in *Narrative as Virtual Reality*. According to Ryan, a text can be immersive only insofar as it is not interactive: when it draws attention to itself by interacting with the reader, as, for instance, postmodernist fiction does extensively, it inevitably betrays its own fictionality, and breaks the immersive spell.

Perhaps the best involuntary objection to this idea has been formulated by Hayles, who, reflecting on how Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is at the same time a haunted-house/horror narrative *and* a self-conscious reflection on meaning-making and storytelling, recognises that 'Mark Danielewski has found a way to subvert and have his subject at the same time' (779). The very persistence of the immersion process *beyond* the end of a text's consumption – which allowed, for instance, for the tragic Wisconsin stabbing – would seem to disprove Ryan's paradox.

Her study is still highly valuable to our discussion, as when she characterises the concept of fiction addiction, also called 'the Don Quixote syndrome,' in which readers lose 'the capacity to distinguish textual worlds, especially those of fiction, from the actual

world' (99). The very name chosen by Ryan shows us how this syndrome is definitely not a recent or unprecedented phenomenon. She could have as easily called it 'the Emma Bovary syndrome.' The behaviour encountered time and again in self-conscious escapism would appear to embrace precisely this type of escape; so why do we encounter such an abundance of Don Quixote syndromes in contemporary American fiction?

Partially, this may be a consequence of the legacy of postmodernist fiction. The features of postmodernism that are recuperated most extensively in my core texts are its use of pop culture sources, though with varying degrees of reverence (see Hoberek, 'After Postmodernism' 237-8); and the collapse of diegetic barriers widely described by Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction*. If, as McHale convincingly claims, postmodernism exploited elements of science fiction and the fantastic, so do my texts – but to a broader extent, and by acknowledging their sources more openly. Crucial in this regard is how self-consciously escapist texts never portray the type of addiction described by Ryan as the behaviour typical of a reader 'who seeks escape from reality but cannot find a home in the textual world because she traverses it too fast and too compulsively to enjoy the landscape' (99).

As voracious as Sam Clay, Oscar De León or *Bleeding Edge's* hackers may be in their consumption of their particular cultural products, they share a deep commitment to their choice of entertainment, approaching it with the rigour of scholars. And here may lie the true novelty of my texts: in the way they recuperate a type of appreciation that was already present in the second volume of *Don Quixote*, when the self-imagined knight, showing unexpected wisdom, reflects on how his obsession may make him wiser than the other, supposedly sane characters peopling his novel.

Postmodernism, whose legacy is always perceivable in my core texts, already foreshadowed this appreciation of escapism. An exemplary exploration of the topic can be

found in Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc.; J Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968), which represents the world its protagonist escapes from as no less bleak, artificial and pointless than the tabletop baseball games that absorb most of his time. Yet Coover's text ultimately still represents escapism negatively, as Henry Waugh becomes a cruel God to his fictional baseball players, once his dedication to their fictional world has taken over his life. In this context, the definitive negative judgement on the potential of escapist entertainment in postmodernist fiction is arguably to be found in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), in the form of its lethal 'cartridge,' a movie so powerfully addictive that anyone who watches it is unable to ever stop, and thus dies.

A much more recent, similarly anti-escapist novel is *The Nix* (2016) by Nathan Hill. The novel's protagonist Samuel is a dedicated fan of *Elfscape*, an online video game of fantasy battles that stirs in him the feeling of 'coming home at the end of a long day to someone who's glad you're back' (14). Yet Samuel's solace is frustrated and superficial, as he remains unable to abandon himself to the game's escapist potential, and reminds himself that his game nights are constituted by 'a few lonely people tapping keyboards in the dark' (22). Samuel's inability to fully suspend his disbelief and immerse himself in *Elfscape*'s escapist realm might be motivated by his own self-loathing, with the novel describing in detail how ashamed he is of his gaming interests. One of his recurring thoughts concerns what his former girlfriend Bethany would think of him if she could see him: 'She would think Samuel hasn't grown up at all - still a boy playing video games in the dark' (20). What appears curious about this passage is that, if anything, it is Samuel's self-consciousness and fear of inadequacy that appear especially boyish: it is a central concern of children, and especially adolescents, to appear grown-up in their tastes and pursuits. Adults, almost by definition, do not have to justify their interests.

While the novel details Samuel's journey as he overcomes his frustration and heals

from the trauma of his mother's abandonment by meeting her again and learning the story of her life, none of this leads to an acceptance of his favourite medium of escape. If anything, in the novel's conclusion *Elfscape* is further condemned as instrumental to Samuel's misery: after he learns to understand how he misplaced his anger, aiming it at his students and at himself, he concludes that 'it was so much easier to settle in front of his computer than to face his stagnant life' (615).

Escapism is thus condemned as an easy, addictive, and harmful force, paralleled throughout the novel with frozen and unhealthy food. At no point in the narrative is the pleasure granted by Samuel's commitment to his game constructed as rewarding or valuable: even the notion that the game feels like going home 'to someone who's glad you're back' is countered by Samuel's implied distaste for his online friends, whom he assumes to be his intellectual inferiors (15, 18), and to be 'lonely' (22) or otherwise problematic. Nor is the text's satire of *Elfscape*, which, with its generic fantasy theme, seems to be inspired by popular online game *World of Warcraft* while also standing as a metaphor for the entire genre, relieved by more rewarding or aesthetically inspired instances of electronic arts or video games. In the arch way it deconstructs the dynamics of online games specifically, and escapist entertainment more broadly, *The Nix* is reminiscent of *The Ice Storm*; except that Moody's treatment of comic books, while not above the occasional moment of mockery, still argues for their usefulness as a navigational tool to the novel's protagonist.

Starting from a very different perspective, self-conscious escapism instead recuperates a Quixotic appreciation of the retreat into fiction. The parables it narrates are often as bitter-sweet as Cervantes', as its texts never shy away from describing the toxic, often damning consequences of forgetting where the boundaries of fiction are. Yet they also take seriously the healing, consoling, and enlightening powers of escapism. It is in

this tension that much of their narrative complexity lies.

'Ravening Monsters:' Conclusion

In the course of this thesis I have argued that a selection of contemporary American novels are concerned with exploring the dynamics and consequences, alternately salvific and imprisoning, of 'getting constructively lost' inside fictional worlds (Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* 76). These texts engage with escapism by discussing the dynamics behind the creation of supposedly escapist fiction, in *Kavalier & Clay*, *Bleeding Edge*, and *House of Leaves*; or by focusing on characters who employ these escapist fictions as 'a powerful lens through which to view the world' (Miller 92), and study them as dedicated scholars, again in *Kavalier & Clay*, and in *Oscar Wao*, *Moonglow*, *The Fortress of Solitude*, *Against the Day*, and other texts.

A metaphor I have employed extensively in my thesis to characterise these texts' staging of escapism has been that of a cosmic struggle, waged against a universal, all-encompassing enemy that might be variously defined as the world, reality, or history. Imagination and fantasy offer much-needed solace to characters confronted with the horror of these invincible forces. Yet the consolatory and enlightening powers ascribed to escapism are inevitably balanced by its side effects, and by its ultimate insufficiency. If straightforward escapist narratives such as Ernest Cline's *Armada* see their characters' commitment to fictional worlds as sufficient to solve all their problems, self-conscious escapist fiction of the type I have focused on in this thesis recognises, and is concerned with, the limitations of escapism. A commitment to fictional escape turns characters into social pariahs; it invariably fails to prevent historical or personal tragedies; it is *itself* identified by society as a moral fault.

One of the traits shared most widely by my core texts is to be found in the lengths to which they go to represent history as a vast, invincible horror, Lovecraftian in the

maddening impossibility of comprehending or vanquishing it. Dominican history, in *Oscar Wao*, is an inescapable curse. In *Kavalier & Clay*, the 'true magic' of the world is its capacity to erase its elements permanently, exemplified most tragically by the events of the Holocaust (339). *Against the Day* and *Bleeding Edge* represent history as a saga of oppression, orchestrated by mysterious forces operating beyond the domain of governments and, perhaps, of space and time. *Moonglow* offers a nightmarish vision of contemporary history as demonstrating Nazi Germany's symbolic triumph in World War II, through the survival of its ideals and *modi operandi* (396). Perhaps the apex of these nightmarish visions is reached in *House of Leaves*, whose labyrinthine, horrific house is an all-too-explicit representation of its characters' traumas, of their histories of abuse, and their experiences with misery and death.

Yet history and the world are portrayed in such bleak terms also in order to further highlight, by contrast, the marvellous potential of imagination. Even if the respite it grants is bound to be momentary, and its enlightenment never leads to a final victory over suffering, escapism is represented as all the more extraordinary because of its limited efficacy against forces that are otherwise invincible. Also, precisely because of this vast potential, imagination is invariably *frustrated*, but never *defeated*, and is locked with the constrictions of reality in an endless, unresolved struggle. *Telegraph Avenue* shows the dream of a utopian community based on a shared passion for popular music, able to transcend class and ethnic boundaries, as doomed to fail; and indeed, as crushed by the novel's conclusion. Yet immediately a new utopian dream arises, in the form of the hobby store that substitutes for the protagonists' failed record shop. Similarly, if Oscar De León's imaginative life could be read as fruitless – his career aspirations as a writer are unfulfilled at the time of his death – his research, and his collection of escapist fictions, are ready in the novel's closing pages to help his niece complete the quest he began. The way my core

texts represent their protagonists' commitment to escapist narratives is perhaps best articulated by Chabon when he speaks of the notion of fandom as a futile, yet invigorating, pursuit, 'an act of hopeless optimism,' at once motivated by passionate belief, and doomed to failure from the start (*Manhood for Amateurs* 5). Not surprisingly Chabon, who, among my core authors, has engaged with ideas of escapism, and the neighbouring concept of nostalgia, most extensively, has said of his stories that they 'are all, in one way or another, the same, tales of solitude and the grand pursuit of connection, of success and the inevitability of defeat' (7). Isolation and communal belonging, redemption and frustration, are thus inextricably connected in the pursuit of a fan's passion, and cannot be considered independently of one another.

Furthermore, my core texts never portray escapism as a weak choice or as an abdication of responsibility, as a way to avoid difficult decisions by retreating into imagined worlds. Instead, they explicitly point out the problems that their characters are escaping from, deconstructing them in all their complexity. *Oscar Wao* is outspoken about the atrocities of the Trujillo regime, and highly critical of its successors (90n). Lethem's *Fortress of Solitude* highlights the pernicious consequences and racist undertones of gentrification in Brooklyn. Yet these novels also preserve an a-partisan approach to their issues, which are often figured as individual manifestations of the greater, pervasive horror against which they cast their escapist characters. Most of my core texts, that is, do not denounce a single party, ideology or philosophical current, so much as *reality as it is*; and they emphasise this by universalising the historical conditions they describe. Both *Kavalier & Clay* and *Moonglow* suggest that post-war American governments have engaged in policies and actions that in some ways echo those of Nazi Germany. Pynchon's *Against the Day* shows all nations hurtling toward World War I as equally responsible for the tragedy; while *Bleeding Edge* seems profoundly unconcerned with the architects of the

September 11 terrorist attacks, preferring to read them as a consequence of the capitalist system that constitutes the Lovecraftian enemy of Pynchon's broader poetics. Pynchon's anti-capitalist stance is indeed strongly political; yet even here we do not see his characters identifying with any specific ideology or party. Even *Against the Day's* anarchists seem more concerned with a basic struggle against oppression and exploitation than in the minutiae of political theory, apparently subscribing to an exhortation expressed in *Vineland*: 'Maybe we all had to submit to History [...] maybe not — but refusing to take shit from some named and specified source — well, it might be a different story' (80). Capitalising History identifies it as an inimical, vast entity; one that, in spite of its potential invincibility, can still be tackled by acting on a small, local scale, against a 'named and specified source.'

The political stance we can recognise most extensively – though by no means universally – across my core texts is a utopian belief in imagination as a redemptive force, able to transcend nationalities and parties, and to constitute a source of powerful hope against reality's perversions. It comes as no surprise, then, that in an Instagram post Michael Chabon expressed his support for putative presidential candidate Kamala Harris by referring precisely to the *hope* she inspires, a sentiment that 'is not [...] a strategy. It is not a plan. Hope is an act of the imagination' (@michael.chabon).

'New Age Lovecraft:' Rewriting Escapism

The great complexity with which they portray imagination constitutes one of my core texts' most noteworthy traits. Rather than offering unlikely portrayals of triumphant escapism, or presenting cautionary tales against the dangers of narrative immersion – as some works of contemporary American fiction, most notably *Infinite Jest* and *The Nix*, do

– these works contextualise the liberating *and* entrapping attraction of the imagination, problematising both unconditional abandon to and strict rejections of escapism. In so doing, they situate themselves in a literary tradition that stretches back to *Don Quixote* and *Orlando Furioso*: but in what ways do they *depart* from this tradition? How are they *original*?

Part of their innovation has to do with their contemporary context. These texts contextualise and problematise the dynamics behind the creation and consumption of popular and escapist fiction in a historical moment in which these genres and media are being canonised within academia through the success and diffusion of cultural studies. In this way, my core texts insert themselves in an ongoing debate, within and without universities, about the need to re-evaluate popular forms and accommodate genre authors in the canon. They show popular culture as the potential site of a utopian future, for instance in *Telegraph Avenue* or arguably *Bleeding Edge*; or conversely, they portray how, in certain contexts, a commitment to it can lead to prejudice and stigmatisation, in *Oscar Wao* or *The Fortress of Solitude*. Unfailingly, they also portray how easily popular culture is appropriated by the corrupting forces of the market.

Escapist and genre fiction are central concerns of the texts I have discussed in this thesis, all of which, in order to stage their reflections on escapism and to represent the lives of characters dedicated to its pursuit, intertextualise extensively with popular texts from various media. Metadiegetic fictional artefacts are discussed in order to contextualise and explore their diegetic characters' escape into imagination. As such, my core texts are at the same time works of *fiction* and of *popular criticism*, commenting on and highlighting previously unremarked features of the escapist fiction they discuss. This happens, for example, when *Kavalier & Clay* considers *Batman* comic books as reflecting the complex state of father-son relationships in America (631); or when *Oscar Wao* criticises *Magic*:

The Gathering for its shift away from narrative toward impersonal mechanics (269-70).

Eco argues that 'any critical reading is at the same time the analysis of its own interpretative procedures' (*Role of the Reader* 205). Every work of criticism, as such, has a double subject: the explicit object of inquiry; and itself, too; for by creating its theoretical framework and methodology, a critical work is also arguing for *its own* validity, or at least coherence, as a text. This intuitive axiom is complicated when we apply it to texts that are fictional *and* critical. My core texts discuss escapist fiction, its creation, its consumptions, its reception and social status. But at the same time they discuss *their own approach*, and often appear themselves to assume the generic connotations of the texts they are discussing. Does this textual paradox mean that my texts constitute, themselves, escapist fiction?

The answer to this question is far from straightforward. Is *Don Quixote* a knightly romance?⁸⁹ Is *Madame Bovary* a love story? My core texts, in the self-conscious distance that separates them from their subject, are, like these canonical novels, both narratives of escapism and critiques of escapist narratives. Yet as we approach the question of their generic nature, and of their relation to their escapist intertextual sources, we need to consider two of their key features.

The first one is the fact that these novels position themselves *in continuity* with the escapist and popular fiction they thematise. *Oscar Wao*, through a peculiar metafictional game, describes a book very much like itself as 'New Age Lovecraft' (246). By detailing the origin story of a famous creative duo through a tale that 'abounds in improbabilities, fortuitous encounters, lucky escapes' (Huber 155), *Kavalier & Clay* adopts the conventions

⁸⁹ Andrew Evans considers it 'escapist fiction' born of Cervantes' own physical limitations after his mutilation (96); although this could be easily construed as a reductive, and unsubstantiated, attempt to second-guess authorial intention.

of the early superhero comic books at the heart of its plot. The two main strategies my core texts deploy in this context are their profound investment in intertextuality, ranging from simple quotations to trans-fictional borrowings of characters and locations from other texts; and a fluid conception of influence, encountered most notably in the fiction of Lethem and Chabon, that depicts all novels as 'sequels' (45) and popular fiction, in particular, as 'constantly open-ended,' and endlessly carried forward in the works of its admirers (44). The novels of Chabon in particular are explicit in exposing their own status as fan fiction; while Lethem too openly recognises his influences, and concludes *Chronic City* with an emblematic note where he states that 'With gratitude' he returns 'the tiger to Charles Finney, *The Unholy City*,' identifying one of *Chronic City*'s most mysterious plot elements as an intertextual borrowing from Finney's science fiction novel (548). The note proceeds to identify the source of many more borrowed lines, and concludes with the words 'everything else to everywhere else forever and ever amen.' The significance of this final line is twofold. Firstly, it acknowledges the practical impossibility – arguably, the futility – of identifying the precise source of each individual source in the novel; as Chabon's *Moonglow* argues extensively, fictional borrowings are much harder to isolate than might at first be assumed. Secondly, it couches this process of borrowing, and the parallel one of acknowledging one's sources, in sacred tones, albeit ironically, thereby alluding to one of the most common tropes used by my core texts to invest their characters' commitment to escapism and narrative with gravitas: framing this commitment in terms of a spiritual pursuit.

The second way in which my core texts assume the connotations of escapist fiction is through the narrative strategy I have called generic contagion. The metadiegetic fictions that so obsess their characters invade the diegetic storyworld through metaleptical jumps: characters and magical items shift from the metadiegetic to the diegetic level; entire

chapters and significant portions of these novels are narrated through styles appropriate to the escapist fictions at their core. A fundamental indeterminacy attaches to most instances of generic contagion: are the bizarre occurrences happening to these characters genuinely supernatural events? Or are they psychological delusions caused by a prolonged exposure to fictional worlds, and by a subsequent inability to distinguish between the real world and imagination?

In their radical ontological uncertainty, these texts seem to partake of postmodernism, which often revolves around a split ontological commitment, 'on one side our world of the normal and everyday, on the other side the next-door world of the paranormal or supernatural, and running between them the contested boundary separating the two worlds' (McHale 73). If they do so, I argue, it is because they recuperate significant elements of the fantastic genre, from which the speculative aspects of many postmodernist texts, according to McHale, were also inherited (74). The fantastic and postmodernism are both quintessentially metafictional, and the former in particular was theorised by Todorov as constituting the self-conscious form par excellence, because the 'questioning of the limit between the real and unreal, proper to all literature, is its explicit center' (168).

Self-conscious escapism, I argue, is another quintessentially metafictional mode of writing; and complicating our perception of the boundary between real and fictional is not its only self-reflexive concern. Constituted by texts centred at the focus of vast intertextual webs, and positioning itself in continuation with other texts, self-conscious escapism constantly highlights the notion that literary texts are in conversation with one another, (Eco, *Il nome della rosa* 289) and that 'every poem is a misinterpretation of another poem' (Bloom, *Anxiety* 94). If all novels are sequels, then the whole of literature becomes an endless, interconnected story, which is as much about its predecessors as it is about the

world outside the confines of its covers.

'Poets and Critics:' Against Post-Postmodernism

In detailing the ways in which my core texts recuperate certain structural elements from the postmodern and the fantastic, my thesis has some common ground with Irmtraud Huber's *Literature After Postmodernism* (2014), in particular when it comes to detailing how genre elements are employed paradoxically in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. Yet our different approaches must bring us to two very different conclusions. Huber believes his core texts – other than *Kavalier & Clay*, Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) and David Mitchell's *number9dream* (2001) – demonstrate contemporary literature's reconstructive efforts in the wake of postmodernism's caustic experimentation: 'after construction and deconstruction comes reconstruction,' he argues (224), arguing that these texts recuperate, even in their most experimental moments, 'that willing suspension of disbelief that postmodernist metafiction so often strove to compromise and unsettle' (220). While I disagree with Huber's assumptions about postmodernism – to his statements about its lack of belief 'in the power of love and fiction' (16), I would advance the cases of *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, *Il nome della rosa* and *Lost in the Funhouse* – my disagreement with his conclusion comes from the fact that I do not perceive my texts to be in *opposition* to postmodernism.

A text can 'oppose' and 'go beyond' a current or tendency, postmodernism included, only insofar as it is part of a poetics preoccupied with such concerns. This is why Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) has been hailed as a return to a reader-friendly, character-oriented mimetic realism after the metafictional disintegrations of

postmodernism's paranoid narratives, whereas the same welcome has not been extended to the plethora of realist novels that have been published during and after the heyday of postmodernism, long before *The Corrections*. As a writer who positions himself directly in continuation with postmodernist fiction, and whose debut novel was much indebted to Pynchonian paranoia, Franzen *does* move beyond postmodernism during the course of his poetics' evolution. Yet such concerns are alien to Chabon, who, from the beginning of his career, inserted himself in the tradition of the realist novel: the acknowledged models for *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* were *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) (*Maps & Legends* 139-40). While he has acknowledged his fascination with postmodernism, he has also stated how his fiction does not originate in that milieu (136-7), and even later developments in his career have mostly followed in the various traditions of genre fiction.

That is why, in the course of my thesis, I have rejected notions of the existence, in contemporary American literature, of a movement generally defined as post-postmodernism, in any of its critical connotations. How can Chabon be accommodated in the New Sincerity school of writing, when *Moonglow* is so emphatically a *false* sincere text, a carefully constructed lie about a Chabon that never was? Consider 'Golems I Have Known,' an essay in which the author describes his real-life, borderline-supernatural experience with golems. Its inclusion in *Maps and Legends*, a non-fiction collection of essays, seems to identify it as genuinely autobiographical; except that a final footnote reveals it to be entirely fictive: basically, a short story. 'Golems I Have Known' is the transcript of a speech Chabon would read during a book tour, and that elicited mixed reactions from his audience, some of them believing Chabon to be recollecting real-life experiences, relating to the unwritten world, while others recognised his ironical tone and stance (*Maps and Legends*, 205-10).

To highlight storytelling's salvific potential, my core texts focus extensively on fiction's status as magical and sacred. Magic, inevitably, is artificial and mysterious; while sacred pursuits do not pertain, by definition, to the domain of the everyday. In books that are so concerned with *fiction*, with finding artificial alternatives to life, sincerity would seem to have no place, which does not mean that they subscribe to notions of post-truth. Chabon stated about post-truth, 'we're talking about lies: there's truth and lies,' and that writers, alongside stage magicians, are the only professionals justified in telling a lie ('Incroci di Civiltà'). *Lying*, still, is central to what they do.

The only sense in which my core texts can be described as post-postmodern is in the chronological sense: they were indeed written *after* the heyday of postmodernism, at least if we consider *Mason & Dixon* (1997) to be America's last postmodernist masterpiece. Even so, I would argue that the term *contemporary*, while far from unambiguous,⁹⁰ is a more flexible term to apply to them; but I do recognise that my selection of texts makes it very easy to read them as neatly coming after postmodernism. Yet this too is an illusion of perspective, originating in the American dimension of my research. If we expand the scope of our analysis, as indeed I have stealthily done in my introduction and across my thesis, and take a cursory glance over the Atlantic, we might refer to Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa* and *Il pendolo di Foucault*, two exemplary self-conscious narratives of escapism, which employ all the formal, thematic and structural strategies I have identified in my thesis. These novels were published in 1980 and 1988 respectively; indeed, they are often cited as key works of postmodernism, especially *Il nome della rosa*, for instance by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*.

My explanation for this apparent chronological discrepancy is that my core texts intersect with many traditions, including those of genre fiction, the immigrant family saga,

⁹⁰ See Eaglestone (4-5) or Brauner (1-2).

realism, and ergodic literature; but when it comes to their fantastic overtones, and to their metafictional nature, they belong to *the same tradition* as postmodernism. Wallace, a theorist of postmodernism, provides evidence for this in an interview where he states his belief that postmodernist fiction 'was the first text (sic) that was highly self-conscious, self-conscious of itself as text, self-conscious of the writer as persona, self-conscious about the effects that narrative had on readers and the fact that the readers probably knew that. It was the first generation of writers who'd actually read a lot of criticism' (Wallace, Interview With Charlie Rose). This statement is obviously inaccurate, and while it might have a limited validity if we assume Wallace's comment to relate specifically to the sphere of American cultural life, it is still crucial to remark that self-consciousness, and a determination to integrate fictional and literary pursuits with an engagement with the key critical questions of one's time, have existed throughout literary history. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is as much a review of Medieval and canonical literature, through the fictional Dante's engagement with literary figures in the poem, as it is a statement about the propriety of writing in the vulgar language as opposed to Latin. *Don Quixote's* second book features extensive reflections on the notion of authorial precedence and, we might argue, on the notion of fan fiction: of characters acquiring new life in apocryphal stories outside the influence and control of their original creators. Harold Bloom recognises this history when he states that 'poets and critics,' in truth, 'are a poet's precursors' (95).

It is to this tradition of critically aware literature that self-conscious narratives of escapism belong. I am not attempting to substitute one category for a different one – to say that there is no basis for a unified theory of contemporary American literature based on New Sincerity only to claim that we should instead favour metafictional tendencies; not least because, as I have remarked, contemporary American literature is especially split in its attitude towards notion of authenticity and sincerity. In fact, I believe that the affective

turn in literary criticism, as well as cognitive critical approaches, have much to contribute to the study of my core texts, in particular by approaching them via a focus on the reading act: by illuminating the dynamics of addiction, immersion and escapism on the reader's side, just as this study has focused on the textual side of the equation.

Imagination Unbound

A final consideration needs to be addressed one last time before I conclude my thesis. I have remarked on my texts' peculiarly non-partisan nature; and on their disinterest in, or complication of, notions of authenticity and sincerity. Does this mean that their valorisation of escapism can be equated to a surrender in the face of a problematic reality? Do they simply retreat into reassuring, but ultimately damaging, forms of isolation?

Limiting our discussion to *Kavalier & Clay*, we see that Berger concludes his essay on the novel with the idea that 'escapism leads to forgetting. And forgetting is the ultimate form of Holocaust denial' (88). Iain Bernhoft has also argued that *Kavalier & Clay's* embrace of escapism entails 'a rejection of political critique for private enjoyment' that aligns it with neoliberal conceptions of the reading act, in which a text's emotional payoff is conceived as a commodity to be bought and consumed. Furthermore, its 'evasion of political engagement and economic constraint leads [it] toward nostalgia for an irrecoverable (artistic) past' (21). My novels' vast intertextual webs may indeed appear to reinforce this point, if we approach them through Bernhoft's lens: their reliance on past texts can be taken as further proof of their nostalgia.

If I take issue with Bernhoft's reading, and more broadly speaking, with readings of my core texts that unambiguously condemn their defence of escapism, it is for two main reasons. First, the idea that escapism revolves around 'private enjoyment' ignores its

inherent open-endedness and communal dimension, abundantly highlighted, as I have shown in my thesis, by my core texts. Indeed the very term 'popular culture' makes these works' far-reaching appeal, and large audience, one of their defining features; just as their grey areas, so appreciated by Chabon, invite fans to contribute their stories to literature's ongoing dialogue. Fandom, in Chabon's conception, is a fanclub with a seat in the head of each person sharing a commitment to a specific source (*Manhood for Amateurs* 5); it invariably leads to connection.

Second, readings such as Bernhoft's start from the assumption that Chabon's writing is unequivocally positive in its treatment of escapism and nostalgia, a view shared by Doyle in his reading of *Moonglow* (264); whereas both *Kavalier & Clay* and *Moonglow* are, as I have shown throughout my thesis, more nuanced in their approach to escapism. Nostalgia, a central concern of Chabon's, is as much deconstructed in his oeuvre as it is indulged, most notably in *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh's* closing paragraph, where it is said that it 'obliterates the past' (297), and in *Kavalier & Clay's* reflection on the concept of the 'golden age' as one of the central ideas in 'human delusion' (341).

I do agree with Bernhoft that a mode of reading privileging the emotional payoff of novels, and that sees them as machines to convert money, time and effort into emotional nourishment, a more-or-less genuine sense of human connection, and social or intellectual capital, constitutes 'consumerism with a literary critical veneer' (13). Yet it seems to me that this conception of the reading act can only be theorised if it is approached in bad faith: if we assume that readers decide to read with an eye on the consequences of their act, rather than on the process itself, be it out of vanity, pretentiousness, or a wish to acquire social status. As such, Bernhoft and the scholars he discusses to support his argument – Melamed, Charles Sumner, Pedwell etc. – appear even more archly neoliberal than the society they are criticising, in their inability to conceive that one might engage in an

activity for anything other than gain.

The mode of reading presented in *Kavalier & Clay*, and indeed across my core texts, could not differ more from this model. Reading is not materially rewarding: it is a damning and isolating pursuit that *separates* fans and scholars from fellow humans just as often as it reinforces their connections. Escapism is portrayed, in economical terms, as a zero-sum game. The only reason why these texts' characters engage in their pursuits is out of love, even when it damages them; a supreme devotion exemplified most notably in Oscar De León, unable to blame his escapist commitments for his social handicaps because 'he loved them too much' (50). The sacred overtones with which escapist pursuits are invested throughout my texts turn them into a vocation, motivated by enthusiasm in its original, religious conception; and enthusiasm, as Herd argues, is quintessentially opposed to ideas of transferable skills and such considerations (9).

By defending the potential of escapism even in the face of entertainment's high corruptibility to the forces of the market, my core texts reveal a deep faith, albeit one that is never acritical, in the potential implicit in removing oneself from the unwritten world, and in escaping into imagination in its purest forms. Indeed, the reading-as-market model that *Kavalier & Clay* promotes according to Bernhoft is impossible *inside* these texts: the escapist fiction their characters are so obsessed with is often criticised precisely because it is literally *useless*; because it is, supposedly, void of intellectual nourishment, and thus free of that cultural capital one supposedly reads to acquire.

In his study of the concept of escape across human culture, *Escapism* (1998), Yi-Fu Tuan identifies imagination, the capacity to conceive what does not yet exist, as the defining trait of human beings, what distinguishes them from other animals (6). This gift has allowed humans to devise great suffering, but it has also granted them access to great, liberating inventions. The characters inhabiting my core texts would agree: think of *The*

Keep's Charlie, whose belief in humans' fundamental need for imagination leads to a peculiarly literal case of entrapment, but also sustains his life as a quest. This is perhaps the central tenet of my core texts: a belief in the anarchic force of imagination as a commitment to non-existing and apparently useless fictions *in spite* of their addictive potential, of their occasional aesthetic shortcomings, and of their inevitable inutility in the face of the world's potential for suffering. If history is a place of unspeakable horrors, escapism's great potential is precisely its capacity to isolate readers from it; even when, as *Moonglow* or *Bleeding Edge* demonstrate, and as generic contagion in particular suggests, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to draw definitive distinctions between the fictional and the real, considering imagination's foundational role in shaping our selves and conceptions of us.

All of these concerns are articulated and contextualised lyrically in William Morris' 'Apology,' one of the most impressive defences of escapism in literary history. Morris' poem opens with an admission of the unquestionable uselessness of escapism in the face of life's problems; of its inability to 'make quick-coming death a little thing, / Or bring again the pleasure of past years' (52). Yet escapism's magical, immersive potential is compared to that of a wizard able to summon all seasons at will, and to create a paradoxical mixture of them all: to create things *not found in nature*, which is imagination's basic function, as conceived by Tuan. The poem concludes by acknowledging how the world's monsters are to be slain by 'mighty men' (53), rather than by storytellers. Yet in so doing the poem is *still*, paradoxically, pointing out that these monsters exist. Even the most imaginative and entertaining fiction, as such, ends up engaging with the world's problems, offering not only solace, but the first steps toward reaching a solution. Immersing oneself in imaginative landscapes, even – or *especially* – when it is done to seek pleasure, inevitably highlights those features of one's original world that are more problematic, and that require change.

This embrace of the useless magic of fiction is a stance of which contemporary criticism is, I would argue, in need. In an age where academic anxieties move scholars of literature to find new ways of justifying its existence (Nealon 194) by pointing out that humanist perspectives might shed light on social or economic problems, or make better citizens of young people, there is much to commend in any approach to fiction motivated by love, rather than by ideas of social utility. Love of fiction, after all, is love of imagination in its highest form, as it condenses into cultural artefacts; and there is certainly much to commend in loving the gift that makes us humans.

This gift is revered and exercised across my core texts, focusing on the implications and various consequences of narrative escapism. I have tried in my thesis to do justice to these fictional works' many ambiguities, as they represent escapism as salvific *and* entrapping; useless *and* enlightening; as they comment on, and sometimes *become*, narratives of escapism. Because of these paradoxes, and its textual and structural complexities, self-conscious escapist fiction will undoubtedly yield different results to different analytical approaches; and in so doing will contribute new interpretations of what can be retrieved from the worlds of imagination.

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