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“We are only what we know”: Knowledge in David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004)

Abstract: *This essay is concerned with a postmodern version of the literary critique of timeless truths. Cloud Atlas’s fictional presentation of six different socio-historical settings with different belief and media systems are presented as an exploration of a cross-culturally pervasive human hunger for knowledge and domination. The text attempts to pry apart the perilous conjunction between the desire for power and that for knowledge in order to sound out possibilities for the advancement of scientific and technological knowledge and a higher level of civilization, in the sense of longer, more peaceful and comfortable lives and more justice and equality.*

1 Introduction

Knowledge is one of the central themes in David Mitchell’s novel *Cloud Atlas*. Published in 2004 to largely very positive reviews, the novel is strongly concerned with epistemological questions. As is typical of postmodern novels, Mitchell’s text problematizes the notion of universal and timeless truths. Structured into six episodes set in different eras and covering different types of society, the novel shows that what is considered as knowledge and how it is legitimized differs widely. It considers questions of how knowledge and specific cultural and media conditions relate to each other and in which ways/to which extent the discourses individuals are socialized into determine what they know. Connected to this are reflections, typical of historiographic metafiction, concerning the difficulties of reconstructing the past and of transmitting knowledge into the future.

Cloud Atlas specifically traces the relationship of knowledge and power. The text follows a Foucauldian notion of individuals being produced by the structures and rules of the society they live in, in which structures of power and discourses of truth mutually produce and reinforce each other (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 93, 98). Therefore, discourses of truth are also ruled by power, and power needs ideas of what is true, of what counts as knowledge to work:

There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 93)

In this context, the question is not that of the freedom of the subject with regard to the power system. Rather, “the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations” (Foucault, *Discipline* 27–28). Mitchell’s novel emphasizes this by depicting even those figures who are most empowered to gain and control knowledge as products of the power/knowledge system of their specific society.

Yet, the novel also breaks with postmodern notions of the constructedness of the individual by assuming that there is one inbuilt drive which is central to humanity: a “hunger in the hearts o’ humans, [...], a hunger for more” (286, see also: 199, 508–09). As *Cloud Atlas* demonstrates again and again, this hunger especially means a hunger for power and knowledge (e.g. 286, 462), which is both a means of survival, or, more than that, intellectual as well as material growth, and potential self-destruction. Thus, the text questions the connection of the advancement of scientific and technological knowledge and a higher level of civilization, in the sense of longer, more peaceful and comfortable lives and more justice and equality.

In the text’s six episodes, a higher level of scientific and technological knowledge leads to more wide-ranging exclusion and the exploitation of parts of the population which lack power and often knowledge, as well as finally to the collapse of civilization. Only some traditional societies and small, ecologically-minded communities on the margins of modern societies are portrayed as being largely content with their level of power and knowledge and as fairly peaceful. Yet they are constantly in danger of being destroyed and mostly lack the benefits societies focused on reaching higher levels of scientific and technological knowledge offer to parts of the population, such as longer and more comfortable lives. On the whole, *Cloud Atlas* does not advocate a turn away from quests for knowledge or romanticize the lack or loss of scientific or technological know-how. It rather explores whether there is anything which might counter the dangerous conjunction of the desire for power and that for knowledge. In this

context, the text asks for the individual's scope for agency and for acting ethically, in contrast to simply following the hunger for more and gathering ever more power and knowledge to exploit others. With regard to society, *Cloud Atlas* poses the questions of what can replace the model of humanity's advancement through progress and especially of how to harness – to tone down or channel into positive expressions – the equally enabling and destructive “hunger for more.”

2 Knowledge as a Theme in *Cloud Atlas*

Knowledge as a theme runs through all of the episodes of Mitchell's novel, revolving around the following set of questions: what determines what is seen as knowledge in specific societies and do different concepts of knowledge enable people to make sense of their world equally well? How does the connection of past, present, and future work, and how accurately are facts transmitted through time? Which effects does the advancement of academic and technological knowledge have? In which forms is knowledge tied to power structures and used in a systematic manner – politically, economically, academically – to exploit others (specific groups of the population, people from other cultures)? This is complemented by the individual use – and in the novel very often abuse – of knowledge.

The novel begins in the 19th century and portrays the journey of the American notary Adam Ewing in the Pacific where he encounters the effect of colonization first-hand. With regard to knowledge, this episode deals with the different ways knowledge is constructed by different societies – here Western societies and the traditional societies in which the natives Ewing encounters live. Further themes are the abuse of superior technological and academic knowledge in the form of the exploitation of the natives, the loss of knowledge, here affecting the tribes whose knowledge of their past is destroyed, and the question of using one's specific knowledge and position of power responsibly or not, as Adam Ewing is being poisoned by a greedy doctor who pretends to cure him.

The second episode is set in the 1930s and tells the story of the young English composer Robert Frobisher who breaks off his studies at a Cambridge College, goes to Belgium to become the amanuensis of the famous composer Vyvyan Ayrns and kills himself after having composed what he

believes to be the great work of his life. Here great achievements of civilized culture – Ayr’s and Frobisher’s art – are contrasted with the catastrophe of civilized culture that is the First World War, showing that technological and scientific advancement as well as cultural refinement do not necessarily lead to a more peaceful world. Moreover, the episode focuses on the power games between Frobisher and Ayr who each try to play off what they see as their knowledge of the situation and their power – e.g. as an established composer vs. an unknown but inspired one – against each other.

A young journalist, Luisa Rey, is the protagonist of the third story set in the 1970s. At great personal risk, she makes public the dangers connected to a new kind of nuclear reactor while the corporation which wants to build this reactor tries very hard to suppress the publication of this knowledge. This story centers on the growing dangers for humanity connected to an advancement of technology, i.e. nuclear power and its risks. These risks are augmented by the political system being undermined by economic interests, a continuation of the tendencies already apparent in episode one. While it is individuals who exploit their knowledge about the Hydra nuclear reactor for their profit, their ability to do so is due to a fault inherent in the political and economic system portrayed.

The fourth story is set in the near future and centers on the vanity publisher Timothy Cavendish who, against his wishes, finds himself in an old people’s home and desperately tries to escape from this institution. This episode deals less explicitly with the power structures of society than episodes one and three. It instead concentrates on the workings of power and knowledge on the individual level, as Cavendish is completely cut off from information about the outside world and a powerless prisoner in the old people’s home. Though Timothy’s case represents an extreme, this abuse of power again seems to be inbuilt in the political and economic system, which removes members who become useless from its midst, while at the same time profiting from them as much as possible (Timothy’s relatives pay for his stay at the old people’s home).¹

1 This also serves as a transition to episode five. In episode four, the production of human clones who are at the center of the following episode, is mentioned in passing and one of the themes of the episode is prefigured: the treatment of ageing and less productive people is found in a much more radical form in

The novel moves on to a more distant future in the fifth episode. Here, the world has mostly become uninhabitable because of environmental destruction, and the remaining inhabitable zones are ruled by powerful corporations that rigidly control all access to knowledge. In the zone at the center of this episode, Nea So Copros, the tendencies apparent especially in episode one and three have culminated in the fusion of politics and economy. Nea So Copros strictly regulates which group of the population is allowed to know what and employs its own version of a 1984-like *Newspeak*. Again, this episode shows that a higher degree of technology does not lead to a better life for everybody, as parts of the population have comfortable lives but are constantly being misinformed, while other groups – immigrants and clones (called fabricants) – are exploited and have short and uncomfortable lives. The episode focuses on how the fabricant Sonmi-451 is brought into being by knowledge (technological knowledge about cloning) and how all her individual knowledge is socially constructed.

The final episode portrays a future where modern-day states have collapsed and only small communities remain, which have lost most of modern technology. One of these communities, the Valleysmen, live in a fairly peaceful and, in comparison to most other societies in the novel, exploitation-free way, illustrating again that higher technological progress does not necessarily lead to societies characterized by more justice. This episode shows that knowledge can be legitimized differently, as the Valleysmen have a magical worldview as opposed to the empirical and scientific one of the modern societies portrayed in the novel. However, this way of looking at the world seems as true and adequate to its adherents as a scientific one to members of the modern societies portrayed in *Cloud Atlas*.

The novel undercuts the notion of historical progress, not only by depicting the break-down of civilization but also through its circular form. Except for episode six, all episodes are divided in two. In the first half of the novel, the episodes are arranged chronologically with episode six at the end, while in the second half of the novel the episodes are arranged in reverse chronology, thus ending with the beginning. The form of the novel moreover contributes to the discussion of knowledge, as the ways, in which

episode five, as these clones are killed after twelve years, when they have served their purpose.

the episodes are narrated, represent different forms of knowledge. They are each narrated through different media, comprising oral narratives as well as written texts, thereby tracing the transformation and transmission of narrative through time in the context of a cultural history of the media (Breidenbach 196–98). The first episode takes the form of a diary (later on published as a book), the second that of letters, the third is a novel, the fourth an autobiography made into a film, the fifth an interview stored in audiovisual form in a futuristic technological device called an orison, and the sixth an oral narrative. All of these intradiegetic texts are found by the protagonists in later episodes, connecting the different episodes and also – by the way they are received and used by the characters who find them – showing different ways of dealing with written relics from the past and also proving how little is transmitted into the future. Questions of knowledge are thus pervasive in *Cloud Atlas*, as the novel looks at vastly different kinds and forms of knowledge.

3 Knowledge and Power in *Cloud Atlas*

Knowledge and power are omnipresent in *Cloud Atlas* and connected in different ways. The dictum “knowledge is power” certainly holds true for the novel. One connection consists in the control of knowledge by power and the reinforcement of power through knowledge. The power gained by the control of knowledge is spelled out clearly in “An Orison of Sonmi~451” (episode five) where the hierarchical structure of the state is based on differences in knowledge (e.g. about the world, the past or the state’s social practices). As Sonmi~451 realizes in the course of her self-education at university: “What if the differences between social strata stem not from genomics or inherent excellence or even dollars, but differences in knowledge? [...] [W]ould this not mean that the whole Pyramid [the social organization of Nea So Copros] is built on shifting sands?” (231).

The power of controlling knowledge is furthermore exemplified by the corporations in the two episodes “An Orison of Sonmi~451” and “Half Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery”. In both episodes, the corporations keep vital information secret: Nea So Copros tries to suppress the truth about its treatment of fabricants, e.g. their slaughter after twelve years (360), just as in the “Half Lives”-episode, the corporation “Seaboard”

attempts to hide the facts about the dangers of the Hydra nuclear reactor, even resorting to assassination (e.g. 113–14). The importance of secrets to hold on to power is not restricted to corporations, as in “An Orison” the different faculties of Nea So Copros’ university fight against each other for power by using intrigues, causing a character to state: “Secrets are magic bullets” (242). On an individual level, the power of secrets is elaborated on in “Letters from Zedelghem”: the young composer Robert Frobisher retains a sense of power and superiority through gaining the post of amanuensis to the famous composer Vyvyan Ayr by trickery and secretly becoming the lover of Ayr’s wife. However, in a turn reminiscent of *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, in the end it becomes clear that Ayr and his family – backed by their powerful social position and experience in manipulating others – tricked Frobisher and now threaten to ruin his reputation and his chances of ever becoming a recognized composer (475). As both men create some of the most acclaimed works of art of their time but are presented as being dishonest and exploitative, the novel does not only question technological and scientific progress. It also shows that cultural, in this case artistic, achievement, is not automatically linked to more ethical ways of acting on the individual level and, as their way of acting is not depicted as something out of the ordinary, on the level of society on the whole.

Throughout the novel, secrets are portrayed as part of the human make-up, and, as such, are not always destructive. One example of that is that shortly after her “ascension,” Sonmi-451’s colleague Yoona-939 discovers a “hidden” room, a broom closet, in the diner where they live and work, which contains forgotten items, such as a book of fairy tales which she takes to represent the outside world. She feels empowered by her secret which helps her towards filling her need to gain a sense of self (196–98).

In addition to the power of keeping knowledge secret, there is a much more straightforward connection of knowledge and power in Mitchell’s novel, i.e. in the form of technological knowledge, especially weapons’ technology, which e.g. allows a more violent enemy tribe to conquer the Valleymen (307–08). In the Sonmi-451-episode, the corporations can control their citizens because of their industrial technology, and their surveillance technology, e.g. implanted ID chips (e.g. 335), helps them to keep the population under control. In ‘The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing,’ the technological knowledge of the missionaries on Raiatea (weapons, buildings

techniques, amenities to make life more comfortable) ensures their power over the natives (497–98).

On the whole, power and knowledge work in two different ways in *Cloud Atlas*, on the one hand in the sense of Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge, in the context of which power is seen as "something which circulates" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 98) and is never localized anywhere (Wolfreys 197) and on the other hand as the result of a biologically based human drive for more. The connections of power and knowledge which structure society and are beyond the control of the individual are demonstrated in the novel in different ways. For example, the exercise of power over the native populations of the Pacific is justified by what is seen as scientific knowledge, as truth: the superiority of the white race and the various degrees of inferiority of the other races (e.g. 506–08 "The Horrox Ladder of Civilization"). And, as the novel makes clear, those who use power in this way often act according to what they think is true and rightful, like the missionaries on Raiatea (498, 501). The same is true for the staff in the old people's home where Timothy Cavendish is kept ("The woman was sincere – bigots mostly are – but no less dangerous for that [...] [403]). Here, the nurses act in keeping with normalizing discourses (Foucault, *Discipline* 184). The novel shows how "Aurora House" produces "old people", not only by making their difference (especially a slowness and confusion about the modern world) more visible through medical examination but also by heightening or bringing about their deviation from what is considered as normal. To bring this about they are infantilized by denying them meaningful mental or physical exercise (e.g. 372–73).

In the "Sonmi-451"-episode, the university, a place especially associated with the search for truth, is structured through discourses of power, as it is dominated by the Unanimity Faculty (242), *Unanimity* being the corporation which rules Nea So Copros. Moreover, the university is characterized by the faculties which are most relevant in Nea So Copros, i.e. those concerned with genetics (e.g. the Faculty of Genome Surgery and the Faculty of Psychogenomics, 214). Here truths are produced which justify the division of the population into humans and fabricants (human and non-human) as well as in different social strata (the superiority of those who are genetically enhanced and therefore have a right to higher positions in society (231, 237). This exemplifies that "[d]isciplines of knowledge always divide the

human population into distinct categories that are one of the prime instruments of power" (Mansfield 59).

In contrast to the workings of power described above, *Cloud Atlas* also posits an apparently transcultural "hunger for more" (199, 286, 508–09), which enables material, cultural and technological advances and the development of civilization, but, in the form of a ruthless rule of the strongest, is also the means of humanity's self-destruction, leading to the "Fall" which has preceded episode six. The ambivalent result of the human "hunger for more" is summed up by one of the characters in "Letters from Zedelghem": "Our will to power, our science, and those v. [sic] faculties that elevated us from apes, to savages, to modern man, are the same faculties that'll snuff out *Homo sapiens* before this [the 20th] century is out!"² (462, cf. 286).

The novel gives many examples of the destructive aspect of knowledge as a result of the human "hunger for more," as knowledge is depicted as a central means of ascertaining and furthering the power of individuals and – as shown above – of ruling elites. Greedy individuals – who often openly adhere to a belief of the right of the strongest to rule – take advantage of power and knowledge offered to them (131–32, 508). In "The Pacific Journal," many of the people Adam Ewing meets are seeking their own gain, are willing to exploit, lie to or kill others. Examples of this are Dr. Goose who befriends Ewing, only to poison him to steal his money, or the captain of the *Prophetess* and his mate who are only interested in their gain, consequently mistreat and exploit their crew and lie to the missionaries on Raiatea. In "Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery" Alberto Grimaldi, the Chairman of Seaboard, is willing to do anything to keep his power but is in turn killed by an equally ruthless rival (408–10).

However, the "hunger for more" and a drive for knowledge are not always negative, as they might be used for the improvement of society and for a search for truth, even if, in the context of the novel as a whole,

2 The Nietzschean term "will to power" is repeatedly used in the novel, especially in connection with humanity's being in danger of bringing about its self-destruction (see also 131–32, 462). It can be defined in the following way: "All driving force, for Nietzsche, is to be understood as 'will to power' [...]. On this level, will to power refers to the desire every living thing has to grow, expand, and develop [...]." It does not necessarily involve the need to dominate others but often entails relations of command and obedience (Ansell-Pearson 47–50).

truth remains elusive and is never ultimately confirmed: what is seen as truth, depends on society, the individual and often on chance. The positive evaluation of a search for truth which is not motivated by a search for power is expressed in the following exchange between Adam and Meronym: “*Then the true true is diff’rent from the seemin’ true?*” said I [Zachry]. “*Yay, an’ it usually is, I mem’ry Meronym sayin’, an’ that’s why true true is presher’n’rarer’n diamonds*” (288) or, in Adam Ewing’ musings, which express a modernist belief in a “truer,” yet elusive Truth: “As many truths as men. Occasionally, I glimpse a truer Truth, hiding in imperfect simulacrum of itself, but as I approach, it bestirs itself & moves deeper into the thorny swamp of dissent” (17). Sonmi~451’s ascension, her quest for as much knowledge and for gaining access to as much truth as possible is shown as positive as well, even though it is revealed that she was betrayed from the beginning. Yet, the insights she acquires possibly exceed what *Unanimity* had planned and allow her to envision “a further endgame” (364), a vision which seems to become true as she turns out to have become the goddess of the peaceful Valleysmen.

4 The Social Construction of Knowledge

Throughout his novel, Mitchell traces the question of how what can be known and what is considered as knowledge is determined by the society an individual lives in. This is most evident in episode five, the story of Sonmi~451. It is brimming with references to classical dystopian novels like George Orwell’s *1984* or – as the name of the protagonist indicates – Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* while sharing many of its concerns with contemporary ones, such as Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy or Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*. As the protagonist Sonmi~451 is a clone who is literally brought into being by her society’s technological knowledge and all of what she knows is carefully regulated by the state she lives in, the novel’s theme of how the individual is brought into being by society is most pronounced in this episode. It centers on how this process is tied to the kind of knowledge (technologically/academically) a society has, what it sees as knowledge and how access to this knowledge is regulated. That this theme is most prominent in episode five is only fitting, as it is the final episode before civilization collapses: the developments already apparent in

the first episode, especially capitalist practices and the systematic exclusion and exploitation of specific groups of people (based on ethnicity, class, gender or age), culminate here.³

The story is set in the society of Nea So Copros, formerly Korea, which is now ruled by a corporation, *Unanimity*. Nea So Copros is a strongly hierarchical society which strictly controls and regulates the country's people. Capitalism has reached a stage where it has become a "super-discourse," governing all aspects of society, politics and religion. Thus, the concept of the "citizen" has been replaced by that of the consumer (189, 190), and religion has turned into a literal worship of money as the "Soul" has become an implant which serves as ID and credit card and people "genuflect [...] to the dollar" (196). Access to knowledge is tightly controlled and especially the lowest-ranking inhabitants, the enslaved fabricants, are fed only a very rudimentary image of the world. Consumers easily accept this as they are socialized into Nea So Copros' strictly hierarchical conception of society (e.g. 194, 231, 331–32) and profit from the fabricants' cheap labor. Consumers are kept in the dark about many of Nea So Copros' practices, not only concerning the clones. Even the archivist who records the story of Sonmi~451 has hardly any knowledge of the fabricants' slavery and of any form of opposition to Nea So Copros' totalitarian regime (e.g. 360, 364).

How the self and its knowledge of the world are socially shaped is primarily shown through Sonmi~451, a server at a fast-food restaurant called Papa Song's. The fabricants spend their whole life at the diner, are only taught enough words to be able to serve fast-food and to believe that the "Logoman" of their company, Papa Song, is God, whom they have to obey to reach Xultation – paradise – after twelve years (190). They are kept from learning or questioning by their genetic makeup and by eating drugged food (205). Except for Sonmi~451 and one of her colleagues whose "ascension" (191) – their development of a thirst for knowledge and

3 This begins in episode one when 19th-century colonialism is shown as being primarily driven by "capitalist interest in financial gain" (Bayer 352) and the natives are inscribed with "Western consumer culture" (Dimovitz 72). In "Half-lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery," corporations have already gained a great degree of power (443), a tendency which becomes even stronger in "An Orison of Sonmi~451," where the world is ruled by corporations.

learning – is triggered by changing the chemical components of their food, all their colleagues unquestioningly accept the limits of their knowledge. Sonmi~451 believes that the hunger for knowledge is a central proof of her humanity and was only suppressed by the composition of her food (191).

Though she is driven by a ferocious hunger for knowledge – about herself, the society she lives in and the world in general – and the story takes the form of a quest for truth and autonomy, her entire experience turns out to be part of Nea So Copros' careful management of knowledge: in a 1984-like twist, Sonmi~451 reveals to the archivist who records her story her realization that her “ascension” and flight through Nea So Copros were a carefully staged propaganda ploy. She assumes its purpose was to unite the human population against the fabricants and – through involving an opposition to Nea So Copros' regime called *Union* – to provide “Nea So Copros with the enemy required by any hierarchical state for social cohesion” (364). Thus Sonmi~451 realizes that she never escaped from being shaped by the state and that “[f]ree will plays no part” in her story (364).

The theme of how the society we live in determines what we know and what we consider as knowledge is also shown in the novel by pitting against each other very different kinds of society with different worldviews and different media systems. Here *Cloud Atlas* primarily contrasts modern Western societies as they emerged since the Renaissance and especially during the Enlightenment and traditional, small-scale societies. The latter appear in the novel mainly in the first episode as the native population subjugated by Western colonizers and as the Valleysmen in episode six. The societies resembling the modern Western model are based on the assumption of an autonomous, rational individual who relies on him- or herself, not on authorities, and whose perceptions and judgments are strongly based on the empirical. Moreover, these societies are cultures of distance determined by the written, audiovisual or digital recording of communications which do not require the bodily presence of communicators (Kley 47–50). They are contrasted to cultures of proximity, predominately oral cultures, made up of small communities, which need bodily presence and mutual acquaintance for communication. Here, shared cultural knowledge is valued over the individual's interpretation of the world. In the novel, these societies have a magic conception of the world and ascribe truth and knowledge to

metaphysical entities whose intervention serves as an explanation of the world and of natural phenomena.

While the societies which work more or less according to the principles of modern Western societies are dominant in the first five of the novel's six episodes, in the sixth episode, all the modern societies have collapsed and there is a return of traditional communities which coincides with a return to oral narratives. In the novel, it is shown that different approaches to constructing the world and to legitimizing knowledge might work equally well. The prime examples of this are Adam Ewing, the notary of the first episode, and Zachry, a member of the tribe of the Valleysmen in episode six, who relate a similar experience, but make sense of it in very different terms: Ewing by explaining everything rationally, Zachry by taking recourse to supernatural entities.

Ewing has set out on an excursion to scale a hill which will give him a view of Chatham Isle. He feels completely cut off from civilization, even his watch has stopped.⁴ The situation he finds himself in is unfamiliar, sights and sounds are turning uncanny. Instead of ascribing those sights and sounds to ghosts or other supernatural phenomena, however, he immediately rationalizes his experiences and finds natural explanations:

I was circumambulating the crater's lip, seeking a clearer trail back to Ocean Bay, when a startling *hoo-roosh!* *Sent me diving to the ground:* - the mind abhors a vacancy & is wont to people it with phantoms, thus I glimpsed first a trusked hog charging, then a Maori warrior, spear held aloft, his face inscribed with the ancestral hatred of his race. 'Twas but a mollyhawk, wings 'flapping' the air like a wind jammer. (19)

When Ewing hears a strange hum, he traces it back to its source and finds out that it was only flies drawn to excrements (21), and when he thinks he sees a human heart hanging in a tree which seems to pulse as if alive, he immediately discards this as unlikely and investigates what it might really be (21). In a similar manner Ewing immediately discounts a confused dream he has after falling into a hole and being knocked out. Though he takes recourse to a supernatural entity by thanking God for having survived the

4 The importance of clock time for modern society is stressed in the episode "Sloosha's Crossing" (257), where the Valleysmen's last watch is carefully preserved in the school-house.

fall, this does not affect his approach to the world, as he quickly deduces from the dendroglyphs (tree carvings made by a tribe who had lived in that area) that there has to be a way out of the hole (20).

Ewing's empirical and rationalizing approach to the world is contrasted to Zachry's magical view of the world, which in the context of his narration, however, is as successful for establishing explanations of the events and making meaning of the world as Ewing's: Zachry finds explanations for good or bad occurrences or for natural phenomena by tracing them to supernatural entities. For him nature is animate, e.g. he hears a bird talk to him (251). When Zachry finds himself alone in the woods – as Adam Ewing does in the first episode – he encounters Old Georgie, the Valleysmen's version of the devil. For the implied reader (who presumably has an empirical view of the world) a plausible explanation presents itself by the appearance of a bird, which is again in parallel to the Adam Ewing episode. Later on, in the episode Zachry – similarly to Adam Ewing – climbs a volcano, Mauna Kea on Hawaii, which is very dangerous for the Valleysmen (282–96). In this extraordinary situation, he encounters Old Georgie once more and sees ghosts. Rational explanations as delivered by his travelling companion Meronym, a member of a group called the Prescients who have retained the knowledge of the time before the break-down of the modern world, do not change his perception of the situation (292). Though Zachry realizes that Meronym has greater worldly knowledge, he still thinks that his own approach yields, in the end, more relevant knowledge, as Meronym does not know much about what really matters: “*See, [...] Meronym knows a lot ‘bout Smart an’ life but Valleysmen know more ‘bout death*” (288).

In contrasting Ewing's and Zachry's perception of the world, *Cloud Atlas* argues that what is seen as real and true and what counts as knowledge of the world actually depends on cultural context. For the Valleysmen the belief in their Goddess Sonmi and in the devil Old Georgie are true. As Meronym states when Zachry wants to know why she keeps her knowledge about society before the “Fall” (the end of modern civilization) to herself: “*Valleysmen’d not want to hear [...] Times are you say a person’s b’liefs ain’t true, they think you’re sayin’ their lifes ain’t true an’ their truths ain’t true.*” (287) Here the novel questions the traditional Western belief in the superiority and self-evidence of a worldview based on rationality, as the Valleysmen do make sense of their world, live successfully in it for

generations and are not eager to take over Meronym's rationalist, agnostic view of the world.

This ties in with *Cloud Atlas*' doubting the existence of a continuing civilizing process (Mennell 105–07), i.e. a more or less linear progress towards more rationality, improved technological and scientific knowledge, a higher development of art as well as a more peaceful and non-violent way of life. Instead, the novel creates an ambivalent image of human progress. In contrast to the Valleysmen who have a very positive image of the time before the "Fall" and are "oblivious to the events that precipitated the downfall of the civilized and any negative elements of civilized life" (Sims 187), Meronym has access to a greater store of knowledge about the past and is of the opinion – supported by the preceding episodes – that "*Old'uns tripped their own Fall*" (286):

[They had] more gear, more food, faster speeds, longer lives, easier lives, more power, yay [...] Now the Hole World is big but it weren't big 'nuff for that hunger what made Old'uns rip out the skies an' boil up the seas an' poison soil with crazed atoms an' donkey 'bout with rotted seeds so new plagues was borned an' babbits was freakbirthed. (286)

A further difference between modern and traditional societies is that of their media systems, i.e. the contrast between a primarily oral and a primarily written culture. This ties in with another aspect of the question of what we can know in *Cloud Atlas*, i.e. the question of the transmission of knowledge through time.

5 The Instability of Knowledge

The different media through which the episodes of the novel are narrated draw the readers' attention to questions of how knowledge is transmitted, stored for posterity, and decoded by future recipients. This ties in with the theme of the cultural construction of knowledge, as the effort which is placed in transmitting knowledge into the future and the purposes and ways of reconstructing it hinge on the kind of society which does the reconstruction: how a text is read depends on the recipient and on the act of reading. *Cloud Atlas* demonstrates this by the fact that the second halves of the first five episodes are only "revealed" after one of the characters engages with a text, film, or recording referring to the episode preceding

it in time and actively searches for the second half of the story. Something can only be transmitted into the future if there is a recipient who engages with it and the transmitted material is “to be consumed, interpreted, and potentially transformed by (or transformative for) its inheritors” (Shoop and Ryan 100).

This does not only hold true for the readers who are described in the novel, but also for the implied readers. Due to the intense inter- and intratextuality of *Cloud Atlas*, the richness of the readers’ experience depends very much on their cultural and literary knowledge, as well as their ability to notice the many connections between the different episodes (O’Donnell 70–83). Though most of the episodes turn out to be fictional accounts – “Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery” is a novel, Timothy Cavendish’s adventure is viewed by Sonmi-451 in the form of a film – readers are “constantly tempted to forget [this] when entering the narrative world of the text and holding on to the narrative contract that says we will accept the world of the novel as a self-contained unit with its own rules” (Dimovitz 84). Therefore it is difficult to keep apart the levels of the novel which are supposed to represent real events – and therefore convey historical knowledge – and those which are fictional, a tendency which becomes even more marked as it is one of the supposedly fictional accounts, the novel about Luisa Rey’s adventures, which mirrors the real case of Karen Silkwood who died in a car accident in the 1970s while trying to make public safety problems at the nuclear facility where she worked, and whose story was later on turned into a film.⁵

Mitchell’s novel moreover contains the explicit description of numerous reading experiences. With regard to the effect of narratives on future readers, it quickly becomes clear that they often interpret the transmissions from the past in a completely different context from the original one. Thus Sonmi-451 attributes a much greater cultural weight to the film version of Timothy Cavendish’s “ghastly ordeal” than this film presumably merited in the time of its creation. Not only does it enable Sonmi-451 to briefly escape into the world of the imagination and experience a rare moment of happiness (365), for her the film is of high value because it allows a glimpse

5 For further examples of the “blurring and questioning the divisions between literary and historical narratives,” see McCulloch (146).

of the past, as usually “*any* historical discourse” (243) is outlawed in Nea So Copros. Therefore, the film is also opens up a counter-discourse to Nea So Copros’ dominant ideology. It allows a glimpse of lost knowledge, e.g. of how aging people looked, by giving “those lost worlds a brief resurrection” (244).

The after-life of Sonmi~451 depicts how the respective present is transformed by its transmission into the future, as Sonmi and her story survive into the future in two ways. In the episode “Sloosha’s Crossin’” she is venerated as a goddess by the Valleysmen⁶ Their knowledge of her has probably been passed on orally. Independently of that, an orison with her testimony has survived. The two versions of Sonmi~451 are so disparate that Zachry cannot recognize his goddess in the “ghost-girl” talking in the orison, even though Meronym explains the connection between the two (290–91). One generation further into the future, this historical knowledge is lost completely, as the orison is only turned on because it emits sounds and images. Its new function is to serve as entertainment and as an escape from the present (324–25).

This precarious link of past and future, the difficulty of transmitting knowledge, is stressed by the novel in other ways as well. There are several examples which deal with the loss of knowledge of how to decipher recordings from the past, e.g. the tree carvings Adam Ewing finds cannot be decoded anymore because the tribe who made them is nearly extinguished (20). In the story “Sloosha’s Crossin’,” the Valleysmen are wiped out or enslaved by a neighboring tribe, the Konas, which causes the recordings they make of their lives and collect in a specific place called the “Icon’ry” (270) lose their intelligibility and meaning. Thus, Mitchell’s novel emphasizes that sheer chance is involved in the survival of a recording: only because Meronym wanted to study the religion of the Valleysmen does she upload Sonmi~451’s story to her orison, thereby enabling Zachry’s son to inherit it after Zachry is dead; and only by chance does Frobisher find the second half of the book made from Adam Ewing’s diary when looking under his bed.

6 The Valleysmen’s social organization with an abess as their leader is reminiscent of an anti-capitalist, ecologically-oriented community of people who shelter Sonmi~451 for a night and who are also ruled by an abess (344–49).

In addition to exemplifying how unstable the links between past and future are, *Cloud Atlas* contains explicit reflections typical of historiographic metafiction, especially in the “Half Lives”-episode where one of the characters muses on the fact that there are no objective reconstructions of the past and that often it is power which determines the meaning and view of as well as access to the past (as shown in the “Sonmi~451”-episode analyzed above):

The actual past is brittle, ever-dimming + ever more problematic to access + reconstruct: in contrast, the virtual past is malleable, ever-brightening + ever more difficult to circumvent/expose as fraudulent.

The present presses the virtual past into its own service, to lend credence to its mythologies + legitimacy to the imposition of will. Power seeks + is the right to ‘landscape’ the virtual past. (He who pays the historian calls the tune). (409)

All of this stresses how difficult it is to retain knowledge of the past: the accounts of bygone times are interpreted in the present’s frame of reference and according to the interests which dominate the present.

6 Conclusion

Cloud Atlas is an extensive meditation on the different forms knowledge can take, the construction of knowledge in different periods and societies, the connection of knowledge and power; how knowledge shapes people’s lives as well as determines the quality of their lives. The novel posits a “hunger for more” – especially more power with the help of more knowledge – as *the* defining human trait, a trait which has the power of ensuring the survival of humanity (through higher technology and a mastery of the world) but also of destruction (abuse of knowledge in connection to a drive for power). It explores the consequences of this dangerous and potentially destructive conjunction on the level of the individual, featuring many characters who use or rather misuse knowledge to gain power. Yet, the novel also explores power and knowledge and the way they mutually depend on each other in a Foucauldian sense, by showing how individuals are produced by the structures and rules of the society they live in. These rules include what counts as knowledge and who has access to how much/what kind of knowledge. The most extreme example can be seen in episode five where it becomes clear that the fabricant Sonmi~451 is in all respects – in her body, mind and

even her temporary belief in the autonomy of her inner self – a product of the society she lives in. This is not only the case for Sonmi-451, who is at the bottom of the social scale, but also for those higher up in the hierarchy. Their lives are less narrowly circumscribed, allowing them to doubt and exploit some aspects of the power structure of Nea So Copros and of what is presented as truth or relevant knowledge to those placed below them, but they do not generally question their society and the tenets it is built on.

Cloud Atlas casts doubt on the assumption that a higher level of scientific knowledge is necessarily connected to better lives for more people and a more meaningful construction of the world, as – in the world created by the novel – the societies which are least exploitative and destructive are traditional ones or small, ecologically-minded communities on the margins of modern societies. Moreover, in the novel members of traditional societies do not feel a lack of possibilities to explain the world. Their magical worldview enables them to construct the world in a way which is as satisfactory to them as an empirical one is for members of modern societies. In addition, the novel shows that science and empiricism do not necessarily offer greater truths, e.g. when reminding the reader that some theories which were accepted as scientific knowledge at one time, such as the hierarchy of the different races in the 19th century, served as tools of the West to subjugate the rest of the world and were thoroughly discredited as scientific theories later on. However, despite criticizing the assumption of an automatic link of knowledge and progress and despite showing that knowledge can be legitimized differently, the novel does ascribe some benefits to a scientifically and technologically minded worldview: Meronym can heal people Zachry's tribe cannot heal, she can give Zachry information about the world and the past and she can overpower the tribe's enemies with the help of her weapons (278–82, 284–86, 307–08).

Cloud Atlas poses the question of how the seemingly inevitable move towards the self-destruction of society shown in episodes one to six can be countered, i.e. whether the negative aspects of the human drive for more – more knowledge to gain more power – can be kept in check. Part of the answer the novel gives is that the drive for knowledge does have a positive side as well, when, e.g., knowledge is sought as part of a search for (an ever elusive) truth and especially with the aim of contributing to aspects of civilization which improve the life of all people (Luisa Rey's search for

the truth about the Hydra nuclear reactor or Meronym's medical abilities). The positive aspect and usage of knowledge is coupled with a belief in and a hope for a better society, and linked like this, serves as a counterweight to the drive for power. The belief that a better world is possible is made explicit at a strategic point of the novel, namely at its end. The statement made here is thereby invested with great weight, even though it is qualified by the readers' knowledge that the hope expressed here, at the end of the episode set farthest in the past, will not be fulfilled in the future unfolding throughout the novel: "If we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, [...] if we *believe* leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass" (528).

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