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Peter Boxall

Excerpt

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Introduction: Twenty-First-Century Fiction

The title of this book might be phrased as a question: is there such a thing as twenty-first-century fiction? Can we identify a set of thematic or stylistic characteristics that mark a new phase in the development of the novel, that would allow us to speak meaningfully of the twenty-first-century novel, as we might of the nineteenth-century novel, or the modernist novel, or the postmodernist novel? Has our century come into sharp enough focus for us to ascribe to its cultural practices a character, a mood a structure of feeling?

Of course, such a question is framed to a significant extent by the moment in which we ask it, and by the youth of the time that we find ourselves living in. I am writing in the second decade of the century, when the turn of the millennium seems to be a fresh memory, not yet stored in the archive of the mind but still somehow in everyday use. The firework celebrations that marked the event, the skittish global panic about the Y2K computer bug and then the 2001 attacks in New York that seem to so many to mark the real entry to the new millennium, these have not yet, for me at least, faded to newsprint, to sepia, but seem part of the living tissue of the present. As a result, the attempt to offer a definition or a critical description of any twenty-first-century cultural activity is beset by the problem that attends all efforts to capture the contemporary: that is, that the time we are living through is very difficult to bring into focus, and often only becomes legible in retrospect. This is a problem that is captured with striking elegance and precision by Jean-Paul Sartre, in his 1939 essay on William Faulkner's great twentieth-century novel *The Sound and the Fury*. The present, Sartre writes, is 'nothing but a disordered rumour'; the moment that we occupy is always 'indefinable and elusive'.¹ The attempt to focus on the present, Sartre writes, 'can be compared to a man sitting in a convertible looking back' (p. 228). When we look backwards out of a speeding car, the place we are occupying at any given time is a simple, lateral blur, which resolves itself into a picture only when we have left

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it behind, as it fades into the distance. 'At every moment', Sartre says, 'shadows emerge on his right, and on his left flickering and quavering points of light, which become trees, men and cars only when they are seen in perspective' (p. 228). As we look around us at the time of the new century, it is perhaps the case that it appears to us only as these 'flickering and quavering points of light'; it may be that our time has substance and shape, that it contains trees and men and cars, organised neatly in twenty-first-century space, but it might take a little while before we can find a way of seeing them, a means of fashioning a perspective in which they can come to some kind of fixed relation.

This illegibility of the present, as I have said, is always involved in thinking about the contemporary, whenever that contemporaneity happens to take place, and is not a problem that is confined to the twenty-first century. As Roland Barthes writes, in response to Nietzsche's reflections on the present, 'the contemporary is the untimely'.² The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has argued, in response to Barthes' response to Nietzsche, that the untimeliness of the contemporary means that it is never possible properly or truly to read or to inhabit the present. 'Those who are truly contemporary', Agamben writes, 'those who truly belong to their time, are those who neither fully coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands'.³ The experience of the contemporary always involves a certain ejection from one's time, a certain failure of our capacity to frame it or picture it. 'Those who coincide too well with the epoch', Agamben suggests, 'are not contemporaries' (p. 11). But I think that the question I am addressing here – the question of whether we can yet see a set of cultural characteristics that are unfolding now, that define a specifically twenty-first-century predicament, or epoch or sensibility – is nevertheless illuminated in intriguing ways by Sartre's analogy. Sartre's image of the man who looks backwards from a speeding carriage is drawn, as he knows, from Faulkner's novel itself. Quentin, in his section of *The Sound and the Fury* dated 'June Second, 1910', describes the pivotal moment at which he watches an African American man and his mule, from the window of a moving train, and this moment, Sartre suggests, captures something of Faulkner's understanding of being in time. 'Then the train began to move', Quentin says. 'I leaned out of the window, into the cold air, looking back[....] The train swung around the curve, the engine puffing with short, heavy blasts, and [man and mule] passed smoothly from sight that way, with that quality about them of shabby and timeless patience, of static serenity'.⁴ This passage suggests that the perspectival dynamics at work in Sartre's analogy are determined, quite specifically, by the technological

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revolutions that come with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the heart of this moment in Faulkner is the tension between two modes of transport, and between two time signatures. The static serenity of man and mule is held against the smooth acceleration of the train, and the movement towards a kind of modernity which is shaped by the speed of the railway, and of the twentieth-century communication technologies that come in its wake. Sartre's sense of the blur of the present, its cinematic disintegration into 'flickering and quavering points of light', is thus tuned, I think, to the quality of a specifically twentieth-century speed.

There is, then, in Sartre's analogy a connection between one's relationship to the present and the technological apparatuses by which the relations between speed, time and space are determined. Sartre's sense that the contemporary is always unavailable to us, seen through this prism, is not itself a timeless one – a constant, ahistorical condition of contemporaneity per se – but is instead an experience *of* the present that is itself shaped to a degree *by* the present. As Quentin tries to find his bearings in the midst of a dawning twentieth-century modernity, it is the new, disorientating speed of the railway that conditions the material and aesthetic forms in which he experiences, or fails to experience, the present. The elusiveness of the present moment, as a condition of being in time, is mixed, in Sartre's analogy, with the same elusiveness as a historically specific effect of the material conditions of cultural life. It is this mixture in Sartre's analogy of the ahistorical and the historically specific that makes it so illuminating as a way of conceiving our own relationship to the present, in the early decades of the twenty-first century. It is surely the case that our own time is elusive to us, as theirs is to Sartre and to Faulkner, because we are living through it, because the experience of the contemporary itself involves, as Agamben suggests, a certain estrangement from the passing moment. But I think it is also the case that the disjunct quality of our relationship to the present, as we enter a new millennium, is specific to our own time and conditioned in fundamental ways by the material and cultural forces that position us in the world now. Where for Faulkner and for Sartre the attempt to place oneself in the shifting relationship between time and space is shaped by the speed of twentieth-century modernity, our own navigational and orientational apparatuses are calibrated by a shockingly new era in the technological manipulation of time, space and distance, and by a specifically twenty-first-century speed. The motor car, the railway, the cinema, the telegraph the telephone: these are the devices that fashion the quivering present in the twentieth century and that determine the texture, weight and momentum of western modernity. Our own

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time is bent and crafted by the computer, the mobile phone, the satellite the internet; by electronic communication at the speed of light. It is, for our generation of contemporaries, electronic speed that draws the blurred horizon of our possibilities, that conjures a dizzying cahoots between virtual time and weightless space.

It is this shift from the kinetic speed of the motor vehicle to the electronic speed of digital information exchange that has led a number of thinkers, in various disciplines, to suggest that we are entering now, at the turn of the millennium, into a new phase of modernity. It is of course always the case that the contemporary appears to those of us living through it to be a transformative moment; it is difficult to imagine a time that does not feel transitional to its contemporaries, that does not involve an alienating wrench from the dying past towards the unborn future. As Julian Barnes puts it, in a deliciously comic phrase that runs through his 2011 novel *The Sense of an Ending*, the one thing that we can say about any historical period is that it is almost certainly a time of 'great unrest'.⁵ But the quality of our time is determined by a shift in its determining conditions that is perhaps as foundational as anything since the last fin de siècle – indeed, early twenty-first-century culture is arguably characterised, itself, by a fin de siècle mood generated by what Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst call 'the collision between the old and the new', the passage from one epoch to the next.⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, for example, has made the influential claim that the end of the twentieth century has seen the passage from 'solid modernity' to what he calls a 'liquid modernity'. The long history of modernity, Bauman argues in his 2000 work *Liquid Modernity*, is the history of gathering speed, and of the human capacity to modify the relation between time and space as a result of such acceleration. 'Once the distance passed in a unit of time came to be dependent on technology', Bauman writes, 'all extant, inherited limits to the speed of movement could be in principle transgressed'. 'Only the sky', he goes on, '(or, as it transpired later, the speed of light) was now the limit, and modernity was one continuous, unstoppable and fast accelerating effort to reach it'.⁷ But, Bauman suggests, with the movement from solid to liquid modernity, from kinetic to electronic speed, from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, we see a radical change to the way that velocity, time, distance and cultural power relate to one another. Where, under a 'solid' regime, 'velocity of movement is the principle tool of power and domination' (p. 9), with the reaching of that sky-limit – with the late twentieth-century invention of communication at the speed of light – we have seen the arrival of a different means of disseminating power.

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'Power', under this new regime, 'can move with the speed of the electronic signal – and so the time required for the movement of its essential ingredients has been reduced to instantaneity' (pp. 10–11). With the dawning of this new era – what both Bauman and Paul Virilio call the 'era of instantaneity' – we enter into a completely different conception not only of the nature of the present – of temporality and duration – but also of the relation between time and space.⁸ 'For all practical purposes', Bauman writes, 'power has become *extraterritorial*, no longer bound, not even slowed down, by the resistance of space' (p. 11). Where, for Faulkner, the smoothly accelerating passage towards modernity is a mechanical and territorial affair – where the networks of power that enabled the rise of a colonial modernity relied on the spread of the railway to mobilise people and commodities and information – space is now no longer the ground upon which a weighty, locomotive struggle for domination is fought, but becomes instead the element that economic and cultural power promises to erase. For Bauman, the spread of Bill Gates' software empire is a model of this new means of accumulating wealth and power. Gates does not build products that seek to endure – a key mark of a commodity's value under the 'solid' regime – but rather, his products accrue value from their immediate, inbuilt obsolescence. 'Whereas Rockefeller wanted to own oil rigs, buildings, machinery, or railroads for the long term', Bauman writes, quoting Richard Sennett, 'Gates' products are furious in coming forth and as rapid in disappearing' (p. 124). Drawing again on a railway metaphor, Bauman suggests that Gates' economic logic frees him from the need to extend himself in space, to seek an immortality in material permanence, finding instead that power lies in a new kind of immaterial and unbounded contemporary moment, an extended instantaneity, an infinity without duration. 'We may say', he writes, that 'nothing was accumulating or accruing along Gates' life track; the rails kept being dismantled as soon as the engine moved a few yards further' (p. 124).

It is in the context of these shifts in the nature of contemporary duration that our own struggle to understand our time takes place. When Don DeLillo's 2010 novel *Point Omega* begins with a meditative glance from a moving train – with an attempt to capture the 'unsorted thoughts we have looking out the train window'⁹ – the relation he implies between thinking, being, movement and duration is strikingly different from that glimpsed by Faulkner's Quentin, as he steams away from the static serenity of man and mule. Passing time in DeLillo's novel, in a distant echo of Sartre's essay, is broken into 'staticky fragments, flurries of trembling light' (p. 6), but the quality of this fragmentation is determined by a completely

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different set of chronological pressures and apparatuses. The moment, now, is woven, it seems, from a different fabric and holds a different elasticity within what an earlier DeLillo narrator calls its ‘unstuck components’.¹⁰ Bauman writes that the ‘advent of instantaneity ushers human culture and ethics into unmapped and unexplored territory, where most of the learned habits of coping with the business of life have lost their utility and sense’ (p. 128), and it is in this undiscovered country that today’s novel seeks to gain some kind of purchase or find some kind of bearings. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, the mechanics of narrative itself – our capacity to capture and recount events as they unfold in time and space – have undergone a transformation, and it is in the shadow or light of this transformation that prose narrative is required to make for itself a world. I will suggest in this book that, however new and unformed and elusive our century is, it is nevertheless possible to begin to see a series of responses, in the novel today, to this transformed being in the world, to Bauman’s unmapped territory.

In seeking to capture a sense of this novelistic response to our twenty-first-century contemporaneity, this book will respond to a diverse and wide range of novelists from around the world. It is possible to identify, I think, something like a world community of writers, an emerging canon of international literary fiction, whose outlines this book will sketch out. In North America, this includes writers from Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munroe, Marilynne Robinson, Philip Roth, Paul Auster, Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison and Anne Tyler, to more newly emerging US writers, such as Jonathan Franzen, Jonathan Lethem, Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Safran Foer, Claire Messud, Dave Eggers, Nicole Krauss, Sherman Alexie and Amy Waldman. In the UK and Ireland, one can see a similar trans-generational group of writers, from Julian Barnes, Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, J. G. Ballard, Rose Tremain, John Banville, Colm Tóibín and James Kelman, to Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, Andrea Levy, Ali Smith, David Mitchell and Tom McCarthy. I will address these Anglo-American communities, but these groupings of writers only make sense, I think, in a broader, international context. The Anglo-American contemporary novel is shaped by its ongoing dialogue with writers from other nations, writing often in languages other than English. The world community that I trace here includes European writers, from W. G. Sebald and Elfriede Jelinek, to Orhan Pamuk, Ismail Kadare and François Bon; Asian and East Asian writers from Aravind Adiga, Mohsin Hamid, Amitav Ghosh and Hisham Matar to Kenzaburo Oe, Ma Jian and Haruki Murakami; African writers from J. M. Coetzee

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to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Zakes Mda; South American writers such as Roberto Bolaño; Australian writers such as Peter Carey and David Malouf; Japanese-American writers such as Karen Tei Yamashita; Japanese English writers such as Kazuo Ishiguro; British Indian writers such as Salman Rushdie and Kiran Desai; the French Iranian writer Marjane Satrap; the Pakistani-American writer Kamila Shamsie; the Welsh Chinese writer Peter Ho Davies; the Norwegian-American writer Siri Hustvedt; and the French-American writer Jonathan Littell.

In suggesting such a global community, I do not of course seek to argue that all of these writers are alike, that they share anything like a collective notion of what prose fiction can or should do or even share an idea or conception of the world. These writers are strikingly diverse in tone, in style, in temperament, in attitude, and are speaking from an extraordinary array of national cultures and traditions. But if there is no collective movement among these writers, no shared sense of a project and no consensus about the role or purpose of the novelistic imagination, it is nevertheless the case, I think, that these writers together respond to the predicament in which we find ourselves, and to the rapid transformations in the way that global time and space are produced, measured and mapped. Paul Virilio writes, in his 1997 work *Open Sky*, that ‘everything is being turned on its head at this *fin de siècle* – not only geopolitical boundaries but those of perspective geometry’,¹¹ and it is perhaps this perception of a time and space in flux that these writers share; a sense that the cardinal points that orient global cultures are shifting, and a sense too that the novel is a privileged vehicle for investigating this shift, and for producing new perspectival forms with which to picture the world.

Indeed, one of the signs of this sense of flux, of shifting geopolitical conditions, is the international nature of the contemporary novel itself, its emergence from a global cultural matrix. Where the story of the novel has tended in the past to be told in terms of discrete national traditions, it is increasingly the case, as Berthold Schoene has recently argued, that the novel comes into being in an international, cosmopolitan space, which exceeds the boundaries of any single cultural domain.¹² The broad remit of this book, its coverage of such a wide and eclectic range of writers, is in part a facet of this internationalism, this globalisation of our cultural reference points. As Shusheila Nasta puts it, when we discuss contemporary writing today, ‘we must inevitably refer to a diverse body of literature deriving from all over the globe’.¹³ Part of the movement towards liquidity that Bauman registers is the steady decline in national sovereignty, and the consequent failure of national boundaries to contain the movement

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of information and ideas around the world. 'For power to be free to flow', Bauman writes, 'the world must be free of fences, barriers, fortified borders and checkpoints' (p. 14). What Bauman sees as the collapse of a striated, diverse spatiality into the deterritorialised, instantaneous duration of contemporary modernity leads, in a wide array of cultural fora, to an erosion of localism, a supplanting of local categories by global ones. The emphasis on the need for a free flow both of capital and of migrant workers – of nomadic peoples – means that 'any dense and tight network of social bonds, and particularly a territorially rooted tight network, is an obstacle to be cleared out of the way' (p. 14). The novel as a contemporary institution reflects, to a degree, this fluidity, not least in terms of the international market place for contemporary literature, controlled as it is by global corporations such as Amazon and Waterstones. It is increasingly difficult to produce a picture of the contemporary novel without reaching for a global perspective – however implausible the idea of such a perspective might be – because the very predicament to which the novel is responding is one that has required us to imagine ourselves in a global context. As Ursula Heise has recently suggested, we are now a planetary people, for whom a 'sense of place' is woven into and conditioned by our 'sense of the planet'.¹⁴

So, this book will suggest that the international novel today offers a response to a new kind of being in the world in the third millennium, one that emerges in the wake of the decline of national sovereignty, and with the development of a new set of cultural and technological protocols for the organisation of space and time. But if I will argue here that the contemporary novel is engaged in a relationship with a new era of modernity, that it is registering something like the shift that Bauman sees in the passage from the last century to this one, this is absolutely not to suggest that we have achieved a new, liquid state, in which national, political and material difference has been overcome. If this book argues that it is difficult to avoid a global perspective when thinking about any of our local or national traditions, it does not suggest that we have discovered what Pascale Casanova has recently and influentially called a 'world republic of letters', a 'literature-world' whose 'boundaries and operational laws are not reducible to those of ordinary political space'.¹⁵ On the contrary, what this book discovers, in its analysis of the global production of contemporary fiction, is a new sense of the intractable contradictions between the local and the international, and the stubborn persistence of forms of locally embedded material being, that refuse to be eroded by the arrival of a liquid capitalism. While the passage of global capitalism has arguably

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entered a new phase and given rise, to recall Fredric Jameson's resonant phrase, to a new cultural logic, I will argue here that this has not led to a simple disappearance of our material conditions, a melting of spatial and temporal difference into a global homogeneity and instantaneity. Rather, what the contemporary novel witnesses is a growing disjunction between the material conditions of contemporary being, and those spatial and temporal forms in which such conditions become collectively meaningful. The liquidation of capital, the invention of electronic communication, the dawning of an era of instantaneity, the emergence of a global context for all of our interactions: all of these developments have transformed our relations with the world, with one another, and with our own bodies, but they have not made our material environments disappear. As Geoff Ryman discovers, in his rather arresting science fiction novel *Air*, the evolution of a virtual global environment does not produce the evaporation of our embedded realities, but simply brings them to a different and estranged kind of visibility. Ryman's novel proposes a near-future world in which the internet is no longer delivered through computer terminals, but is rather broadcast on the air and beamed directly into our heads, forming a bodiless environment (named 'the Gates format') in which to build global communities. But this new virtuality leads, in Ryman's imagination, to the brutal return of a kind of physicality, an awareness of the materiality not only of the present but of the past, a physical actuality that is all the more powerful for being dissociated from the dominant, virtual forms in which global capitalist relations are conducted. The broadcast, while bringing the protagonist Mae and her tiny village into a weightless global collective, also demonstrates to Mae the material specificity of her local histories, and the incompatibility between such localism and the global community into which 'air' is summoning her. The entry to the Gates format, the narrator tell us, allows Mae to 'perceive the weight of history', to see that 'the past is real', that 'it's still here'.¹⁶

It is this sense of a profound disjunction between our real, material environments and the new technological, political and aesthetic forms in which our global relations are being conducted that lies at the heart of the developments in the twenty-first-century novel that I trace in this book. There are, I will argue in the chapters that follow, three strands that run through the work of the widely divergent writers I will discuss here, three recurrent preoccupations, which turn around this sense of disjuncture. There is a persistent fascination with the shifted temporality that characterises the new century, with a time that passes in a way that we cannot quite capture, that eludes our narrative grasp. If the view from a train

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window in DeLillo's *Point Omega* has a different temporal logic than that which orchestrates time and movement in *The Sound and the Fury*, then DeLillo's fiction of the new century is caught in the grip of an obsession with the tracking of this displaced logic, of what Ursula Heise calls a new 'chronoschism'.¹⁷ *Point Omega* is nothing if not a sustained and fervent struggle, as the narrator puts it, to 'feel time passing, to be alive to what is happening in the smallest registers of motion' (p. 6), to respond to what he calls a 'profound shift in space and time' (p. 5); and this book will trace this fascination with the passing moment, with speeded, slowed, stalled, uneven time, as it runs, like a contrapuntal signature, throughout the contemporary novel. The fascination with slowed time in DeLillo's novel, manifested most clearly in the description of the weightless time of Douglas Gordon's wonderfully slow film *24 Hour Psycho*, is reflected in novel after novel in the new century: in the super slowed fragments of film 'footage' that structure William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*¹⁸; in film stilled to individual hand painted frames in Jonathan Lethem's magnificent *Fortress of Solitude*¹⁹; in the radical slowing of motion in Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder*; in the 'elongated', 'warped' time that Zadie Smith sees as the legacy of the slow motion falling of the towers in New York on 9/11,²⁰ in the 'different slownesses and spectralities' that run like a hidden current through the underwater world of Nicholas Royle's novel *Quilt*.²¹

This response to what Paul Virilio calls the 'otherworldly temporality' of the new millennium is threaded through and wound around the attempt, in the contemporary novel, to grasp the texture of the contemporary real.²² There is, in the fiction of the new century, as well as in a very wide range of other disciplines and intellectual networks, a strikingly new attention to the nature of our reality – its materiality, its relation to touch, to narrative and to visuality. Right across the spectrum of writers that I discuss in this book, one can see the emergence of new kinds of realism, a new set of formal mechanisms with which to capture the real, as it offers itself as the material substrate of our being in the world. The work of theorists such as Catherine Belsey, Hal Foster, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, and many others, has focused in the new century on what Foster calls a 'return to the real',²³ on what Belsey calls the 'incursion of the unknowable real' into an 'increasingly idealist culture',²⁴ and on what Philip Tew has recently called a 'new sense of reality'.²⁵ There is, in David Shields' wonderful phrase, something like a 'reality hunger' in the contemporary critical arts, a desire, he says, among a 'burgeoning group of interrelated (but unconnected) artists in a multitude of forms and media', to 'break larger and larger