The Novel Today: Recent British Fiction
Lecture 12:
The Novel and Digital Culture

1) From Print Culture to Digital Culture:
   Algorithmic Culture and Its Implications

2) Imagining an AI World:
   Ian McEwan, *Machines Like Me* (2019)

3) The Vanishing of the World as We Know It:
   Nicola Barker, *H(A)PPY* (2017)

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1) From Print Culture to Digital Culture:
   Algorithmic Culture and Its Implications

[T]he screen is simply a surface, the site of the appearance of textual ensembles, the visible display of the actions and effects wrought with the technology. The actual power of the technology lies in the fact that at one level all information is held in the code of binary numbers, and from that code information can be re-presented in any mode, whether as music, colour, speech, writing, or image.

(Kress 2003, 12)

Is there analogue life in digital worlds? (Nassehi 2015, 159, my trans.)

[T]he media revolution of the computer and the recombination of data it facilitates form a structural parallel to a society in which causalities and ascriptions can no longer be implemented in traditional analogue forms. Digital technology makes us surmise a network of connections behind visible reality which cannot be recuperated through analogue forms of observation.

(Nassehi 2015, 200, my trans.)

'Algorithmic Culture':

What one sees [...] is the enfolding of human thought, conduct, organization and expression into the logic of big data and large-scale computation, a move that alters how the category *culture* has long been practiced, experienced and understood. This is the phenomenon I am calling [*…*] 'algorithmic culture'. [...] It is a contention of this essay that the semantic dimensions of algorithmic culture (and also then of the related phenomena of big data, data mining and analytics [...]) are at least as important as the technological ones, the latter, for perhaps obvious reasons, tending to command the spotlight. [...] Beyond semantics, what is at stake in algorithmic culture is the gradual abandonment of culture's publicness and thus the emergence of a new breed of elite culture purporting to be its opposite.

(Striphas 2015, 396-397)

e.g. Robert Seyfert and Jonathan Roberge, eds. *Algorithmic Cultures: Essays on Meaning, Performance and New Technologies.* London/New York: Routledge, 2016. [German translation: *Algorithmuskulturen: Über die rechnerische Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit.* Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017]

The trajectory we're on is not a singularity but a phase transition. Its critical point [...] will come when machine learning overtakes the natural variety. Natural learning itself has gone through three phases: evolution, the brain, and culture. Each is a product of the previous one, and each learns faster. Machine learning is the logical next stage of this progression. Computer programs are the fastest replicators on Earth: copying them takes only a fraction of a second. But creating them is slow, if it has to be done by humans. Machine learning removes that bottleneck, leaving a final one: the speed at which humans can absorb change.

(Domingos 2018 [2015], 288)

Algorithms are the generalized symbolic media of the network age. Money, power, certification, knowledge, social capital, that is, the mechanisms of social integration are being mediated more and more by algorithms. We are entering a post-human world in which cognition, decision, and action are the results of heterogeneous networks composed of human and non-human actors, where the conceptual work of generations of thinkers within the parameters of modernity no longer can guide us [sic], where long fought and hard won battles must be radically reinterpreted and seen from new perspectives.

(Krieger/Belliger 2014, 12)

The Costs of Consciousness:

#1   Confabulation
#2   Slowness
#3   Anthropocentrism
                        (cf. Hayles 2014)
vs.
The Power of 'Unthought'/'Thinking without Thinking'
"The Utopian Potential of Cognitive Assemblages"
(Hayles 2017, 202-216 = final chapter)

[T]he primary function of nonconscious cognition is to keep consciousness, with its slow uptake and limited information-processing ability, from being overwhelmed.
                                                                        (Hayles 2017, 10/88)

Aspects Crucial to Hayles's Argument:

- the reevaluation of cognition as distinct from consciousness
- the recognition that cognitive technologies are now a potent force in our planetary cognitive ecology
- the rapidly escalating complexities created by the interpenetration of cognitive technologies with human systems
                                                                        (Hayles 2017, 19)

2) Imagining an AI World:
Ian McEwan, *Machines Like Me* (2019)

The Novels of Ian McEwan:

The Cement Garden (1978)
The Comfort of Strangers (1981)
The Child in Time (1987)
The Innocent (1990)
Black Dogs (1992)
The Daydreamer (1994)
Enduring Love (1997)
Amsterdam (1998)
Atonement (2001)
Saturday (2005)
On Chesil Beach (2007)
Solar (2010)
Sweet Tooth (2012)
The Children Act (2014)
Nutshell (2016)
Machines Like Me (2019)
The Cockroach (2019, novella)

[+ short stories]   > "England's national author" (*New Yorker* 2009)

Full title (on title page): *Machines Like Me and People Like You*

Beginning

It was religious yearning granted hope, it was the holy grail of science. Our ambitions ran high and low – for a creation myth made real, for a monstrous act of self-love. As soon as it was feasible, we had no choice but to follow out desires and hang the consequences. In loftiest terms, we aimed to escape our mortality, confront or even replace the Godhead with a perfect self. More practically, we intended to devise an improved, more modern version of ourselves and exult in the joy of invention, the thrill of mastery. In the autumn of the twentieth century, it came about at last, the first step towards the fulfilment of an ancient dream, the beginning of a long lesson we would teach ourselves that however complicated we were, however faulty and difficult to describe in even our simplest actions and modes of being, we could be imitated and bettered. And I was there as a young man, an early and eager adopter in that chilly dawn. [...]

I was among the optimists, blessed by unexpected funds following my mother's death and the sale of the family home, which turned out to be on a valuable development site. The first truly viable manufactures human with plausible intelligence and looks, believable motion and shifts of expression went on sale the week before the Falklands Task Force set off on its hopeless mission. Adam cost £86,000. I brought him home in a hired van to my unpleasant flat in north Clapham. I'd made a reckless decision, but I was encouraged by reports that Sir Alan Turing, war hero and presiding genius of the digital age, had taken delivery of the same model. He probably wanted to have his lab take it apart to examine its working fully.

Twelve of this first edition were called Adam, thirteen were called Eve. Corny, everyone agreed, but commercial. Notions of biological race being scientifically discredited, the twenty-five were designed to cover a range of ethnicities. There were rumours, then complaints, that the Arab could not be told apart from the Jew. Random programming as well as life experience would grant to all complete latitude in sexual preference. By the end of the first week, all the Eves sold out.

'A-and-Es'!

Characters

Charlie Friend, 32, degree in anthropology, conversion course to law (specialising in tax > irregularities > community work), book on artificial intelligence, dabbling in investment opportunities with little success on the computer from home)
Miranda Blacke, 22, doctoral scholar of social history
Adam
Mark, c. 4

Maxfield Blacke, Miranda's ailing father, a writer

Peter Gorringe – **Mariam** from Pakistan

Alan Turing, the greatest living Englishman
(**Margaret Thatcher** vs. **Tony Benn**)

Ian Patterson, "Sexy Robots." *London Review of Books* **41.9 (2019)**

The book is full of free-floating fears: fear of Adam, as the scope of his independence increases: 'Through the night, I'd fantasised Adam's destruction. I saw my hands tighten around the rope I used to drag him towards the filthy river Wandle'; fear of criminality; fear of working-class parents who abandon their children; fear of drinkers, drug-users, prison habitués; fear of the rapist wrongly but perhaps justly accused of raping Miranda, now said to be out of prison and looking for vengeance ('I believed she had brought a murderer into my life'); fear of riots and the far left; fear of almost all powerful feelings. Without these fears, the debate about consciousness, mind and brain, AI, artificial mucous membranes, love and play would be even more inert. It's the fear of violation and the fear of difference that give the novel what emotional force it has. [...]

McEwan is on record as disliking experimental writing and seeing modernism as a dead end. Like the fictional poet John Cairncross in *Nutshell*, whose work is said to be 'up there with Fenton, Heaney and Plath', his literary horizons are conservative. In this, he is curiously not unlike his robot: Adam is programmed to learn at a prodigious rate and is soon awake to the 'ordinary voice and these moments of godless transcendence' in Larkin's poetry. The book presents a clearly satirical picture of a robot's ideal rational future, with its complete marriage between man and machine: one where the sum total of world literature will stand as testimony to an earlier confused, heroic, self-deluding age, and in which the only necessary form of literature will be 'the lapidary haiku, the still, clear perception and celebration of things as they are'. But the haikus Adam comes up with, including his last words, are comically banal, undercutting the slight note of sadness with which McEwan kills off his vision of one possible dangerous future. This is a cautionary tale, and being based as it is on extensive research carries discursive weight, but like others of his recent novels, it remains divided, emotion and information unconnected, while off to one side a chorus underlines the moral issues, sets essay titles and suggests model answers, without ever questioning what human longings are all about.

This belief that science would offer us an exemption from our place in this vast panorama of disintegration […] was a displacement of a fundamentally religious instinct. I thought of the psychoanalytic concept of transference, whereby the patient's childhood relationship with his or her parents was redirected onto the figure of the analyst. Wasn't transhumanism precisely that: a wholesale projection of the formative relationship with God onto the figure of Science? Wasn't all of it – brain uploading, radical life extension, cryonics, the Singularity – a postscript to the oldest of narratives?

(O'Connell 2017, 209)

3) The Vanishing of the World as We Know It: Nicola Baker, *H(A)PPY* (2017)

The Novels of Nicola Barker:

Reversed Forecast (1994)
Small Holdings (1995)
Wide Open (1998)
Five Miles from Outer Hope (2000)
Behindlings (2002)
Clear: A Transparent Novel (2004)
Darkmans (2007)
Burley Cross Postbox Theft (2010)
The Yips (2012)
In the Approaches (2014)
The Cauliflower (2016)
H(a)ppy (2017)
I Am Sovereign (2019)

Nicola Barker, *H(A)PPY.* London: Heinemann, 2017.

- 'literary fiction'
- transcription of Mira A.s internal monologue (?) in a world governed by the 'New Path' of continuous real-time online tracking of emotional balance: the text of the novel ('the Cathedral') becomes an alternative to the official ‚Graph' (cf. Ian Bogost, "The Cathedral of Computation", *The Atlantic* Jan 15, 2015)
- typographical freedom vs. coordinate *system*
  > the novel/fiction vs. probability calculation (cf. Esposito 2007)
- the 'kink' (Agustín Barrios aka Chief Nitsuga Mangore, guitar virtuoso and composer, Paraguay, 1885-1944)
- Mira A. vs. 'The System' (Kite), the Kora Group (the tuning wars)
- internal (drugs) und external (operation) interference
- final words: "I softly embrace silence."

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The New Path

After they banded together and saved us from the Floods and the Fires and the Plagues and the Death Cults, the Altruistic Powers actively discouraged The Young from thinking about God. We walked a new path. They called it The New Path. They called it A Path of Light. And The Young were taught various, simple techniques that allowed them to feel at peace. We moved Beyond God. We were taught to celebrate This Moment. And our chemicals were balanced.

We were perfected. We were given just enough choices to make us feel as though we were free, but not so many that our minds (our still-fragile intellects) became overloaded. Doubt ended. The Information Stream was purified. Before, there was filth and it corrupted us. After, there was freshness. There was the smell of newly cut grass. Everything shone. They made us feel innocent again. No – *no.* They made us Innocent again.

We are Innocent. We are Clean and Unencumbered. Every new day, every new dawn, every new hour, every new minute, we are released once more from the tight bonds of History (the Manacles of The Past). […]

It makes us H(A)PPY.

H(A)PPY.

H(A)PPY.

But why is that happening?

Read Nicola Barker's H(A)PPY to the guitar music of Agustin Barrios

It's what she recommends. And the music does strike a deep chord with the rebellion at the heart of this dystopian tale

Kate Womersley

https://www.spectator.co.uk/2017/08/read-nicola-barkers-happy-to-the-guitar-music-of-augustin-barrios/ (Jan 13, 2020)

It is an unexpected pleasure when fiction has a soundtrack to accompany the work of reviewing. *H(A)PPY* is 'best enjoyed in conjunction with *Agustin Barrios: The Complete Historical Guitar Recordings'*, Nicola Barker advises before her text gets underway.

It's tempting to dismiss this as a gimmick. But Barrios's music strikes a deep chord with the rebellion at the heart of Barker's 12th novel. Born in the 1880s, the Paraguayan's playing was ridiculed because he preferred his guitar strings to be made of steel rather than fashionable gut. His dissonant art, like Barker's today, could not be accused of courting admiration.

The 'sad-happiness' of Barrios's music is what comes to destabilise *H(A)PPY*'s 'post-post apocalyptic world'. This dystopian tale of sorts begins simply: the 'filth and degradation' of life as we know it has been relegated to a sad corner of the earth, while the Innocents lead an almost flawless existence in accordance with the System. Bodily problems have been resolved: there is no pain, no ageing, no death. Everyone strives (not too hard) to exercise self-control and remain in the Moment. It is, I guess, like being conscripted to a never-ending mindfulness retreat, with the added injustice of other participants enjoying open access to your thoughts. The potentially therapeutic, when taken to the extreme, becomes a tyranny.

Barker does not tell us much about what this new world looks like, but we learn what it feels like. Mira A, a musician and maker of guitars, is struggling to stay 'in Balance'. Her thoughts — like everyone else's — are broadcast on the Graph, also known as the Sensor. This psychological FitBit, instead of calories, tracks emotional equanimity. The words of Barker's text change colour as Mira A's feelings inappropriately intensify, like the 'pinkening and purpling' Sensor which warns when an EOE (Excess of Emotion) is imminent.

Mira A cannot quite convince us she is HAPPY; rather, she's 'H(A)PPY'. The Innocents are concerned about this parenthesis. Could she be the 'unsteady, tipping domino'? In the System, narrative itself is considered toxic. Fragments keep appearing on Mira A's Stream which she cannot help but connect: a guitar waltz, an image of a young girl, a cathedral. Even after chemical intervention and a surgical operation, Mira A's mind continues to resonate with an emerging story 'like a metal guitar string'. Her Stream becomes flooded with text — about Paraguay, Barrios's biography and incomprehensible snippets of history.

The novel's later pages are graffitied with diverse fonts and erratic capitalisations in 'a heaving, streaming, tropical rainforest of incomprehensible words words words words words words'. The shape of a guitar is bleached out from the printed text. Sections read like poems, appear like pictures, sound like music. Overwhelmed by the effort of self-policing, Mira A finally finds freedom in the human urge to 'tell the story of myself. As if I am distanced from myself.'

I finished the book spent but impressed. It will be a while before I find the energy to reread *H(A)PPY*, but the delights of Barrios are effortlessly repeatable. 'I can't expect you to understand why this resonates with us so deeply,' says a non-Innocent about Barrios's art. In graceful tribute, Barker has written herself into this music, celebrating the beauty of its imperfection. She also plays uncompromisingly on steel strings — and creates something harsher and brisker than many novel-readers are used to — which aspires beyond being merely understood.

Barrios's work today enjoys great popularity. Barker's timely, invigorating novel risks becoming popular, too.

A Map of (Post-)Modern Fiction

Modes:	Documentary Fiction	Realist Fiction	Revisionist Fiction	Implicit Metafiction	Explicit Metafiction
Scales:	external/environ-mental reference illusion 'real' comm./ character comm.	←→			internal/sys-temic ref. anti-illusion lit. comm./ narr. comm.
'Programs':	(Avantgarde)	Realism	Romanticism →	Modernism	← Aestheticism
Orientations of Meaning:	obj. (subj.) [(lit.)]	obj. subj. (lit.)	(obj.) subj. lit.	(obj.) subj. lit.→lit.	[(obj.)] (subj.) lit.

(cf. Reinfandt 1997, 240)

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