

2022-11-01

# Period, Break, Form

Sergeant, David

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/18689>

---

10.1215/00295132-10007474

Novel: A Forum on Fiction

Duke University Press

---

*All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.*

## PERIOD, BREAK, FORM

This essay examines the relationship between novelistic form and a historical moment shaped by new technologies in Dave Egger's *The Circle* (2013) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Moon* (2018). In both, the novel form is itself positioned as a major counterforce against the malignant powers that are attempting to form the age. Also in both, new technologies are understood not as primary or independent shaping forces, but as an enabling component of a larger political and economic form, a variant of capitalism. However, the crucial difference between the two novels is in how they periodise this capitalism, an act which is inseparably bound up with their generic identity. *The Circle* implicitly sees the growing power of the tech giants as a historical break, a departure or step-change from previous modes of capitalism; a periodising that anticipates Shoshana Zuboff's influential recent definition of 'surveillance capitalism.' In *Red Moon* the new technology is less central to the plot, and capable of working for both the good and the bad guys. This relegation of technology as period marker reflects the novel's positioning of the contemporary moment – as it blurs into the near future setting – as a continuation of a longer historical arc, rather than a break from it.

Critics such as Michael McKeon, Hayden White, Raymond Williams, and Fredric Jameson have described the formative relationship between genres and periodisation, such that changes in genres are bound up with changes in historical reality. In this essay I will show how *The Circle* attempts to write of a paradigmatic historical change but cannot construct a generic form commensurate with it. Indeed, its own generic identity confounds the notion of such a change by opposing the new capitalism with an individuality that is doomed to fail, and which is rooted in the narration and reading of the embodied, subjective richness of that individual: a generic stream that has been linked by critics with the development of capitalism. In contrast, *Red Moon* opposes a globalized authoritarian capitalism with history itself, a history identified with the novel form. The genre it draws on for this attempt is the historical novel, whose *longue durée* history, as the genre of revolution, fits *Red Moon*'s own depiction of a *longue durée* capitalism in the process of being – possibly – ruptured. This revolution is, in a meaningful sense, the novel: that is, *Red Moon* gropes towards the form this revolution might take by putting together a novel form that can represent it. In this sense it echoes recent accounts, by critics such as Anna Kornbluh and Carolyn Lesjak, of the constructive potential of aesthetic form in relation to forms in the world.

In seeing periodisation and genre as central to how these novels relate to social forms, this essay departs from one notable recent treatment of the relationship between aesthetic and historical experience, Caroline Levine's *Forms, Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. While the readings that follow accord with Levine's estimation of the dynamic relationship between the two, they differ in their emphasis on the importance of the periodising narrative that each novel brings, implicitly or explicitly, to the moment it treats with. Where Levine sees 'suspending causality' as crucial to recognising the role of social forms and the possibility for agency in relation to them, in both *The Circle* and *Red Moon* the nature of these forms depends on just such causality – another word for which might be history, or periodisation,

given that both novel's emphasis on historical rupture entails the breaks that periodisation both produces and is produced by. Such periodisations are always provisional, always fictions, but they are also inevitable for any historical accounting: hence Jameson's cryptic maxim 'we cannot not periodize' (*Singular*, 94).<sup>1</sup> Equally, with regard to the novels, their aesthetic form is bound up with questions of genre, conceived of as something more dynamically active and constructive than Levine's definition of 'acts of classifying texts' (13). Genres are provisional and heuristic constructions that provide a way of talking about how novels negotiate, and negotiate with, history.

#### THE INDIVIDUAL AS RESISTANT FORM IN *THE CIRCLE*

*The Circle* by Dave Eggers follows a protagonist, Mae, who joins the powerful internet corporation of the title, whose activities are colonizing every aspect of life and gradually taking on the properties of the totalitarian state. Both her life and the lives of other citizens are being reformed by the monopolistic tech giant whose power and interest is vested in new social media technologies. Notwithstanding the novelty of both the technology and the unfettered corporate power it enables, the Circle is an authoritarian surveillance state in formation, with an easily recognizable lineage both in history and fiction – Soviet Russia as much as Orwell's Oceania, or Zamyatin's One State. This authoritarian power devours both individuality and a meaningful history. As an employee Mae has to prioritize attending a scheduled company barbecue over a visit to an unexpectedly sick parent, while moments when she is unwatched are reserved for timed toilet breaks. The company's campus buildings are named after different historical periods, such as 'the Dark Ages', 'the Renaissance', 'the Enlightenment', 'the Industrial Revolution,' 'the Machine Age.' In a manner that recalls Fredric Jameson's diagnosis of postmodernism – and so aligns the anaesthetizing of history more broadly with late capitalism – the temporality of history is converted into space, such that all of these periods become conterminous, equally visible and available.<sup>2</sup> The campus also recalls Jameson's description of both the inevitability and the meaningful consequences of periodization, as it suggests a version of history based on a bloodless conception of technology and knowledge: in a nice touch, the 'grand hall' in which major announcements are made is situated in the building called 'the Enlightenment', an era whose Eurocentric, universalizing, teleological conception of history structures the entire campus.

The Circle, then, is a crystallization of the world of new media technologies as they have unfolded in globalized capitalism and under political regimes unable or unwilling to take on their increasingly monopolistic status, such that they begin to resemble remembrances and

---

<sup>1</sup> Compare Walter Benjamin: 'Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad' (254).

<sup>2</sup> See Jameson, *Postmodernism*.

premonitions of the authoritarian state. Resisting this entity in *The Circle* is the embodied individual life. The people who Mae encounters living outside the Circle are distinguished by the prominence of their physical being, whether it be her ex-boyfriend Mercer's repellent fatness and arts-and-crafts vocation, or the couple she meets living on a boat on the lake, who have been weathered by the elements and look older at first sight than they are, whereas they greet her as if she has only just gained a body – as, in a sense, she only just has, by leaving the confines of the Circle and taking the canoe out: 'My god. You don't have a mark on you' (144). More precisely, however, the Circle is opposed by the manifold contingency and complexity that embodied existence brings with it. Out on the water with the couple, 'the wine, which Mae knew was not good, tasted extraordinary' (141), though the Circle and its agents would not be able to perceive this. Nature is the pre-eminent example:

She sat down, facing south, where she could see the lights, the bridges, the black empty hills dividing the bay from the Pacific. All this had been underwater some millions of years ago, she'd been told. All these headlands and islands had been so far under they would have barely registered as ridges on the ocean floor. Across the silver bay she saw a pair of birds, egrets or herons, gliding low, heading north, and she sat for a time, her mind drifting toward blank. She thought of the foxes that might be underneath her, the crabs that might be hiding under the stones on the shore, the people in the cars that might be passing overhead, the man and women in the tugs and tankers, arriving to port or leaving, sighing, everyone having seen everything. She guessed at it all, what might live, moving purposefully or drifting aimlessly, under the deep water around her, but she didn't think too much about any of it. It was enough to be aware of the million permutations possible around her, and take comfort in knowing she would not, and really could not, know much at all. (269-70)

Entities can be in a simultaneous state of existence and non-existence, birds be seen but not named, other creatures imagined and almost certainly there, though almost certainly not exactly as imagined: it is the quantum nature of embodied individual existence, the world a field of probabilities and potentialities that only take particular form in space and time once perceived. 'Everyone' might have seen 'everything', but this is different to the Circle's omnipresent omniscience for being as much potential as fact, for allowing difference and contingency, a 'million permutations' that in their infinite variation and combination are scarcely knowable, and whose presence is part and parcel of being embodied and alive, not requiring analysis or intellectual application: Mae guesses and is aware and thinks even as she drifts 'toward blank' and doesn't 'think too much about any of it.' This embodiment, and the reading of it, requires an immersive and dynamic attention that is anathema to the 'attentional capture and exploitation' (xi) that James Williams has described as the core activity of companies in the age of information.

*The Circle* not only valorizes this individual embodied life but associates it with the novel form. Fictional narrative exemplifies the kind of contingent, interweaving, embodied existence that is both the main redoubt against the corporation's takeover, and the main example of what would be lost by its victory. In its implicit contrasting of the novel with the forms of reading encouraged by social media, *The Circle* echoes the kind of contrasts between the novel and less affective forms of reading, such as the tract, that Leah Price has described in Victorian Britain. In both cases the novel gains distinction by being 'parochialized' (12), as Antoinette Burton, and Isabel Hofmeyr put it, in relation to other forms. As Mae continues her integration into the Circle she seems to lose her ability to read people: 'you no longer pick up on basic human communication cues', (260) she is told. While we see no literal evidence of this, what *is* increasingly lost is her ability to be read by us – to manifest as narrative – in the complexly embodied, multi-scalar, ramifying sense seen in the passage above. Instead, such prose is increasingly replaced by a to-and-fro of thought and narration that culminates in sentences that are presented, in free indirect style, as Mae's thought, and which work to close down options, cleaving to certainty and sloganeering, often in response to rhetorical questions that become a dismal stand-in for genuine dialogism:

Clarity had made her knowable to the world, and had made her better, had brought her close, she hoped, to perfection. Now the world would follow. Full transparency would bring full access, and there would be no more not-knowing. Mae smiled, thinking about how simple it all was, how pure. (465)

If only someone could make these decisions for her – somehow eliminate the doubt, the possibility of failure. But she had to know how Ty had pulled all this off, didn't she? Perhaps all this was some test? It made a certain sense. If she were being groomed for great things, wouldn't they test her? She knew they would. (478)

It is telling, indeed, given the identity between fictional narration and the fulness of embodied life, that this mimicking of Mae's increasing subjugation to the company also gives the novel a brittle, repetitive feel as it goes on, and *The Circle* treads a fine line in using the fuel of the plot to get this increasingly one-dimensional narrative – illustratively so, but still – to the last page without becoming insufferably tedious in the process. Indeed, one might say that the novel climaxes by performing a kind of suicide of the form, as Mae refuses the chance to bring down the Circle, though in such a manner that we might think she has accepted:

She pictured the Circle being taken apart, sold off amid scandal, thirteen thousand people out of jobs, the campus overtaken, broken up turned into a college or mall or something worse. And finally she pictures life on a boat with this man, sailing the world, untethered, but when she tried to, she saw, instead, the couple

on the barge she'd met months ago on the bay. Out there, alone, living under a tarp, drinking wine from paper cups, naming seals, reminiscing about island fires.

At that moment, Mae knew what she needed to do. (486)

The payoff being that she betrays the man and saves the company – but the point here is that she can no longer read the work she is in, and certainly cannot read it as we can, and as we know it should be read. The very end of the book sees Mae resentful of the fact that she cannot know what her mentor-turned-rival Annie, now in a coma, is thinking: 'What was going on in that head of hers? It was exasperating, really, Mae thought, not knowing.' Nicholas Royle has described the reading of fiction as a form of telepathy, and that seems an appropriate comparison here, as Mae both wishes to and cannot read the thoughts of the character who was stricken by politics and history – though it would be more accurate to say that what she wishes for would be the bad alter-ego of reading, a 'knowing' that would flatten its complexities into a data-set. In parallel to this, the kind of telepathy by which fiction lives is increasingly disabled as the novel goes on, as Mae becomes a one-dimensional object of narration apart from us: a shift both reflected and in large part achieved by the increasing preponderance of sentences in which she is the named subject – Mae thought, Mae saw, Mae felt – rather than merged with us through free indirect style, as in the section in which she canoes out to the island, the end of which was quoted previously. In that section, once she has taken to the water, her name is mentioned six times in the first eight paragraphs, and then not at all in the next six, as we blend with an increasing completeness into her embodied experience.

However, this twinning of reading and the embodied individual also has as its correlate what is at best a blindness, and at worst a latent antipathy, to collective organization and agency. Paul Stasi has observed how for both Georg Lukács and Theodore Adorno 'aesthetic form is what enables the work of art to apprehend the essence of a social order within which the isolated bourgeoisie subject must be situated.' If *The Circle* accords with both theorists in its critical attitude to capitalist modernity, its form repeats that capitalism's fragmenting obfuscation of the social totality and the isolation of the individual subject. While the homogenous overtaking of history by the corporation is the subject of satiric attack in the novel, it also passes into the novel itself. Although collective political agency, as it is vested in states and intergovernmental entities such as the EU, are recognized as the most potent opponents of the Circle's rapacious surveillance capitalism in this very near future world, the novel's deeper structure works to anathemize politics for being linked, in the most primally affective ways, to temporality. The downfall of Mae's friend and mentor Annie comes from her being dispatched to negotiate with bodies such as the EU, a mission from which she returns aged and haggard, as if time exists more intensively in such realms: 'Annie was not yet twenty-seven but there were bags under her eyes ... she seemed to have aged five years in the last two months' (351). This leads her to champion a disastrous new venture that would comprehensively chart personal histories, which reveals her own family's benefiting from the slave trade: in other words, after a dose of contemporary politics her domestic sphere is

opened up to a wider historical process and destroyed. Mae's symmetrical rise in fortune, in contrast, is founded upon a total concentration upon her own bodily life in the constantly renewed present moment, Jameson's 'reduction to the body' that is also the 'reduction to the present' (Baumbach, 145). Both the political opposition and its neutralization take place almost entirely out of sight, through brief reference, and instead the main opposition that we do see are lone people or couples who have retreated to rural isolation.

In parallel with this line of reading, we might probe why the material poverty and unimpressive physicality of the (relatively) elderly lake couple should be so desirable, while the 'nineteenth century' vibe of the public utility where Mae worked before joining the Circle should be so repulsive. There are obvious answers in the text as to why this is so: the couple are interesting and live in beautiful nature where her former co-workers were prematurely aged, physically disgusting, socially obtuse, and sited in a 'tragic block of cement with narrow vertical slits for windows' (9). My point, however, is that a public utility seems beyond the bounds of imaginative redemption, whereas a site of natural isolation is ripe for emotional loading as a counter to the corporation. In similar vein, Mae's giddy questions about the energy and apparatus needed for a computer processor that can totally surveil a single life – 'and if even a hundred more people wanted to store their every minute ... how could we do this when each life took up so much space?' – go unanswered, and the potential implications of 'the manufacturing plant' being 'in China's Guangdong province' are not pursued (though the satirical edge of their products being used on American democratic politicians is present). And who, meanwhile, is restocking the hundreds of dorms on the corporate campus with toiletries and clothes each night?

*The Circle* is not unaware of such issues of materiality, class, and globalization – late in the novel Mae reflects on how, in comparison to the confines of the Circle's headquarters, walking through 'any city ... seemed more and more like a Third World experience, with unnecessary filth, and unnecessary strife and unnecessary errors and inefficiencies' (370-1) – and their absence from the narration can be seen as part and parcel of the triumph of the Circle. But while the richness of both embodied life and fictional narration make for a compelling counterweight to that totalitarianism, they are helpless, on their own, before it. Hopefully, it should be obvious that this is not to demand that all fictions diligently map the material histories entailed by their contents. But while *The Circle* satirizes the co-option of the language of creativity by corporate capitalism, its occlusion of the less desirable forms of work which support both creativity and corporation provides an uneasy mirror image of a similar occlusion performed by capitalism: as Annie McClanahan argues, the rise of 'immaterial' tools and labour actually 'enable[s] both the globalization and the acceleration of exploitation', while 'the production of post-industrial technologies [in places like China] most resembles nineteenth-century factory work, with its absolute extraction of surplus value through child labour and the extension of the working day' (87). On the one hand, you could argue that the glimpse of the squalid left-behind city presages the fall of the gleaming technocratic dystopia that is the novel's main focus. On the other hand, in its all-but exclusive focus on the creative and digital economies, it replicates the fantasy of those economies as having left the messy

materiality of production behind: the problem for the inhabitants of that city, as for the workers in Guangdong province, is likely to be not so much their distance from the gleaming new present, but its exploitative and violent proximity.

In the light of the impotency of *The Circle's* counterweight to its eponymous evil, and its seemingly reflex recoil from politics, it is instructive to go back and review the plan to bring down the corporation that was presented to Mae by the company's renegade founder, and which she refused to implement. The plan stated that at the point when she had 'the maximum amount of viewers' she was to read out a document, "'The Rights of Humans in a Digital Age'", which would precede a 'series of steps that we [the founder and Mae] can take together that can begin to take all this apart', with the disclosure of everything that's been going on enough to 'convince anyone, no matter how blind, that the Circle needs to be dismantled' (486). It is the least convincing part of the novel, not least in its oscillation between a recognition of the need to generate mass agency and a repeated lapse into a focus on individual action ("I know I can do it. I'm the only one who can do it, but I need your help"), and in its groping projected conversion of public opinion – which is different in what way to the harvested public 'convictions' that have driven the corporation? – into decisive change. The lack of any forms that might mediate between embodied individual and the social totality proves decisive, such that the novel form itself becomes the well-meaning mirror of an atomizing contemporary capitalism in which the collective and its politics have been erased – just as have the hinterland cities of the US and China. Equally, in its harking back to iconic documents of revolution – Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791), the French National Assembly's *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) – the novel signals what this scalar gesture is replacing: revolution. Instead, the novel's cherished form – embedded amidst the dystopian satire – is the narrative of sensorially rich, embodied individual life. While one historical lineage for passages such as the one quoted above, with Mae on the lake, might obviously reach back to the Romantics, in the emphasis on the individual life *The Circle* recalls the valorisation of the personal and private, in the service of free-market capitalism, that many critics have described in the 'therapeutic' world-view characteristic of much twentieth-century fiction.<sup>3</sup> The generic composition of *The Circle* both reflects its failure before the challenge of the historical moment, and is diagnostic of why it fails.

This lack of an adequate resistant form, and its relationship to periodisation, is suggestively echoed by Anush Kapadia's review essay on Shoshana Zuboff's *Surveillance Capitalism* – a book which, in its focus on incipiently authoritarian tech giants and their conversion of personal lives into profit, strikingly resembles *The Circle*. Zuboff vests her resistance to surveillance capitalism in a 'human nature' (93 *et passim*) that Kapadia historicises as a 'particular post-Enlightenment self' (331). Zuboff also identifies the period of regulated and reciprocal capitalism which preceded surveillance capitalism as the historical form to set against it, a move described by Kapadia as symptomatic of 'a definite nostalgia on the part of a certain generation for the contained capitalism of their youth. Since many of them have

---

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*; Ohmann; Long; Aubry; Edmunds.



cultivated an immune response to anti-capitalist metanarrative, they rule out “revolution” and take shelter in “reform” as if these were the only two available options’ (332). It is the periodisation of surveillance capitalism as a break from the capitalism that went before which allows for this. As Kapadia notes, ‘Zuboff mis-specifies the nature of capitalism itself as she underappreciates the extent to which it already rests on the logics of “radical indifference” or “equivalence without equality” that she sees as new in its surveillance avatar’ (333), though a form of which was described by Marx; equally, the post-war decades she valorises are better seen as an ‘interregnum’ (332) in a longer and grimmer continuum. *The Circle* might not be as explicitly invested as Zuboff in an exceptional stage of capitalism as an opponent to surveillance capitalism, but its investment in a kind of sensorially and psychologically rich individuality becomes a kind of unintentional indexing of that stage. In Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Red Moon*, in contrast, the answer to the technologically enhanced capitalist authoritarianism is to draw on a different historical periodisation in order to go forward, into a realm where we have never been, what Kapadia calls ‘a counter-utopia fit for political and economic purpose’ (332), achieved through revolution rather than amelioration.

#### READING HISTORY AND THE BODY IN *RED MOON*

Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Red Moon* follows events that connect together different characters, a China on the edge of revolution, and a moon that has been colonized with human settlements. Like *The Circle*, the novel makes the hermeneutic relationship between reader and novel oppositional to an authoritarianism that would destroy it. Unlike *The Circle*, in *Red Moon* technology is not a defining force in the historical moment it represents. Indeed, the most striking new form of technology – a powerful emergent Artificial Intelligence – aids this opposition and becomes associated with reading and the aesthetic form. However, this differing evaluation of technology is not the determinate difference between the two works. *Red Moon* differs primarily from *The Circle* in its treatment of the relationship between the individual and the collective, and between both of these and a history defined by that relationship, and so periodised in an entirely different way. In *The Circle* the individual embodied life becomes the entity worth reading, the thing that is there to be read, and the problem with the new technologies, reflected by the novel’s own form, is that they are blind to such reading. In *Red Moon*, in contrast, history, the historical process, becomes the object of reading, both for ourselves and for the characters within the novel – with the added injunction that reading carries with it the necessity of acting, of taking part in the collective composition of history. The characters are readers of what is going on in the novel and in history, and, as such, ciphers for us; but they are also what is being read, or what might be read by another (character in the novel or reader of the novel). In *Red Moon* history is what forms us, but we also form history. We feel we are outside, looking on, looking in; but we are both subject to it and dynamic actors – or reading writers – within it.

The two primary readers in *Red Moon* bring together new and, as it were, old tech. The latter is vested in Ta Shu, a famous videoblogger, traveller, poet and practitioner of Feng Shui; the former is represented by the Analyst, an insider in China's Artificial Intelligence Strategic Advisory Committee who shares the desire for reform expressed by various social movements. Ta Shu's feng shui becomes a kind of all-purpose aesthetics of dynamic unity in historical time. In the first place it does what feng shui commonly does, which is to read landscapes and other spatial arrangements for harmony and alignment – but it also performs a similar operation on Chinese history as it continues into the present ('feng shui is a kind of Daoist political geography'). Ta Shu's feng shui is – like aesthetics, we are told – 'practical' (17), primarily because it is the context for human action, and as such is symbiotic with historical time: the 'general human desire to periodize history' is 'a hopeless quest to make sense of human fate by doing a kind of feng shui on time itself' (128). To read the world in this manner is also, implicitly and explicitly, to be deciding what would be the best thing to happen next, on a criterion keyed to collective harmony, balance and wellbeing, as when Ta Shu's counselling the premier-to-be of China is labeled 'political feng shui' (327). Rather than reproducing the neoliberal emphasis on the creative person as an 'asocial or antisocial flexible individualist' (8), as Sarah Brouillette puts it, the arts and creativity in *Red Moon* are not only collectively and historically engaged, but are modes of approaching the world that can be performed by anyone, regardless of actual occupation or pursuits.

The Analyst and the nascent Artificial Intelligence he is building together provide the intellectual and technological counterpart to Ta Shu's embodied and aesthetically framed perception. Though the AI works by scanning vast amounts of data, the result of its operations mirrors the work done by Ta Shu. However, because the Analyst and AI are narrated in discrete chapters and largely insulated from the emplotted action – unlike Ta Shu – their role as readers is clearer to see. The 'choreographi[ing]' of a vast crowd, such that its 'movement' is changed 'from a march to a dance ... [f]rom revolt to phase change' (276), requires a 'plan known to participants' (276). As part of discerning this plan the Analyst identifies Chan Qi, the leader of a grass-roots reform movement and a principle character, as being 'in a position to spread [the plan]; indeed, the Analyst 'suspect[s] that is her role in all this' (276). It is a telling moment: both novel and historical world have an emergent form which, once recognized, is tantamount to a plot – both narrative and political – which, once known, must then determine the role of each person bound up in it, which is everybody. Towards the end of the novel the necessity for any reading to become action bound up in the plot – to become the writing of history – is made clear. As a good reader, the Analyst has to step out from his secure separation and intervene in the unfolding work of narrative art from which he is not separate – which he promptly does, at the cost of his own freedom. Similarly, the decisive moment for the AI – left alone after the Analyst's arrest – comes when it realizes that its pattern-finding must give way to action: although 'words are acts, and even important acts, there are in the discourse space of the current global civilization simply too many acts.' The AI therefore reasons that 'something more may be required', before concluding with the command: 'act.' Both reasoning and language parallel Ta Shu's conclusion which just precedes this, when he

realizes that, despite being unable to foresee the consequences of any action in full, and despite the 'darkness at the heart of things ... we have to act. So: act.'

Discerning a pattern in the artform of collective history does not mean that it is or will ever be either finished or perfectly whole. Rather, it possesses the same kind of dynamic complexity that characterized individual embodied perception in *The Circle*, and in this sense such history replaces nature as the complex and gratifying ecosystem in which humans gain their full meaning: 'man is by nature a political animal', as Aristotle famously had it. In her study of nineteenth-century realism Anna Kornbluh also quotes Aristotle's maxim, before observing that Marx directly repeats it: 'Man is zoon politikon in the most literal sense: he is not only a social animal, but an animal that can be individualized only within society' (29). She goes on to observe that both Aristotle and Marx therefore '[avow] order as the condition of possibility of life as such, the very matter of life itself, the very matter to which materialism addresses itself'; and contrasts such an approach with the prominence of 'contemporary anarcho-vitalism' in contemporary theory, 'the neo- Deleuzianisms and neo- Spinozisms such as those of Hardt and Negri, messianisms such as Agamben's, antistatism in Foucauldian and Marxist flavors, antinomianism in queer theory, assemblage theory' which all 'oppose order to life' (29). While this perspective accords with the analysis of *The Circle*, in which the vitality of the individual body is in opposition to what Kornbluh calls 'collective forms' that could only appear negatively, *Red Moon* is also a reminder that the sense of the body channeled by such vitalism is not in contest with such forms, but exists in a dialectical relationship with them. To put it another way, *Red Moon* experiences just as much as *The Circle* the base pull of the intensely experiencing body, but is different in making it dependent upon a social totality that is itself reconceptualized in the wake of planetary ecological emergency.

The intensity of the body is evident from the first pages of *Red Moon*, in the sheer oddity of the moon's gravitational pressure and the ungainly embodiment it entails. The moon's uncanny effect is a reminder of how the body can no longer be taken for granted, but is keyed to and dependent upon a unique environment which is, in turn, now unmissably a part of history and subject to political contestation. The moon is also disorientating in its visual otherness – colours, perspectives, shapes – as well as more fundamentally, for being dead. As such the preciousness of earth is thrown into greater relief, and the novel recalls the famous 'earthrise' photo of the distant planet peeking out from the lunar surface – only not as a simplistic celebration of global oneness, of a kind that has been criticized in relation to the image for overriding the differences actually entailed by life on earth, but rather as an allegory lived out by every being in every moment, thanks to our physical dependence on a planetary environment to which there is no alternative, and which is under unprecedented threat. At the same time, however, the moon becomes the site for a utopian figuration of the bodily joys of the collective, in such a way that the latent commonalities between human and nonhuman are also made visible: as Valerie, a US diplomat, takes part in an acrobatic freeform version of an opera, in which the participants swoop around through the reduced gravity in imitation of the gibbons who are also housed on the moon station. In this dual exposure of the body – as precious and individual, as planetary and under threat – the moon clarifies and

accentuates what is also true on earth. For instance, the moon's opera interlude is foreshadowed by Fred glimpsing an amateur musical group in a Chinese park, playing music 'foreign – even a bit alien' to him (116), but whose joy transports all of its players, including those who 'seemed to consist of disabled people, some with Down's syndrome, it looked like, others deformed or odd in other ways': people whose fluency in the shared musical experience, in spite of apparent difference, speaks to Fred, who is autistic, and who has felt himself to be set apart from others as a result. These collective experiences are figures for the utopian commonality of embodied beings, regardless of identity and species.

However, for the most part the terrestrial body in *Red Moon* is stressed and threatened, not so much in parallel to its uncanny estrangement on the moon, but as a reflection of how tenuous is the bodily existence whose grounding importance the moon brought to the fore. Fred spends much of the novel nauseous and weakened after being poisoned in the first few pages; Qi, heavily pregnant throughout, is also nauseous, tired, hungry, and physically stressed. Together they spend much of the novel simply on the run from the authorities, bounced from place to place, trying to hide, eat, drink, sleep, stay alive. Indeed, the ratio between the kind of evasion which makes up the local experience of Qi and Fred, and the decisive actions she takes in relation to the emergent pattern of historical change, is hugely outsized. In the first place this is a recognition of the necessity for bravery and persistence in the face of pain and threat and deprivation, such as climate change should herald for all and political regimes have long required of many. The two most prominently embodied figures in the novel are easy to allegorize in this sense, Fred being poisoned (like the planet), Qi struggling to give birth to new life while people try to kill her (like our global civilization). But the sheer excess of their embodiment, of the way it plays out in longueurs of inactivity and functional action, is also a simple crediting of its fact, or feel: giving it its due, its airtime, such that while its connection to the plot is always in play, that plot is also played out to the time of the contingent and local body. The body in *Red Moon*, as it is stressed and disorientated and threatened, can be historicized as an intuition, on the one hand, of the dual crisis of the current moment, the perpetual threat we live under from authoritarian surveillance capitalism as it is bound up with the continuing destruction of the biosphere; and, on the other hand, of its utopian dialectical reversal, the apprehension of the planetary commons which this threat should actualize, the precariat 99% joined in their suffering of this threat and the agency they retain in combination.

## THE COLLECTIVE FORM

In its concern with how the individual discerns and is bound up with a 'plot' that is simultaneously political (the national revolution in the novel) and fictional (the novel itself), *Red Moon* is a historical novel transplanted into the future. This scalar problem has always lain at the heart of the genre: as Harry E. Shaw put it, the historical novel 'raises in an acute form a question common to all mimetic works of art – the relationship of the individual to the

general, of particulars to universals' (30). Much of Lukács's theorizing of the genre is concerned with just that, as in his description of the 'mediocre' characters 'in which great historical trends become tangible' (35); while Jameson also puts 'the problem of the representation of collectivity' at the genre's heart (*Antinomies*, 266, 280). This generic influence on *Red Moon* accords with its periodisation of history, which is presented as a struggle between capital and the commons through the long global rise of capitalism, a rise punctuated with revolutions that disrupted it locally and which provided a glimpse or promise of what now must now be achieved on a scale commensurate with capitalism's triumph: global revolution, meaning a systemic paradigm shift, a definitive historical break. Though the novel's focus is mainly on China, and so on Chinese revolutions – 'the Cultural Revolution, or the Communist revolution, or the 1911 national revolution' [16, all under heaven] – this process is implicitly identified with the near future US revolution depicted in Robinson's previous novel, *New York 2140*, which in turn drew on everything from the French and American and Russian Revolutions, to the New Deal and the influence of John Maynard Keynes. At times this identity becomes explicit:

But now it appeared that everywhere in the world governments were suffering a crisis of representation. Possibly this was because it was all one system, which one could call global capitalism with national characteristics, each variation around the Earth marked by the remaining vestiges of an earlier nation-state system, but still making together one larger global thing: capitalism. When it came to those national characteristics, China had the Party, the US its federal government, the EU its union; but all were ruled by the globalized market. (364)

In the information age, the globalization age, might it be possible for a new dynasty to come to power, not just in China but everywhere around the world, and without bloodshed? This was what they were in the midst of finding out. (277)

*Red Moon* is not so much engaged in finding (out) a form for this new dynasty, than in finding one for the finding out – or perhaps truer to say, this finding out *is* the new dynasty. We saw in *The Circle* how the attempt to raise the narrative of the rich individual life against capitalist authoritarianism failed, and how this was partly explained by that valorised life itself being part of the capitalism it was trying to oppose, a misstep bound up with the novel's periodisation of surveillance capitalism as a break with what came before. *Red Moon* reaches back to the historical novel which itself has its roots in the period of the French revolution and after, in an attempt to write such revolutions again, but in a new way that would be commensurate with the historical break it seeks – a utopian dialectical reversal of the kind of globalization that capitalism has driven.

However, as the quotes above from Lukács and Jameson indicate, putting together a narrative that can represent the relationship between individuals, history, and the collective is no simple thing. Robinson's solution to this problem in *Red Moon* is to have the focalizing

characters maintain an ongoing reference to the emergent revolutionary collective, as well as to the opposing collectivity of oppressive elements in government: we thus receive a relay of commentary about the constituency and activities of two groups who remain at one remove from us, their basic unrepresentability transferred out of the hands of intractable theorizing and into the (story)world, where the problem is at least a familiar and practical one. This relay gains narrative definition from being pegged to the primally basic story of Fred and Qi being hunted and trying to stay alive, which acts, as it were, like a scattering of iron filings into a magnetic field, the path they take then limning the dynamic of larger forces that would otherwise remain invisible. The posited national collective also gains substantive life from Qi, Fred, and Ta Shu all intersecting with it at various points, and, at those points, being part of it: as when the latter is caught up in the crowd that has marched on Beijing. Such substantiations will then be given a macro definition again by these characters joining the Analyst and others as commentators and speculators at one readerly remove from the collective. Lukács's account of the historical novel rested on the suggestive but unavoidably elusive discussion of 'typical' characters possessing 'capacities and propensities which when intensified illuminate the complex dialectic of the major contradictions, motive forces and tendencies of an era' (*Writer*, 158).<sup>4</sup> Robinson goes a step further by inserting the explicit contemplation of the 'major' elements and their complexity into the novel, via the various characters, to aid the illumination process, making it somewhat less vatic and more didactic.

This strengthening of the 'major' or top-down element in the novel entails recovering a function akin to the so-called 'omniscient narrator' or authorial commentary, which is often seen as having died out in the novel in the twentieth-century when modernist skepticism made its supposedly implicit claims to god-like omniscience untenable. While *Red Moon* does not have narratorial commentary, something similar – discursive speculation about the larger pattern of what is happening, along with considerations of political theory, history, science, and so on – is devolved onto the central characters and divided between them, so that each of their perspectives points towards a god-like position of top-down unity, identical with the rolling out of history, though this utopian position remains essentially unachievable. We might say then that *Red Moon* seeks to recover a collective agency equivalent in its scalar potency to the god-like omniscient narrator of novelistic lore, while also recognizing this position to be a catalytic fiction. Equally, the recovery of a totalizing, top-down perspective can be seen as an attempted break from a historical development which saw discursive exposition become disreputable as part of the late-nineteenth century divergence between highbrow and lowbrow fiction, or modernism and mass culture, as the former sought to distinguish itself from the latter, resulting in a formal ideal that was theorised by Henry James, codified by Percy Lubbock in *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), and then inherited by the creative writing programs that played such a dominant role in post-war US literary fiction, as Mark

---

<sup>4</sup> See also the complementary phrasing in Lukács' *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*: 'the determining factors of a particular historical phase are found [in typical characters] in concentrated form' (122).

McGurl has described.<sup>5</sup> Robinson himself suggests such a genealogy when discussing his use of what he calls ‘info-dumps’, justifying their use against the outworn strictures of a late modernist literary establishment.<sup>6</sup> If the exclusion of discursive exposition parallels the rise of capitalism and the concomitant exclusion from the novel of any social or political material that might trouble the stability of the world on which it is based, then *Red Moon* suggests that the pressures of the Anthropocene near future make such partitioning more obviously untenable.

These generic recoveries and recombinations in *Red Moon* are what allows it to dynamically associate the novel form itself with the collective, in a comparable manner to *The Circle*’s association of the novel form with the resistant individual. The key to this dynamism is the dialectical relationship between the collective and history, or space and time, which has been key to the work of Fredric Jameson, a major influence on Robinson’s work.<sup>7</sup> In *Red Moon* this dialectic opens out of the simple question: what mediates between individuals and the state that is commensurate in the novel with the social totality and its agency? The answer might seem to be the mobilized revolutionary mass. It is their movement that the analyst tracks and choreographs, that Qi organizes and finally triggers. However, this identification threatens to return us to the same problem: what is intermediary between the mass and the individuals who make it up? Whatever we interpose between the two scalar points, part and whole, the same problem recurs. If the local migrant workers’ branch mediates between the mass and individuals, then what is intermediary between that branch and the individuals that constitute it? The spatial and formal character of part and whole, group and individual, might lead us to expect that a spatial entity would mediate between them, but the relationship between them is constituted of narrative. The collective – in this case, the Chinese nation – only exists temporally, as a state of continued emergence, as a narrative that – notwithstanding the formal demands of any particular narrative – never ends. It is striking, given this, that *Red Moon* does not conclude with the birth of Qi’s child, exactly – which in the abstract would seem a neat figuration – but with the more difficult escape from imminent danger after the birth, the extreme physical stress of a shuttle take-off into space with a newborn while possibly being targeted by missiles. It ends, therefore, with a narrative opening into the future rather than a tying-off into a symbol.

This equation of the collective with the temporal unfolding of the relationship between micro and macro scales – or between the dramatized characters and the national plan in which they are engaged – is suggestive of the hermeneutic circle, in which the whole is understood by way of the parts and vice-versa, such that ‘the meaning of the text is discerned and disclosed with progressive immanence throughout the reading of the text’ (7), as Henri

---

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed account of this divergence see Wegner. However, Paul Dawson argues that the contemporary renovation of the classical ‘omniscient author’, in authors such as David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen and Zadie Smith, is ‘symptomatic of the broad anxiety within the literary field over the cultural capital of literary fiction, and hence the public authority of the novelist’ in an age of digital media (9).

<sup>6</sup> See for example Britt.

<sup>7</sup> Jameson was Robinson’s PhD supervisor.

Bortoft puts it. This is then to identify the novel itself, *Red Moon*, with the collective. Just as the collective lies beyond representation, so *Red Moon* lies beyond paraphrase: which is to say, to fully comprehend what it is, no retelling or analysis (such as this) will suffice. The closest you can get to knowing what each of these entities are, is by taking part in them. In one understanding, any hermeneutic process – and not just the interpretation of the art work, though that is often exemplary – is then an instance of a subsuming holistic unity, which can be identified with the community: such a sense can be inferred from both phenomenological and mystical traditions. However, in *Red Moon* that identification is not only explicit but comes with with the crucial detail that the collective structure is historical and so temporal, and emergent through the course of the novel as it is tied to the plot, which in turn pivots on the revolutionary masses. Narrative temporality in *Red Moon* is identified with this collective.

*Red Moon's* attempt to compass the challenge of scale is yoked to the hermeneutic relationship between part and whole that characterizes the individual text, such that the hermeneutic process itself becomes identified with the totality and history. The indubitable force and substance of the former relationship – to read is to encounter it – is thereby also granted the latter, such that Jameson's utopian future 'on the point of emergence' (*Antinomies*, 476) with which the novel ends is also the world into which we emerge on putting it down. Equally, the decisive question that is projected beyond this ending, and so into the world we emerge into from the novel – the question of *what will happen next?* – simultaneously concerns both political and narratorial agency. In this sense, when Qi implores the masses to '*stay vigilant!*' she is addressing us as readers, given that our attention is identical, in its scope and shadowy absent-presence, with the ostensible addressee, the revolutionary crowd. If calls for a 'new story' that might be adequate to the crises of the Capitalocene often assume either a sort of informational didacticism, or the stimulation of emotional investment and attachment, then Robinson's novel is that but also something more: the cultivation of a utopian sense of agency and possibility as it is seeded in the form of the novel.

#### WORKS CITED

- Aristotle. *Politics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998.
- Aubry, Timothy. *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011.
- Baumbach, Nico, Damon R. Young, and Genevieve Yue. 'Revisiting Postmodernism An Interview with Fredric Jameson.' *Social Text* 34: 2 (June 2016).
- Benjamin, Walter. 'Theses on the Philosophy of History.' Trans, Harry Zohn, Ed. Hannah Arendt. *Illuminations*. London: Pimlico, 1999)
- Bortoft, Henri. *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way Toward a Science of Conscious Participation in Nature*. Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1996.



- Britt, Ryan. 'The Man Who Puts the Science into Science Fiction.' *Inverse* (March, 2017) <https://www.inverse.com/article/29027-kim-stanley-robinson-new-york-2140-interview-climate-change-world-building>
- Brouillette, Sarah. *Literature and the Creative Economy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014.
- Burton, Antoinette and Isabel Hofmeyr, eds. *Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire: Creating an Imperial Commons*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Clark, Timothy. 'What on World is the Earth?: The Anthropocene and Fictions of the World.' *Oxford Literary Review* 35: 1 (2013): 5-24.
- Dawson, Paul. *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-First Century Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013.
- Edmunds, Susan. *Grotesque Relations: Modernist Domestic Fiction and the U.S. Welfare State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Eggers, Dave. *The Circle* London: Penguin, 2013.
- Jameson, Fredric. *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London: Verso, 2002.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Antinomies of Realism*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Jameson, Fredric. 'Antinomies of the Realism-Modernism Debate,' *Modern Language Quarterly* 73: 3 (2012): 475–85.
- Kapadia, Anush. 'All that is solid melts into code.' *Economy and Society* 49:2, (2020): 329-344.
- Kornbluh, Anna. *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2019.
- Lesjak, Carolyn. *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021.
- Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Long, Elizabeth. *The American Dream and the Popular Novel*. Boston: Routledge, 1984.
- Lubbock, Percy. *The Craft of Fiction*. New York: Viking, 1957.
- Lukács, Georg. *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur Kahn. Lincoln, NB: iUniverse.com, 2005.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*, trans. Irving Howe. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander. London: Merlin, 1969.
- McClanahan, Annie. 'Investing in the Future: Late capitalism's end of history.' *The Journal of Cultural Economy* 6:1 (2013): 78-93
- McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.
- McKeon, Michael. *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*. London: Radius, 1988.

- Ohmann, Richard. 'The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960–1975.' *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983): 199–223.
- Price, Leah. *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Robinson, Kim Stanley. *Red Moon*. London: Orbit, 2018.
- Royle, Nicholas. *Telepathy and Literature: essays on the reading mind*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.
- Shaw, Harry E. *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and His Successors*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983.
- Stasi, Paul. 'Realism and/or Modernism: An Introduction.' *Modernism/Modernity Print Plus forum* 5: 4 (Jan 25. 2021). <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/realism-and-or-modernism>
- Wegner, Philip E. 'The Possibilities of the Novel: A Look Back on the James-Wells Debate', *The Henry James Review*, 36: 3 (Fall 2015): 267-279.
- White, Hayden. 'Anomalies of Genre: The Utility of Theory and History for the Study of Literary Genres.' *New Literary History* 34: 3 (2003): 597-615.
- Williams, James. *Stand Out of Our Light*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. New York: Public Affairs, 2019.