“Can a Medium be a Protagonist? Rival Media in the Novels of David Mitchell”

John Shanahan
DePaul University

With his first novel appearing in 1999, David Mitchell has emerged as a major author in the age of “Web 2.0,” and therefore under the shadow of what N. Katherine Hayles has called “the mark of the digital” on all contemporary print literature. Mitchell’s novels, especially his first three (Ghostwritten, Number9Dream, and Cloud Atlas) are filled with representation of, and mimesis of, competitive remediation. “Paper is dead, have you not heard?” exclaims Queen Shrouds, for instance, a haughty digital avatar of new media triumphalism in a kaleidoscopic fairy-tale narrative in Number9Dream (229-30). In Cloud Atlas, among many examples I could cite, we follow the puzzled reactions of two Korean clones decades from now to what they can only describe as a “broken sony” but we know is a children’s illustrated fairy tale book, and we later hear tell of the uncomprehending gazes of far-future (but “stone-age”) villagers when they ritually watch the ghostly glow (but for how long?) of a holographic video from a smartphone-like handheld device, the “orison.” (Cloud Atlas itself, in its largest structure, can be likened to a series of windows open simultaneously, a trait about which I’ll say more below.) In Ghostwritten, to give just one more example, a military-derived AI program that has attained self-consciousness --and then developed a guilty conscience-- periodically contacts a late-night radio call-in program to vent about the unruly creatures it must police in its personal “zoo” – i.e. we humans. As we can see, various writing and media forms appear in Mitchell’s highly imaginative novels; science fiction devices and plots
push the competition into creative allegories of the struggles of print vs hypertext and
carbon vs silicon, thereby making his work evocative of future struggles over the nature
of media interface more generally in these early years in ubiquitous sensibility, info
uptake, and enhanced reality.

The topic is a large one, and I can only outline it here. I will show in this paper
one interesting feature of his work – representations of the waning of the human and the
individual in the name of the medial and common. I’ll suggest that the blatant mysticism
so characteristic of his novels—reincarnated characters, wandering disembodied souls,
karmic causality, and the like—should be seen less as simplistic fantasies of an exoticized
East Asia (though they are in part that) than as a symbolic expression of his science
fictional content and new media-derived forms for a postsecular culture. Despite what
might at first seem merely late-modern orientalism in an Englishman’s tales of east Asian
settings and characters, the pronounced enchantment in Mitchell’s novels comes more
from his new-media derived attempt to tell stories of high technology than from his
placement of many of those tales along the Pacific rim.¹

One can place Mitchell in the ongoing struggle of print fiction with electronic text
in a medial ecology of competitive remediation. The ever-growing profile of alternative
platforms for storytelling and so-called “emergent” narrative in avant-garde literature and
in multi-player and distributed video games and interactive artworks draws increasing
critical attention from literary scholars. Joseph Tabbi has gone so far as to argue that “a
condition of literature’s renewal and emergence in the networked environment of
computers, interfaces, and tagged content in databases” is to “becom[e] a network” such
that “the density of connection accounts for a work’s significance” (40, 37). Matthew
Kirschenbaum has recently seconded this in relation to the many electronic paratexts web culture creates for a novel such as Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*: “Texts themselves are increasingly networks of transmedia properties. … [T]he bigger the book, the more extended its network of transmedia relations becomes.” Transmediality is a common feature and plot device in all of Mitchell’s fiction, especially *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*. Attention to it will help us determine where we might place Mitchell’s novels in a changing ecology in which print finds itself unmoored from historical and medial givens in a ubiquitous digital culture. The terrain for such a reading has been scouted already in several important works. N. Katherine Hayles, for example, has explored the “mark of the digital” upon recent print novels in their use of erratic fonts, non-linear plotting, and stories of, or actual uses of, remediation. We can also look to Mark Hansen’s brilliant reading of Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, where Hansen understands the novel as staging a “medial agon” in order to highlight the privileges of print against orthographic media such as film and photography, ultimately in the name of “the rehabilitation of fiction in the wake of the digital” (611, 610). If Mitchell does not take the pronouncedly typographic path of Danielewski, he does like the latter stage within print fiction an engagement of the impact of the digital upon the future of storytelling.

Mitchell’s solution to the problem of print as one among multiple media is in part to highlight what Hansen calls the flexibility of print fiction “as a form of media capable of mimicking other media” (612). *Cloud Atlas* is of course a print novel, but it is made of stories narrated as if each was its own separate media or genre, from written diary entries to digital video recording to oral storytelling. We might stop here and offer that Mitchell has simply illustrated Marshall McLuhan’s well-known dictum that “the content of any
medium is always another medium” (8). But that would only take us part of the way to grasping the significance of his representation of a variety of media inside of a print novel. Mitchell’s assertion of the power of novelistic form within the horizon of the digital is not merely in highlighting comparative weaknesses of orthographic recording systems such as photography and film—one of Danielewski’s major accomplishments, according to Hansen (612). Mitchell privileges print by centering on the voice of first person narration in order to document the fact that no other form of media can similarly accomplish the construction and revelation of selfhood without necessary mediations of language, whether written or spoken. Mitchell’s mystical plotting makes an additional feature clear, namely that any such self is not autonomous of its supporting media; this is the insight (in Emersonian key) of the transcendent connectedness of all souls into one greater over soul, and (in cybercultural key) of the subsumption of all particulate data and bodied information within a total matrix of the virtual digital “cloud.”

This is an expression of the fact that Mitchell’s early novels, esp. *Cloud Atlas*, are, if I can put it this way, a rewriting of nineteenth-century American transcendentalism as science fiction. To compress the evidence here: recall the appearance of Emerson’s poem “Brahma,” for instance, at a climatic moment about three-quarters of the way through *Cloud Atlas*. And consider the character of Adam Ewing in the “outermost” tale. Ewing sounds like Emerson, is adrift in Melville’s south Pacific, and is the seeming initiator of a hand- or comet-shaped birthmark (in other words, a “birthmark” similar in shape to the one in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s story of that name). Ewing, in other words, functions in *Cloud Atlas* as a narrative placeholder or emblem for nineteenth-century American transcendentalism. Since Ewing is the first of six connected central protagonists, he is
the originating point of the soul that recurs in the others and provides them a unity with one another on a karmic plane. Ewing, this is to say, is the means of entry of a few individuals into Emerson’s “Over-Soul,” “within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other” (Selected 262). In Mitchell, openings to the transcendent usually happen to characters in moments of sacrifice for causes beyond or even against their own individual fortune or in moments of inspiration when the impersonal and vatic is prized over the merely personal. Ewing’s story, the first and last sections of Cloud Atlas and literally its outermost frame or farthest circle, anchors all of the other stories within its own. His conscious pledge to the long arc of human freedom ripples outward in time through different quests for justice in different historical periods by Luisa Rey, Robert Frobisher, Timothy Cavendish, Somni-451, Zachry, and other characters. The shared birthmark, then, serves as a theatricalized mark of the characters’ de-individualization as we read of their struggles with the dynamics of oppression in their various worlds.

Transcendental models of the world require a dualism of higher and lower realms apprehended by intuition or the physical senses respectively. Just such dualism dominates Cloud Atlas. Adam Ewing, wandering the south Pacific in 1850 reflects, “As many truths as men. Occasionally, I glimpse a truer Truth, hiding in imperfect simulacrums of itself, but as I approach it, it bestirs itself & moves deeper into the thorny swamp of dissent” (CA 17). Centuries later, the clone Sonmi-451 similarly notes under interrogation “Truth is singular. Its ‘versions’ are mistruths” (CA 185). And then there is the beautiful image composer Robert Frobisher recalls in early twentieth-century Belgium:

Once, [my grandfather] showed me an aquatint of a certain Siamese temple. Don’t recall its name, but ever since a disciple of the Buddha preached on the spot
centuries ago, every bandit king, tyrant, and monarch of that kingdom has
enhanced it with marble towers, scented arboretums, gold-leafed domes, lavish
murals on its vaulted ceilings, set emeralds into the eyes of its statuettes. When
the temple finally equals its counterpart in the Pure Land, so the story goes, that
day humanity shall have fulfilled its purpose, and Time itself shall come to an
end. (CA 81)

But my claim about Mitchell’s deployment of nineteenth century transcendental writers
goes only part of the way towards understanding the deep structure of dualism in Cloud
Atlas and the other early novels, and it can so far give us little critical purchase on the
science-fictional content and form also so pronounced in them. Here we need to look at a
second major element in Mitchell’s novels: new media platforms. As I posited in the
introductory remarks, the true importance and timeliness of Mitchell as a novelist lies not
simply in the way he echoes American transcendentalists, but in how he has combined an
Emersonian idealism with contemporary cyber-cultural models of reality. Cloud Atlas is
an expression of an idealist dualism common in the nineteenth century but also, it is
becoming clear, in our own moment as well—the general drift over the last two decades
to vague notions of cyberspace and “the digital” by means of religious vocabulary.

According to Milad Doueihi in a provocative account of the nature of interactive
experience, digital culture in the past two decades has become so capacious and so tied to
new experiences, new social forms, and novel scales and contours of individual being
that it is functionally like a new religion. In fact, “currently, digital culture is the only
rival to religion as a universal presence” (3). He continues:

The much discussed and celebrated transition from analog to digital and all that it
entails amounts to a conversion, in the technical as much as the religious sense of
the term. … [C]onversion requires a retrospective examination of the past (thus
the reinterpretation and recapturing of older frameworks and contents into the
new ones) as well as new explanations of actions and events. It is precisely
because of this seemingly inevitable process of conversion that digital culture, no
matter how vaguely we define it, is laying a claim for the status of a world religion. (3)

Because it is not physically “anywhere” but gives the impression of movement and limitlessness in another “world” or realm of experience, cyberspace easily reinforces dualisms of idea and copy, form and matrix, and mind and body. In the metaphors of surfing, immersion, and the like so common in representations of cyberculture in the 1990s and first years of the new millenium, one encounters images of minds leaving the limits of the body. N. Katherine Hayles is correct in noting of our present that “perhaps not since the Middle Ages has the fantasy of leaving the body behind been so widely dispersed through the population” (qtd. in Wertheim 263). According to Victoria Nelson, “the widespread use of Platonic metaphors such as ‘virtual reality’ to describe computer-generated images as if they ‘lived’ in a tangible place has carried us deeply (backward or forward, according to one’s bias) into the Western mystical tradition” (21). Cyber-Platonism and neo-Cartesian dualism have in effect become the spontaneous philosophy of our time.

A fan since childhood of science fiction and fantasy, a long-term ex-pat in Japan in the mid and late 1990s—a period of innovative and globally influential cyber-culture and anime such as *Ghost in the Shell, Neon Genesis Evangelion,* and *Serial Experiments: Lain* (not to mention the influence of *The Matrix* on both sides of the Pacific)—Mitchell draws deeply on emerging new media culture while embroidering on it in his novels. I am suggesting that Mitchell’s dedication to science fiction—at the level of content (stories of fabricants, conscious AI programs, etc.) and at the level of form (writing as “borrowing,” and as a multimedia platform, to be discussed next)—pushes him, and does indeed almost all forms of contemporary culture, into a metaphysical dualism, what I will call a digital
neotranscendentalism. Mitchell’s novels convey a rich dualism, where the phenomenal world is taken to be less real because (in recurring Buddhist vocabulary) it is generated and warped by illusion and desire—a major recurring motif in *Ghostwritten*—or because (in recurring cyber-cultural vocabulary) of the separation of the seemingly free virtual sphere from an otherwise resolutely determined reality.

Emerson argued that what at first appears to be numberless unique individuals and eccentric personalities comes with time to seem a set of predictable human probabilities:

There is an optical illusion about every person we meet. We look at them, they seem alive, and we presume there is impulse in them. In the moment it seems impulse; [but] in the year, in the lifetime, it turns out to be a certain uniform tune which the revolving barrel of the music-box must play. (*Selected* 246)

Like the characters in the novel muddling through their individual lives, and also like the reader of *Cloud Atlas* who cannot but follow one character at a time sequentially while reading, “We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime, within man is the soul of the whole” (*Selected* 246). The involuted cyclical structure of *Cloud Atlas*, I am suggesting, is Mitchell’s attempt via novelistic form to capture the transcendentalist’s attention to oscillations between the linear unfolding of lives and stories in time and an intuitive, transcendent, non-narrative simultaneity. (I will have more to say about the superposition of linearity and circularity in *Cloud Atlas* later.) Given a long enough span of time and a comprehensive enough view, larger patterns and general laws subsume individual traits. The countless seekers in Mitchell’s novels are permitted brief glances into the numinous realm where behind random dispersion and seeming disconnection all things are in fact connected—an intuition of what Zachry calls the “true true,” and Somni-451 the “game beyond the endgame” (*CA* 274, 349).
Mitchell says he goes “shoplifting” in books (BBC World Book Club 18:30). He preserves and imitates in his fiction not simply a style or voice but the very content of the source works too. Mitchell’s ventriloquism, his ability to write beautifully and creatively in others’ voices, styles, and with their very characters “redressed,” as it were, is perhaps the most notable feature of his work. This practice too, I want to suggest, can be seen as an expression of American transcendentalism. Emerson for one held that “Every book is a quotation” (Selected 472), and, consequently, “That is the best part of the writer which has nothing private in it” (Selected 178). Of the importance of impersonality in Emerson, Sharon Cameron notes in an influential essay, “We could say that what occupies the subject position of Emerson’s essays … is a rhetorical construction whose most enduring feature impedes or staves off any apparent individuality, any representation of a private will. That is the sine qua non of the Emersonian ‘I,’ ostensibly styled without either point of view or idiosyncrasy … characterized by its fetishized universality, its obsessively constructed anonymity” (19-20).

But Mitchell’s debt to Emerson and nineteenth-century transcendentalists is, I’ve been arguing, at the same time combined with concerns very much of our present time. Updating the Emersonian impersonal for the 21st century, Mitchell’s new media style of strong appropriation makes him a prose exemplar of what Marjorie Perloff, writing of contemporary poetry, calls the style of “unoriginal genius.” Perhaps Mitchell is the first popular novelist exemplifying what Kenneth Goldsmith has called “uncreative writing.” Using appropriative methods like those found in the avant-garde works Goldsmith and Perloff champion yet aiming at a popular readership, Mitchell’s novels feature a lapidary
form borrowed from novels and film, employing “cut and paste” narrative tricks, and a repeatedly thematization of competitive media platforms. *Cloud Atlas, Ghostwritten,* and *Number9Dream* then, while being print novels, are also perfect expressions of the formal dilemmas of the print novel in the age of “web 2.0.” If in the age of the web “writing has met its photography,” in Goldsmith’s memorable phrase, writing’s most timely and innovative responses may be “mimetic and replicative, primarily involving methods of distribution, while proposing new platforms of receivership and readership.” Indeed, for an online “module” on creative writing for the BBC in 2008, Mitchell highlighted his use of cut and paste to write, and compares creative writing with use of an “editing suite” in film-making. Mitchell writes novels (and we are meant to read them, it seems) in the same manner that we engage in the interactive online experience we call immersion in “web 2.0.” *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas* in particular mime the sense of movement and flow associated with browsing online, of dipping in and out of stories across multiple media in the kind of “discontinuous” reading practice that Peter Stallybrass reminds us typified almost all reading in the centuries before the rise of the novel and may be upon us as common practice once again. Courtney Hopf therefore accurately describes the phenomenology of reading Mitchell’s novels this way:

> like cognitive hyperlinks, the moments of recognition experienced by characters are replicated a thousand times for the reader throughout all of David Mitchell’s novels. From the smallest allusion … to the reappearance of character … the experience of reading Mitchell’s novels is a process of meaning-making through links, and those links encourage a destabilization of subject positions.

Every character is an allusive hint and circulation of cultural “memes”; every plot device an arrow pointing toward other works. Emerson’s idealism, I suggest, supplies a common deep grammar for Mitchell’s many narrators despite their demographic variability. *Cloud Atlas* features a variety of
voices, but in the end all give the same speech. Perhaps this is only as it should be; after all, Emerson held that “There is one mind common to all individual men” (123) and one is most oneself when thinking and acting in accord with impersonal and timeless “higher laws” of nature. For Emerson “Weakness of the will begins when the individual would be something of himself,” rather than recognize “that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other” (Selected 263-4, 262). This is surely why Mitchell’s novels are so preoccupied with cause and effect and the relations of individual to cosmos. The larger view is an intuition of karma; for Mitchell it is a conceptual, but also narrative, bridge of eastern and western metaphysics, just as it once was for the later Emerson. Here we see the subtending architecture as well as one motive for the time jumping in Cloud Atlas; it is a means for Mitchell to portray the transcendental view that although individuals live “in succession, in division, in parts, in particles … the soul is the whole … the eternal ONE” (Selected 262). The soul, for Emerson, unlike the senses, “has no dates,” and yet “the web of events is the flowing robe in which she is clothed” (Selected 265). In seeking and sometimes creating so many doomed cloud atlases, Mitchell’s characters aim, again in Emerson’s terms, “to come from our remote station on the circumference instantaneously to the centre of the world, where, as in the closet of God, we see causes, and anticipate the universe, which is but a slow effect” (Selected 266). In Cloud Atlas Nietzsche’s eternal return and doctrines of karma are aligned together such that Mitchell writes in the voice of, from the place of, Hegel’s philosophical Mind that sees the true cunning of reason behind the myriad of seemingly unconnected lives and the mundane prose of the world. Emerson’s ever-expanding circles are the ideal.
I offer that this can help explain the power of the chiastic structure of *Cloud Atlas* as a whole, by which we read forward in represented time past our own present and into a far future, and then backwards again into the past in the second half, finishing all of the stories in reverse order. It is the ability for the reader (but not the novel’s protagonists, of course, whose fate is sealed, as we know) to move from the unknowing forward-facing walk into a future of obstacles, the path of tragedy for Hegel, and then turn around for a retrospective view that characterizes the comic, because cosmic, vision. According to Hegel, reconciliation of opposites into greater wholes results in “subjective satisfaction, and this enables us to make the transition to the sphere of comedy, the opposite of tragedy.”

One cannot change the past, nor much in the present, but one can look for meaning in suffering and glimpse the bend of the long arc of justice by trying to see larger patterns and wholes in a common humanity. According to Hegel, in tragedy the true development of the action consists solely in the cancellation of conflicts as conflicts, in the reconciliation of the powers animating action which struggled to destroy one another in their mutual conflict. Only in that case does finality lie not in misfortune and suffering but in the satisfaction of the spirit, because only with such a conclusion can the necessity of what happens to the individuals appear as absolute rationality, and only then can our hearts be morally at peace: shattered by the fate of the heroes but reconciled fundamentally. (2: 1215)

I want to suggest that it is the evocation of a similar Hegelian “subjective satisfaction” in the reader for which the doubled forward-and-backward structure of *Cloud Atlas* strives. When the complexity of the actual, with its real-time string of defeats and false religions disappoints, there is to be found redemption in higher philosophy. According to Hayden White:

Hegel regards Tragedy and Comedy not as opposed ways of looking at reality, but as perceptions of situations of conflict from different sides of the action. Tragedy approaches the culmination of the action … from the standpoint of the agent who sees deployed before him a world which is at once a means and an impediment to
the realization of his purpose. Comedy looks back upon the effects of that collision from beyond the condition of resolution through which the Tragic action has carried the spectators, even if the action has not carried the protagonist there but has consumed him in the process.xii

Ultimately for Hegel, “Comedy is the form which reflection takes after it has assimilated the truths of Tragedy to itself” (White 94). Zachry’s carved icons, the dendroglyphs Ewing stumbles upon, the people, religions, ideas, technologies, and media forms that repeatedly go up in smoke over centuries in Cloud Atlas, even Frobisher’s ethereal music, all stand in the end as mere proxies to be seen through, and therefore rejected, for the more permanent because disembodied glimpse of souls as clouds in time. While the novel’s represented time ends in catastrophe on Hawaii, the novel literally ends hundreds of years earlier, also on Hawaii but in 1851, with an isolated voice looking optimistically to a future of more tolerance and economic equality. The century and a half since Ewing’s musings have proved him wrong; Zachry’s stories from the future on the big island show liberal modern humanity doomed. But as readers, as contemplatives, we seek to account for the doomed small lives and horrors by shaping to some degree redemptive stories of greater casualty. Emerson’s karmic over-soul becomes in Mitchell’s narrative hands the cipher and key of late modern globalization. Against Emerson’s “droning world, chained to appearance” where so many toil in a global history described once by Hegel as “the slaughter-bench on which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals have been sacrificed,” Mitchell’s sensitive seekers and proleptic dreamers try to make ethical stands.xiii In Mitchell’s novels, individuation to be livable must be ensconced within more comprehensive transpersonal patterns. And authorship like ethical living is a transcendence of individual voice and concern by locating each as a mere blip in greater, de-individuating, substrates (in other words, to
join into the ocean made of millions of drops, to recall the last sentence of *Cloud Atlas*).

In a series of novels that paradoxically have little idiosyncratic psychological depth despite a world of individual voices, Mitchell has created an innovative novelistic canvas for embedding individuals into multiply-integrated and ever-widening scales of mediation that engulfs them.

________________________

NOTES

i This is not to ignore the robust tradition of “techno-Orientalism” in pop culture since at least the 1960s. For a trenchant critique of techno-orientalism in two of Mitchell’s main sources, William Gibson and

ii “Why Books?” 1:02:00.

iii *Electronic Literature*; “RFID”; “Saving the Subject”; and “Material Entanglements.” See also Panko.

iv This is not to say Mitchell avoids all typographic experimentation in his novels. The first U.K. edition of *Cloud Atlas* has, for example, facsimiles of handwritten journal dates in the Ewing chapter, different typeface suggesting a newspaper clipping in the first Luisa Rey chapter, and pronouncedly different fonts for the interrogator and Sonmi-451 in the fifth story. These effects are not in the American edition. It should also be noted that the Somni chapters in the British and American printings are slightly different textually as well. Thanks to Ryan O’Malley for a suggestive course paper on the differences between the U.K. and American first editions.

v In the *Washington Post* interview, Mitchell claims that Ewing is “Melville, but with shorter sentences” (“Book World”).

vi “With the rise of the Web, writing has met its photography. By that, I mean writing has encountered a situation similar to what happened to painting with the invention of photography, a technology so much better at replicating reality that, in order to survive, painting had to alter its course radically” (14).


viii “When cultural critics nostalgically recall an imagined past in which readers unscrolled their books continuously from beginning to end, they are reversing the long history of the codex and the printed book as indexical forms. The novel has only been a brilliantly perverse interlude in the long history of discontinuous reading” (“Books and Scrolls” 47).

ix “The Stories We Tell,” 121.

x On the increasing importance of karma in Emerson’s thought after the mid-1840s, see Versluis 51-79.

xi *Aesthetics* 2: 1220.

xii *Metahistory*, 94-5.

xiii *Selected* 179; Hegel qtd. in Kaufmann 256.