Sovereignty, the State of Exception and Counter-Culture: Toward a Transnational Critique of State Power in 20th and 21st Century Anglophone Fiction

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the way in which contemporary fiction is highly concerned with sovereign power and the state of exception, as described by Giorgio Agamben in *State of Exception*. While in the last decade Agamben’s work has provided a new locus for the study of state power, I argue that disquiet over the reach of state power into everyday life has existed in fiction since at least the 1980s. Reading James Joyce, Margaret Atwood, Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Don DeLillo and William Gibson alongside Agamben’s theories of state power and the state of exception sheds light on fictional representations of modern developments in power, the state and the corporate world. Through close analysis of philosophical and fictional texts, I draw out the complex politics of contemporary novelists and underscore the importance of both fictional and theoretical representations of contemporary political power.

The dissertation consists of four chapters. Chapter One examines what I contend is new about Agamben’s work on power which is that, unlike Foucault, he accounts for the kind of power that may produce a concentration camp, and examines the place of this power at the heart of contemporary politics. Through analyses of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* I examine the ways in which Agamben’s theories move us towards a clearer understanding of representations of state power in contemporary fiction. In Chapter Two I discuss sovereign power in Rushdie’s postcolonial India and England, and I describe how
national identities of citizens of, or migrants to, those countries take shape in a society whose very fabric is affected by power that is frequently unrestricted by the law or by democracy. In Chapter Three I consider the “aftermath” of sovereign power in the work of Kazuo Ishiguro. In particular, I argue that he represents the extent to which sovereign power conditions culture and society, and how contemporary art and intellectual thought have failed as effective countermeasures to the power that may produce the state of exception. In the final Chapter, I consider the ways in which violence constitutes a form of resistance to sovereign power in the novels of William Gibson and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*; further, I assess Gibson’s new narratives of space as potential counters to the state of exception.

While Agamben’s work provides an opportunity to highlight the extent to which sovereign power and the state of exception are at work in contemporary novels, I contend that fiction represents these phenomena and their significance more completely than Agamben is able to. The use of figurative and experimental language and narrative techniques is highly effective in conveying the nuances and the experiential realities of state power, thereby moving the reader’s understanding beyond the abstract and the conceptual.
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Introduction

This project was originally intended to be a re-appropriation of “postmodernism” in the context of the study of contemporary fiction. I wanted to show that, as all literary production changes with time, so postmodern orientations to the world had altered from the period of the 1980s and early 90s out of which so many influential studies of that phenomenon had grown. Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton and many others had produced so wide a range of scholarship on postmodernism that, paradoxically, I felt that the authoritative heft of their articles, books and high-level university positions had rather frozen or imprisoned an area of cultural enterprise that, by its very nature as a “post”-x incidence or trend, was necessarily always moving and metamorphosing. I wanted, in short, to advance a study of my kind of postmodernism: the novels, theory and criticism that I felt, taken together, described so appropriately my experience of the modern world. I hope that I have achieved this last goal, but it is at the cost of one very significant omission: that of “postmodernism” itself, the very term that started it all.

As soon as I had made significant distance into a more comprehensive survey of postmodernism’s major thinkers, I realised that there were two enormous problems with using the concept as a foundational term for a scholarly dissertation. The first was that almost no cross-party agreement, as it were, or consensus had been reached as to what postmodernism actually was, particularly in the light of the fact that most authors associated with the word by critics seemed to be uninterested in, or completely disavow, the term’s relevance to their work. What critical alliances there were seemed to be, perhaps partly as a result of the bitter “theory wars” in university literature departments, embroiled in the reductively basic question of whether this multi-headed hydra of a cultural phenomenon was a “good” or “bad” thing. (Post-)Marxists like
Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson were quite obviously in the latter camp, convinced that postmodern art was just the cultural propaganda wing of an ever more sophisticated homogenising global capitalism. Those such as Ihab Hassan, Brian McHale and, of course, Jean-Francois Lyotard, were more celebratory, proposing that the postmodern was the only appropriate, and indeed ethical, response to a world split asunder by the unassimilable horrors of World War Two, the atomic bombs, and the Shoah. There were, of course, more moderate and nuanced voices, most notable among which is Linda Hutcheon. Even she, however, by declaring in an updated version of *The Politics of Postmodernism*, during the suitably titled “Epilogue,” that postmodernism is “over” – making it sound more like a love affair than a critical and cultural phenomenon – showed that her conception of the term was markedly different from mine (Hutcheon 166). The phenomenon that she declared over, for instance, is one that I still consider to be something more like “early-postmodernism,” forever tied, as all literature is to its time, to the upheavals and struggles of the 1980s. Hutcheon’s declaration, to me at least, seems rather sadly motivated by embarrassment at what she sees now as her own over-celebratory endorsement of the concept and its art. Just as depressingly, her epilogue disallows the privilege that we seem perfectly happy to allow other literary and cultural genres or movements and that she was so proud of postmodernism for embracing: the chance to shift, change and metamorphose.

What I did not want to do with my dissertation was to add yet another dissenting voice to this unruly, mutually-contradictory chorus, blithely declaring that I was right and everyone else was wrong simply, perhaps, by virtue of my growing up in a different era. This impression was reinforced by my second significant problem with “postmodernism” which was that, despite the enormously rich critical history of the term through which I have barely glanced above, the idea
of the postmodern has simultaneously – in more conventional and everyday discourse – become something like a more disappointing cousin of the dead metaphor: which I half-jokingly think of as the undead concept.

With “undead concept” I mean that, despite being used so much in public discourse and common parlance that it essentially has no meaning (I still hear the phrase “oh that’s so postmodern” directed at everything from skyscrapers to Hello Kitty Halloween displays), the word “postmodern” stubbornly refuses to die, continuing to shamble around like a refugee from a *Dawn of the Dead* shopping mall. The irony of such a simile reflects particularly poorly on postmodernism, for even that staple of the undead film, the zombie, has received a major update of late, with the stumbling foot-draggers of yesteryear now sprinting around like pallid, terrifying Varsity athletes in movies like Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* and computer games like Valve’s *Left 4 Dead*. No such zappy resuscitation seems possible with “postmodernism,” however, the term having long since been vacuumed up and held prisoner by the force of eternal entropy which is *cliché* and overuse.

I realised that I did not want to resurrect a discussion of postmodernism when I recalled a conversation I had with a student colleague of mine at undergraduate level at Royal Holloway, University of London. Graham was trying to explain Saussure’s ideas on linguistics to me by using the example of how the signified of the sign “caravan” was different in every person’s case. He explained that, because of a happy childhood spent holidaying in caravans, he had very positive associations with the word, an experience which I realised contrasted completely with my few cold, wet and interminable experiences in the same device. We would thus have any conversation where the word “caravan” was used coloured differently by those experiences. In my opinion, “postmodernism” today could be the ultimate example of this. It is a word that
almost everyone knows and uses, but almost no-one can agree on. Above all I wanted my dissertation to be not about one word and the endless disagreements over its meaning, but about my material. This substance was the novels that I knew were intimately connected together by ideas, emotions, politics and feelings: the work of James Joyce, Margaret Atwood, Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Don DeLillo and William Gibson.

Hopefully that list of authors seems quite disparate, for if so that shows that, despite my turning away from “postmodernism,” that the alternative theoretical and critical narrative that I claim links some of their works still needs to be drawn out. The germination of this non-postmodern approach to contemporary literature came with the challenging philosophical focus of my Masters degree at Royal Holloway. Habermas’s still-seductive calls for a return to enlightenment rationality and ethics; Benjamin’s criticism of the violence underpinning the modern state; Arendt’s attention to the banal and predictable causes of Hitler’s authoritarian rule; and the revolutionary work on power, prisons and sexuality by Foucault; all of these rich and antagonistic approaches started to reshape my thinking about literature and the world and, to an extent, underpin the project in your hands today.

I am sure every academic and scholar has had something like a foundational thinker or text(s), or some reading experience that, at a particular place and time, spurred them forward into a new argument or project. I do not think this necessarily makes that thinker or text different, special or superior, but I do think that the confluence can be highly productive. For me, this moment came when I read Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, for he seemed to unify some of the most interesting ideas of several exciting thinkers like Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida. What struck me in particular was how he gave credit to, but identified the limits in, some of the work of Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt. Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, like
Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, has been highly influential. If I position myself as an Agamben scholar, however, I can make an attempt at explaining the limits of both these books that *Homo Sacer* and *The State of Exception* try to address. Foucault famously – and, for Agamben, fatally – chooses not to cover the concentration camp, preferring to focus on the prison, while Arendt’s fantastically close attention to the subject of rule by decree in Weimar and Nazi Germany does not address the widespread, multi-national history of that phenomenon across governments, both democratic and non-, over Western Europe well before the 1930s.

This is the gap into which Agamben’s books step. His position is that the power to produce the concentration camps, the form of executive power or rule by decree, expanded to its end point – in the form of martial law or the state of siege – that Agamben calls “sovereign power,” was not some historical accident or exception, but in fact has been a crucial aspect of government since Napoleon first declared the “fictitious state of siege” in 1811. Due to the varying names for martial law in different countries and languages, Agamben calls the political and legal state in which the concentration camp can be produced “the state of exception,” named after its all too frequently specious justification as a temporary measure in response to a supposedly exceptional circumstance. Following the Nazi juridical theorist Carl Schmitt, Agamben terms the kind of power that can establish the state of exception, where legal protections of communities and citizens may be stripped away, “sovereign power.”

There are problems with Agamben, of course, and my project does attempt to explore at least some of these: sovereign power is my starting point, rather than my end goal. For my own part I am always aware that I am also working in translation rather than in the original. I therefore try to limit close analysis of grammar and diction in these works, preferring instead to concentrate on ideas and argumentative and rhetorical structures. Despite these challenges,
Agamben’s argument in *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception* offered me the possibility of a critical orientation to certain contemporary works of fiction which helped to highlight similar concerns among those texts. Upon reading of sovereign power and the state of exception, I realised that several of my hitherto-postmodern novels, from Dublin under martial law in *Ulysses*, though the treatment of immigrants in Brixton Brickhall in *The Satanic Verses* and into Ishiguro’s imprisoned teenage schoolchildren in *Never Let Me Go*, were very concerned with the continual presence of the state of exception in modern life, and with the challenges of how to represent it and the kind of power that gives rise to it.

The relevance literature might have to an examination of Agamben’s ideas seems very clear to me, for there is little doubt that Agamben writes *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception* out of the impulse to revolt against the contemporary dominance of sovereign power and violence. Such a revolution involves, in the first place, the bringing to light of the existence, and effects, of that force (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 86). I will argue in my first chapter that in *Midnight’s Children* and in *Ulysses*, for example, the power to bring about the state of exception, and particularly the way in which that force frequently operates through the “normal” order, is potentially more open to representation in fiction than in philosophy. Instead of rationalizing and enumerating the facets and the history of sovereign power, authors of fiction may instead draw the reader through an experience of what it is to be continually exposed to this nexus of violence and law. Agamben’s theory of sovereign power and his attention to its most potent sign, the state of exception, are both interesting ways of approaching contemporary novels because they provide the opportunity to draw out hitherto under-appreciated aspects of those texts. My first chapter examines what I contend is new about Agamben’s work on power, and – with assistance
from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* – suggests ways in which this new thought might be able to impact critical reading of contemporary fiction.

Reading novels in the context of the concept of sovereign power provides for an alternative narrative of what characterises contemporary fiction to that of the “postmodern,” “postcolonial,” “national” or “transnational.” This narrative tells a different story of modern prose writing that relates how, just like Arendt, Foucault and Agamben, authors like Atwood, Rushdie, Ishiguro and Gibson are also very interested in modern developments in power and how it is deployed, particularly by the state and the corporate world. The novels in this study are frequently centred around their own interpretations of what Agamben calls “sovereign power.” Some, as I shall claim in chapter two in which I discuss sovereign power in Rushdie’s postcolonial India and England, write about its prevalence in concepts of nation-building, and how the national identities of citizens of, or migrants to, those countries are affected by living in a society whose very fabric is affected by power frequently unrestricted by the law or by democracy. Other novels consider what I call, in the third chapter, the “aftermath” of sovereign power, representing the extent to which major uses of such force condition political movements and identities as far-flung as postwar Japanese pacifism and contemporary art. In the final chapter I wish to consider the concept of violence as a form of resistance to sovereign power in the novels of William Gibson and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and it is this narrative trajectory of my dissertation which I wish to foreground a little more now.

Just as Agamben finds unexplored areas in the work of earlier theorists of power, such as Foucault’s omission of the concentration camp and his more general lack of attention to the multi-national history of martial law, so my own project finds fault also with Agamben’s ideas. His attempt to curtail discussion of the state of exception by addressing it in purely legal terms,
as a juridical phenomenon, is both forced and, at points, unconvincing. The fiction I examine in this project takes a more complete look at the nature of the kind of power that is able to declare and sustain a concentration camp, as well as giving readers more of a sense of what a modern state of exception might look or feel like to those affected by it. As I shall argue in my section of chapter one in which I consider Agamben’s discussion of the Roman *iustitium*, the state of exception, when not confined to the solid borders of the camp, is sufficiently challenging a concept to grasp that Agamben finds himself reaching after vague, figurative ideas and concepts. The figurative and the representational are, however, necessary strategies when confronted with any major intervention, such as the use of sovereign power, which is where the great strength of fiction comes in. I argue that the study of contemporary fiction holds great possibilities for the understanding of the nature, extent, and consequences of, the kind of power that may authorise the stripping of the most basic rights and freedoms associated with life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I claim that such a study also helps to enrich the understanding of those novels, providing an excellent basis for extended academic study.

Agamben’s work provides an opportunity to highlight the concepts of sovereign power and the state of exception at work in contemporary novels, but I contend that fiction explains the phenomena and their significance more completely than Agamben is able to. This ability is because of the novel’s ability to use figurative and experimental language and narrative techniques in order to better relate a concept the importance of which, because of its complexity and difficulty, can only truly be realised through metaphor and story. A recent collection of Agamben-centred criticism entitled *The Agamben Effect* is a rare book-length result of the increasing tendency for Agamben to be cited in literary or cultural studies papers, although the essays in that collection are of limited use for this project as they refer largely to his earlier work
on aesthetics (Ross). More serious study of Agamben still tends to be limited to what I might call “hard philosophy,” with two of the leaders of that branch of Agamben criticism being Steven DeCaroli and William Connolly. I owe a debt to these two thinkers for their excellent collection Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life, although it by necessity gives little consideration to the merits of Agamben’s ideas in the realm of literary or artistic studies.

My central claim in this dissertation is that contemporary fiction has been concerned with the phenomena that Agamben identifies as sovereign power and the state of exception for quite some time. While Agamben has provided the focalising terminology, the disquiet over the reach of state power into everyday life has existed in fiction since at least the 1980s. Literature and culture respond to the world they emerge from, and Atwood, Rushdie, Ishiguro, DeLillo and Gibson all discuss the power that may produce a state of exception, and convey dismay about its existence, mostly with a rather pessimistic view of the outcome of its use, and also the world that has produced it. While I am sure that there are other novels besides the ones that I have chosen that also portray concern about sovereign power, Rushdie’s major novels, Ishiguro’s A Pale View of Hills, An Artist of the Floating World, Never Let Me Go, DeLillo’s White Noise and Gibson’s “Sprawl” and “Bridge” Trilogies, alongside his newer book Pattern Recognition, are all special because they make different contributions to a multi-faceted consideration of sovereign power in the politics of our era. Rushdie’s work provides a tragic look into the challenges facing those who would champion multiplicity and hybridity in the face of the monolithic forces of the state and state-sanctioned corruption and communalism. Ishiguro’s first two novels examine the ramifications of the state of exception after it has passed, in post-war Japan, providing a unique insight into the political problems Rushdie prefers to tackle in medias res, taking us as he does back to the Amritsar massacre and the Brixton riots. Finally, I move to Don DeLillo and William
Gibson for, though they share their own brand of despondency about sovereign power and its capacity for using the new forces of media and technology to curtail human rights and freedoms, they also propose the possibility that literature, or at least artistic representation, might have a role in resisting sovereign power.

Paying attention to the major events in Rushdie’s most celebrated novels in the light of Agamben’s ideas in Homo Sacer and State of Exception, it is possible to detect a very different, defining, political narrative linking Midnight’s Children, The Satanic Verses, and The Moor’s Last Sigh. In my second chapter I argue that this is a story characterised not, as critical consensus most frequently has it, by “magic realism,” but by what I call “tragic realism:” the magical promise of hybrid identity, politics and culture undone by savage events all too frequently involving sovereign power and the state of exception. This reading in turn results in the opening up of an even less magical reading of Rushdie’s most recent work. This interpretation uncovers Rushdie’s turning away from, or even mourning the failure of, the magical realist style and the effervescent, multiplicitous politics that is associated with his work.

One of the most exciting aspects of this project, for me at least, is the way in which it enables the coming together of conventionally-disparate authors. My third chapter is inspired by Agamben’s description of the iustitium – or juridically vacuous state of chaos – in ancient Rome, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s representation of the upheaval in wartime Tokyo under and after the Allied bombing raids. Ishiguro shows conditions so bad that mothers feel forced to drown their own newborn children and flee family, homes and even the cities of their birth. Ishiguro’s subject in A Pale View of Hills and An Artist of the Floating World is always, by implication, the military regime of pre-war, wartime and post-war Japan. Reading with a focus on the kind of state power that produced the camps in Machuria, the atrocities in Nanking and, most prominent in these
novels, the insane drive to fight an unwinnable war against the rest of the world, establishes an interpretation of Ishiguro’s work that goes beyond a psychological representation of trauma and of postwar generational change. My reading of Ishiguro instead posits that these social representations are not ends in themselves, but means by which he examines the social and cultural conditions that made Japan vulnerable to militarism and to the subsequent state of exception in Japan, as well as abroad, that sent teachers off to be tortured and a whole generation away to die. Further, this reading expands the contextual field of Ishiguro’s texts, for in showing the cultural trauma of the aftermath of the state of exception Ishiguro truly realises its terrible ramifications in a way Agamben does not, for Ishiguro argues convincingly that art and intellectual thought are not privileged solutions to such massive political problems. Much as my reading of Rushdie opens up the possibility of an alternative way of understanding his oeuvre, so my interpretation of Ishiguro’s work provides a way of constructive a consistent narrative of aspects of his novels up to the present day. In *Never Let Me Go* I claim that, despite their differences, Ishiguro’s earliest novels and one of his latest share a very similar politics when read in the light of my starting point, of Agamben’s description of the state of exception as a paradigm for modern politics. Ishiguro’s shift from showing sovereign power’s ramifications during, and after, wartime Japan, to the abstracted, alternative England of *Never Let Me Go*, shows that he has been pursuing his own critique of such political problems for over twenty years – well before Agamben started his foray into *Dottrina Dello Stato* or “State Theory.”

Writers like Don DeLillo and William Gibson are sufficiently concerned with the violence of sovereign power that I argue they propose their own version of what I will, in an homage to Benjamin, call “revolutionary violence,” that uses violence as a counter to oppressive force (Benjamin, 300). In essence, in *White Noise* and several of Gibson’s books, these authors
propose taking on aspects of the violence used by repressive political forces as a method for countering their interpretative dominance, for what is at stake is nothing less than gaining back and leveraging interpretative control over events and narratives. The concept of this kind of revolutionary violence has philosophical precedent, best expressed by Hobbes with his assertion that "the wickedness of bad men also compels good men to have recourse, for their own protection, to the virtues of war, which are violence and fraud" (Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, 4). Indeed, it is in its suspension of the protections afforded by the normative aspects of law, in what Agamben calls force-of-law, that sovereign power in fact inevitably produces multiple forms of discursive resistance by suspending the very juridical order which buttresses our idea of “normality.”

Despite my claims for its relevance to contemporary political thought and writing, this project is not an attempt to demonstrate that Agamben’s “sovereign power” is a more superior conception of power than that of, for example, Foucault, Butler, Arendt, Nietzsche, Benjamin or Hobbes. Rather, Agamben adds several crucial concerns to the discourse of power. What these ideas provide for the reader of contemporary fiction are signs of the action of sovereign power: they allow us to see when something is happening in addition to, for example, the disciplinary power of the police or repressive identity politics. Agamben shows us that sometimes these multiplicitous forms of power are linked by a common thread: that of an entity, or entities, seeking sovereign power; the power to make a certain set of rules, or laws, so immanent that they may as well be fact. These rules become in force as if they were the most integral of society’s laws, without any input by, or approval of, the citizenry at all, and are frequently justified as exceptional, temporary measures when they are rarely anything of the kind. Finally, I should also make clear that I am reading Agamben’s work as a set of ideas upon which to build a method of
reading. I focus directly on sovereign power as a way to collate the aspects of Agamben’s theory best suited to addressing power in contemporary fiction. Agamben marries his discussion of sovereign power with extensive work on how this phenomenon, and its associated effects, might affect public law theory. This study does, therefore, take into account law as an instrument of sovereign power, and how certain legal effects point to the presence of that power, but an epistemological consideration of the juridical system is not the focus of this project. Sovereign power, on the other hand, is a compelling focal point around which much shared political concern in major recent novels, across the boundaries of genre and nation, may be found.
"Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend upon the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable." –Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, Preface, ix

“The event is first of all *that which* I do not first of all comprehend. Better, the event is first of all *that* I do not comprehend.” –Jacques Derrida, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, 90

*Introduction*

A politically-charged section of Salman Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* recalls the slaughter of over a thousand unarmed civilians by British soldiers in the Indian city of Amritsar, in April 1919. The Amritsar massacre, as it came to be known, proved a key catalyst for still-wider protest against British Imperial rule in India, and its representation in Rushdie’s novel functions as context for his illustration of an Indian history formed by a series of crises and violent political events. Just as important, however, is how far the difficulty of interpreting these moments contributes to the character of such events in *Midnight’s Children*. As Rushdie’s focal character, Dr Aadam Aziz, is carried by the crowd down a narrow corridor toward the *Jallianwala Bagh* square where the killings will take place, he has no idea what will shortly happen. As Aziz sneezes at just the right time to fall on the floor, and thus avoid the bullets, his experience of the event is of a noise like teeth chattering in winter, and of people stumbling, falling, on top of him, so that he is trapped on the ground and afraid of injuring his back. Meanwhile, our narrator relates the important details of what is happening—the orders from Brigadier-General Dyer, the number of soldiers and of bullets fired, the approximate number of casualties, and so on—parallel to Aziz’s view from the floor of the square, spattered with the
blood of those he sought to care for (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*, 35-36). This doubled perspective, the interweaving of a fictitious testimony with the representation of history, is something that a novel is uniquely positioned to do. In *Midnight’s Children*, it is a statement on the significance of how the citizen, Dr Aziz, does not comprehend the event he is experiencing. For Derrida at least, this lack of understanding is in fact what characterises a major event: it is too significant for interpretation, for taking action.

Milton Friedman’s idea of making use, for political ends, of the malleable nature of major events has, of course, been around as long as the *polis* itself, and is not a uniquely modern or capitalist phenomenon. *Antigone* is in many respects nothing more than a competition between a King and his citizens for interpretative rights over Antigone’s burial of her brother. Nevertheless, Giorgio Agamben argues that one particular instantiation of the manipulation of the representation of major events – the state of siege in Napoleonic France – proved a foundation for the entire structure of democratic politics as we know it today.

*Fictitious state of siege: the discursive creativity of sovereign power*

In *State of Exception* Agamben relates the story of an event which gave birth to the unlimited political use of what is called “martial law” in English, and in France “*état de siège*” or “state of siege.” On the 24th December 1811, Napoleon issued a decree that allowed the Emperor to pronounce a state of siege whether or not a city was actually under attack or directly threatened by enemy forces (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 4-5). This situation was given two equally important names in the decree that distinguished it from an “*état de siège effectif*” or “real state of siege:” either the “*état de siège fictive,*” that is “fictitious state of siege,” or “*état de siège politique,*” that is “political state of siege” (Agamben, *State of Exception* 3, 11). The
connection between fictif and politique in State of Exception is critical, and resonates throughout my consideration of literature concerned with state power, for it shows that there can be major consequences – especially political ones – to fictitious representations of the world. Agamben’s attention to the doubled description of one situation, the state of siege, emphasizes that fictitious representation plays a large role in political acts and events. Such a notion demands the input of fiction to a discussion of the role of the state of siege in contemporary politics, for it is the novel which, by its very nature, highlights the possibilities of the fictitious most profoundly. The instability of the terms and language used to address what Agamben will call the “state of exception,” necessarily feeds into Agamben’s own argument. Though he might not admit this problem explicitly, I find that –despite numerous readings and re-readings of State of Exception and Homo Sacer– Agamben never fully resolves the barriers that language, representation and interpretation seem to throw up when considering a historical and political phenomenon, or set of phenomena, that is so complex and stands on such shifting ground. Indeed, I might prefer to see Agamben admit more frequently that more than one interpretation of the nature and grounds of the state of exception could in fact assist with understanding its nature, action, and ramifications.

For instance, as the Napoleonic decree of 1811 shows, with the declaration of the state of siege such a situation comes into being irrespective of the situation used to justify that move. This means that every instantiation of the state of siege is at once the same, because it is decreed in the same way and leads to much the same outcome (“martial law”), and yet also different, for it must supersede a state of normality which will always be slightly different. Put another way, the pronouncement of the state of siege is inseparable from the condition itself to the extent that, much like the instantaneous transfer of the sovereign’s crown from one head to another upon the ruler’s death, there may be no markers, beyond the declaration, that all power has shifted to the
de facto leader and yet, by definition, the state of siege in some way grows out of, and is predicated upon, a state of peace. While I am anticipating my own argument too early here, I have always been uncomfortable with the way in which Agamben sometimes seeks to collapse these kinds of complications in the service of a stable argumentative arc and structure. What these complexities and “fictif” backdrop do, however, is provide an early opportunity for me to suggest that fiction might have an important role to play in understanding conditions of contemporary politics, democracy, and state power.

By locating the roots of the state of siege in the “fictitious,” however, Agamben is not trying to say that such a state is somehow nonexistent. One of the ironies of Napoleon’s decree is that it makes the state of siege even more potent by underscoring the power of the leader who initiates it. A ruler who may decouple the rationale for her actions from real events demonstrates, in that very act, the extent of her authority. Linguistically, we might say that she removes the sign of “siege” from any substantive relation to its referent. “State of siege” is thus political and fictitious because it only requires justification in the realms of politics. More exactly, she who pronounces the state of siege in the Napoleonic city includes everything within the city walls under the specific conceptions of politics and law which she controls. Since, under the state of siege, the ruler’s total control includes that of the very definitions of such ideas, we might more properly say that not only does what she says “go” but that there is little legal difference between what she claims and what is so in fact. When Brigadier-General Dyer proclaims Martial Law in Midnight’s Children then, the peaceful reality of the protest at Amritsar is not only ignored entirely, in favour of the declaration by Dyer that the execution of the protestors is “a jolly good thing” (36), but in addition, through Dyer’s use of emergency power, that peaceful reality is turned into violent opposition to the regime. Rushdie’s point is that this malleability of “fact” is
not limited to the realm of the novel, and I wish to underscore this eerie synergy between Rushdie’s ideas and those of Agamben. I say this similarity is eerie because of the imperative both authors place – despite writing almost two decades apart – on interrogating the role of political power in using fictitious representation to distort or rewrite events. That Rushdie and Agamben’s concerns are so similar is beyond coincidence. Instead, they are both responding to a significant force active in contemporary life.

In *State of Exception* Agamben calls this political use of the emergency by state power the “state of exception,” naming its defining quality as a zone of indistinction between law and fact: “The modern state of exception is . . . an attempt to include the exception itself within the juridical order by creating a zone of indistinction in which fact and law coincide” (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 26) The problem here for Agamben is that, according to its most basic justification, which is its phrasing, the “state of exception” is supposed to be exceptional to the juridical system rather than a normal part of it. The most potent example of the state of exception for Agamben is the concentration camp, in that “the camp is the state of exception made spatial. . . The camp is a hybrid of law and fact in which the two terms have become indistinguishable” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 169-170). The particular power of the camp is that it equates the fact of what Agamben calls “bare life,” that there is life outside the political realm (politics and the juridical system have no say over a life outside their jurisdictions, yet life still exists), with the law of *Homo Sacer* or “sacred life,” a life that is designated as subject to the law and is thus maintained or killed as a consequence of a juridical decision (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 174). In other words, the state of exception may *de facto* change both fact and law in order to achieve a situation where nothing is outside the remit of state force.
As perhaps the most extreme use of emergency power, the concentration camp is, in *Homo Sacer*, the measurement by which we might judge the reach of contemporary state power. Since for Agamben “the emergency has, as Walter Benjamin foresaw, become the rule” in places as far-flung as the former Yugoslavia, Nazi Germany and the modern-day United States, he argues that the state of exception “is starting to coincide with the normal order” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 12, 38). The power to produce a state of exception Agamben dubs sovereign power, from Carl Schmidt’s notorious pronouncement that “sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception” (11). In *State of Exception*, Agamben assembles a first chapter entitled “The State of Exception as a Paradigm of Government,” where he argues that such a paradigm has been almost permanently in place in most combatant countries since World War One with their refusal to rescind emergency powers garnered during the conflict. Indeed, the resonance with the severe economic crash of 2008-onwards is notable here, with Agamben emphasizing in *State of Exception* (writing in 2003) that after WW1 “it is significant that military emergency now ceded its place to economic emergency” as a pretext for “the expansion of the executive’s powers into the legislative sphere” such that arbitrary legislation by decree continues as a paradigm of government to this day (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 13).

There are problems with these ideas, and for me they lie most notably in the broad nature of Agamben’s definition, that the state of exception is “a zone of indistinction in which fact and law coincide” rather than the preferred alternative of opening the juridical system up to fact (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 26). I too am interested in the power that might produce a concentration camp, a war, or an arbitrary reduction of the rights of a citizen, but I am not sure that what links these problems, and others, is that the power to do this makes fact and law coincide. I like the language and ideas that Agamben has highlighted in these two books, for he
provides an opportunity to talk about, and focus on, the powers that our modern democracies seem to have to strip their citizens of legal protection. This is why I write this project using the language “state of exception” and “sovereign power,” to denote these powers and the condition they can establish, but I maintain that, first, Agamben’s work requires robust critique before going further with these concepts and, second, that such critiques open up opportunities for considering other representations and considerations of Agamben’s ideas.

The state of exception as a contagion of democracy

The state of exception, in its presence as what Agamben claims to be the “paradigm of government,” resembles a condition of disease in its destruction from within of the foundational idea of democracy, which is representative or direct rule by the citizenry. Camp X-Ray did indeed, as Agamben asserts, reveal the rot within the political claims made by those in charge in the United States, much as the Amritsar massacre did in India and, in turn, does in Rushdie’s novel. Although the latter event in no way happened under a democratic system, I make the comparison precisely because of this apparent difference. The continued replication of events of state-sponsored massacre into the present day hints at the danger of ascribing democracy the quality of being inherently resistant to the overuse of the kind of executive power that may ignore or rewrite the law. The state of exception is a condition of even democratic states, in Agamben’s work, in that it is a clause in the contract of the existence of the Nation-State. For Agamben, Camp X-Ray demonstrates that, far from having been abandoned after 1945, the Camp continues as the ultimate refuge of the democratic state which perceives, or claims to perceive à la Napoleon, danger at the city walls (Agamben, State of Exception, 3-4). Agamben underlines the threat that lurks at the heart of emergency reactions to every major event in a
democratic state, when he quotes the conclusion of Clinton Rossiter’s book *Constitutional Dictatorship*: “No sacrifice is too great for our democracy, least of all the temporary sacrifice of democracy itself” (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 9).

Rossiter’s troubling proposal of what, in reality, would be nothing more than democratic suicide, hints at the doubled ontology of “state of exception,” which is the uncertain nature of who, or what, might be doing the sacrificing. The state of exception holds the possibility of “state” beyond “nation” in its nature as a condition marked off from the world by means of its ability to, for Agamben, make fact and law coincide or, for me, to strip the citizen of her legal or commonly-agreed rights. That is to say, although state power has historically been closely involved with producing states of exception, the state of exception is in fact available to any power which demonstrates the ability to produce these effects. If “sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception” then any power may be described as sovereign, so long as they can issue a state of exception. Logically, then, sovereign power is not an exclusive weapon of the state, but is a tool open to any who decides on the state of exception. Therefore, although *Dottrina Dello Stato* or “State Theory,” the field in which Agamben works, is a crucial kernel out of which my own project springs, it cannot be its end point. Citizens and peoples may find themselves in a state of exception: caught in a battle for, or an aftermath of the excesses of, sovereign power, without such a situation being defined exclusively through the state and state Theory. As I shall demonstrate shortly with a compact reading of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the limitation in Agamben’s consideration of sovereign power – that such power is only held by the state rather than corporations or transnational institutions like the IMF – is taken up well by representation of sovereign power in contemporary fiction as early as 1922.
In order to understand Agamben’s conception of the precise extent of sovereign power, it is necessary to provide some context for the close relationship between State of Exception and what is perhaps the seminal text on power in State Theory, Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence.” While there is excellent work already extant on sovereignty in Homo Sacer, most notably that written by Stephen DeCaroli and William Connolly, in their respective essays “Boundary Stones” and “The Complexities of Sovereignty,” those thinkers did not have the benefit of referring to State of Exception when producing those papers. It is in this later book where Agamben focuses much more directly on sovereign power, and analysis of its relationship to Benjamin gives an abundantly clear sense of the newness of Agamben’s work on power and its potency for helping to read a spectrum of contemporary novels.

Agamben claims to have conceived of a “tetralogy” of essays, which only begins with Homo Sacer; State of Exception being the second of five (Raulff, 609). Nevertheless, there is little doubt that Agamben responds to several of the flaws in the rather sweeping nature of Homo Sacer with the sequel. Most notably, State of Exception broadens its focus from biopolitics and the Camps, both of which must inevitably be dominated by discussions of the events in Nazi Germany, to a more sustained and thorough analysis of the increasing frequency and significance of states of exception since the Napoleonic era. State of Exception thus seeks to demonstrate that the presence and use of sovereign power, as evidenced by reserving the ability to establish, or actually establishing, states of exception, is of wide and increasing relevance to politics across national borders.

Agamben implies that the only limit to sovereign power is the limit of its capacity for violence. Contrary to claims by DeCaroli and Connolly, in their work on Homo Sacer, that
sovereign power requires, or generates, a particular “field” or “ethos” (respectively) in place in a culture or territory for it to exert its unusual and abnormal force, for Agamben sovereign power *makes* itself applicable through violence, through – as we shall come to see – force-of-law (DeCaroli 50, Connolly 28). This is an evolution of Benjamin’s ideas in “Critique of Violence,” and the key term which Agamben takes up from Benjamin is the German word *Gewalt* which, as well as meaning “violence,” may be translated simply as “power” (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 53).

For Benjamin, in “Critique of Violence,” the idea that violence is inextricable from power underpins his reading of state politics and its reliance on the law. For Benjamin the very existence of the juridical system, let alone its enforcement, is predicated on violence. The state uses law to annex violence through the creation and application of rules which define the state as the only legitimate wielder of force. In the dictionary’s primary reading, violence is “the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury” and, simultaneously, involves “forcibly interfering with personal freedom” (*OED*). Violence does not just involve force or injury, then, but also an attack on the integrity and/or the freedom of the self. For Benjamin the law and, therefore, the state are both somewhat predicated on interfering forcibly with the body of the citizen, and thus also seek to reserve the right to inflict injury or incarceration. This is, for Benjamin, the reason why governments of the early twentieth-century were so concerned about workers-unions, in that in the 1920s, “organized labor is, apart from the state, probably today the only legal subject entitled to exercise violence” (Benjamin 281). This is a useful beginning for how I intend to read Agamben’s work as a more general theory of sovereign power, one that is detached from traditional sovereignty. Benjamin emphasises that entities other than the state, or the Sovereign, may utilise the force-of-law which seems, even to thinkers like DeCaroli, to demand a receptive
culture or society: that is to say wider legitimation (DeCaroli, 50). Benjamin argues instead that entitlement is merely about a group’s ability to deploy violence. Gewalt is of particular interest for my investigation of the jurisdiction of sovereign power, since it holds potential for producing my own, more sustainable, definition of Agamben’s implications about sovereign power: that sovereign power is universally regulated by its capacity to apply violence in such a way that it may produce a state of exception, a state where a person or group is stripped of its commonly-agreed rights, either under the law or, perhaps, more unwritten rules.

*The discursive power of the Law*

It seems rather paranoid to suggest that law might just be a function in an equation written by sovereign power, a function that is always already conditional on not being in conflict with the ruling power and its capacity for violence. However, Agamben’s claims make more sense when read with a key source for *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*, Jacques Derrida’s lecture and subsequent essay “Force of Law: the Mystical Foundation of Authority,” which outlines the inferior relationship that law has to force. Derrida makes several key points about the relationship between law and violence. He insists on the importance of an aphorism, that “there is no law without enforceability, and no applicability or enforceability of the law without force” (Derrida, 6). Without the ability to enforce the law, the juridical system is predicated on nothing but an empty set of rules. Law is empty without the capability to force compliance, which means that the idea of the law as a detached, disinterested legislative body of regulations and judiciary independent from the executive bodies of the juridical system – such as the police and prison service – is not only a myth but something like an opposite to the effective action of the law. Further, this mutually-serving relationship between law and violence gestures toward the status
of the law under sovereign power, where fact and law coincide in a nexus of pragmatic violence which constitutes the law as subject to the sovereign’s will. This subservient relationship of law to force is why, in the title of his own chapter, Agamben places the “law” in “force-of-law” under erasure.

Derrida’s most important point with the idea of “force of law,” according to Agamben, is that he is differentiating “between the *efficacy* of the law – which rests absolutely with every valid legislative act and consists in the production of legal effects – and the *force* of law.” Force of law “refers in the technical sense not to the law but to those decrees (which, as we indeed say, have the force of law) that the executive power can be authorized to issue in some situations, particularly in the state of exception” (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 37-38). We might think here of President Hindenburg’s right to rule by decree during the Weimar Republic in Germany where the legislative body, the Reichstag (Parliament), might defer via its Chancellor to the executive office, the President, in any situation where immediate legislation was desired by the party in power. In Agamben’s reading of “Force of Law,” there is a separation of force of law from the law itself, in that – in the state of exception – we see how “acts that do not have the value . . . of law acquire its ‘force’” (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 38). That is, we see acts of force which have the form of law but none of its content, such that the law is in force without any legal referent.

I understand Agamben’s reading of this kind of legal situation to be explicitly rooted in his narration of the Napoleonic decree of 1811, which allowed the declaration of a state of siege whether or not the city was actually under attack. The material fact, of whether the city was under attack, would (or should) be a key component of the content behind the legal decision on whether or not to impose martial law. With the eradication of the relevance of this material
situation, the legal decision loses its content and the action of the law thus loses its “value,” while losing none of the powers assigned to enforcers of the law designed. We are thus left with “force of law.” A contemporary example of this kind of action may be found in the recent Guardian article on the continued furor over the, essentially illegal, Terrorism Act 2000 in the UK, and particularly the powers it gifts police for carrying out arbitrary stop and search operations: “[Amnesty International] adds that Section 44 powers under the Terrorism Act 2000 gives the police sweeping authority to stop and search. While these powers may in theory be exercised ‘only for the purpose of searching for articles of a kind which could be used in connection with terrorism,’ the law explicitly states they ‘may be exercised whether or not the constable has grounds for suspecting the presence of articles of that kind’” (Norton-Taylor). I wish to draw particular attention to the last line, where the law states that a search may be carried out whether or not there is any evidence or grounds for that search. This is a great example of force of law being used by sovereign power to strip away legal rights via the justification of the perfect non-existent enemy at the gates: the threat of terrorism.

Considering “Critique of Violence” helps to add weight to the notion of the jurisdiction of sovereign power as essentially pragmatic, particularly in regards to Benjamin’s concentration on Gewalt, a word that means both “power” and “violence” at the same time. If the British state did not have the force available to it to conduct mass illegal stop and search operations, then it might well not seek to do it. Of particular interest is why, Benjamin claims, the state is so concerned whenever it fails to entirely annex Gewalt to its own exclusive use:

If, therefore, conclusions can be drawn from military violence, as being primordial and paradigmatic of all violence used for natural ends, there is inherent in all such violence a lawmaking character. . . . It explains the abovementioned
tendency of modern law to divest the individual, at least as a legal subject, of all violence, even that directed only to natural ends. In the great criminal this violence confronts the law with the threat of declaring a new law, a threat that even today, despite its impotence, in important instances horrifies the public as it did in primeval times. The state, however, fears this violence simply for its lawmaking character, being obliged to acknowledge it as lawmaking whenever external powers force it to concede them the right to conduct warfare, and classes the right to strike. (Benjamin, 283-284)

The state seeks to divest the individual of all violence because it is terrified of any entity, other than the state, coming into possession of the ability to make law. This is lawmaking violence. First Benjamin, then Derrida in “Force of Law,” and now Agamben in *State of Exception*, all make the link between power and legal force. To make law is no less than to “force” an entity to concede one’s “right” to act. There is no mutually-shared conception of an abstracted right to rule here, no divine or democratic legitimation of action. Instead there is only the power to seize the discourse of legality, of juridical interpretation. Nowhere else is Derrida’s maxim that “there is no law without enforcement” clearer, for in a sense, as Agamben claims with respect to force-of-law, there is sometimes no law but enforcement. Law is conceived of as but one factor in a functioning juridical system but, in its most extreme instances such as the right to make war or to strike, law is nothing but a set of rules adhered to because of Gewalt: if a state has the power to inflict significant violence on another nation without reprisal, then that state’s warfare is de facto legal. This is why Agamben places “law” under erasure in his own chapter, entitling it “force-of-law.”
Against the background of this chaotic history of political misuse of the law, Agamben reminds us that sovereign power has a very specific definition: the power to declare a state of exception, where the very existence of life is subject to the sovereign decision. What Gewalt provides for my own study is the answer to jurisdiction, that is, how does the sovereign create “and guarantee the situation as a whole in its totality” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 16)? The answer is a pragmatic one: power which may deploy enough violent force to annex law, and thus the rules that protect the rights of the citizenry, is sovereign. Understanding sovereign power in the context of the role of gewalt in state decisions and actions is important because it solves one of the biggest methodological problems of all in interpreting Agamben’s work – the boundary of sovereignty – and provides us with a coherent vision of the kind of power he refers to, without deferring to Agamben’s vague definition of a force which creates a zone of indistinction between fact and law (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 26). Thus, I would adjust the “ethos” or “field” of sovereignty that has been used in Connolly and DeCaroli’s recent work on Agamben to explain sovereignty’s limits in a multi-state and multi-power world. If sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception, then it necessarily follows that, just as lawmaking violence is not limited to the state but may be claimed by workers or another entity with the capacity for such violence, then sovereign power is not limited to the state, the judiciary or the police and military.

If I might recall Rushdie’s imagining of the Amritsar massacre, I would say that some novelists have in fact been arguing as much for some time. The British Raj in Rushdie’s novel responds with overwhelming force because it is terrified of having its monopoly on force and law challenged by a group daring it, through peaceful protest, to admit that alternative interpretations of its actions are legitimate and unavoidable. If Brigadier-General Dyer does not order his men to fire he allows the protestors force-of-law, because it would be an implicit
recognition by the regime that it may no longer use sovereign power and, thus, may not
guarantee its rule. By massacring civilians, Dyer maintains the impression that the military, and
the Raj, hold sole decision on the law and the state of exception. The interpretation of the event
here is crucial. Recall that Dyer asserts that the massacre of the, now not pacifist but violent,
protestors was “a jolly good thing.” Still more potently, Rushdie’s narrator, Saleem Sinai, relates
the narrative of Amritsar from one man’s perspective as well as from a more contextualised
historical viewpoint. Aadam Aziz has no immediate sense that he is in the middle of a mass
killing, aware only of a chattering of teeth and protestors falling on top of him such that, in a
moment of dark humour, he is worried about injuring himself. In the light of my discussion of
sovereign power, and its control over the interpretation of events and the meaning of laws, one
way of reading Rushdie’s writing here would be that, even for those experiencing a major event,
there is not necessarily any stable context or narrative within which to place their experience and,
thus, to make sense of it. Rushdie is not just representing a colonial-era massacre to emphasise
the tumultuous environment leading up to the birth of independent India. He is also emphasising
that the kind of power Dyer uses at Amritsar is so potent because it involves a component of
discursive domination as well as rifle shots. Naturally, highlighting the instability of meaning is a
technique well-recognised as almost a founding trope of much contemporary fiction. However,
what Rushdie is doing here is demonstrating how that very instability makes a potent weapon for
those with sufficient power over interpretative discourse, such that the very nature of an event
may be fundamentally altered from a pacifist protest to a violent threat to society and the state.
Brigadier-General Dyer’s use of power is not reducible to Benjamin’s military power, or
Foucault’s disciplinary power, because of his acquisition of interpretative rights to the event as
well as the right to physical violence. In Midnight’s Children, Dyer’s actions in the Amritsar
square and in subsequent discourse are violent, but they are violent with a specific aim beyond simply maintaining rule or authority. Both actions are linked by their attempt to act with force-of-law. Dyer makes force and law coincide in the square by responding as if the protests are violent, even though they are not. As Agamben would claim, his actions have the form of law without any of its content: Dyer produces *anomie*, a juridical vacuum. Just as importantly, his annexation of interpretative discourse after the event allows him to declare the protest forbidden whether or not it in fact was, just as the Napoleonic commander may declare a state of siege whether or not the city was actually under attack.

*Ulysses: from Representation to Revolution; the account of sovereign power in colonized Ireland*

I wish to move now toward the inspiration for this project, which is the representation of what I have been calling “sovereign power” in contemporary fiction, starting with some exemplars which stretch across James Joyce’s epic novel *Ulysses*. Written over sixty years before Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, *Ulysses* helps to encapsulate my claim throughout this project that sovereign power has been a major concern for many novelists, in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and that it is not a concern limited to what is sometimes called the “postmodern” period. While this project only begins with Joyce, his work provides a historical nexus, basing my project in literary history as well as contemporary discourse. His text acts as a stable starting point for a journey across almost a hundred years of fiction known variously as postcolonial, postmodern, feminist, activist, cyberpunk, transnational, American, Canadian, Indian, Anglo-Indian, and Anglo-Japanese, but all sharing one major concern: that being the extensive reach of sovereign power in contemporary life.
*Ulysses* focuses extensively on the influence of British imperial power in Ireland. Joyce represents the British, and their junior partners the Irish viceregal government, as a pervasive, inescapable power that influences much of what happens in Dublin. Joyce emphasizes, however, that this influence has grown so strong in *Ulysses* that his Irish characters seem dangerously subject to its impact on their identities. The way in which Britain’s most vitriolic critic in the novel, the citizen, seems trapped in a hateful relationship with that conquering country, hints at Joyce’s concern with the hidden interpretative influence of the imperial power on a citizenry priding itself on its nationalism and its independent nature. The citizen displays a comically nihilistic denial of his contaminated roots, claiming that the British “civilisation” has been in fact a process of “syphilisation,” and that any substantive influence has been entirely of Ireland upon England: “No music and no art and no literature worthy of the name. Any civilisation they have they stole from us. Tonguetied sons of bastards’ ghosts” (Joyce, 311). In fact, the representative “citizen” is a literalisation of the success of the imperial attempt to brand Irish citizenry as unstable and uncivilised. In an effort to speak of this interpretative dominance, *Ulysses*, far from demanding a cogent call to arms against the British and their persecutory influence, endeavours to weave a tapestry of representations, one that relies on subtle, multiply-intersecting ideas. The purpose here is nothing less than a reordering of the discourse of dominance: to reintroduce complexity to an interpretative matrix which is portrayed in the novel as always already determining Irish identity in favour of the imperial power.

One of the most profound manifestations of this impact on identity is that it is the colonials’ ubiquity, rather than their actions, that dominates much of *Ulysses*. That British influence is so *present* is a key aspect of the representation of power in the novel, because it provides a low-level, yet pervasive, sense of unease in the text. This almost mundane immanence
makes Dublin alien on the most basic of levels, and founds the Irish on a base that is always undermined by empire. Stephen says when he taps his forehead, “in here it is I must kill the priest and the king,” and it is at this point that any focus on the disciplinary power of the police and the army over Irish life is broadened, to account for those who organise those institutions (Joyce, 548). Stephen does not wish to kill the mental image of the soldier or the DUP officer, neither does he speak of destroying the institutions behind them. Instead he talks of the organising powers which affect his possibilities of a sense of self away from the disquieting authority of church and empire. The linguistic marriage of priest and king is key, for it is by associating the priesthood with the monarch that Stephen asserts the necessity of eliminating the conceptual association between church and authority. In turn, by associating the singular figure of the king with the widely scattered executors of church influence embedded throughout Ireland, Stephen gives force to the notion that it is the perception of an equally widespread sovereign authority which is more dangerous than the occupant of a throne hundreds of miles away.

Further evidence of this expansion of everyday sovereign influence lies in _Lestrygonians_. Despite the powerful image of imperial greed of Edward VII “sucking red jujubes white,” the sight that prompts Bloom’s moment of insight is the rather more ordinary “lozenge and comfit manufacturer to His Majesty the King” (144). This is one of innumerable ways that the city of Dublin in _Ulysses_ is permeated inescapably by mundane reminders of colonisation, right down to the names of roads like “Nelson Street” (239). The very language of Dublin’s residents is saturated by English references or by the occasional phrase that is, simply, English. _Circe_ sees Bloom requesting that Beaufoy “play cricket,” and _Hades_ has him exclaim “By George,” both being used with no apparent hint of irony (437). Equally salient is the degree to which
Shakespeare is quoted by many of *Ulysses*’s Irish characters. This most English of playwrights is used so often that it is sometimes as if Dublin’s citizens misquote Shakespeare deliberately as an act of making him their own. Nevertheless, Shakespeare is so significant an influence on English nationalism (at least Stephen is not forced to teach *Henry V*) that it would be naive to divorce his texts from their land of origin. The most powerful example of this cultural influence comes when Stephen is required to teach the bard to his charges in *Nestor*. His superior, Mr Deasy, quotes Iago before extolling the supposedly thrifty virtues of the English, a subtle piece of parody by Joyce that nevertheless hints at Ireland’s cultural entanglement with their mainland foes (30). In *Hades* Lenehan misquotes Antonio in complimenting Bloom on his generosity to Dignam’s memorial fund: “I’ll say there is much kindness in the jew, he quoted elegantly” (236). In using an English poet to subscribe to a form of racism, by describing Bloom as Jewish not Irish, Joyce shows that Lenehan’s everyday life is affected continually by a received national otherness and discourse, a colonising process which seems just as profoundly effective and insidious as the firing of bullets.

The effect of this colonisation, however, is not limited to generalised domination or the disciplining of an “uncivilised” populace. In *Ulysses*, the varied ways in which the colonising power affects Dubliners share something of a common outcome, which is that they make what Agamben might call the “fact” of Irish identity coincide with the law that the residents of Dublin are subject to Imperial rule. In effect, the fact that Dubliners are Irish is altered to fit the imposed law that they are British subjects. This can be seen most clearly when reading Joyce’s representation of the police in Dublin, and how their effect on the characters of *Ulysses* corresponds, in a more marked way, with the cultural and social appropriation of Irish life described above. In the Dublin that Leopold Bloom experiences, the police are everywhere, to
the extent that Dominic Manganiello sees their “continual presence” as a prime medium for “Joyce’s attack on the State” (Mangianello, 106). For Manganiello, this attack revolves around unmasking Dublin’s police (the DUP) “as a group oppressing mankind,” and as such, merely through their existence, they function as the novel’s most direct representatives of the dehumanizing, persecutory effects of state power (Mangianello, 106). There is, of course, little doubt that a key aspect of Joyce’s depiction of the police is their explicit oppression of the citizens, not through amateurish, though brutal, assaults such as Private Carr’s on Stephen, but through their physical manifestation (the “night watch . . . loom tall”) of the removed organs of the British state (Joyce, 409). Every soldier’s tunic is “bloodbright” with the stains of Irishmen killed by the British, and every policeman reminds every Irishman of the man in control, sucking red jujubes white (410, 144). Nevertheless, the most potent effectiveness of the police is in fact masked by focusing on the explicitly oppressive nature of their existence in Dublin.

It is tempting to view the cultural colonisation of Ireland in *Ulysses*, on the one hand, as the 1910s equivalent of “soft” power, and the military and juridical influence of the British state, seen most frequently in *Ulysses* as the police, as “hard” power. Under this schema, the impregnation of Irish life by the language and culture of the oppressor is the hidden flank of an Imperial strategy which makes the ground more fertile for the more visible, conventional leverage of Imperial force. While this approach is certainly productive, an alternative reading would be that it is precisely in the use their own version of “soft” power that Dublin’s police most realize the coincidence of fact and law, of Irish subjectivity to the imperial power. That the envoys of the British are so ubiquitous they almost become part of Dublin’s geography, its everyday form and nature, hints at this more insidious effect of police presence in the novel. Most potently, when the denizens of what Tymoczko calls the “otherworld” of *Circe* urge Bloom
& Stephen: “Don’t be all night before the polis in plain clothes sees us,” we see that, even in
the heart of the novel, the police are potentially indistinguishable from normal Irish citizens
(Tymoczko, 214, Joyce, 420). In this way, the idea that the police are in plain clothes is both
literal and metaphorical. The possibility that anyone could be a policeman, that there is no
immediate way of telling between the Irish and the British-ruled police (the DUP were even
drawn from Irish residents: a classic tactic of divide and rule), has the metaphorical effect of
making every Irish citizen double as a potential agent of imperial power. Such a tactic makes the
reach of the British state something different from simple oppression, for it quite literally makes
the law, that the Irish are British subjects, true in fact: every Irish citizen might already be an
agent of British law. It is here that we see the unique effects of sovereign power, in the
complexity of a violence which makes the very form of law, with little to no consistent or
accountable content, applicable to everyday human action, to the very presence of life. This has
the effect of making any action by the state effectively “legal.”

In *Ulysses*, what links the subtle permeation of Irish life by the culture of Empire, and the
doubled-ontology of a citizenry that resembles the executors of Imperial juridical order, is the
continual presence of the state of exception: that every normal citizen is always potentially
exposed to sovereign *Gewalt*, to sovereign power and violence. No more clearly does Joyce
represent this condition of the normal, legal subject permanently exposed to being redefined in
“fact” as exceptional and, thus, legally exposed to violence without legal protection, than when
he writes of the police using the Greek contraction *polis*. *Polis* also means both “city” and
“citizenry,” which is why, in addition, it can be read as “city-state.” With the words: “don’t be all
night before the polis in plain clothes sees us,” Joyce speaks of how the entire city-state of
Dublin has become defined by the sovereign power of British Imperialism (Joyce, 420). This
power is characterized in *Ulysses* by its creation of a city-state of exception where the very existence of both the city and citizenry is created and guaranteed by the presence of a violent *polis*-state. The shadows of the night watch do indeed loom tall, and the fact that they do so most prominently in the nightmarish dream-world of *Circe* is appropriate, for it is the parallel shadow-structure of life in Dublin which inevitably conditions the lives of the Irish characters who continue to quote Shakespeare and swear by a long-dead English King.

**Going forward: sovereign power as reading focus**

Events in Ireland since the publication of *Ulysses*, while frequently dark, eventually proved that the sovereign power of the British Empire was far from all-encompassing. Agamben’s work on sovereign power would not be interesting if he were narrating the story of a total, unstoppable force against which resistance is not only pointless but difficult to conceive. The reason that his ideas sometimes give this impression is that they are still very new. Michel Foucault has been highly influential in the discussion of power for many years, which also means that it has been the prison, rather than the camp, which has remained the locus of how to identify the nature and action of state power and other major forces. Nevertheless, the camps did happen, and continue to spring up all over the world, particularly the metaphorical camps in literary discourse that I will address subsequently. The next chapter of this project, for example, takes Indira Gandhi’s “emergency” in *Midnight’s Children*, and the brutal cleansing of the slums of Bombay that follows, as the figurative centre of Salman Rushdie’s wider concern throughout his novels with communalism and its manifestation in the violent physical and interpretative sanitization of difference. The power to produce a camp does seem overwhelming, which is why much of this chapter has been dedicated to solidifying the nature and, thus, limits, of sovereign power.
Sovereign power is defined by its capability for deploying sufficient force to render whatever law (or rules) its wielder implements so effective that the fact of an individual’s biological and intellectual discreteness becomes of no concern, and her legal and unwritten protections may be summarily ignored.

Recall, however, that what my own parsing of Agamben’s ideas also demonstrated was that sovereign power is precisely not defined by a direct connection to the big-S Sovereign. In fact, it may be said that any power with the pragmatic capability of pronouncing the state of exception, of acting with force-of-law with little legal or operational restraining factors, demonstrates the possession of small-s sovereign power. What I concluded from this was that sovereign power is potentially open to any entity or person; although the extent to which the latter incidence might be sustainable is something discussed more extensively in the fiction I will read in the rest of this project. Someone like Margaret Atwood for example, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is particularly suspicious of the fate of individual freedom in the face of the state of exception, given the operational dominance of the state over everyday life. This pluralization of sovereign power is a key part of my reading of Agamben’s theory, because it affirms that there is always competition for that power. That every human being is not literally in a concentration camp at this moment in time does not debunk Agamben’s narrative. Not only is this a far too literal reading of the contemporary rise of sovereign power, but it also omits the significance of the notion that this competition frequently creates a sort of balance which is sometimes broken—as in the Third Reich or for the world citizens unlucky enough to be whisked away to Guantanamo Bay.
The iustitium and the limits of non-figurative language

In contrast to the dominating force of the camp in Agamben’s thought, however, I contend that it is necessary to be more concerned than Agamben seems to be with the consequences of sovereign power outside the camp, or the firing squad. Agamben’s attention to the Roman concept of *iustitium* as the most figuratively potent example of the state of exception is something that deserves special attention here. This chapter is particularly relevant in the context of fiction that represents the ramifications of sovereign power and the state of exception, such as the major novels of Salman Rushdie. This is because the problems I outline below in Agamben’s chapter on the *iustitium* in *State of Exception* seem to point toward the importance of figurative language and narrative representation for understanding sovereign power and the state of exception, and thus towards the importance of contemporary fiction for commenting on modern politics.

The *iustitium* was a state of chaos entered into by the Roman Republic, decreed by the Senate, upon the death of the Emperor or a similar situation which endangered the Republic. During the *iustitium*, which literally means “standstill” or “suspension of the law,” all citizens (in extreme cases) could be called upon “to take whatever measures they considered necessary for the salvation of the state.” (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 41) The chapter “Iustitium” is, by no accident, located at the centre of Agamben’s *State of Exception*. The section is something of a counter to the historical sense garnered of the concept in the first half of Agamben’s text, switching as it does away from the recent history of the state of exception through Napoleon to Hitler and the NSDAP, turning to a more allusive, metaphorical consideration of what it might mean to live in amongst that state as it is happening. Instead of Agamben’s more usual definitive examination of the state of exception – he starts this chapter by stating that the *iustitium* “allows
us to observe the state of exception in its paradigmatic form” – Agamben quickly transitions into the form of the semi-rhetorical question. “What is a human praxis which is wholly delivered over to a juridical void?” he asks, responding to the difficulty of accounting legally for human acts committed in the anomic space, or space devoid of law, opened up by the juridical vacuum of the iustitium (Agamben, State of Exception, 41, 49). Agamben’s expansion of this dilemma produces not a “paradigmatic form” that answers all queries about the shape of the state of exception, but instead generates another question, one which goes to the heart of the problem of legally prescribing an a-legal, or anomic, situation of chaos. The question is how might the juridical order account for the legal status of actions committed during the state of exception. This lack of a clear illustration of what the paradigmatic form of the state of exception might be foregrounds Agamben’s retreat into figurative description of the iustitium, which in turn suggests the importance of looking to fiction for exploring the state of exception.

In the face of the problem of how the magistrates’ command, for the citizenry to do their utmost to defend the state, may endure or have meaning once the iustitium has come into being, Agamben says only: “how can such a command survive in the absence of any legal prescription or determination? It is from this perspective that one must also view the impossibility . . . of clearly defining the legal consequences of those acts committed during the iustitium with the aim of saving the res publica” (Agamben, State of Exception, 49). Agamben then goes on to claim, in a rather circular argument, that the only way to look at such acts is to see them in the context of the vacuum of law, that an act committed under the iustitium neither executes or transgresses the law, but inexecutes it. Such actions are “mere facts, the appraisal of which, once the iustitium is expired, will depend on the circumstances.” Thus, “the state of exception is not a dictatorship, but a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations – and above all the
very distinction between public and private – are deactivated” (50). The immediate problem here, of course, is that it is a juridical action which announces and enables the *iustitium* in the first place. The state of exception may be characterized by a lack of all legal determinations, but, at least in the context of the Roman *iustitium*, such a character is made possible to some extent by the juridical order and by government: and the persistence of the *iustitium* must signal the continued presence of those systems.

This is a problem which Agamben appears to be aware of, if only in the metaphorical language he uses to gesture toward the symbiosis between politico-juridical action and the state of exception. Most potently, acts committed during the *iustitium* are, as long as the *iustitium* lasts, “absolutely undecidable, and the definition of their nature – whether executive or transgressive, and, in the extreme case, whether human, bestial, or divine – will lie beyond the sphere of law” (50). Of course, the fact that Agamben not only defers but abandons the definition of the nature of such acts, at least in *State of Exception*, speaks to the difficulty of apprehending the reality of life under the state of exception. In an elegant but transparent move he implies that, since these acts “lie beyond the sphere of the law,” he does not have to investigate their nature. Instead, he only alludes – and then but implicitly – to acts like the “divine” violence of Walter Benjamin or perhaps, with “bestial,” the state of nature in Hobbes. This allusiveness does Agamben little service, least of all when insisting upon the absolute undecidability of actions during the *iustitium* while immediately suggesting that such acts fall into one of three hazy categories (human, bestial and divine). Such undecidability might justifiably emerge from the particular emphasis on the juridical with which the “Iustitium” chapter begins. Most particularly, it would indeed appear impossible to make legal definitions, or even sense, of an act undertaken in the absence of a functioning legal system. The old maxim that “ignorance of the law is no
excuse” holds little valid content in the situation where law itself is ignorant of its own vacuity. However, the dual move to, on the one hand, “human, bestial, or divine” and, on the other, to answers that “lie beyond the sphere of law,” gives the lie to Agamben’s attempt to define the state of exception based on a space characterized by the absence of law: what he calls “an absolute non-place with respect to the law” (51). Whether or not Hitler legally achieved a dictatorship, for example (48), is surely an insufficient end point for analysis of what that fateful period in western Europe meant: especially for its citizens.

Agamben appears to be somewhat aware of the limitation of legal discourse for describing the state of exception, but by relying on legal terminology to furnish his definition of that state he inevitably commits and restricts himself to legal discourse. Put simply, in attempting to define the apparently indefinable Agamben does justice neither to the particular character of the state of exception nor to a universally applicable definition. This double-bind is most on show in the concluding paragraph to “Iustitium”:

The idea of a force-of-law is a response to this undefinability and this non-place. It is as if the suspension of law freed a force or a mystical element, a sort of legal mana, that both the ruling power and its adversaries, the constituted power as well as the constituent power, seek to appropriate. Force of law that is separate from the law, floating imperium, being-in-force [vigenza] without application, and, more generally, the idea of a sort of “degree zero” of the law—all of these are fictions through which law attempts to encompass its own absence and to appropriate the state of exception, or at least to assure itself a relationship with it.

(Agamben, State of Exception, 51)
The very allusiveness of the language at work in “a force or mystical element,” “a sort of legal mana,” “floating imperium” and “a sort of ‘degree zero’ of the law,” suggests that there is a lot more going on here than can be accounted for by a discussion of the juridical order and the law. At the risk of reading Agamben’s words too literally, might not a “legal mana” consisting of the force of the law shorn from its legal content, an empire that is “floating” rather than rooted in the established order, or a “degree zero” of the law, all be best described as phenomena that go beyond law at the least and, more frequently, describe events which have at best a mythological relationship to the juridical order? I claim that, firstly, Agamben is indeed gesturing toward important elements of contemporary politics with this description of the iustitium, but that such importance is characterized by the applicability of these descriptors to something more than the juridical order and, secondly, that Agamben’s resorting to such sustained figurative language demands that we seek help elsewhere if we wish to understand the relationship between the iustitium and contemporary politics.

The alternative future in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, over-familiar as the novel might be to millions of readers, provides a productive opportunity for assessing representations of state power, precisely because of the novel’s ubiquity. Handmaid’s evident and well-known concern with power structures provides fertile ground for demonstrating the potential for reading such texts alongside theory like Agamben’s. While it is never a good idea to take authors at their word when they try to explain what one of their works is about, Atwood’s various claims about her impetus for writing The Handmaid’s Tale are nevertheless instructive, for they seem to have delineated rather too clearly certain ways of reading the novel. This is particularly so in the case of the 1998 Anchor/Doubleday edition, which features an interview with Atwood included in the text, indicating that the publisher, at least, thinks that the author’s
motives are a useful guide to reading the book. In this interview Atwood claims that her novel is about what happens if “certain attitudes” toward women are extended to their “logical conclusions” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 1998 edition, 394). This seems to have guided much of the reaction to not only this text, but much of Atwood’s subsequent work. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is, on the surface, a feminist text which chronicles a world where patriarchal anxiety about the female reproductive system is writ large into a nightmarish dystopia in which right-wing, religious fundamentalism governs the fate of everyone in what was once the United States, forcing women into hyper-gendered slavery and men into a bizarre feudal hierarchy based around the (non-)possession of their female charges.

Patriarchy and misogyny are without doubt two fundamental driving forces in *Handmaid*, particularly given its position as “speculative fiction” or “SF,” for the novel roots its concerns and forces explicitly in contemporary 1980s life. In her reflections on the time before the revolution and the installation of the authoritarian state of “Gilead,” June/Offred speaks of gender inequality in the workplace, in that all of her fellow employees are women overseen by a male boss (Atwood, *Handmaid*, 1996, 165\(^1\)). One of the tools used to disenfranchise women is financial, for almost the first act of the new government is to use electronic banking, a relatively new phenomenon by the novel’s publication in 1985, to transfer all accounts held by women into the names of male husbands or family members (163). In taking on the issue of abortion (doctors are executed and their corpses hung in public if they are found to have performed an abortion, during or before the new regime), Atwood was particularly accurate in criticising the mood of the 1980s in Reagan’s America. “The Harris Poll” has tracked the prevailing attitude to the

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\(^1\) Subsequent references to *The Handmaid’s Tale* are to the 1996 edition.
United States Supreme Court 1973 ruling on abortion, in “Roe vs. Wade,” since it was first made, and I quote its key question here, along with all poll answers taken up to 2009:

(“The Harris Poll,” 2009)

While opposition to Roe vs. Wade grows dramatically from 1976, an equally relevant trend is that it is not until the 1980s that support for the ruling starts to drop (note that each factor frequently seems to vary independently of the other). The year of publication of *The Handmaid’s Tale* sees the lowest support for the Supreme Court decision until 2006 (and a 1% difference might be merely a difference of rounding a 0.5% point), while concurrently producing opposition that is a full 10% higher than both six years before and just four years after. While these trends might appear cyclical, another way of looking at these statistics is to observe that in 2010 it has been almost twenty years since support for Roe vs. Wade was at 60% and since opposition has been below 40%. Atwood’s “logical extension” of chauvinist and misogynist attitudes seems to have been fairly prescient in this case.

The problem with reading *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a specifically or uniquely feminist representation of a speculative dystopia is that it has potential to mask other interesting aspects
of the text; aspects which, I argue, contribute to a richer and subtler novel. While the society of Gilead does indeed seem to have been largely created out of a suspicion, and even a hatred, of women, it would be difficult to claim that it is these “attitudes” which enable the condition of authoritarian dystopia in the text. It is the implementation of dictatorship and an unforgivingly hierarchical society, rather than gender discrimination, which are responsible for the suffering of June and those around her. At the risk of sounding defeatist, I would argue that there will always be people who hate women, or men, or both/either gender(s) of skin colour x, peoples of the Jewish diaspora, and so on, and that these problems on their own are not likely to create a malevolent authoritarian state. I am not convinced that *The Handmaid’s Tale* identifies this phenomenon as the primary problem either. Rather, I think that June and “women” in general might, as well as critiquing sexism, stand in as representatives of people marginalized by nefarious uses of power structures. On this basis, it is not solely gender attitudes that Atwood criticises in her book but, more widely, the lack of checks and balances on uses of particular kinds of power, power which has the potential to enable such discrimination to grow to nightmarish proportions and significance.

The most significant hint that Atwood’s critique might range more widely than the topic of attitudes to women lies in the radical restructuring of society that the Gilead regime achieves in the novel. Of course, when read as feminist critique, this restructuring might appear as a figurative schema for 1980s chauvinism. The novel’s representation of the codification of women into very strict behavioural confines and societal roles, as well as simply placing them at the bottom of the hierarchy of power, asks its reader to question precisely how different that arrangement is from contemporary life, where women are excluded from major corporate and governmental roles while being paid significantly less than men in almost every job. However,
this reading is necessarily limited to interpreting the presence of the Eyes, the Angels, the Commander, the Marthas, and so on, as metaphor or allegory. While I agree that these figures are, to a large extent, symbolic, to me there appears to be something else here that Atwood is commenting on through the use of this symbolism. I argue that it is not entirely clear what these figures are symbolic of, and that they are still very much open to interpretation by the diligent reader. The starting point for this reading is seated in the very act of restructuring that the Gilead government has performed. The Gilead society’s radicalism, the fact that almost all human life has been repurposed, rather than just the lives of women, implies that the novel is representing more than the exploitation of women, and encourages the reader of *The Handmaid’s Tale* to question how the regime has achieved these results.

One of the key moments of the novel is when we discover that the Commander, who, according to Ofglen, has had some kind of founding role in the creation of Gilead, is actually not really in control of his own fate or of the direction that Gilead is taking, if indeed there is any direction at all (Atwood, *Handmaid*, 197). He has to ask June what she thinks he and his co-conspirators have achieved, and almost seems to be seeking absolution from her when he tries to get her to agree that things are “better” now for more people (198). In fact, this discovery might better be described as a process of uncovering that spans the novel. The Commander asks June to his study in order to do the things he cannot be seen to do in public, like play scrabble with a woman, drink, or hold hands. This large difference between the Commander’s public and private behaviour gives the impression that he and his colleagues have given birth to a state of affairs that has run away from them, achieving something of a life of its own in its prescription of its creators’ own behaviour. The ostensible rulers of this society are reduced to simulated command and dominance, such as at the hidden brothel “Jezebel’s” (219-239) or staged events like
Prayvaganzas or Salvagings, but also seem isolated from the rest of society. This aspect of Atwood’s dystopia seems like a particularly interesting interpretation of the Iustitium or state of chaos, in that it underlines how the release of force of law from its juridical moorings, in the state of exception, like some kind of floating “legal mana” as Agamben would have it, reduces the “magistrates” to the same legal level as citizens. By seeking the power to make fact and law coincide – so that they may reorder society – the rulers of Gilead have also lost control of any kind of spirit of the law, any publically-verifiable facts which might provide consistent rationale for political action, instead producing an endlessly mutable world where the only constancy is the very inconsistency of the possible application of power to people.

With one exception, that being the outing to Jezebel’s, the Commander himself seems trapped in this anti-idyll in a Cambridge home in Massachusetts. He does not know the reason that the black van has come for June at the close of the book, let alone whether it is an official or resistance vehicle, and its authenticity is thus doubly unknown. This throws the lack of individual power in Gilead into sharp relief, for not only is the Commander unable to rescind the fake/real orders of the fake/real Eyes who take June away, but he also has no means to discern their status as either state-validated or resistant. This is a significant representation of the power of the Iustitium, of the state of exception. It is instituted in The Handmaid’s Tale to facilitate the fantasy of ultimate control; over gender but also, more widely, bios, but turns out to not only be beyond the individual decree of the Commander but beyond the comprehension of those who spawned it.

This reading perhaps helps to explain why the ceremony of “Salvaging,” where the assembled women are called on to beat to death a supposed rapist, comes at the end of the novel (262-263). In dystopian fictions past, this kind of savage state-sponsored event has tended to be
used as a way to communicate to the reader the terrifying, unjustifiable nature of those in charge. Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for example, features the breaking of Winston in prison via the threat of the mask full of rats being lowered onto his face. H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* gives the reader the revelation that the Morlocks survive by feasting on the Eloi, as a way of attacking the sickness of late Victorian class politics, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* uses the deathly harvesting of its main characters’ organs as a way of attacking the contemporary fusion of sovereign power over life with the chillingly exclusive language of “the human.” All of these novels rely upon introducing these Suvin-esque *nova* or “new things” at or before about two-thirds of the way through the text, so that the authors have time to draw out the material introduced by these powerful symbols (Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 64).

*The Handmaid’s Tale* does not do this with the “Salvaging,” preferring to situate the event within a few pages of the novel’s close. This decision suggests that the event might perform the function of expanding or altering an already extant critique, but it is not immediately clear what form this extension might take. Intrinsically it seems to be a combination of two things. First, Atwood is highlighting the ease with which the workings of justice systems can be appropriated by unscrupulous regimes or structures. Here the Gilead government alters the crime of a political prisoner to suit the punishment in that, by transmuting his resistance against the authorities into a sexual violation in the midst of a hyper-gendered society, the prisoner’s violent death serves the function of illustrating the argument for maintaining such a society. Second, Atwood seems to be using this moment as another shot at the putative failures of feminism. From the contrast between June’s inaction and her mother’s activism, to the apparent willingness of the Aunts and Wives, like Serena, to go along with Gilead’s brave new world, and June’s own refusal to help Mayday by gathering intelligence about the Commander, *The Handmaid’s Tale*
illustrates the time-honoured lesson that the one thing a dictatorship needs is the cooperation of its citizens. Here, the Salvaging offers a brief moment of release for the frustrations of an enslaved portion of society, used and re-directed toward the regime’s needs.

However, in the light of Agamben’s description of the *Iustitium* as what it might mean to live in the state of exception, I propose another – complementary – reading of the Salvaging and why it lies at the close of the novel. The killing of the political prisoner is also a metaphor for the particular kind of power that the novel has been seeking to criticise: the power that relies on force-of-law. With the Salvaging, Atwood offers a graphic description of what a state of juridical anomie, or emptiness, looks like, for it is a literalization of the use of the force of law without any legal referent. This event puts the “force” on show above all else, with the graphic nature of the violence, as well as the way in which the man is punished for a fabricated crime, and asks its readers to reflect on the potential ramifications of ignoring the possibility that such power might be used. The Salvaging thus asks readers of the novel to return to what they have experienced in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and to consider how this force that is finally revealed, uncloaked and visceral, has in fact been at work throughout the text in the establishment and maintenance of what is an almost absurd total-restructuring of the Nation-State. It is this absurdity which acts, just as the hyperbolic character of the Salvaging does, as a signpost that Atwood’s warning is most profoundly about the extent of the power that lies (not so) dormant in the modern state form.

Perhaps, then, one of the key words to describe what I have proposed as the alternative thrust of the novel, toward the way in which the rulers of Gilead maintain their state of exception, is “watchfulness.” Every side of the gender and political debate seems to sleep its way through the transition into Gilead, as well as the maintenance of it, and it thus strikes me that the
novel is about more than gender politics or dictatorships. It is a dramatisation of the *Iustitium*, the state of chaos that seems to describe accurately the experience of the state of exception and the use of sovereign power. Such a reading shows the opportunity Agamben’s theory provides to discuss these aspects of contemporary politics in even the most well-read of novels.

*Conclusion: the political action of contemporary fiction*

I have spent much of this chapter discussing the negative ramifications of the state of exception, and the power to create it, for private citizens, but what the example of the *iustitium* shows is that, in theory, public space is simultaneously opened up to the actions of the private citizen when the law is suspended. If I follow Derrida in agreeing that the event is “that I do not comprehend,” that a major event does violence to the interpretative apparatus that could be used in understanding it, then I might finally venture a reading of what Agamben means, at the end of *State of Exception*, when he claims that “the only truly political action ... is that which severs the nexus between violence and law” (88). Specifically, Agamben means that the violence of major change must be read and interpreted anew whenever possible, rather than ordered into preexisting structures of interpretation, of concrete discursive rules. The novels in this study are intensely political for precisely this reason. Some, as I shall claim in chapter two on Salman Rushdie’s representations of sovereign power in postcolonial India and England, write about its prevalence in concepts of nation-building, and how the national identities of citizens of, or migrants to, those countries are affected by living in a society whose very fabric is affected by power frequently unrestricted by the law or by democracy. Kazuo Ishiguro’s early novels, set in postwar Japan, consider what I call, in the third chapter, the “aftermath” of sovereign power, representing the extent to which major uses of such force condition political movements and
identities as various as postwar Japanese pacifism and contemporary feminism. In the final chapter I will consider the role of violence in relation to resisting sovereign power. Writers like Don DeLillo, in *White Noise*, and William Gibson, in all his novels, are concerned enough with the violence of sovereign power that I argue they propose their own version of what Benjamin calls “revolutionary violence” (Benjamin, 300), which presents violence as one of the few effective counters to oppressive force. In essence, in *White Noise* and several of Gibson’s books, both authors propose taking on aspects of the violence used by repressive political forces as a method for countering their interpretative dominance, for what is at stake is nothing less than gaining back and leveraging interpretative control over events and narratives.

What all of these novels share is concern with the instability of fact in their worlds, and a concurrent insistence on elucidating the events which give rise to major change. This demonstrates shared insistence on a politics which rejects the rationale that power must always be the arbiter of fact and of mutual agreement on law. In essence, the novels in this project make the event’s signature lack of comprehension a guiding factor in their always-multiple, always contradictory narratives of “fact,” always striving to show that “it was so, and it was not so” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*, 35).
And there it stands, the glory of the Moors, their triumphant masterpiece and their last redoubt. The Alhambra, Europe’s red fort, sister to Delhi’s and Agra’s – the palace of interlocking forms and secret wisdom, of pleasure-courts and water-gardens, that monument to a lost possibility that nevertheless has gone on standing, long after its conquerors have fallen; like a testament to lost and sweetest love, to the love that endures beyond defeat, beyond annihilation, beyond despair; to the defeated love that is greater than what defeats it, to that most profound of our needs, to our need for flowing together, for putting an end to frontiers, for the dropping of the boundaries of the self. Yes, I have seen it across an oceanic plain, though it has not been given to me to walk in its noble courts. I watch it vanish in the twilight, and in its fading it brings tears to my eyes . . . . See: here is my flask. I’ll drink some wine; and then, like a latter-day Van-Winkle, I’ll lay me down upon this graven stone, lay my head beneath these letters R I P, and close my eyes, according to our family’s old practice of falling asleep in times of trouble, and hope to awaken, renewed and joyful, into a better time.

–Salman Rushdie, The Moor’s Last Sigh, 433-434

Introduction

The final passage of Salman Rushdie’s epic novel The Moor’s Last Sigh jars somewhat with the generally accepted reading of Rushdie as a writer who celebrates hybrid postcolonial existence: that “flowing together” and “the dropping of boundaries of the self” is what characterizes the worlds portrayed in his novels. Instead, not only does this ending indicate that such a celebratory love is at risk of being defeated, of it lying down to sleep beneath an epitaph
reading “RIP,” but this defeat is also threatened by “conquerors” wishing for the “annihilation” of such a world view. In this chapter I argue that Rushdie’s novels are marked by the dramatization of a conflict between hybridity and state power. Rather than naively propagating multiplicity as a privileged worldview, Rushdie instead uses the magic of his hybrid writing strategies to draw out the contrasting opposing forces that threaten the citizens of his novels. This is a political project I wish to refer to, with my own brand of rhetorical excess and overdetermination, as “tragic realism”: the method of communicating the tragic nature of horrors perpetrated in the same of the state or others who act with its power, by setting it against its discursive opposite, which in the work of Rushdie is a hybrid, multiplicitous technique of writing and reading.

Giorgio Agamben, in *Homo Sacer* and particularly *State of Exception*, emphasizes that the defining quality of contemporary state power in its continual recourse to the state of exception, is its tendency to establish, or attempt to establish, a monopoly on violence. By the state, I mean the groups, institutions and structures used to administer the nation. The nation, by contrast, can be usefully conceived as, more generally, the people and citizenry within a territory whose boundaries are accepted as indicating nationhood. Such generalization is all that is available after, for example, Kosovo’s declaration of independence, which has been “recognized” almost as variously as there are states and international bodies. This seemingly arbitrary separation has the advantage of contextualising the term, sparingly used in this chapter, “Nation-State,” for it indicates the somewhat antagonistic relationship between the two formations. For example, the Indian soldiers at the command of Brigadier-General Dyer during the Jallianwala Bagh massacre were representatives and executors of the state, but before being recruited (and, possibly, after taking their uniform off while asleep at night) were part of the
nation of India. While I very much concede the openness of the question of what comprises Nation-Statehood for many thinkers and critics, for me once a person or citizen meets the two criteria of being employed by the state and of carrying out the orders of the state, she might even find herself in conflict with the nation, certainly if state power requires her to fire on a fellow citizen. This separation provides one explanation for the continued use of “Nation-State” in public discourse, and provides part of the theoretical grounding for my claims that Rushdie represents state power as frequently acting against the interests of a nation’s people and citizens.

My methodology of close analysis of fiction – with particular focus on representations of the political use of executive and other exceptional forms of power – springs from an attempt to draw out an under-considered political project in Rushdie’s work, which counters critical consensus that his politics is synonymous with celebrations of “hybridity.” This political project is signalled by the transnational nature of the postcolonial worlds in Rushdie’s work, specifically in the representations of the similarity between how state power operates across national and cultural boundaries, and how these moments frequently act as a discursive counter to “hybridity.” I concentrate specifically on the three most well-known and critiqued novels, those being Midnight’s Children, The Satanic Verses and The Moor’s Last Sigh, as well as the two latest works Shalimar the Clown and The Enchantress of Florence. I do this in order to demonstrate the enduring nature of Rushdie’s concern with state power in the former, and to underline the recent development and change at work in the latter two books.

There are two interlinked aspects to my method. Firstly, I attempt to trace, across the novels, the thematic significance of Rushdie’s repeated return to the dominance of the state over the hybrid, multiplicitous citizenry, who are generally thematized in the hero or narrator. Secondly, I employ close analysis of especially resonant incidents in order to establish the action
in Rushdie’s work of what I call “tragic realism.” This technique works as a counter to hybridity and magic realism in the novels, drawing out the nature of the postcolonial and migrant experience as frequently more tragic than magical. This reading challenges received ideas about Rushdie’s oeuvre, and charts his concern with the misuse of the state of exception and the power to produce it, by state forces and other, still more shadowy, powers.

**Destabilizing the political primacy of “hybridity”**

Critical reception of Salman Rushdie’s novels has tended toward a reading of their content and focus as contingent upon, and directed by, their multiplicitous, hybrid use of language, style and structure. Michael Gorra’s reading in *After Empire* is emblematic of this approach, identifying the “hybrid” postcolonial self as the main subject of both *Midnight’s Children* and *The Satanic Verses*, while at the same time asserting that that subject is addressed incompletely, for Rushdie’s “entrancing” style “distances one from the horrors it describes” (Gorra, 142, 145). Gorra does not merely identify a problem with the delivery mechanism of Rushdie’s narrative, but also implies that such entrancement undercuts serious representation of postcolonial identity. This is a conflation of Rushdie’s literary technique and his politics which is representative of the dominant body of criticism of his work. For Gorra, *Midnight’s Children* is “full of an unironized nostalgia for Saleem’s Bombay childhood” rather than any serious consideration of the emotional toll exacted upon his characters by the postcolonial experience (146-147). Most damningly, *After Empire* implies that the politics of Rushdie’s novels are not so much undermined by their self-indulgent style as fatally-formed by it, to the extent that: “the whole narrative of *Midnight’s Children* remains so firmly under the thumb of his self-regarding
style that at times I find it hard to distinguish between the writer’s fantasies on the one hand, and the Widow’s on the other, between the book and the totalitarian world it purports to attack” (145).

Objections to fragmented, self-referential style as being somehow coterminous with the politics of a text are not, of course, confined to criticisms of Rushdie, having become distinctly well-worn in readings of contemporary fiction since the publication of Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and its assertion that “postmodern” style promotes the cause of transnational capital and the governments who support it (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xii). The replication of that book’s methodology among its younger offshoots, such as Kwame Anthony Appiah’s statement that the postcolonial in Europe and North America is largely controlled by a “small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery,” has frequently accentuated the assumption that there is an unproblematic link between the hybrid style and structure of what some call “magical realism” (which is frequently associated with some postcolonial texts, like those of Rushdie) and an endorsement of exuberant transnational capital and the power structures which support it (Appiah 1991, 348).

Appiah’s claim, and this anti-postmodern/postcolonial discourse as a whole, are intimately related to the debate over the authenticity of postcolonial narratives and testimony, made famous by Harish Trivedi’s critique of certain reactions to *Midnight’s Children* and of Rushdie himself as a “Funtoosh” or “Mimic Man” (Trivedi 1999). However, both thinkers produce a somewhat troubling conception of the big-W West as some sort of homogenous, monolithic entity dedicated to belittling the pure authenticity of the sealed urns of non-“Western” (we surely cannot escape the implication of “Eastern”) cultures. Nevertheless, the power of this
rhetorical stance has probably contributed to the crucial impact both essays have had on how many critics read “postcolonial” texts like Rushdie’s. While this discussion is an important one, I wish to defer addressing these complaints here, pausing only to recall Anuradha Needham’s use of C.L.R. James’s phrase that an author might be “in the West, but not [necessarily] of it” (Needham, 51). Instead, I wish to return to Michael Gorra and a much more basic problem with his reaction to *Midnight’s Children*, that is to say the idea that Rushdie’s “entrancing” style produces a lack of distinction between the book’s political position and “the totalitarian world it purports to attack.” Here, I will counter the concept that Rushdie’s writing technique is on some basic level indivisible from both his politics and the book as a whole.

_Away From the Nationalist Politics of the Novel_

What is life like inside the ghetto of “Commonwealth literature”? Well, every ghetto has its own rules, and this one is no exception.

One of the rules, one of the ideas on which the edifice rests, is that literature is an expression of nationality….Books are almost always praised for using motifs and symbols out of the author’s own national tradition, or when their form echoes some traditional form, obviously pre-English, and when the influences at work upon the writer can be seen to be wholly internal to the culture from which he “springs.” Books which mix traditions, or which seek consciously to break with tradition, are often treated as highly suspect.


One area where almost all Rushdie critics probably agree is that his writing aims to celebrate (or exoticise, for Trivedi) difference, multiplicity and hybridity: and that the India he seeks to represent in his novels is the India of plurality, of many-in-one. This is the approach
most frequently criticized for a kind of supposed Orientalism. The title of Tobias Wachinger’s article in *Ariel* says it all: “Spicy Pleasures: Postcolonial India’s Literary Celebrities and the Politics of Consumption,” although Wachinger, naturally, goes further in the body of the article, appropriating Pico Iyer (not really the thinker most critical of globalization or transnational capital) in asserting that “texts like *Midnight’s Children* . . . serve a jaded mainstream always on the look for ‘hot spices, tropical birds and sorcerers’ to rejuvenate itself” (Wachinger, 89).

Revathi Krishnaswamy, in his 1995 *Ariel* article “Mythologies of Migrancy,” bemoans the characteristic “self-pleasuring destabilization” of Rushdie’s work, which he thinks has now spread to innumerable new Indo-Anglian texts; and, as I have claimed, postcolonial discourse has perhaps become too familiar with Trivedi’s railings against Rushdie (Krishnaswamy, 133).

However, those more generous toward Rushdie still seem to draw out this tendency toward hybridity, what many have also called “magic realism,” as the most significant aspect of his work, stylistically and politically. Jaina Sanga in *Salman Rushdie’s Post-Colonial Metaphors: Migration, Translation, Hybridity, Blasphemy and Globalization*, says that in Rushdie these eponymous metaphors “are, in the truly postmodern sense, inextricably intertwined; that is, talking about any one of these metaphors almost always involves the other” (Sanga, 5). This trend is even more marked when going to a more student-focused collection such as *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views*, where a significant number of the essays replicate the received notion that Rushdie equals hybridity. Paul Cantor argues that the aim of *The Moor’s Last Sigh* is to chart the beginnings in Arab Spain of “a genuinely multicultural community,” and that the palimpsest is the “central image for cultural hybridity in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*” (Cantor, 131). For him “new cultural forces do not displace or erase prior ones, but simply write over them, giving culture the layered character Rushdie finds so interesting” (133). Brian Finney’s
version of this interpretation is Rushdie’s deployment of Bakhtinian “heteroglossia,” while Stephen Baker works with Thomas Docherty’s *Alterities* to argue that Rushdie and other “postmodern” writers position the reader alongside multiple Others, giving “a sense of ‘dissident’ subjectivity” (Finney, 200-201, Baker, 236-237).

There is remarkable consensus across these readings, far beyond the question of the degree to which Rushdie and other postcolonial writers may or may not be in cahoots with capitalism. For me, this suggests that Rushdie criticism has, on the whole, been dominated by the perspective of a few influential writers, most notably Timothy Brennan, Harish Trivedi, and, to an extent, the wider views of post-Marxists like Fredric Jameson and Anthony Appiah. Brennan’s infamous statement that a whole slew of modern writers like Mario Llosa, Derek Walcott, Salman Rushdie, Isabel Allende, Gabriel Marquez and Bharati Mukherjee are Third-World Cosmopolitans (Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*, 52), and that “cosmopolitanism today” is “propelled and defined by media and market” (Brennan, “Cosmopolitans and Celebrities,” 2), might not have been treated with sufficient critical distance. The feedback loop of authenticity in postcolonial criticism is glossed well by Michael Gorra, when he characterises Brennan’s stance on Rushdie as asserting that “to be cosmopolitan is, on this reading, to be inauthentic” and thus, presumably, not cosmopolitan but only superficially so, an assumption that seems to inflect the tone of much of the criticism I have just quoted (Gorra, 131).

While critiquing Rushdie for failing to do justice to a given imagined community has been a limiting factor in scholarship, in some ways this limitation pales in comparison to the wider schema I have laid out here: of assuming that Rushdie’s project, be it postcolonial, postmodern, or otherwise, consists most significantly of an endorsement of hybridity, difference
and multiplicity. Put another way, Rushdie is deemed a “magical realist” not only because that is the way he apparently writes but because it is what his oeuvre represents politically, that his novels promote the perspective of impurity and intermingling in order to persuade readers of the value of such a standpoint as a way of looking at the world. This is not the fault of critics per se, so much as it is the inevitable consequence of the power and insistence of Rushdie’s own writing on his work in the aftermath of the fatwa and the furore that came to surround The Satanic Verses. It is worth recalling that potent statement of “In Good Faith:”

*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Melange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives to the world, and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves. (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 394)

Written in 1990, this is the ethos that has driven much Rushdie criticism and, to an extent, postcolonial metaphors and figurations, for close to two decades, and there is no doubt that it fits Rushdie’s novels very well. All those descriptions of his work as “hybrid” are not merely falling into line with the ethos related in *Imaginary Homelands* – an ethos forced by the circumstances of the fatwa to favour the inclusive, less critical aspects of his work – but respond to significant aspects of the work. Nonetheless, I want to argue that there is a considerable gap between the politics of Rushdie’s oeuvre and its more hybrid aspects, which are mostly limited to his novels’ re/presentational and organizational techniques.
For me, Rushdie’s novels return to certain narrative trends which, in fact, seem to undermine the multiplicitous, self-referential style taken by so many as analogous to his politics: that the political imperative of our time is to embrace hybrid communities, cultures and ways of thinking. From representations of Indian national history, Gandhi and Nehru’s competing plans for the future of India post-imperial rule, to the rise of racist Thatcherism in Britain or the microcosmic anti-communalist struggle in Kashmir, many events in Rushdie’s texts make explicitly political statements about many contemporary phenomena, in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Britain, the United States and beyond, both in the past and the present. The way in which key historical events are represented by Rushdie is far from merely a stylistic matter. The context in which these events are placed, and the manner in which nodal points like Kashmir are repeatedly returned to in his books, suggest a cogent political project that is given inadequate credence by readers who insist on the primacy of Rushdie’s linguistic innovations. Rushdie’s project consists of a move away from nationalist conceptions of history and postcolonial identity, and toward a transnational critique of state power and its dual drive toward a monopoly on violence and on the representational forces which decide on “fact.”

The starting point for my argument lies in the already-extant voices dissenting from the critical consensus on Rushdie and hybridity. Despite my complaints above, I have already pointed out that Michael Gorra does distance himself from Brennan’s claims on the lack of authenticity of supposedly cosmopolitan writers, asserting instead that, “Rushdie’s work as a whole can perhaps best be seen as an attempt to contest the terms on which such judgments get made” (Gorra, 131). Paul Cantor’s analysis of how the “farce” of “empty” hybridity in the Benengeli thoroughfare at the close of The Moor’s Last Sigh signals a different kind of “cultural hybridity informed by multinational capitalism and an abstraction from the local” is helpful,
foregrounding the claim I wish to make, that hybridity is but one facet of Rushdie’s political tapestry (Cantor, 134). Neil ten Kortenaar’s extensive analysis of *Midnight’s Children* in *Self, Nation, Text* plays a crucial role in my analysis of sovereign power in the three epics, *Midnight’s Children*, *The Satanic Verses* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. Kortenaar’s book is also relevant here, though, not only for its suspicion of Trivedi’s spurious definition of what it is to be Indian, but also because of how it debunks the supposed centrality of “hybridity” in *Midnight’s Children* (Kortenaar 2004, 240-241). Kortenaar sees that novel as more “self-conscious” than hybrid, problematizing the notion that the hybrid orientation is born with Rushdie’s oeuvre, and thus somehow defines its subsequent orientation and action.

Perhaps most important here is Atef Laouyene’s essay “Andalusian Poetics: Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* and the Limits of Hybridity,” for it introduces the critical notion that Rushdie deploys hybridity as a concept that has significant limits. Laouyene reads the combination of Arab Spain and India in that novel less as “nostalgia . . . as many Rushdie critics have suggested, than an attempt to map out the limits of postcolonial hybridity as an empowering subject position” (Laouyene, 145). This focus on Rushdie’s doubts about hybridity contextualizes the close of *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, quoted at the start of this chapter: I read Moor’s sad capitulation less as a self-indulgent eulogy for a literary condition lost or unattainable, and more as a distinct move in the attempt to engage with postcolonial identity, of which hybridity might only be a limited part. Laouyene highlights this limit by referring to a notion that is a particular motive force for my own claims in this chapter, namely that hybridity is not only limited in Rushdie’s works but also represented as being at the risk of failing. For Laouyene, the hijacking of notions of multiplicity by various figures in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* displays “misgivings about the potential failures of certain forms of hybridity art:”
In the face of intractable religious fanaticism and political extremism, Rushdie intimates, such abstract notions as hybridity, plurality, multiculturalism, and liminal subjectivity may potentially be vacated of their historical significance and resistive value. (Laouyene 145)

I will argue later that there is indeed a failure of hybridity in Rushdie, but not until its near-fatal collapse in *Shalimar the Clown*. Laouyene argues that *The Moor’s Last Sigh* represents “hybridity” as limited because of its inability to act “as an agent of social change” in the face of relations of power like “class” or capital (160), but I argue instead that it is the dramatization of this conflict between hybridity and state power that most interests Rushdie. Rather than attempting a post-mortem judgment call about hybridity’s failure to achieve some kind of “change,” Rushdie instead uses the magic of his hybrid writing strategies to draw out the contrasting forces that threaten the citizens of his novels. The magical, multiplicitous self throws its adversary forces and institutions – one of which in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* is a savage underground prison wielded by a corrupt juridical system – into sharp, well-defined relief. This is a political project I wish to refer to as “tragic realism:” the method of communicating the tragic nature of horrors perpetrated in the same of the State, or others who act with its power, by setting it against its discursive opposite, which in Rushdie is the hybrid, multiplicitous technique of writing he uses in his novels.
An eminent Indian academic delivered a paper on Indian culture [at the Festival of India in London in 1982] that utterly ignored all minority communities. When questioned about this from the floor, the professor smiled benignly and allowed that of course India contained many diverse traditions—including Buddhists, Christians and “Mughals.” This characterization of Muslim culture was more than merely peculiar. It was a technique of alienation. For if Muslims were “Mughals,” then they were foreign invaders, and Indian Muslim culture was both imperialist and inauthentic. At the time we made light of the gibe, but it stayed with me, pricking at me like a thorn.


Rushdie’s latest novel at the time of writing, *The Enchantress of Florence*, is his most explicit response to this particularly Indian version of the excluding sense of authenticity at work in areas of the national imagined community, which Vikram Chandra has called “The Cult of Authenticity” (Chandra, 1). The novel counters this sense with a rich, multiplicitous narrative that nevertheless emphasizes repeatedly that India, along with “Western” nations like Italy, is nothing if not contingent upon the history of actions and efforts of inauthentic foreigners. Having spent much of his previous novels, as I will argue, enumerating the magic and tragedy thrown up by the conflict between, on the one hand, socio-cultural diversity and, on the other, political pressures seeking to counter that multiplicity, in *The Enchantress of Florence* Rushdie returns, figuratively, to the source. Last gestured toward in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, the central conceit of the latest book is that the very existence of India and the form of her culture of tolerance and
debate are very much founded upon the “Mughal” conquest hundreds of years ago. Further, just as the Muslim invasion and occupation of Southern Europe – which give rise to the immigration to India in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* of the Cochin Jewish diaspora and thus founds the richly-layered action of the text – was a venture of violent imperial conquest, so the modernizing forum for secular philosophical debate of the “Tent of New Worship” in *Enchantress* is also a direct result of the space cleared for it by the all-powerful Mughal regime of Emperor Akbar (Cantor, 79). This irony tinges much of the action of the book, and accounts for a great deal of the strange and extreme violence we read in it, for the implication is that “hybridity” functions perfectly well alongside authoritarianism, and is thus far from a panacea in the search for a progressive postcolonial identity. The narrative depicts Emperor Akbar chopping up foes in his battle for the conquest of India one moment, and then the next instant we see him debating the degree of justification for the use of that power with cheeky scholars and apostate foreigners. While often very funny, this humour draws attention to the provisional nature of all our narrator’s fun and games. Like Scheherazade, Niccolò Vespucci might be executed at any moment if the Emperor, in a transparent dig at some of Rushdie’s past readers, does not like what he hears.

Despite the connection here between secular, multiplicitous politics and dictatorial regimes, this reading again risks drifting down the well-trodden path of representing Rushdie’s work as primarily a celebration of hybridity and intermingling. This is why I wish to emphasise another connection between *The Enchantress of Florence* and his previous novels, which in my

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2 Paul Cantor, in “Tales of the Alhambra,” emphasizes that in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* “imperialism may at times be linked to multiculturalism, and . . . monoculturalism may in turn be linked to postcolonial nationalist movements” (124).
view elucidates a sustained, and much less optimistic, political project of tracing the action of overdetermined state power in the modern era. While, for me, this novel’s abstraction from the contemporary horrors narrated in the three epics rather precludes it from the same level of tragedy I argue is at work in those texts, nevertheless that very abstraction provides an opportunity to isolate the kind of writing techniques that, in Rushdie’s earlier works, produce “tragic realism.”

I refer to the technique of juxtaposing representations of events in two separate countries in order to draw out similarities in the way state power operates in different political systems and cultures. In *Enchantress*, this practise takes the form of a narrative pendulum that swings between Emperor Akbar’s court in northern India and Niccolò Machiavelli’s place in the rise and fall of the Medici family in Florence fifty years earlier. The choice of this particular Italian city seems straightforward enough, for its beauty and almost mythical place in Renaissance culture make it a usable narrative foil for the illustrious seat of Emperor Akbar, Fatehpur Sikri. Machiavelli, too, is an appropriate choice for a novel so interested in the development of thought and culture within the authoritarian systems of the early-modern world, invested as he is in much popular imagination as the *doyen* of the pragmatic, mechanistic use of power by rulers. Nevertheless, as readers more familiar with Machiavelli’s work know, his relationship to power and his efforts to curry favour with a resurgent Medici family have overshadowed his life as a servant to the Florentine Republic. It is this aspect of the man which Rushdie’s version of history seeks to rehabilitate, as a counterpart to a Mughal imperial project that does not consist, merely, of murder, torture and conquest.

During part one of *The Enchantress of Florence*, the narrator describes, in a common Rushdie tactic, a fictionalized painting by the character Dashwanth that acts, in the narrative, as
something of a clarifying lens for key events, and, for the reader, as a figurative meditation on the ramifications of those events in the novel:

The painting is an allegory of the evils of power, how they pass down the chain from the greater to the lesser. Human beings were clutched at, and clutched at others in their turn. If power was a cry, then human lives were lived in the echo of the cries of others. The echo of the mighty deafened the ears of the helpless. But there was a final detail to be observed: Dashwanth had completed the chain of hands. The Mirror, the slave girl, her left wrist captured in her young mistress’s firm grasp, with her free right hand had seized hold of Khanzada Begum’s left wrist. They stood in a circle, the three lost creatures, and by closing that circle the painter suggested that the clutch or echo of power could also be reversed. The slave girl could sometimes imprison the royal lady. History could claw upwards as well as down. The powerful could be deafened by the cries of the poor.

(Rushdie, 125)

Mirroring, shadowing, and foreshadowing play a significant part in this novel, frequently thematized, as they are here, in names or by physical objects. “The Mirror” (the slave girl character) in the painting acts to reflect and thus replicate the sign of power, such that the power remains but its wielder changes. More precisely, it is the artist, Dashwanth, who paints in the change from a linear to a circular chain of power, fully realizing the concept of the “echo” such that its ghostly cry returns from the lesser to the greater. How far this happens in the novel outside the world of its art and cultural debate is a question Rushdie deliberately flags up. While Emperor Akbar ends the narrative becoming increasingly convinced that difference, that heterogeneity and the challenge to his absolute rule which The Mirror’s grasp represents here, is an essential part of “the wellsprings of the good,” Machiavelli becomes disillusioned that such
things actually change the citizenry for the better, a position our painter seems to share (310, 240). Dashwanth becomes so enamoured with his vision of the “young mistress” Qara Köz and, perhaps, of the unattainable completion of the chain of power that he can only invent, he decides to paint himself into the painting also, and disappears from the real world entirely (127).

Something of the real-life Machiavelli’s bitterness is faithfully reinscribed in the novel and, for such a rollicking, beautiful text, provides a more direct link with what I will shortly argue is the dark world portrayed in *Shalimar the Clown* and the similarly shadowy excesses of state power in *Midnight’s Children* and *The Satanic Verses*. In particular, his reaction to being betrayed by the Florentine public, as he is ejected from public life by the newly resurgent Medici clan, is full of references that will be familiar to a reader of Agamben’s description of the shift in power dynamics and structures in the modern era:

> The people had wanted his death, or at least had not cared if he lived or died. In the city that gave the world the idea of the value and freedom of the individual human soul they had not valued him and cared not a fig for his soul’s freedom, nor his body’s integrity either. He had given them fourteen years of honest and honourable service and they had not cared for his sovereign individual life, for his human right to remain alive. Such a people were to be set aside. They were incapable of love or justice and therefore did not signify. Such a people no longer mattered. The love of the people was fickle and inconstant and to pursue such a love was folly. There was no love. There was only power. (239-240)

The contrast between the autocratic world of Emperor Akhbar, which nevertheless allows debate and values ideas of love and justice, and the pseudo-democratic ethos that Machiavelli decries
here as mob folly, is a potent figuration of my reading of Agamben’s work: that the pragmatics of power dictate state action rather more than a given political system, be that democratic or authoritarian. Machiavelli, in the aftermath of the state’s demonstration of its mastery of sovereign power as it abandons and exiles him, still maintains that the same City-State “gave the world the idea of the value and freedom of the individual human soul.” Even as the state exhibits the weakness of Machiavelli’s idea of his “sovereign” life, the irony is that he still believes in the sovereignty of “the people” as constitutive of the state, blaming them for his fate rather than the system he helped to maintain for the fourteen years he was in power. This is the tragedy that much of *The Enchantress of Florence* builds toward: that once engulfed by the state and its power its characters cannot think outside the box that power circumscribes. Here, the state servant Machiavelli is represented as having lost sympathy for the populace as a consequence of his time in charge. It is he who no longer cares whether the other lives or dies, which is a quality of the use of sovereign power over life, whether from the State or from those who act in its stead.

“Tragic Realism”: Toward a Transnational Critique of State Power

When he suffers at the Hand of the Widow, Saleem shares a bond with all the other victims of the state. Together they constitute a nation. At the end of the novel, the identity of India is no longer in question: India is made up of all who have suffered at the Hand of Indira Gandhi. It might not be too much to declare that Saleem the memoirist (as opposed to Saleem the hero) is the child of that second midnight, the hour when Indira Gandhi arrogated dictatorial powers to herself with the declaration of a State of Emergency.

-Neil ten Kortenaar, *Self, Nation, Text*, 142
The Enchantress of Florence thematizes Agamben’s language of power in explicit narrative tropes but, as the end of Neil ten Kortenaar’s chapter on “The State” in Self, Nation, Text, explains, Rushdie was concerned with similar ideas as early as Midnight’s Children. Rushdie’s interest in state power continues throughout his work right up to the present day, and it is an interest far less contingent upon magic realism and hybridity than it is on “tragic realism.” This is a technique of representing transnational trends of how states, both democratic and non, both “East” and “West,” seek to control and repress their citizens, the tragic effects of which Rushdie accentuates through contrasting them with the magical, hybrid side both of migrant identity and of the possibilities of transnational culture and writing.

Nowhere is this approach more apparent, or more forceful, than in The Satanic Verses. The novel opens with its two heroes, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha (née Salahuddin Chamchawala), falling out of the sky over the English Channel, from an aeroplane blown up by terrorists, and miraculously surviving (Rushdie 1995, 38, 1-10). This moment tends to be read as a herald of the coming celebration in the novel of the “newness” brought into the world by the migrant and by cross-cultural pollination, with particular focus given to the effervescence of the passage where Rushdie combines his heroes’ terrifying fall with their sudden decision to flap their arms and sing together, an action which, against general interpretations of physics, slows them down until “the two of them were floating down to the Channel like scraps of paper in a breeze” (9). However, the passage is rather more equivocal about the book’s coming narrative than it might appear:
“Fly,” Chamcha shrieked at Gibreel. “Start flying, now.” And added, without knowing its source, the second command: “And sing.”

How does newness come into the world? How is it born?

Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?

How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is? What compromises, what deals, what betrayals of its secret nature must it make to stave off the wrecking crew, the exterminating angel, the guillotine?

Is birth always a fall?

Do angels have wings? Can men fly?” (8)

Not only will the book be about “change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining” then, but it seems that the narrative will also touch on the extremity and danger of that newness and of its occasionally self-compromising nature, an idea that, as we have seen, The Enchantress of Florence takes up at length. This line seems to foreshadow how Gibreel is driven mad by the discomobulating experience he finds in his lives both in India and in Britain, culminating in his suicide after murdering his Everest-climbing partner, Alleluia Cone. Of still greater interest for my argument here are the references to “the wrecking crew, the exterminating angel, the guillotine,” allusions which foreshadow a parallel narrative to that of the migrants of “Brickhall” (transparently modeled on Brixton) and Bombay: a story of the brutal pragmatics of state power, the privations of which remain horribly consistent, from the origins of India in Midnight’s Children, to this book’s allegory of Margaret Thatcher’s Britain, through to the crime bosses and
communalism of *The Moor’s Last Sigh* and, of course, the disillusioned worlds of *The Enchantress of Florence* and *Shalimar the Clown*.

Tragic realism seems a particularly appropriate interpretation of the politics of *The Satanic Verses* because of the novel’s scathing verdict on the Thatcher administration, which dominated late 1970s and 1980s Britain, especially after the jingoism unleashed by the Falklands War, and most particularly her government’s immigration rhetoric. Agamben’s argument that the exceptional politics of the camp now informs the overall ethos of the use of power by the state is thrown into sharp relief by the novel’s depiction of Saladin Chamcha’s incarceration in an immigration internment camp, where he and his fellow inmates have literally been made into monsters merely by arriving in Britain. Be it a wolf, a manticore, a woman whose skin has been turned to glass, holidaymakers from Senegal who have been changed into slippery snakes, all the migrants Saladin meets have been literally transformed by the state:

“But how do they do it?” Chamcha wanted to know.

“They describe us,” the other whispered solemnly. “That’s all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct.” (168)

As someone who lived in Britain for over two decades, including the years of the Thatcher government, this description of the power of the jingoistic *Daily Mail* and its tabloid cousins rings all too true for me. I am reminded in particular of Margaret Thatcher’s pronouncement in 1979, only recently released under the 30 year rule, that “it was essential to draw a line somewhere” over “Asian” immigrants, and that such immigrants should not be able to get
council housing when “white citizens” could not (Swaine)\(^3\). The above section in *The Satanic Verses* goes farther than an attack on the Tories, for its description of the magical creatures which help Devil-horned-and-hoofed Chamcha flee the nightmare “Detention Centre” does not resemble the optimism of change-by-conjoining, but precisely its limit: the moment where multiplicity must flee the guillotine of the state:

They ran out of that ward of nightmares into the clarity of a cold, moonlit sky, past several bound, gagged men: their former guards. There were many shadowy figures running through the glowing night, and Chamcha glimpsed beings he could never have imagined, men and women who were also partially plants, or giant insects, or even, on occasion, built partly of brick or stone; there were men with rhinoceros horns instead of noses and women with necks as long as any giraffe. The monsters ran quickly, silently, to the edge of the Detention Centre compound, where the manticore and other sharp-toothed mutants were waiting by the large holes they had bitten into the fabric of the containing fence (171).

This is a world of “nightmares” deliberately designed for “containing” the “monsters” it has created, and the description of the “shadowy” nature of the fleeing mutants suggests something of the “sacrifice” necessary for survival that the novel gestured toward as Gibreel and Chamcha fell from the sky. Indeed, the binding of the guards foreshadows the revolutionary, even violent, agenda that the Brickhall activists must assume towards the close of the novel, upon the unjust arrest of Uhuru Simba. The point here is that this is the magical world of parts of Rushdie’s novels, but made nightmarish by the intervention of the state. This is the section of the novel,

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\(^3\) It should be noted that, in Britain, “Asian” refers explicitly to peoples of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin, rather than the much wider “Asian” diaspora the term implies in North America.
along with its version of the Brixton riots, that represents the migrant experience in Britain more accurately than Saladin’s identity crisis or Gibreel’s madness: Thatcher claimed in an interview with Granada Television in 1978 that “people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture,” comments that are credited with causing “a collapse in support for the National Front” (Granada Television’s “World in Action,” and Swaine).

One more interesting aspect of the Detention Centre section may be found in the final sentence of that chapter – “Ellowen Deewoen” or, phonetically, “London” in heavily accented Indian-English – when Saladin’s nurse Hyacinth Phillips instructs him where to head to: “east she told him, as he heard his own footsteps replace the tinnitus in his ears, east east east they ran, taking the low roads to London town” (171). Although it is not clear upon which beach Saladin and Gibreel land, just before the plane explodes Chamcha notices the “white cliffs” that are the hallmark of Dover and much of the south east coast of the UK (86). Rushdie clearly knew details of the UK Government’s migrant detention policy, since he uses the correct phrase “Detention Centre,” from which they were redesignated as “Immigration Removal Centres” (IRCs) under the “Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002” (“Immigration Removal Centres”). The only south coast Detention Centre operational close to the publication of _The Satanic Verses_ was Haslar, in Gosport just outside Portsmouth, which opened in 1989 (“Haslar IRC”). It is more than feasible that Rushdie would have heard the announcement that the Detention Centre was to open, in time to write this section, given the glacial speed with which governments often work: and it fits the novel, since one does have to travel east to get to London from Portsmouth (“Dover IRC”). However, it is as much north to London as it is east from Haslar, which indicates an additional motive for Rushdie in writing that Saladin and the escapees went “east east east.”
By implying that the immigrants are fleeing north as well as east, this sentence explicitly links London with India, Chamcha’s new home with his old, and signals once more that Rushdie is as much searching for ways to represent transnational commonalities, both good and bad, as he is for portraying difference. The irony that his characters go east, only to end up in London, seems something of a wry comment on the limitations of Rushdie’s search for that difference.

Such a reading also serves to illuminate Rushdie’s depiction of the similarities between how state power operates in India and in Britain, in *Midnight’s Children* and *The Satanic Verses*. Just as Brigadier Dyer orders his forces to shoot down the peaceful protestors at Jallianwala Bagh, so Inspector Kinch of the Metropolitan Police seems to have colluded in the shadowy murder of community activists in Brickhall (Rushdie, *Verses*, 465). It is extra-judicial state power in both cases which dramatically shifts the narrative of each novel. The representation of the punitive police raid on Club Hot Wax – an underground scene where wax effigies of political and historical figures are melted down as the climax of the show, and the favourite victim is always “Maggie” – is equally damning, setting off a genuinely dangerous riot which causes real “rivers of blood” to flow, literalizing Enoch Powell’s odious speech in a moment that is downbeat even for Rushdie (454-457, 293):

> But here, there is no beauty, sleeping within. There is Gibreel Farishta, walking in a world of fire. In the High Street he sees houses built of flame, with walls of fire, and flames like gathered curtains hanging at the windows. – And there are men and women with fiery skins strolling, running, milling around him, dressed in coats of fire. The street has become red hot, molten, a river the colour of blood. (462)
Indeed, this passage, with its emphasis on the fire set off, or allowed to be set off, by the state recalls the massacre of Bangladeshi citizens and the burning of their homes by plain-clothes Pakistani military forces in *Midnight’s Children*, as they “held Pakistan together by turning flame-throwers machine-guns hand-grenades on the city slums” (357).

Returning to *Midnight’s Children* then, what Neil ten Kortenaar describes as “that second midnight,” in his description of the Widow’s declaration of the State of Emergency, the hour that really gives birth to Saleem and his generation, might also apply to this “Midnight, March 25th, 1971” in Dacca (now Dhaka), Bangladesh, for it seems to be equally resonant in the novel’s verdict on state politics (Kortenaar, 142). This is the hour where “students and lecturers came running out of hostels; they were greeted by bullets, and Mercurochrome stained the lawns” (356). The decision to depict the attack on Dacca University, coupled with the Mercurochrome reference, is a choice by Rushdie to mimetize the regressive qualities of this moment, for it takes us back to that moment after Jallianwala Bagh when Aadam Aziz arrives home, stained with the red smears of blood that ran from the protestors he was trying to save. The attack on Bangladesh is mimetized first, not in an assault on a military barracks or another target of strategic importance, but in an attack on an institution that holds open the possibility of positive change: like peaceful protest, the university is one of the few branches of the state which legitimizes (and, sometimes, regulates) dissent. With “fire,” the linguistic connection between the crackdowns in Brickhall and Dacca in these two novels, Rushdie indicates a deeper, eerie “East”-“West” link between the state’s claim to tolerate difference and its burning desire to extinguish it in fact.
The Alternative State Apparatus

. . . this shadow-Jehovah, this anti-Almighty, this black hole in the sky, my Daddyji . . .”


Rushdie accentuates his project of tragic realism in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. While its tales of Mughal-conquered Spain, the exodus of the Cochin Jewish diaspora, and the rise of corruption and organized crime in India, might seem far-removed from the single narrative voice of *Midnight’s Children* or the allegory in *The Satanic Verses* of ideological fundamentalism in pre-modern Islam and neo-liberalism, the concern with the ramifications of the abuse of state power links all three texts. To demonstrate this, I wish to concentrate in particular on the representation in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* on the battle for power between what I call the “alternative state apparatuses” of organized crime and communalist activism.

Needham’s analysis of *Midnight’s Children* observes that Saleem’s narration functions as an alternative reading of the nation’s “unity” espoused by Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India*, and we might in turn examine criminality in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* as a thematization of the degree to which hidden, undemocratic forces of disunity have come to shape the supposedly unitary landscape of Indian politics (Needham, 56). When ten Kortenaar writes of “that second midnight” of the Widow’s Emergency, he suggests just how much of Saleem’s, and thus the novel’s, identity is formed by that second, dark, shadowy story (Kortenaar, 142). And when we read of our hero’s crime-boss father, Abraham Zogoiby, in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, we cannot avoid feeling the prevalence of a similar kind of influence.
The hero, Moraes Zogoiby, says of his father in the novel’s penultimate act: “I saw him wrapped in darkness, a collapsing star sucking darkness around itself as its mass increased. No light escaped from the event horizon of his presence” (341). In Abraham’s victory over the Muslim gang boss Scar, and his other enemies, Moor sees a “dark, ironic victory for India’s . . . secularism. . . . Maybe.” But if he and the other alternative state apparatus, the communalist empire of Raman Fielding, should clash, there will be only “Armageddon” (332). Indeed, Abraham and Fielding have such a shadowy kind of authority that much of their influence on the action of the novel only happens by implication, in the unwritten space between the sentences, leaving the reader to only guess how far the novel’s characters go to appease them. When Fielding incites a Hindu communalist mob that threatens to burn down the gallery exhibition of Moor’s mother, the (fictional) famous painter Aurora Zogoiby, she averts it by calling him on the phone: “‘how much?’ she asked. And Mainduck named his price” (233).

It is Rushdie’s language at these moments that is most telling, most indicative of his concern with the undemocratic nature of power at work in the state: it is “dark,” of “darkness,” “ironic” and of increasing “mass,” “a collapsing star” sucking light and dark alike into its orbit. These words literally foreshadow the conflict with which the novel ends, between Abraham’s influence – carefully squeezed over decades from the unseen interactions between capital, society and the state – and the equally uncontrollable force of communalist fervour:

For there in the sanctums of the Under World I had been shown, by this casual demonstration of the length of my father’s arm, that Abraham would be a formidable antagonist in the coming war of the worlds . . . that struggle between two layers of power in which I, and Nadia Wadia, and Bombay, and even India
itself would find ourselves trapped, like dust between coats of paint. (Rushdie, Moor, 318)

In Abraham and Mainduck, Rushdie personifies the nature of state power, its ability to squeeze the city and the nation because most of its operations are unknown and unseen, because of its inhabiting and mastery of the shadowy areas of pragmatism and politics. What is a “sanctum” for one citizen, Moraes, is but another shadow for Abraham’s fingers to slip into, and The Moor’s Last Sigh is an attempt to describe the nature of this exceptional world and the way in which it achieves its existence alongside the everyday. Nevertheless, despite its move into this more abstracted thematizing of the “dark” world of state power, Rushdie’s project of exploring that power’s effect on the citizen remains as central as it was a decade earlier. As Kortenaar writes on Midnight’s Children, “the Widow . . . is not essentially different from the male sovereign that Hobbes portrayed. It is the state, once the ground of Saleem’s psychological integrity, that now directly threatens that integrity” (Kortenaar, 138). Nowhere is this continuum clearer than when Moraes is sent to a nightmarish prison, rather reminiscent of the Detention Centre in which Saladin Chamcha finds himself, which he had never noticed despite its presence in an area of Bombay he knows well:

    Had I slipped accidentally from one page, one book of life on to another – in my wretched, disoriented state, had my reading finger perhaps slipped from the sentence of my own story on to this other, outlandish, incomprehensible text that had been lying, by chance, just beneath? (Rushdie, Moor, 285)

This moment is not merely another self-referential gesture, drawing attention to the nature of the novel as text, but is also a statement of political intention, that The Moor’s Last Sigh is an
attempt at writing the interaction between the hidden world of state power and the visible world of the citizen. Further, this paragraph describes the narrative structure of all the novels I have addressed in this chapter, and the “disoriented” and disorienting technique of magic realism is used as a way of permeating the discursive wall that separates the everyday from the exceptional, the state of normality from the state of emergency, and of highlighting the tragically real consequences for those who get caught in the net. This is the ethos which lies behind Moor’s description near the close of the novel, of the process of restoring a painting of his mother’s that is hidden beneath a protective fake: “two worlds stood on her easel, separated by an invisibility; which permitted their final separation. But in that separation one would be utterly annihilated, and the other could easily be damaged” (427). Moor is referring to the palimpsest, the thin layer of clear lacquer placed over the original work, such that the new image could be separated from the old as it is painted on. The risk for the restorer is that she has to scratch away at the fake picture on top but never knows if she is going too far, for the protective lacquer is invisible and of indeterminate depth. The intimation for Rushdie’s own project is that the discursive and representational violence involved in uncovering the mechanisms and ramifications of state power is necessarily indiscriminate and violent. The writer must scrape and gouge in to the protective layer that lies over this shadow world, but in doing so runs the continual risk of damaging the world itself. There is much difficult violence in all of Rushdie’s novels, with the multiple detonations that savage so many innocents in Bombay at the close of *The Moor’s Last Sigh* being especially difficult to read, and the restorer’s paradox reads something like an apology from Rushdie to his readers for what he sees as this notable difficulty of addressing the shadow-worlds of our time.
In this particular sense, *The Moor's Last Sigh* signals an evolution in Rushdie’s style from earlier novels. Neil ten Kortenaar, in a finely detailed reading, talks of the grand identification between narrator, nation and citizen in *Midnight’s Children*. For Kortenaar:

Saleem . . . identifies with the whole [of the nation] and not with a part, as though, like absolute monarchs in Renaissance Europe, he was two bodies at once: a physical body and, in its image, the spiritual collective body of the state. The collective that Saleem imagines in his own image and in whose image he imagines himself resembles the figure of the sovereign in the original frontispiece of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*: a giant towering over his dominions, his body composed of the Lilliputian figures of his subjects. (Kortenaar, 131)

In providing an alternative narrative of the sovereign nation-state, then, in *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie produces a parallel figuration of it in the form of Saleem, the channel for the one-thousand-and-one children of Midnight, the generation representing India’s birth and, for Kortenaar, something of its failure also. However, as Kortenaar indicates with his reference to the contrast between Rushdie’s Leviathan of a narrator and his Lilliputian subjects, therein lies an inevitable double-bind: that in shadowing the Nehruvian discovery of India the author lays claim to the kind of power he seeks to criticize. As I have suggested, Rushdie, with his layer of clear lacquer in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, becomes increasingly uncomfortable, post-*Midnight’s Children*, with this relationship between his novels and the power of the Nation-State, but it is not until *Shalimar the Clown* that this discomfort breaks out into the despair which threatens the very nature of his politics.
The End of Hybrid History and The Last Man: or, Kashmir and Shalimar the Clown

He was even questioning the anticommunalist principles embodied in the notion of Kashmiriyat, and beginning to wonder if discord were not a more powerful principle than harmony.

Communal violence everywhere was an intimate crime. When it burst out one was not murdered by strangers. It was your neighbours, the people with whom you had shared the high and low points of life, the people whose children your own children had been playing with just yesterday.…Maybe Kashmiriyat was an illusion. Maybe all those children learning one another’s stories in the panchayat room in winter, all those children becoming a single family, were an illusion. Maybe the tolerant reign of good king Zail-ul-abidin should be seen—as some pandits were beginning to see it—as an aberration, not a symbol of unity. Maybe tyranny, forced conversions, temple-smashing, iconoclasm, persecution and genocide were the norms and peaceful coexistence was an illusion.


The sad aspect of *Shalimar the Clown* is that it represents the logical extension, to its end-point, of the politics I have narrated in this chapter, and the novel’s defeatism marks a capitulation by Rushdie in the face of the forces he has spent almost all of his previous novels attacking. One of the most powerful elements of *Midnight’s Children*, *The Satanic Verses* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, is that these novels pit the state against the citizen, the destabilizing, changing effect of the migrant or the new generation against the monolithic, concretizing power of The Widow, or Maggie Thatcher, or Communalism and crime-ridden Capital. But *Shalimar the Clown* depicts a world where the hybridizing impulses of its characters are not only ground
down in a depressing and final process throughout the novel, but are also implied to be tainted from the start. Rushdie’s fictional world now suggests that the long arm of the state, and its competitors for sovereignty, have become so influential that the book’s citizens are born already tainted by the shadow of discord and of chaotic violence. The novel suggests that many of its characters are always already perpetuating the interests of the worst aspects of the state and, thus, contributing to the failure of hybridity and of a multicultural, inclusive version of postcolonial identity.

I have already argued that there is a kind of mutually-serving equilibrium, in Rushdie’s work, between a narrative method of magic realism and a political project of tragic realism, and that the contrast between the two serves to highlight the relative power of each for representing different aspects of contemporary life. What happens in Shalimar the Clown, however, is an almost total restructuring of this relationship, with an unconvincing, unsustainable fantasy world of inter-faith harmony in a Kashmir village at the start of the novel, quickly giving way to what can only be described as an Armageddon for hybridity in the face of massive movement of global terrorist and capitalist power structures. The magic of the multiplicitous representation of character, culture and nation, which has hitherto constituted much of each novel’s method of storytelling, is relegated in Shalimar the Clown to a fantastical, dreamlike structural aside at the start of the text and subsequently excised from the language and narrative almost completely. Just as disturbing, however, is the implication the novel makes that the self-referential, multiplicitous way of life was always a simulacrum, and that the descent into the shadowy world of violence and power is in fact built in to its characters from birth. Firdaus Noman, the mother of the novel’s eponymous protagonist (or perhaps antagonist), Shalimar, says of her son and daughter:
“The times are changing,” she said softly. “Our children aren’t like us. In our generation we were straightforward folk, both hands on the table in plain view at all times. But these youngsters are trickier types, there are shadows on the surface and secrets underneath, and they are not always as they seem, maybe not always even what they think they are. I guess that’s how it has to be, because they will live through times more deceptive than any we have known.” (Rushdie, *Shalimar*, 111)

When read alongside my central argument, that Rushdie’s political project is to write about the shadowy, repressive nature of state power, Firdaus’s words seem like an unsettling new verdict that such deceptive times have resulted in a corresponding shadow at the secret, private heart of its people. If *Midnight’s Children*’s Saleem, following Kortenaar, is written as an alternative sovereign entity to the Hobbesian State, grandiosely but hospitably gathering up the survivors of the Emergency into an alternative vision of the Nation, its history and, again from Kortenaar, the postcolonial self, then the hero of *Shalimar the Clown* represents something more compromised and “deceptive.” Saleem, of course, is a first-person narrator, giving at least the impression of being “straightforward,” of having “both hands on the table at all times,” and there is a distinct sense that Rushdie identifies strongly with Saleem’s view of the world. In the above passage Shalimar, by contrast, seems to be being symbolically cut-off from that sympathetic ancestry. Rushdie’s is saying that his new narrative children are not “like” him.

Shalimar Noman, the pro/antagonist and pseudo-anti-hero of the novel, is of particular note in this regard within the wider context of Rushdie novels. Shalimar the clown is, despite his nickname, not funny or lighthearted at all, as the narrative relates how he came to be an extremist-trained Islamic terrorist motivated to kill an American intelligence officer, an event
which opens the action of the novel. In almost every other Rushdie story, the reader is encouraged to sympathise with the protagonist. Saleem Sinai is, despite his grandiose claims about being “handcuffed to history,” charming and likeable. Gibreel and Chamcha in *The Satanic Verses* go through so much suffering at the hands of the state and of the public that we instinctively root for them for much of the text. Moraes Zogoiby suffers similarly, while Vespucci in *The Enchantress of Florence* is so consistently on the verge of being executed for his wild stories that, like Scheherazade, we must wish for his success so that the story might continue. By contrast, after a short period of unconvincing childlike innocence, Shalimar the clown becomes a sinister, opaque figure, one that signals a major departure for Rushdie’s work.

Despite all Rushdie’s protestations that the major historical *errata* in *Midnight’s Children* were in some way deliberate, it seems fairly clear that the error about who dictated the *Ramayana* is not Saleem’s but in fact Rushdie’s own (Kortenaar, 239). That Rushdie would subsequently describe a mistake he – rather than Saleem – made as a “howler” shows how close Rushdie was to his hero and narrator as he wrote the novel: how attached Saleem’s view of the world is to his own. This attachment continues through *Shame*, written out of a personal sense of outrage at the “honour killing” of a young Pakistani girl, to *The Satanic Verses*, where Chamcha’s fish-eating ordeal famously mirrors Rushdie’s own experience at Cambridge. Something very different is happening in *Shalimar the Clown*. For an ostensible protagonist, Shalimar is absent from the action of the narrative completely for long periods, appearing only in dreams or fleeting glimpses, and his opaque, sinister character is difficult to read and hard to sympathise with. While Shalimar does function as a device to problematize the stereotyping of terrorists as madmen and women with no rationality or humanity, and thus requires a degree of identification, there is little doubt that the real hero of the tale is the daughter the first and last
chapters are named after: India/Kashmira. That Kashmira almost certainly kills Shalimar with an arrow from her golden bow, in the final scene, completes the transformation from earlier novels. In previous texts, the protagonist and hero are generally the same character(s), whereas in *Shalimar* Rushdie must eradicate his book’s eponymous child, the one with “shadows on the surface and secrets underneath,” or risk him being the text’s epitaph instead of “Kashmira.” This strategy is not entirely convincing but, given what I am claiming here, it is probably not meant to be.

The importance of the Indo-Pakistani-ruled province of Kashmir to Rushdie’s fiction has, of course, been pointed out in the past, notably by Patrick Hogan and Daniel Roberts, in “Kashmir and the Politics of Identity” and “Rushdie and the Romantics: Intertextual Politics in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories,*” but this significance has been highly complicated by *Shalimar the Clown,* which, as well as being largely set there, is dedicated to Rushdie’s Kashmiri grandparents. Its import for discussions of Rushdie’s relationship with magic and tragic realism lies in its narrative extension and expansion out of what the novel sees as the failure of multiplicitous, inclusive politics in the province, into a similar failure in its characters and in the wider world. The uneasy co-existence of civilian and military worlds is destroyed by a declaration of martial law, hitherto neighbourly village residents are stoked into communalist exclusion, and intermingling forms of expression such as cooking and dance are replaced by fundamentalist terrorist ideology and violence.

In many ways this chapter has been an attempt to trace the occasions, throughout Rushdie’s *oeuvre,* when what is represented by the golden, multiple, magical land of “K” – as it is known in Rushdie’s most charming book, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* – comes up against its limits. That is why I opened with the multiplicitous Moraes Zogoiby hoping to awaken,
renewed and joyful, into a better time, for I was hoping to draw out and account for the moments
of sadness, violence and injustice that signal an alternative narrative to the one told by most
critics: I wanted to unmask the narrative that would cause Moor to wish for sleep above
remaining in the world, or for Saleem to end up atomized by the very history he was so lovingly
recording and personalizing. However, it is also the case that Moor enters his premature sleep
only at the close of the novel having, much like Saleem, been the welcoming gatekeeper of a
chronicle that is, despite my focus here, as much magical as it is tragic. It is the evacuation of
this magic from the world of *Shalimar the Clown*, and the expansion of the tragic to fill the
resulting void, which signal Rushdie’s epitaph for his own politics, an expansion which helps to
explain India’s response to the death of her father, Max Ophuls:

> Everywhere was now a part of everywhere else. Russia, America, London,
> Kashmir. Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another’s, were no longer our
> own, individual, discrete. This unsettled people. There were collisions and
> explosions. . . . She had had an English childhood too, but she did not remember
> it as a golden place, she had no sense of a better before. For her that disenchanted
> after-land was where she had lived all her life. It was all there was. Contentment,
> contentedness, content, these variant forms were the names of dreams. If he could
> offer her such a dream, her suitor, maybe it would be a greater gift than love. She
> went back to her apartment to consider his proposal, damn it, what was his
> fucking name. Judd Flood. (Rushdie, *Shalimar*, 37)

This section was taken up by Theo Tait in the *London Review of Books* as an example of
Rushdie’s overwhelming “ambition” to write “the story of everywhere,” of “globalisation,” but
for me this is a misreading, for the passage refers explicitly to the loss of a very particular place
India/Kashmira is the child of a Kashmiri mother, but is born far away from that province in Mehrauli, New Delhi, and quickly shipped abroad, first to England, then to the United States (209). For her there is no “golden” place in the hybrid land of Kashmir, and she has “no sense of a better before,” of a Kashmir without the collisions and explosions of communalism, because that moment has passed with the coming of the children Firdaus Noman, her grandmother, observes are so different (111). For India Ophuls the opposite of the “disenchanted after-land,” the enchanted golden valley which gave us Aadam Aziz and Rashid the Shah of Blah, has never been more than a magical dream, and this is why she values a dream more than love. In *Midnight’s Children* it is this dream world which gives us the romance of Aadam Aziz and Naseem Ghani, via the perforated sheet; it is what starts Rushdie’s whole project off, and for me it is this dream of a magical coming together of peoples and cultures which sustains his darker narratives of the power of governments, communalism and capitalism. It is this sustenance which has failed its task in *Shalimar the Clown*, which is why there is no longer the magic of difference and why “everywhere” is “now a part of everywhere else.”

With the otherworldly nature of what is involved in finally stopping its antagonist, *Shalimar the Clown* underscores the difficulty Rushdie faces in halting the slide into the more tragic aspect of tragic realism. India, now renamed Kashmira, probably manages to shoot Shalimar dead in her home in the final sequence of the novel. We read that her arrow is “let fly,” but we are not allowed the final verdict on whether Kashmira’s shaft or Shalimar’s knife emerges victorious. Nevertheless, the novel hints that it is the former. Kashmira has borrowed night vision goggles from one of her private security protectors which, unless Shalimar can see in the darkness of the powercut, gives her a significant advantage sufficient for his honed instincts to switch modes from “attack to defence . . . to the self-preserving wariness of the
hunted” (398). More powerful than this technological and tactical advantage, though, with knife against arrow, naked eye against green-tinged military optics, is the symbolic dominance implied by her use of a “golden bow.” It is difficult to avoid the association with Artemis here, Greek goddess of the hunt and of war, elder sister to Apollo and daughter of Zeus, king of the gods.

Not all Greek poets agreed that Artemis’s bow was gold, with Callimachus (“Hymn 3 to Artemis”) in particular asserting that it was silver, but there are enough literary references for Rushdie to have decided on the gold colour that links Kashmir’s weapon of choice to her home province: Homeric hymn XXVII, “To Artemis,” as well as Ovid’s “Metamorphoses” (1.693), both concur on gold. Artemis was infamously fearsome when angered or threatened, murdering every one of Niobe’s daughters with poisoned arrows in response to a perceived slight, turning Actaeon into a stag to be torn apart by his own hounds, and demanding the sacrifice of Agamemnon’s daughter Iphigenia so that his fleet might set sail to Troy (Oxford Classical Dictionary 2009, “Artemis”). However, it bears mentioning that India/Kashmira is by no means a cipher for the Greek goddess. Artemis was intensely protective of her virginity, whereas India goes through a brief period of prostitution in her teens. Kashmira is Rushdie’s own version, drawing on what is required to counter the symbolic power of Shalimar. It is here that the London Review of Books’s Theo Tait again displays an incomplete reading of the novel. For Tait, “the preposterously slinky and glamorous India Ophuls” is a symptom of Rushdie’s “fondness for hyperbole, and his ever-growing obsession with glamour.” Tait explains that: “She is 24, ‘a proficient athlete and a brilliant student,’ who is planning a snazzy psycho-geographic documentary about LA. Her ‘spare-time pursuits’ include weekly boxing sessions, training in the ‘close-combat martial art of Wing Chun’ and small arms target practice – but the arrow is her ‘weapon of choice’” (Tait, 1). While I agree that the depiction of women in Rushdie’s novels
seems to vacillate rather too freely between the absurdly beautiful and the terrifyingly monstrous – the Widow contrasts with Parvati the Witch in *Midnight’s Children*, Mishal Sufiyan with Maggie Thatcher in *The Satanic Verses*, Uma Sarasvati with Aurora Zogoiby in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* – in this particular instance I think that Tait’s reading is incorrect. It is the examples that Tait chooses for the absurdity of Kashmira’s glamour, the athleticism, the boxing, the Wing Chun, the firearms, and most of all the bow, that indicate Rushdie’s deliberate insertion of this overdetermined litheness; they demonstrate that Kashmira must take on the warlike attributes of the divine Artemis in order to resist the historical forces bearing down on her in the form of Shalimar. The “hyperbole” Tait identifies here does not mean an obsession with glamour, but rather a desperate final retreat into magic realism, where only the mantle of the divine may halt “the tragedy of multiplicity destroyed by singularity, the defeat of Many by One” presaged at the close of *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (Rushdie, *Moor*, 408). Rushdie’s depiction of women is frequently problematic, but Tait misses the connection between Kashmira and Artemis.

Tait writes that “Max and India may have started out as cool and conceptual, but they end as a fantasy of sophistication and omni-competence that would make Ian Fleming blush.” In fact the message of the novel is that contemporary symbols like James Bond, the Shalimar garden in Kashmir or the credit of American moral power, forged in the fires of World War Two, are inadequate to the challenges posed, by the power of twenty-first Century transnational terrorism or neocolonialism, to the children of that age. The resistance struggles in 1940s France in the novel give us Max Ophuls who, initially a war hero, descends in even Kashmira’s eyes in his work for the U.S. into an “invisible robotic servant of his adopted country’s overweening amoral might” (Rushdie, *Shalimar*, 336), an explicit play on the notion that America’s deeds in the last great war legitimized its actions afterward: for Rushdie, overweening power is necessarily
without morality. The dispiriting conclusion in *Shalimar the Clown*, that only the divine symbolic power of antiquity might be sufficient to discursively challenge the downfall of hybridity and multiculturalism, provides the context that explains Rushdie’s crestfallen retreat into the abstracted discussion of power, and the nostalgia for Mughal India, in *The Enchantress of Florence*.

*The Ambivalent Politics of Hybrid Narrative and the Sea of Meanings*

As dispiriting as the close relationship between *Shalimar the Clown* and Rushdie’s longstanding fascination with Kashmir is, I find myself retreating from allowing it the last word on his political project, because I find that another text is even closer to Rushdie’s relationship with that province and, indeed, India as a whole. I refer to the multitudinous, teeming tales in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, and what I believe is their intimate connection with Rushdie’s writing on the political history of his first home Nation:

The continuing saga of the Nehru family, of the vicissitudes of Jawaharlal, Indira, Sanjay and Rajiv, has been, for hundreds of millions of us, an obsession spanning more than three decades. We have poured ourselves into this story, inventing its characters, then ripping them up and reinventing them. In our inexhaustible speculations lies one source of their power over us. We become addicted to these speculations, and they, unsurprisingly, took advantage of our addiction. Or: we dreamed them, so intensely that they came to life. And now, as the dream decays, we cannot quite bring ourselves to leave it, to awake. (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 48)
The essay “Dynasty” was written in 1985, five years before the publication of *Haroun*, but it foreshadows that collection’s concerns and language very closely. That Nehru dynasty spectators “poured” themselves into, presumably, an ocean of story large enough for “hundreds of millions” of fantasies invokes nothing if not the “Ocean of the Streams of Story” entitling the second part of *Haroun*, and the act of “dreaming” such obsessions into “life” is an uncanny mirror of Haroun’s power to make anything he wishes come true, if he just closes his eyes and concentrates hard enough.

The parallels between *Haroun* and how Rushdie interprets the success of the dynasty of power in India go much further, though, than such figurative allusions. India’s citizens are represented here as being attached to their narratives in the fashion of both the pseudo-good Guppees and the somewhat-bad Chupwalas, as both Vishnu and also Shiva, creator and destroyer. In *Haroun*, our eponymous young hero goes to sleep near the start of the book, and wakes up to find a “water-genie” in the next room, who is in the process of dismantling the ethereal connection between the otherworld of the ocean of stories and his storytelling father Rashid, whose powers as a storyteller are failing. Haroun blackmails the genie, fortuitously called “Iff,” into taking him to “Kahani,” the strange moon orbiting high above where the sea of stories lies, so that he might restore his father’s link with the multitudinous narratives he has built his life on reciting. Once Haroun arrives on Kahani, the connections with India’s dreaming of the Nehru dynasty start to emerge.

The sea of stories on Kahani is made up of countless interweaving tales of all types, constantly renewed by a giant fissure in the ocean floor out of which flow vast quantities of new narratives, which continue to intermingle with the other strands in the sea, revivifying those already drifting across the kingdom. However, the moon is also inhabited by two opposing
factions, the Guppees and Chupwalas. The Gupees maintain the ocean of stories, tending it by preventing its threads from becoming too tangled, but the Chupwalas, it emerges, are attempting to poison the sea and destroy its fragile ecosystem by blocking the rejuvenating fissure. Each faction inhabits one hemisphere of Kahani, with the Gupee half in constant light and the Chupwala share in permanent darkness. While this aspect would, in some traditional stories, serve as proof of the Chupwalas’ loathsomeness, this being a Rushdie narrative the possibility of making such an assumption is swiftly closed down. It in fact transpires that the Gupee scientists have constructed machines which actively prevent the moon from rotating, thus condemning the Chupwalas to an imbalanced status quo and infantilizing the Gupee populace into fear of, and an inability to function in, the dark. *Haroun* ends with these machines being deactivated, the Gupees and Chupwalas agreeing to coexist and to maintain the ocean of stories together, and Haroun returning to live happily ever after with his, once more storytelling, father.

Returning to Rushdie’s reading of India’s fantasy of the Nehru dynasty, it seems possible to read those pouring themselves into such stories as both Gupees and Chupwalas. They are both “reinventing” them and “ripping them up,” dreaming them “intensely . . . to life” and finding that the dream “decays.” More precisely, it is the process of ripping fantasies up that is the prerequisite for reinvention, much as the literal dark side of *Haroun*’s moon must become a part of its normal, balanced productive cycle at the end of the book. Narrating and reading are thus both destructive and constructive, and this ambivalent valency is perhaps an overlooked part of hybrid identity and the politics of difference in Rushdie’s work. It is here also that we find the counter to the lack of balance in the politics of *Shalimar the Clown*, for that novel’s slip into an unalloyed sea of bitterness does not remain consistent in the face of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and its humorous portrayal of the self-destabilizing quality of authenticity when faced
with so many tangled strands of origin and identity. As Rushdie writes in “Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist:”

What we are facing here is the bogey of Authenticity. . . . Authenticity is the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism. It demands that sources, forms, style, language and symbol all derive from a supposedly homogenous and unbroken tradition. . . . One of the most absurd aspects of this quest for national authenticity is that – as far as India is concerned anyway – it is completely fallacious to suppose that there is such a thing as a pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw. The only people who seriously believe this are religious extremists. (Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands, 67)

Despite the near-victory of the religious extremist in Shalimar the Clown, perhaps it is this near, rather than actual, victory which points toward a different conclusion than the one I started to draw earlier. Rushdie tries to present a homogenous narrative of the victory of transnational power over the identities of his characters, but does not fully succeed because he cannot resist involving the reader at the most crucial part of his text. Like Rashid, his dumbstruck namesake in Haroun, Rushdie still cannot avoid turning to his audience to help provide the conclusion to his story, and this protects even Shalimar the Clown from going down the path of pure and homogenous defeatism. Even, or perhaps especially, the author, cannot legislate for the reactions of his one-thousand and-one readers to his one-thousand and-one tales. With the end of Shalimar I might read the end of the balanced project of magic and tragic realism, but others might only read the end of one book among many. However, what links all these books together – even Haroun with its government-sponsored prevention of the planet from spinning – is the sense that much of the “tragic”
part of tragic realism can be traced directly to the door of state power or those, like Moor’s father or the communalist Fielding, who act with similar sovereignty over law and life.
Chapter Three: Aftermath

Introduction

Whatever the extent to which *Shalimar the Clown* and its abandonment of hybrid, multiplicitous politics reflects a shift in his work, Salman Rushdie does fill his novels with electrifying battles against communalism, Thatcherism, terrorism, and many other forces seeking to wield disproportionate power over individual citizens. Aadam Aziz may almost get killed at the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, yet *Midnight’s Children*, even its very title, is something of a dramatization of the victory over the imperial power and the continued struggle against those forces which move into the resultant vacuum. Kazuo Ishiguro offers a profoundly different approach to representing sovereign power and the state of exception, by talking about the savagery of the continued effects of the state of exception after it has taken place, a concept I refer to as “aftermath.”

I begin by arguing against the critical reception of Ishiguro’s first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* – which reads the unknown, ghostly woman in the novel as a spectre of trauma in and of itself – by setting up the position that the trauma is explicitly political, in the sense that it locates the state of exception and the excessive use of sovereign power in a social context. By “social context” I mean that it provides the context of the experience of that state by citizens and, more precisely in Ishiguro’s works, its *aftermath*. Aftermath displays the irreversible nature and gravity of the changes in human behaviour and society wrought by the deployment of sovereign power.

In my view, criticism has only identified the surface narrative of *A Pale View of Hills*. Instead, it is necessary to look deeper at what I refer to here as the “abstracted narrative” of a
state of exception that has ended with the surrender of Japan shortly after Nagasaki was
destroyed, but nevertheless still has potent influence on the lives it has left behind. This
aftermath of waste and social trauma is signalled by the convergence of grisly deaths of
daughters with those of drowned pets and babies, and the figurative persistence of the horrors of
the state of exception in the hitherto-sacred forest which borders the geographic and narrative
world of *Pale View*. The forest in Ishiguro’s novel is a world of chaos and possibility, but is also
terrifying because it is unknowable: the forest is in part a vestige of Agamben’s *iustitium* that has
drained out of the city, yet remains on its periphery.

A Pale View of Hills as a post-state of exception novel

One of the most distinctive aspects of Kazuo Ishiguro’s debut novel *A Pale View of Hills*
is its allusiveness, buttressed by an elliptical and ghostly narrative and structure which accentuate
the sense that the novel is reaching beyond its apparent subject matter. While Ishiguro might
seem to reach the apotheosis of this approach in his much later, and longer, novel *The
Unconsoled*, in fact it is precisely the content’s contrast with *Pale View*’s more concrete context,
of post-World War Two Nagasaki and 1960s England, which makes what the book alludes to all
the more flickering and uncertain. The most glaring politically-charged aspect of the setting is, of
course, the situating of much of the narrative in the broken, wasted Japanese city of Nagasaki
after the war and the atomic bomb. This is a historical moment sufficiently important to Ishiguro
that he revisits it in his next book *An Artist of the Floating World*, where he reprises many of the
themes and even some of the characters from *A Pale View of Hills*. 
A Pale View of Hills is set some time after the chaos of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki, when the city is somewhat getting back to normal. Considering Ishiguro’s novels as texts of aftermath is inspired by Agamben’s use of highly metaphorical concepts in his representation of the iustitium, the state of chaos and juridical emptiness that lies at the centre of Agamben’s State of Exception and provides a key model of what the state of exception looks like when it emerges from its hidden existence at the heart of the state. The half-deserted streets of Nagasaki in Ishiguro’s novels, surrounded by smashed wasteland and broken buildings, populated by citizens so traumatised that they are haunted by visions, are vivid depictions of what comes after the iustitium, a description of the consequences of the state of exception which Agamben himself does not provide. Recall that under the iustitium, which literally means “standstill” or “suspension of the law,” all citizens (in extreme cases) could be called upon “to take whatever measures they considered necessary for the salvation of the state” (Agamben, State of Exception, 41). For the citizens of Nagasaki the situation in the war has been even worse than this. Not only do we see a city, in both Pale View and Artist, almost completely devoid of young men after they have been conscripted to fight to save the state, but those living in Nagasaki have been compelled to take “whatever measures necessary” to protect Japan, by being slaughtered in an atomic weapon drop after Japan refused to surrender. For me, Ishiguro is responding to two cumulative results of the use of sovereign power. First, the invocation of martial law – the state of exception – in wartime Japan in order to conquer neighbouring nations has resulted in a narrative world emptied of young men and of many wives, husbands and daughters. Second, the dropping of the atomic bomb left Nagasaki in a state of destroyed chaos, where Ishiguro’s characters exist in such a disordered world that daughters inexplicably commit suicide, and the very existence of many of the characters is open to question, as if in a nightmare.
For me, Etsuko’s journey to England in *A Pale View of Hills*, only to find that the effects of the war follow her there with the death of her daughter, indicates that Ishiguro uses his depiction of the aftermath of Japan’s wartime state of exception as a warning of the consequences of allowing sovereign power to remain at the core of all our state systems, rather than just that of Japan.

The relevance of fiction for understanding the aftermath of the state of exception is underscored by the fact that Agamben relies on some of the same representative techniques as Ishiguro’s novels. *A Pale View of Hills, An Artist of the Floating World* and *Never Let Me Go* use allusive, figurative language, and concepts like motherhood, cultural splitting and biopolitics in their own representations of the *iustitia* of postwar Japan on the one hand, and a nightmare world of organ harvesting on the other, to provide a more complete picture of the state of exception than we find in Agamben’s *iustitium*. They also identify why concern over the state of exception is important. As Adriana Cavarero shows us in *Relating Narratives*, the significance of an event may not be truly apprehended until it is over, and Ishiguro’s fiction opens up the possibility that only after the event, in its aftermath, do we have full opportunity to consider the nature and effect of the state of exception (Cavarero, 17). Fiction can provide this perspective on the nature and consequences of the use of political power in our time, because its signature feature is the use of the figurative in order to represent that which conventional communication struggles to explain.

Ruth Forsythe and Cynthia Wong both point out the significance of the themes of trauma and memory in *A Pale View of Hills*, but I contend that these topics do not account for why Ishiguro set two successive novels in Nagasaki, rather than any of numerous other Japanese cities that suffered during the war. Forsythe delves into Ishiguro’s interest in the life of women in post-war Japan and England (Forsythe, 104), while Wong in her chapter “Narrative and
Memory” focuses on the cultural split between older and younger Japanese generations (Wong, 27-37). These are critically important aspects of the text, but it is difficult to find in such readings interpretations of the choice of Nagasaki as the background for the stories of both Etsuko and Ono. While Ishiguro was born there, I wish to suggest that Nagasaki plays a more potent role in the texts than some readers have realized. Ruth Forsythe, for instance, highlights the shattering role that the atomic bomb played in the hero Etsuko’s life (104), yet the city seems to serve a more representationally-charged function in the text than simply being a symbol of the devastation of war or of misguided Japanese foreign policy. The particular way in which Ishiguro focuses on the setting of Nagasaki means that he explicitly traces a representational journey of aftermath across the face of the city, drawing attention to the events under the wartime state of chaos in Nagasaki and in Tokyo.

The aftermath of military rule mimetized in the geography of the city

The title of *A Pale View of Hills* is particularly relevant here, contrasting as it does so completely with the ferocity of martial law and martial thinking the novel depicts as active in pre-war and wartime Japan. These hills are first mentioned in the narrative almost exactly at the centre of the novel, on page 99 (the Penguin paperback has 183 pages). The protagonist, Etsuko, says of her location in a tower block on the outskirts of Nagasaki: “on clearer days, I could see far beyond the trees on the opposite bank of the river, a pale outline of hills visible against the clouds” (Ishiguro, 99). What Etsuko can see are the hills of Inasa that overlook Nagasaki and the bay on which the city sits (103). Technically this feature is called Mount Inasa, or Inasayama, but I will use Ishiguro’s representation for the purposes of consistency. Etsuko’s visit to Inasa
with her friends seems like the only happy section of the book, and these hills must, therefore, take on key importance for any extended discussion of the text. What is of special interest in the above description is Inasa’s geographical relationship to Etsuko for, in what seems like a throwaway line, the hills lie “far beyond the trees on the opposite side of the river.” This spatial arrangement hints at both why the view of the hills is pale and only appears on “clearer days,” and also the reason for the novel’s setting in Nagasaki. The relationship between what becomes, at points, the rather frightening riverbank and the ghostly outline of happiness in the hills mirrors the separation between Japan and England in the narrative, except that the aftermath of the state of exception follows Etsuko to her exiled-Inasa in Britain. Etsuko’s daughter Keiko kills herself in England, but Ishiguro grants us a glimmer of a way out of the state of exception; Etsuko does, at least, still have her second daughter Niki who Etsuko has successfully brought out, alive, from postwar Japan.

The significance of Inasa in *A Pale View of Hills* is that it provides a conceptual lynchpin for understanding the setting and geography of Nagasaki in the novel as something of a symbolic map for the difficulties (and occasionally hopes) surrounding its characters. Unfurling this map involves tracing Etsuko’s friendship with Sachiko – another local woman in Nagasaki – and her daughter Mariko, because the troubles these characters face in key locations of Nagasaki and Tokyo foreshadow the impossibility for Etsuko of escaping the aftermath of the war: the state of chaos that follows her to England such that her daughter takes her own life. Early on in this narrative there is a near-instantaneous sense of foreboding about what might happen to Sachiko, and particularly Mariko. When Etsuko reminisces about first talking to Mariko she hints at this: “Quite probably there was nothing so unusual about her behaviour that morning, for, after all, I was a stranger to the child and she had every right to regard me with suspicion. And if in fact I
did experience a curious feeling of unease at the time, it was probably nothing more than a simple response to Mariko’s behaviour” (16). What is especially troublesome about this passage is that before Etsuko partitions the narrative, by recalling her time spent in Nagasaki before emigrating to England, we have just been told that Etsuko’s first daughter Keiko hanged herself in her room in their new English home (10). It is thus difficult to avoid the sense of impending doom for daughters at the start of *A Pale View of Hills*, and Etsuko’s description of first meeting Mariko does little to dampen this impression of a foreshadowing. The construction “and if in fact I did” is entirely typical of Ishiguro’s language, its tentative relationship to its subject giving a sense that the narrator – as opposed to the author – is not in fact in control of the narrative or the events it contains. This kind of language also heightens a sense of the narrative resonance of such moments of description in the novel. Ishiguro hints at a symbolic purpose, yet to be articulated, that the reader must seek out. Many of Ishiguro’s novels have a puzzle-like structure which mirrors that of his sentence construction, making them all the more effective at the kind of foreshadowing he attempts in *Pale View*. It is, of course, Sachiko and Mariko with whom Etsuko visits the hills of Inasa that day in the latter half of the novel, and these characters’ role in the novel gestures toward the high importance of *setting* in the work as a whole: a setting in Nagasaki which, in its very geography, provides a figuration of the challenges facing the characters in the novel as they are caught in the aftermath of the use of martial law and martial thinking in wartime Japan.

Sachiko and Mariko live in a somewhat derelict cottage on the bank of the river that is mentioned in the description of the pale outline of hills, and Etsuko’s apartment overlooks both the cottage and the surrounding geographical features. On the other side of the river lies the aforementioned forest, and to get to the cottage Etsuko has to walk across broken, marshy
ground alive with mosquitoes (11). This river, which might be that which runs north to south through the modern-day suburb of Narutaki, serves as a pivotal location in the narrative. In particular, the mysterious “other woman” Mariko speaks of, who visits her when Sachiko and Etsuko are out, emerges from the dark forest at the border of the Nakajima river (17). Only later do we read an explanation for this vision. Sachiko relates to Etsuko how, when she and five-year-old Mariko were living in Tokyo, her daughter saw another woman kneeling by a canal. As she turns to look at them, she raises her arms out of the water, revealing that she is drowning a baby. As Sachiko tells it, this woman cut her own throat a few days later (74). We are thus tempted to read this unnamed woman as a figure for the despair following the 1945 destruction of Japan by Allied bombing. However, the book continually questions this interpretation, introducing layer upon layer of allusion which focuses the concern of the novel rather more closely on the historical-political context of the post-war world and the chaos it causes in the lived experience of its citizens.

Etsuko and the inescapable embodiment of the remains of war

The problem with reading the unknown woman as a spectre of trauma, as Sachiko’s narrative might have us do, is that this figure seems to insinuate herself into the text in an ever-more embodied fashion: she becomes more than a spectre. Barely six pages after Sachiko has dismissed Mariko’s repeated testimonies of the return of this woman to their cottage, Mariko tells Etsuko that “Mother’s seen the woman. She saw her the other night” (80). That this is not merely Mariko extending her fantastical interpretation of the world is suggested by its proximity to Sachiko’s attempt to categorize it as metaphysical, traumatic memory. Narrative proximity of
related but different events is a technique Ishiguro uses repeatedly in order to comment obliquely on those moments. Here, Sachiko’s protestation that Mariko is merely working through trauma comes across as an attempt to deflect attention from her own unease about the phenomenon of the woman. More significantly, however, just afterward Etsuko describes the night when she first baby-sits Mariko in the cottage. Mariko runs outside and sits under a willow tree by the water’s edge. As the now heavily-pregnant (with Keiko) Etsuko searches for her, an old piece of rope becomes caught round her ankle. She picks it up and, upon seeing it, Mariko becomes frightened and runs away into the dark, back toward the cottage (83-84). That this is an echo from the future, of Keiko’s suicide, insinuating itself into Etsuko’s recollection of the past, is a fairly obvious reading, as is the recollection this moment introduces of the murder of a young girl by hanging, from a tree, in postwar Nagasaki (100). What is less clear is the precise relationship that this event has with the figure of the unknown woman, given that this moment appears to interpolate Etsuko into that role. However, that relationship becomes clear once we start to read the unknown woman as a foreshadowing of the failure of Etsuko’s attempted escape from the aftermath of the war in Nagasaki. England holds little solace, for Etsuko and her daughter carry the impact of the wartime state of exception, which required them to submit to years of suffering which broke up their family and happiness, with them.

On the way home from their visit to Mount Inasa, Etsuko, Sachiko and Mariko are on a tram when Etsuko is unnerved by the sight of a woman also on their car, with “a thin face and tired expression,” staring intently at Mariko. This moment is typical Ishiguro in its elusiveness, suggesting at once that this is, on the one hand, some manifestation of the unknown woman and, on the other, that she is merely a malnourished, exhausted human being that Etsuko only constructs as threatening. The former reading seems consistent with one interpretation of the
narrative, for it would mean that all three main characters witness the return of the unknown woman and, further, it potentially weakens the case for Etsuko unknowingly playing that role in the text. This Japanese section of the narrative is, of course, an entirely remembered construction by Etsuko, so a different kind of reading is also tempting here. This might assert that the encounter on the tram literalizes the conceit that every character in a remembered narrative is in some way the holder of those memories. On the remembered tram Etsuko looks upon herself, hinting that Sachiko and Mariko are on at least one level more symbolic than real memories.

I enumerate several appearances by the unknown woman, that all resist cogent readings, because they feed into the debate about the close of the novel and what its significance is for the meaning of the text as a whole. Specifically, I contend that the unknown woman points to the presence of a much more abstracted story beneath the surface of the narrative. Walkowitz, for instance, summarizes quite neatly the interpretative quandary readers are left with in regard to how far Etsuko’s story is “true,” and who the protagonists are supposed to be, by pointing out the uncertainty over whether Sachiko’s daughter Mariko might, in fact, be Etsuko’s daughter Keiko (Walkowitz, 1068-1069). That the unknown woman also, with the exception of the episode on the tram, seems to emerge from the forest bifurcating the (dream-)world of the pale hills and the destroyed reality of Nagasaki proper is also important, and I shall come to this momentarily. The conclusion of the book is an extended one, seeking as it does to resolve, or at least elucidate, several of the narrative’s more symbolic aspects. Sachiko has had an unstable and fairly destructive relationship with an American called “Frank” throughout the story, with him continually promising to take her to America and then delaying or postponing the trip. The end of the novel is signalled by Sachiko convincing herself that this time Frank really will be taking her to the U.S., and she thus begins to pack and prepare Mariko for moving far away. What this
preparation actually consists of is the killing of Mariko’s kittens, which Sachiko initially promised they would keep. Mariko runs outside to witness her mother drowning the kittens and, in a chilling moment, Sachiko looks up from kneeling by the river, kitten in hand, exactly as the woman drowning her baby in Tokyo did (167). Just as disturbingly, as Etsuko goes out of the cottage to search for the now-unnamed “little girl,” she seamlessly switches from the position of friend, comforting Mariko about the prospect of her trip to America with Sachiko, into that of the mother, telling Mariko that “if you don’t like it over there, we can always come back” (173). These moments shake the sense of a cogent narrative still further from its moorings, hinting instead at a rather more abstract story that must simultaneously refocus the setting of the text from a consideration of the chaos of postwar Japan to the psychological and physical scarring caused by the state of exception in general: the aftermath reflects on the nature of the iustitium. Etsuko leaves Japan for England, of course, but her daughter kills herself in this self-constructed Inasa far away across the global forest, demonstrating the difficulty of escaping the ramifications of the state of exception and proving just how pale the view of those hills was from the smashed, marshy wasteground of Nagasaki.

The universally symbolic narrative of Pale View: giving birth to national discourse

A hint of this deliberate abstraction of the novel’s specific context may be found in the text’s seemingly undue attention to Mariko’s kittens, and the risk of a nasty fate that might lie in store for them if Sachiko finally moves (either to her Uncle’s house or America). For much of the text, it merely seems a battle between an emotionally-attached young child and a weary, pragmatist mother, yet Mariko’s insistence that the cats live and travel with her is repeated
several times in the story. Only at the close does the meta-purpose of the kittens become clearer. Firstly, there is the matter of the rather savage language Sachiko uses repeatedly in rationalizing both to Mariko and to Etsuko why the kittens must die. She refers to them as “these creatures” (164), “these filthy little animals” and “dirty little creatures” (165), and in her longer outbursts seems to be echoing the kind of philosophy that Ishiguro’s younger characters in both *Pale View* and *An Artist of the Floating World* suggest led Japan into a brutal war with no thought for the consequences for that younger generation:

> “Can’t you think of anything else?” she said, lowering her voice almost to a whisper. “Aren’t you old enough yet to see there are other things beside these filthy little animals? You’ll just have to grow up a little. You simply can’t have these sentimental attachments for ever. These are just . . . just animals don’t you see? Don’t you understand that, child? Don’t you understand?” (165)

Coupled with the section below this, where Sachiko is described as “quite calmly” dropping the kittens – including Mariko’s favourite Atsu – into a drowning-box right in front of the girl, it is difficult to escape the relationship that the language here has with the novel’s wider depiction: of an older Japanese generation driving wilfully into war alongside a philosophy that holds at its core the idea that sentimentality and sympathy for others is a weakness. This weakness would be at once sympathy for the foreign other in China (Japan’s late 1930s campaign in Manchuria was infamously brutal) and elsewhere, and even for the younger generation those in power see fit to sacrifice in their own country. This is one reason, at least, why the setting of Nagasaki is so important for understanding the novel, for it is the location of the worst event of the war for Japanese citizens. The novel does not depict men dying in battle, but rather children and kittens being drowned or hanged as a result of living in a state of chaos unleashed by a small, elite
government and state apparatus which bore very little of this kind of brunt. Men like Ogata-san in *Pale View*, or Ono-san in *An Artist of the Floating World*, are still alive and well, while their sons and daughters have been bombed or shot, imprisoned or tortured.

It is this symbolic “giving birth” to a national discourse and state of being to which I wish to pay closer attention. I have already discussed the significance of Etsuko’s first meeting with Mariko and the sense of foreboding that accompanies the moment, but have not yet considered Etsuko’s subsequent reaction to that event or, at least, her remembered version of it. When referring to how Mariko does not come to her when called for the first time but in fact runs away, frightened, Etsuko remarks that “such small things were capable of arousing in me every kind of misgiving about motherhood” (17). Such focus is placed on the welfare and fate of daughters in this novel that, coupled with Forsythe and Wong’s justifiable attention to the importance of cultural and generational handover post-World War Two, it seems that there is a figurative importance here not limited to the trauma of Etsuko losing her daughter. More precisely, such meaning is hardly “limited” by the psyche-wrenching sense of loss that pervades the novel but, instead, it is perhaps that Etsuko’s individual, internal wasteland has a distinctly reciprocal and symbiotic relationship with the world that has given rise to it. We only learn late in the novel that Etsuko has suffered a tremendous amount in the events preceding the narrative of *Pale View*, yet she is so quiet about it that, for instance, we only learn that she has lost not one but two husbands in the violence of war halfway through the text, and then only through a throwaway comment in a conversation with Mrs Fujiwara (76). The point is that the text almost exaggeratedly does not focus on the loss of husbands, family or property, but specifically on sons and daughters, which suggests that Ishiguro has a particular emblematic aim, which anticipates the attention to the postwar generation in *An Artist of the Floating World*. This lies in both an explicit concentration
on the moment of transition between generations, as a figuration of the movement from World War Two to the peace in a destroyed land that followed, and, more personally, to reinterpreting the burden of motherhood as something impossible to fully bear in the face of the abuse of power by those in charge. Motherhood here works as a metonym for the responsibility of a given society “giving birth” to the new generation. In *A Pale View of Hills*, the responsibility has been heaped on a collection of traumatized private individuals in the wake of a catastrophic breakdown of public responsibility by government and the state. It is difficult for Etsuko to be happy being a mother when the state that her child will live in has proven itself so undeserving of the great power it wields, while simultaneously leaving her responsible – since state power seems capable of starting wars but not looking after children – for Mariko’s welfare in a destroyed urban wasteland.

By viewing *A Pale View of Hills* as a post-state of exception novel, the importance of setting in the text takes on particular potential for meaning. Returning to the tripartite division I identified in Etsuko’s description of the pale outline of hills, between Nagasaki, the forest on the other side of the river, and Mount Inasa lying beyond, it is possible to view the forest as a spatial representation of the imaginative potential for change, after the *ius titium* of the bombing of Tokyo and the nuclear destruction of Nagasaki (99). The forest is what the remembered narratives of the book pivot around. On one side there is Nagasaki, with child murders, a shattered landscape and a legacy of trauma, and on the other there is Mount Inasa, where Etsuko, Sachiko and Mariko share a pleasant day out together. In Nagasaki, Etsuko sees the world that is and, in Inasa, the world as she would like it to be.

The evidence for this reading lies most strongly in the interaction between Mariko and an older boy, named Akira, whom she meets while out on their day trip. Akira is the spoiled son of
another Japanese woman who bullies Mariko by criticising her drawings, trying to humiliate her with mathematical questions, and refusing to give back to her the binoculars that Etsuko bought for her (113-116, 108). In a particularly pleasing moment, Mariko then climbs up a tree so easily that it shames the terrified Akira into attempting the same feat, at which point Mariko steps on his fingers causing him to fall to the ground and start to cry (119).

The symbolic content of this sequence reveals the power relations Etsuko wants to criticise, and is couched in who has “given birth” to Akira, for his mother is touring Inasa with a loud, fairly insufferable (loudness seems particularly offensive in this novel) American woman (113-119). The symbolism of the daughter of the Japanese woman who lives in a cottage that dates from before the war – for Sachiko’s dwelling was one of the few buildings in their suburban village to survive the bombing (12) – kicking down the child of Japanese-American cooperation is highly significant, especially given that the city they are looking out on from Inasa was completely annihilated by the Americans in what, along with the firebombing of Dresden, might be described as one of the worst war crimes in history. This is to say nothing of the potent class and power conflicts here. While Mariko’s father – like Etsuko’s first betrothed and Mrs Fujiwara’s husband – is dead, Akira’s father is alive and well and working at the prestigious Mitsubishi Corporation (116-117). Upon closer reading, there is further evidence in this passage of an unpleasant imbalance in the sharing of the problems of aftermath. While Ishiguro’s description of the boy as “tubby” and his mother as “plump-faced” might seem an all too typical way to stereotype two bullies, in the context of the immediate post-war rationing of Japan that keeps Sachiko and the thin exhausted woman on the tram slim out of necessity, it is in fact an indication that the war has not hit this family hard at all (107, 113). As the unnamed plump-faced mother says to her son: “you know everyone isn’t as lucky as you” (108), and this sequence of
the novel reads very much like an imagined attempt by Etsuko to redress the post-war balance of power in a way that seems fairer to her, but at the same time Ishiguro only has her do so in a daydream. The tragic outcome of Etsuko’s journey to England, with the death of Keiko, expresses the limitations of representationally unpicking the scope and reach of state power.

The forest as the location of aftermath: the shadow of horror and outline of possibility

That Inasa represents an imagined state of what might have been or, perhaps, what should have been if the Japanese and American leadership had not created the *iustitiums* of Tokyo and Nagasaki, is made clear by the final narrative twist in *A Pale View of Hills*, where it emerges that it might in fact have been Etsuko and her own daughter Keiko, who is of course now dead, on that ride up the cable car to the mountain that day. On the penultimate page of the novel, Etsuko is in England telling her second daughter Niki about the memories she has just been recalling to us. She says of a calendar she gives to Niki: “that’s a view of the harbour in Nagasaki. This morning, I was remembering the time we went there once, on a day trip. Those hills over the harbour are very beautiful. . . . Keiko was happy that day. We rode on the cable cars” (182). Of course, Etsuko might well have been remembering more things than she mentions that morning, and she might have been inspired by her outing with Sachiko and Mariko to take Keiko to Inasa after she was born. However, coupled with other similarities in their lives, such as Sachiko and Mariko moving to America while Etsuko moves with Keiko to England, the extent of the foreboding surrounding the future fate of Mariko, and the moment when Etsuko starts addressing “the little girl” (hitherto Mariko) by the river as if she were her own daughter, this moment at least indicates that two readings of Etsuko’s memories can be sustained by the text (90). What I
wish to make clear at this point is that the potential for this creative revisioning of the past seems to emerge from the forest that separates Nagasaki from the view of Inasa, and that this forest thus represents a space which figures the importance, for the characters in the novel, of attempting to go imaginatively beyond the harsh reality of the aftermath of the state of exception in Nagasaki.

Forests in Japanese culture are frequently spaces of magic and of otherworldliness. A close cultural relationship to woods and forest is, of course, far from unique to Japanese culture, but its particular roots in history and in religion—most notably in the presence of death in these forests—mark out the distinctiveness of the character of this relationship. The Spring 2005 edition of “Kateigahō,” Japan’s arts and culture magazine, featured an article entitled “The 10 most exquisite sacred forests in Japan” in an entire section on “Japan’s Sacred Forests,” which also features an article on the importance of forests to the films of Miyazaki, the director of Spirited Away. Atsuta Jingu, a twenty hectare protected forest at the heart of Nagoya in Aichi prefecture, is the second most important centre of Shinto worship in the world, even featuring a camphor tree that is over a thousand years old: quite a feat after the drive for timber in World War Two and the American firebombings, events which I shall come to momentarily (Kateigahō, “10 Sacred Forests”). The cedar, cypress and oak trees of Yahiko Jinja surround the supreme Shinto shrine in Niigata prefecture, located on Mount Yahiko, which is “revered as a sacred mountain with the divine power to protect people from evil,” commanding “a panoramic view of the sea of Japan” (Kateigahō, “10 Sacred Forests”). The final outstanding location in the Kateigahō article is Kasuga Taisha on Mount Mikasa, “a most sacred forest,” where the gods of Kasuga Taisha dwell. Despite the privations of World War Two and centuries of ambition by self-interested ruling elites, logging in the wood “has been forbidden for more than a millennium,” with UNESCO designating it a World Heritage Site in 1998, and people are not
allowed on the mountain at all except for certain pilgrimages to lesser shrines at limited times of the year (Kateigaho, “10 Sacred Forests”).

In “Japan’s Forests: Good Days and Bad—Rhythms of Damage and Recovery,” an April 2009 essay for the Japan Society, Conrad Totman points out that the history of excessive land clearance for building, fuel and living space stretches back as far as ~600AD (Totman 2009). A cyclical series of damage caused by economic exploitation of woodlands, then emergency repair programs, then more exploitation, is a signature feature of the 1500s to the early twentieth century. What is interesting about this cycle, as it relates to the action of A Pale View of Hills, is the relationship between forests and state power in both the destruction and rehabilitation of woodland. Totman points out that within a century, post the industrialization of the Meiji period in the 1870s, industrial society twice risked destroying the archipelago’s fragile forest systems almost entirely. However, it was also this authoritarian drive toward national agricultural policy and then industrialization, which provided the impetus toward rescuing the forests. Of special note here is the role of international politics in the function envisaged for the forests by the state. Totman argues that it was the expansionist policies of Europe and America, both economically and militarily, that engendered a turn toward militarism at home. Under the slogan fukoku kyohei – or “rich country, strong army” – the Meiji government by 1872 had embarked on a massive logging program to build military forces and urban structures, as well as to fuel the metalworks required for the military-industrial complex in a response to what it saw as the threat of well-armed and fuelled Imperial moves by Western powers (Totman 2009). This had disastrous ecological consequences, requiring the late Meiji government to launch large restoration projects, the work of which was completely undone by the Second World War (Totman 2009).
This leaves us with the forest of *A Pale View of Hills*, a forest which also seems to have been largely swallowed up in the present by the ever encroaching suburbs of Nagasaki. In the novel, however, the forest appears to represent an abstract sense of possibility, both good and bad. The novel is centred around, of course, the reference to the pale outline of the hills of Inasa – located on the other side of the forest – but in the same section we are presented with that reference to a newspaper story of a young girl having been hanged from a willow tree (99-100).

In the context of how central forests are to Japanese culture and history, it seems an especial atrocity to murder a child by hanging her from a tree. However, it would be too easy to read this as a symbol of a generation being hanged on the gallows of a culture and history steeped in warfare, particularly since the unknown woman, who of course emerges from the forest and wants to take Mariko with her, seems to be such an unstable motive force in the text. On the one hand she seems frightening and threatening, but on the other there is certainly some sort of connection between her and our hero-narrator Etsuko.

This threat is echoed by the dream-like world of the forest out of which the unknown woman emerges. The forest is a world of chaotic possibility that must be passed through to reach Inasa, but it is terrifying because it is unknowable: a vestige of the *iustitium* that has drained out of the city yet remains on its periphery. The broken wasteland of Nagasaki and Tokyo is what state power has left our characters and, much as the war follows Etsuko to her own Inasa of faraway England, leaving her daughter to hang herself in a closet rather than from a willow tree, there is the sense that the only escape to a forest or the hills is in dreams or the imagination. It is worth recalling here that Agamben resorts to this kind of figurative description of a state of being in reaching after the meaning of the *iustitium*, such as the letting forth of “a sort of legal mana,” and Ishiguro’s forest seems more appropriate than Agamben’s description of the *iustitium* as a
figuration of the state of exception because of its more complete embracement of figurative language (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 51). Representing the state of exception seems to require both attention to its human ramifications – the loss of daughters, homes, and happy memories – and the deep resonance and persistence of those effects. The aftermath of the state of exception in Ishiduro’s novels seems a lot like the dark shadow of Cavarero’s tale of how the outline of a stork appears in a man’s garden. The subject of Cavarero’s story goes out at night onto the wet lawn and drops his glasses, traipsing around at random in an attempt to find them. When he observes his tracks from higher ground the following morning, he finds that his footprints have traced the outline of a stork on the grass (Cavarero, 1-3). Just as the man can only recognise that the stork is there when he looks down on it the following morning, so considering the aftermath of the state of exception is a crucial aspect in Ishiguro’s fiction of how to understand that chaotic storm of overdetermined political and juridical power.

An Artist of the Floating World and the role of art in the state of exception

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro expands his representation of the aftermath of the state of exception into an examination of the role of culture when confronted with sovereign power. Ono-san’s explanation to his grandson of the patriotic songwriter Naguchi’s suicide highlights the novel’s concern with art and its place in the structures and action of state power (Ishiguro, *Artist*, 155). Mr Naguchi is represented as a simultaneous perpetrator and victim of the war and, taken out of context, Ishiguro’s description might seem to implicate more than exonerate him. His songs are part of the ideological state apparatus: there is no clean separation of art and state but rather, in the eponymous “floating world,” only a promise of
fleeting, intangible beauty which is inevitably rendered false because all art is necessarily tied to the world. This seems at once a cautionary commentary on the limitations of Ishiguro’s own criticism of Japanese imperial thought and approaches, and also a gesture toward what might be a problem in my own project: that, in the sense that Japan’s World War Two state of exception held at least the tacit support of a significant sector of its populace, there might be less of a separation between state power and citizenry, and between art and the state, than I have at times claimed.

In his book *Globalization and Dislocation in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro*, Wai-Chew Sim relates the importance of the connection between the novel’s artists and historico-political events. For Wai-Chew, “the focus of *Artist* is the meaning of Ono’s artistic career. What is underscored indeed are the strong parallels between the progress of his career and wider historical developments” (Wai-Chew, 79). According to Wai-Chew, Ono’s career parallels Japan’s move from “isolationalism to aggressive expansionism,” and then to a kind of imperfect self-awareness after the war ends (80). Where I differ from Wai-Chew is in the assessment of both the representation of the art, rather than just the artists, and the kind of narrative Ishiguro is telling. Specifically, I question Wai-Chew’s interpretation of the novel as primarily a character study of Ono and his conflicts with mentors and mentees (89). *Globalization and Dislocation* is one of the recent studies of Ishiguro that takes *An Artist of the Floating World* as seriously as Ishiguro’s more recent work, and Wai-Chew uncovers far more of the nuances and complexities of the novel than many other critics, who he rightly says tend to “focus on the exotic image of Japanese culture celebrating the beauty of the ephemeral” (97). Nevertheless, by claiming that Ono’s career is “developmental” rather than episodic, in the sense that it is more appropriate to view Ono’s work as a continuum that progresses alongside Japan’s move to “aggressive
expansionism,” rather than a career in three separate stages of commercial, nostalgic and militaristic, Wai-Chew continues to subscribe to the view held by his critical forbears that Artist is mostly about Ono and, just as importantly, what his selectively-remembered life signifies about the “wider historical developments” in the region (Wai-Chew, 79-80).

I do not agree with the approach of reading Ishiguro’s novel as a study of Ono, for a character study elides the importance of Ishiguro’s representation of art. Despite his excellent discussion of the unreliability of Ono as a storyteller, Wai-Chew seems to gloss over the ramifications of the fact that Artist is a remembered narrative, at least in the context of what kind of story we are being told (108-111). An Artist of the Floating World, in its entirety, is told in the aftermath of World War Two. Despite long detours into Ono’s memory of past events, it is difficult to overstate the significance of the fact that everything that happens to Ono is being narrated after the war is over. This means that the book is not strictly a developmental look at where it all went wrong for Ono and/or Japan, but is more a concluding view back on irretrievable, immovable events, after the radioactive dust has settled. It is critical that Ishiguro’s decision to write about “an artist of the floating world” be considered in this context, because it encourages us to ask a question that Wai-Chew does not. If the novel is focused on personal and generational conflicts and betrayals that symbolise wider historical developments, then why does Ishiguro choose to write about artists (Wai-Chew, 86-89, 79)? Were Artist to be read as a character study, then any influential figure in politics would have been sufficient for a protagonist.

The key difference between Pale View and Artist lies in the significance of the attention to art in the later text. Ishiguro’s novel is in large part about the limitations of art and artistic commentary when faced with sovereign power. We see in A Pale View of Hills that it is in the
aftermath of Japan’s imperial militarism that its lasting ramifications become clear, but it is
aftermath too in *An Artist of the Floating World* that highlights the impotence of art, and artists,
in the novel when faced with the state of exception and its destructive echoes that remain after
the event has passed. Ono’s retrospective reveals that art leading up to the war was complacent
about the threat faced by militarism, in the form of Mori-san’s celebration of the pleasures of the
floating world, and that some art actively supported the prospects of Japanese military
expansion. In *Artist*, art is not an effective counterbalance to the drive to war, and it is here that
Ishiguro shows why societies and cultures are so vulnerable to states of exception, such as
martial law in wartime Japan. By de-emphasising the transformative and transcendental power of
art and culture that figures like Mori-san believe in, Ishiguro suggests that there is very little
countervailing force to oppose the abuse of state power in modern politics.

Mori-san says this of a fellow artist named Gisaburo, his companion in fascination with
the floating world: “the best things, he always used to say, are put together of a night and vanish
with the morning. What people call the floating world, Ono, was a world Gisaburo knew how to
value” (Ishiguro, 150). The floating world seems to be set up in the novel as a tragically fragile
and flickering alternative to the aggressive nation-building so attractive to those in power,
politically and culturally, leading up to and during World War Two: and most notably, of course,
attractive to Ono himself. For Anne Chisholm, for example, the floating world is a “lost world”
of “love, beauty and art” (Chisholm, 162), and in this reading it is the intangible, ethereal quality
of the floating world that gives it its value for critics like Chisholm However, the problem with
reading the novel in this way is that it simplifies the complexities of Ishiguro’s representation of
art and its relationship to the state. In this sense Mori-san’s description of the art of the floating
world might take on a more sinister undercurrent. In the light of how pointless the war seems in
the desolation of the novel’s postwar setting, with Ono’s house half destroyed and his wife killed by bombing, the suicides of architects of the conflict, Ono’s son Kenji killed in China, and Kuroda’s arrest and torture at the hands of the Japanese police, it seems difficult to escape the similarity between how Mori-san describes the value of the floating world and how Ono and his friend Matsuda turn toward promoting Imperial expansion (Ishiguro, 11, 22-23, 155, 181, 113). The latter too seems little more than an ideology “put together of a night” that has “vanish[ed] with the morning.” As Rebecca Walkowitz has pointed out, readers and reviewers of Ishiguro have sometimes been guilty of Orientalising Ishiguro’s work in various ways, most commonly ascribing some kind of inherent Japanese-ness to much of what he writes (Walkowitz, 1056-1060). This is most on show in reviews such as that of the *New York Times Review of Books* which compare Ishiguro’s style to that of “Japanese painting” (Walkowitz, 1060), and reading the art of the floating world as an alternative to overwhelming militarism might encourage such an interpretation. In this approach, Ishiguro’s elegant style serves as a figurative counterpoint to the horrors going on in his plots, for it reminds us that there are elements of endeavour not totally bound by the privations of historical and social context. Reviewers with, apparently, little experience of Japanese culture seem to associate the art of that country with a sort of spare, understated selectivity and a highly developed aesthetic which is at the same time enticingly “other.” However, I wish to suggest that it is in fact possible to read the action of art in *An Artist of the Floating World* as not only far from beautiful and aesthetically pure, but also as a force that does little to counter the tide of militarism and politics, with the state of exception at its core, that led to the destroyed wasteground of Nagasaki, and that this is a representation that involves Ishiguro knowingly implicating his own work in a limited, even failing, discourse of art and culture as a response to the state of exception and sovereign power.
Of special note here is Ono’s assurance to his grandson that the fate of the composer Naguchi, whose patriotic songs led to success for him before the war and suicide after, will not be his own destiny. Such denial of course leads Ichiro and the reader to question how different the two artists might in fact be:

But you see, Ichiro, when the war ended, things were very different. The songs Mr Naguchi composed had become very famous, not just in this city, but all over Japan. They were sung on the radio and in bars. And the likes of your Uncle Kenji sang them when they were marching or before a battle. And after the war, Mr Naguchi thought his songs had been – well – a sort of mistake. He thought of all the people who had been killed, all the little boys your age, Ichiro, who no longer had parents, he thought of all these things and he thought perhaps his songs were a mistake. And he felt he should apologize. To everyone who was left. To little boys who no longer had parents. And to parents who had lost little boys like you. To all these people, he wanted to say sorry. I think that’s why he killed himself. (Ishiguro, 155)

Given how unwilling Ono has been hitherto in the novel to speak for more than one or two sentences to anyone, and especially on any subject that suggests the war might not have been a good idea, this long speech near the close of the novel seems to mark something of a valedictory confession by proxy for Ono. The paintings he makes that estrange him from his mentor Morisan, most notably the call to arms for Japan that is “Complacency,” seem to be precisely the kind of tarnished propaganda also spread by Mr Naguchi (165-167). In a moment that is rather reminiscent of the idea of giving birth to the nation that I identified as central to A Pale View of Hills, it is important that Ono here is directly addressing a child rather than an adult. Ono
mentions his dead son Kenji, explicitly drawing the family connection through calling him “your Uncle,” and this attention to historical and social lines of progression and to heritance is important, for it hints that Ishiguro might be attempting to draw out the same kind of narrative in the representation of art in the novel. What is critical is that Ono is attempting to communicate to the new generation the kind of experience the citizenry has just come through. This is something like what Kiran Desai called “the inheritance of loss.” Ono’s word choice is particularly relevant here, focusing as he does on the loss of the new generation who had little to do with encouraging or starting the war: “all the people who had been killed;” “all the little boys . . . who no longer had parents;” “little boys who no longer had parents;” “parents who had lost little boys like you;” “mistake;” “mistake;” “apologize;” “sorry.” Despite this moment being only at the close of the novel, it is possible that Ishiguro shows Ono as finally becoming aware of the repeated disconnection between generations in the text. Endless cycles of loyalty and betrayal doom each new wave of characters to repeat the mistakes of their forbears. Here, Ono is both trying to communicate the loss that Ichiro’s generation must inherit because of his actions and those of people like him, and at the same time draw a different kind of connection than that which Mr Naguchi draws. Instead of apologising face to face to those he failed, as Ono finally does here, Naguchi chooses to turn away from that dialogue and extinguish its very possibility in the act of suicide. With either decision, Ishiguro demonstrates, there is a connection between the self and society. Ono seems to be trying to maintain that connection rather than severing it in the tradition of the other artists in the text.

Ono’s apology by proxy to Ichiro and his generation suggests that Artist is attempting to bring out the cultural complexity of the use of sovereign power, by showing that it is sometimes only after the events have passed that it is possible to realise the full ramifications of actions that
a society and culture may previously have supported. Agamben claims that the contamination of politics (I assume he means some as yet unrealised ideal of democratic politics) with a kind of empty version of the law has been a bad thing (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 88), and I agree with this in the sense that it is never advisable to give any person or institution the power to authorise a concentration camp. Nevertheless, while this seems like a sensible idea to me, the nature of morality and many other ideas is continually shifting in the context of societal opinion. For the Ono-san who painted the artwork “Complacency” in *Artist*, the use of sovereign power to declare martial law and to go to war with China and the United States might have seemed like the only correct response to the imperial conquests of European powers. I merely want to pull back from accusing all users of sovereign power of manipulating an unseeing citizenry. In the case of Ono and Matsuda in *An Artist of the Floating World* at least, Ishiguro suggests that his characters were quite ready to lead the rush toward war themselves, and that their culture was equally ready to support it.

*The smell of burning: a hidden structure of social critique*

The intimate connection between state power and citizenry in *Artist* is most on show in the figurative linking strategy Ishiguro uses between, on the one hand, the privations of Japan in a state of siege as the American bombers close in on Tokyo and Nagasaki and, on the other, the highly private conflicts and crises of identity infused in the novel by the stories of art. Ono elucidates the profundity of this link near the close of the novel:
“The smell of burning still makes me uneasy,” I remarked. “It’s not so long ago it meant bombings and fire.” I went on gazing out to the garden for a moment, then added: “Next month, it will be five years already since Michiko died.”

Matsuda remained silent for a while. Then I heard him say behind me:

“These days, a smell of burning usually means a neighbour is clearing his garden.” (200)

The sense of smell, for both Ono and Matsuda, connects recent and past events together in a way that cannot be accounted for by chronological sequence or socio-historical context. Rather, Ishiguro’s choice of the sense most connected with memory produces the notion of a network of moments joined together by the profundity of their impact on the psyche of his characters. It is not just the fire that makes Ono uneasy but also the particular way that it becomes known. Smell, unlike the sight of flames or the sound of bombing, is insidious, for it permeates everything. Ono and Matsuda knew at the most basic biological level, with every breath, that Nagasaki was being destroyed.

It is the imposition by the war on the most basic processes of life that I wish to focus on, for it is no accident that Ishiguro makes the smell of the destruction a central moment of the text. Only at the close of the novel is it made explicit that the smell of flames and fire makes Ono uneasy, yet this connection is foreshadowed almost from the start of Ono’s adult life. Upon learning that his son wishes to be a painter instead of a businessman, Ono’s father decides to burn his paintings in an unsuccessful attempt to purge Ono’s career aspirations. Since the incident is, like all the other events in *An Artist of the Floating World*, told from Ono’s perspective, we do not actually see the paintings destroyed as Ono’s father does it behind closed
doors. At night, after he is supposed to be in bed, Ono paces the house and runs into his mother in the corridor. He remarks on what he knows is the smell of his destroyed artwork:

“There’s a smell of burning around the house,” I remarked.

“Burning?” My mother was silent for a while, then she said: “No. I don’t think so. It must be your imagination, Masuji.”

“I smelt burning,” I said. “There, I just caught it again. Is Father still in the reception room?” (47)

While this sequence might appear to be less initially horrifying or intense than a bonfire under Ono’s nose, in fact the writing emphasises the all-pervading importance both of the event and of the sense of smell which signals it. Despite his father’s closed doors, the smell of burning permeates the whole house providing no escape from the act. Further, and with special reference to my focus on Ishiguro’s representation of the aftermath of iustitium, Ono does not know whether his father has finished destroying his work or even whether he remains in the reception room at all. The smell of his actions remains long after the act itself has finished, displaying an explicit concern in the novel with the effects of certain events as much as the events themselves. The novel’s narrative is of course a remembered one and, in Ono’s memory of this event, Ono imagines he can sense the smell of burning before his father has begun the deed. This is an inescapable indication that the novel seeks to make explicit connections between the gigantic atrocity that was World War Two and the less well-addressed way in which such atrocities might start at home, most particularly in the realm of art and culture (44).

Ishiguro’s implementation of the smell of burning in Artist produces and signals something like an alternate structure of the text. Ishiguro’s attention to social and generational
interaction amidst a background of culture and artistry signals not that he is mostly concerned with domestic, private breakdowns in trust and confidence, but indicates instead that he is very interested in the kind of social conditions and behaviour that might have given rise to the extreme misuse of state power we see in the text, power that decimates generations at home and abroad. It is not coincidence that the smell of burning that signifies the cremation of cities at the close of the text is first encountered with the burning of Ono’s paintings. It is my contention that what might appear to be a near-rambling narrative, filled with Masuji Ono’s tangents, digressions and mis-remembrances, in fact masks a clear structure of a critique of art that signals a deep concern for the role art and culture has played in the sadness and suffering of Artist’s characters. For me this novel is nothing if not an indictment of the political and social forces that sought, or allowed, the kind of power to take Japan to war and to subsume every citizen, as well as the very fabric of society, to the needs of the military, but Artist goes further than this. While Japan created states of exception abroad that seem to exactly follow the Agamben model in terms of all legal protections and other rights being completely stripped from citizens, in the form of concentration camps in Manchuria and the infamous atrocities at Nanking and elsewhere, Ishiguro is also representing how and why this power came to be used at home in Japan, and key to this is the failure of culture to adequately oppose this kind of politics.

Betrayal and the failure of art in the face of sovereign power

In An Artist of the Floating World, art is not a solution to war and the abuse of power, for there is no artistic community across generations. Each generation of artists accuses its precursor of betrayal. Each major artist in the novel has a mentor and a mentee, and the way in
which the artistic and personal relationship always breaks down is key to understanding the two-
fold nature of Ishiguro’s representation of this society. The artists in Ishiguro’s Nagasaki, rather
than behaving in a different way to the rest of society, display equal vulnerability to rhetoric that
splits and undermines communal groups, and at the same time seem themselves all too eager to
drive toward a future that encourages this kind of splitting. Another way of saying this might be
to assert that while Ishiguro’s work displays sympathy for the way in which the militaristic,
authoritarian rhetoric of state power works its insidious way into the daily lives of his characters,
at the same time his novels recount continual patterns of behaviour and attitude, especially
amongst those at the centre of cultural production, which seem to have done little to stave off
Nagasaki’s *iusstitium* or to help them recover in its aftermath. In *An Artist of the Floating World*,
art involves one continuous chain of mentorship and betrayal which again counters the received
notion of generational change and the idea that Ishiguro is writing of the breaking-off of one
generation from its pre-war ancestry. The implication is that maybe artists like Kuroda and his
ilk, despite the benefit of hindsight they hold as regards the actions of mentors like Ono and
cultural influencers such as Mr Naguchi, might produce human and artistic monsters of their
own.

While it is not as desolate a moment as Ono’s only postwar encounter with Kuroda, the
betrayal of Ono by Mori-san is perhaps the most symbolically resonant moment in the text.
There are several reasons why this is so, but in the reading of aftermath the two most salient
must be, first, that this is the separation between the two artists of the floating world in the novel
and, second, that if Ono’s betrayal of Kuroda is at the narrative and emotional core of the book
then this encounter, at the pavilion in the Takami Gardens, is its aesthetic heart: so much so, in
fact, that the Canadian paperback edition of *Artist* features a photograph of nothing more than the
kind of paper lanterns that Mori asks Ono to light in this scene. In fact, with the way in which Ono describes the pavilion as becoming “a favourite spot” over the years – to the extent that it is also the place where he has his last conversation with Kuroda – it is tempting to assert that with this location Ishiguro mimetizes the betrayal of Japanese citizenry by art in the very geography of the city, the betrayals of Ono by Mori and Kuroda by Ono in this location attaining broader resonance by being attached to the city’s landscape. Much as the forest provides a spatial metaphor for the imaginative potential or mana of the aftermath of the iustitium, the pavilion in the Takami Gardens is significant beyond its apparent role in that it provides a nodal point where the narratives of art, aesthetic beauty and betrayal come together.

The presence of the aesthetic is crucial to this scene because, once more, the novel tempts the reader to ask questions about the relationship between art, politics and conflict, and thus between art and the state of exception. It might seem an insignificant comment that the pavilion was in fact destroyed during the war, and that a peace monument now stands nearby, but at the least it must call the reader to ask what the pavilion might stand for, and perhaps might imply that it represents something other than peace (175). Most notably, the language Ishiguro deploys in this scene suggests a connection between the highly developed aesthetic sensibility of its characters and the destruction to come. After walking up through the gardens and arriving at the pavilion, Mori asks Ono to light the candles. Darkness has fallen, but Mori has brought the tools to light the candles with him, with the apparent foresight or, perhaps, foreknowledge, that the effect will be “most interesting” (175-177). There is an implication here that Mori has done this before, just as Ono will continue to do after him: a sequence which apparently culminated in Ono’s own rejection of his top student Kuroda. Despite this being the final betrayal portrayed in the novel then, it would of course be inaccurate to think that the sequence finishes here with the
wartime generation, for that would be to miss the point of what Ishiguro is trying to say about the very similarity of behaviour between generations that critics of this novel have frequently missed. With the destruction during the war of this place, a structure that is so central to the artists at the centre of Ishiguro’s novel, comes a quite literal enaction of the continual destruction wreaked by the exclusiveness and lack of self-awareness that characterizes art – from the commercial work at Takeda’s studio that eagerly feeds Western stereotypes of Japanese kitsch to Mori-san’s expulsion of any student that develops his own style – in *An Artist of the Floating World*. The paradox of art, in the form of Ishiguro’s novel, indicting art more generally is one of the things that makes this novel so effective, for it introduces a layer of metatextual self-deprecation that also encourages the reader to question her own role in forming the meaning of what she reads.

Rebecca Walkowitz also refers to the significance of scenes of betrayal in *An Artist of the Floating World*, describing them appropriately as calling upon the reader “to measure the nearness of artistic and political treason” (1070). Her consideration of personal betrayal is also astute in its insistence upon the political relevance of the term, and thus discusses much of the material I have also considered here. However, there are significant differences in how I read the political ramifications of these scenes:

The betrayal of Kuroda seems to be the political kernel or “primal scene” of Ishiguro’s novel. . . . The given scene with Mori-san and the implied scene with Kuroda lend a political tone to the scene with Ono’s father, which constitutes the first betrayal in the novel: as Kuroda is imprisoned for refusing to be “useful” to the militarist regime, so Ono’s father, who punishes his son for choosing art over business, seems to enforce a similar orthodoxy (46). In this retrospective,
patriarchy is legible as an element of fascism. The novel . . . refuses to separate politics and art. (Walkowitz 1070)

My most immediate concern with Walkowitz’s analysis is that it is not accurate to say that Kuroda is imprisoned “for refusing to be ‘useful’ to the militarist regime.” He is imprisoned because Ono betrays him as a traitor to the state. This moment is an unqualified betrayal of the trust placed in a teacher by the student. What Kuroda has, in fact, done or not done is largely irrelevant, as Ono finds out when he objects to the harsh treatment meted out to Kuroda and his family by the police. Ono complains that “it was quite unnecessary to burn those [paintings]. There were many fine works amongst them,” but the police attending the scene have already decided that Kuroda and his work are “unpatriotic trash” and escort Ono from the scene (183). There is no evidence at all in the text that the police have made some assessment of Kuroda or his work based on merit or any other measurement. The police are at Kuroda’s home because Ono, in his capacity as “official adviser to the Committee of Unpatriotic Activities,” has sent them there. From his privileged position as narrator, Ono claims that he did not intend for anyone but a committee member to visit Kuroda. This is not convincing (182-183). In fact, I would assert that Walkowitz’s analysis elides at least part of Ishiguro’s aim with this scene.

My complaint about Walkowitz’s treatment of the politics of betrayal and art in Artist is important because it touches on the representative essence of the novel: the floating world and the art that surrounds it. While Fascism may not be a sufficiently accurate way of referring to the male-dominated politics of Ishiguro’s Japan, there is at least some depth to be gained from reading these sorts of connections. Most pertinently, the burning of artwork throughout the text is – from the perspective of when this book was written in the early 1980s in Britain – significantly reminiscent of Nazism and its attitude to subversive artwork and material. However, it is
certainly not the case that, as Walkowitz claims, the refusal to represent the real world is a key political act of the novel: what she calls “its own political act.” Walkowitz sees the art of the floating world as some kind of resistive force combating the Fascist or, more accurately, exceptional elements of Japanese state power. The problem with this is that just as the title *An Artist of the Floating World* misleads, in that it infers the presence of just one of these painters in the novel rather than the two that actually influence the action, the floating world itself is far from a united, consistent entity that the critic may take up as acting in opposition to Japanese imperialism. Masuji Ono and his mentor Mori-san, both artists of the floating world, cleave from each other before the war even starts and certainly before the destruction of Tokyo, and Nagasaki (though Hiroshima is not mentioned), events which are seen as the worst consequences of the warmongering of the military regime in the novel. The fires of destruction in *An Artist of the Floating World* are lit long before Matsuda makes the demand to Ono that art more closely represent “the real world.” As we have seen, the smell of burning is emergent in the novel from many betrayals between generational figures. This is a process that Ishiguro shows us as extant long before and after the war and the hyper-militarist desires of expansion and conquest, yet paintings are there at every turn. Indeed, I would claim that the art of the floating world has a lot in common with the art of Matsuda and Ono promoting military action. Both are seductive ideologies which rely rather more on their proponents for their success than on any intrinsic content, although figures like Mori-san and Ono are not willing to accept such responsibility. Art and aesthetics themselves are seen as entirely partial to the forces of militarism in *Artist*, rather than as a force opposing them. Although the meaning of the novel’s title is deliberately multiple and uncertain, it is difficult to escape the notion that the artist of the floating world must be Ono: the man who turns to militarism. This is not a convincing answer to Fascism or the power of the
politics of exception, and the fact that we see no production of art by Ono or his colleagues after the war, that might reflect more soberly on the aftermath of the conflict and the devastation wreaked, suggests just how deeply the art in Ishiguro’s text is tied to the politics of imperialism and the state of exception.

The vulnerability of society to the expansion of the state of exception

Walkowitz does raise an important question, which is no less than what, in fact, is the key political act of the novel? What is the novel’s “own political act?” While I have discussed several contributing elements so far, it is necessary to aggregate these factors in an attempt to pin down a distillation of Ishiguro’s politics in An Artist of the Floating World. The examination of pre-war politics, art and society in Artist shows that the state of exception in Japan in World War Two is a product of factors already extant in Japanese life. His point is that the state of exception produced in Japan in World War Two is not as unique as its context might suggest: the conflict within art is a recognisable signal that many cultures are vulnerable to the harnessing of their energies, ebbing and flowing as they do between generations, by the power of the state. Ishiguro draws out the consequences – with relevance very much beyond Japan – for the lives and personal relationships of citizens once that excess of state power has taken root. The ongoing resonance of these ramifications, long after the new generation takes over, is what Ishiguro’s first two novels most profoundly trace.

Suichi, Ono’s son-in-law by way of his daughter Setsuko, responds robustly to Ono’s celebration of the bravery of his deceased son Kenji: “those who sent the likes of Kenji out there to die these brave deaths, where are they today? They’re carrying on with their lives, much the
same as ever” (58). However, this is an equally definitive reply to the idea that there are clear, discrete solutions, and in particular artistic solutions, to the societal problems which helped to bring on the iustitium of Nagasaki. Whether it is intentional or not it seems clear that Suichi’s criticism could easily apply to Ono too, for his involvement in producing paintings like “Complacency” alongside pro-Imperialists like Matsuda. Ono appears to have, despite his personal losses, managed to carry on his life mostly the same as before. He lives in the same house, visits the same bar in the same pleasure district, and spends much of the novel uncomprehending of why there seems to be such hostility to men of his age and political affiliation. Again, in spite of the beautiful photographs of paper lanterns on the covers of various editions of An Artist of the Floating World, it is difficult to take seriously the idea that Ishiguro’s novel posits art as anything but part of the problem he identifies. This is because art emerges from the society surrounding it, and Ishiguro’s complaint is with cross-generational behaviour patterns that contribute to the ascendency of state power in his novels.

An Artist of the Floating World is not a novel blaming one specific generation for the iustitium of Tokyo and of Nagasaki, with their citizens who end up drowning babies and labelling friends as traitors. There is a more widespread malaise in Ishiguro’s work. Ono says of Hirayama, the boy who gets insulted and beaten up after the war for continuing to sing patriotic songs praising militarism and Japanese expansion: “they may not like his songs and speeches, but in all likelihood they are the same people who once patted his head and encouraged him until those few snatches embedded themselves in his brain” (61). With this moment, Ono shares his rather low key, but still significant, revelation that inter-generational change and the inbuilt promise of continual renewal through the newness of people and culture is something of an illusion. There is of course intra-generational change and variation for, just as Ono went from
artist of the floating world to propagandist of Imperial expansion, so he is reduced at the close of
the book to a cultural irrelevance (191-194). As these bullies of the boy Hirayama reverse their
position alongside the reversal of historical and political fortunes, so Ono manages to renew his
orientation somewhat: but both changes signal the absurdity in *Artist* of the idea of tracing its
society’s change in fortunes based on the age and political affiliation of a given influential group.
Instead, Ono’s comment on Hirayama calls on the reader to question the role of all mentors and
leaders in the text, for in some ways the way Hirayama is treated is the way all students in the
novel are guided. Ono’s father, Mori and Ono himself all pat their charges on the head, embed a
few snatches of ideology in their brains, and then get angry when they do not act like their
forebears. Although it would be pure conjecture to say so, it is hard to imagine Kuroda behaving
very differently, or his art contributing to a radically different result.

*The close of An Artist of the Floating World: finding a language of social and political betrayal*

In *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World* Ishiguro does something that
Agamben does not, which is that he accounts for why our societies are so vulnerable to the state
of exception in the first place. Ishiguro’s novels examine the social conditions prior to, during,
and especially in the aftermath of the state of exception. He looks at the ramifications, beyond
the legal aspects, that the state of exception and the *iustitium* have for citizens, and questions
whether art and culture have been complicit in the dominance of sovereign power in our political
systems. Ishiguro’s novels, with their questioning of the resistive capacities of society and art
that we imagine are our defence mechanisms against tyranny, depict in powerful fashion both
*that* we are vulnerable to the state of exception and *why*. This is something that literary
representations of the *iustitium* after the fact, of aftermath, are uniquely placed to show us (and I am explicitly anticipating *Never Let Me Go* here and its depiction of the banality of political evil). As Walkowitz and others have pointed out, the key event of *An Artist of the Floating World*, an event which overshadows the whole narrative like a psychic echo traced in smoke, is Ono’s betrayal of Kuroda (Walkowitz calls it the “political kernel” of the text). I agree with this, but if read as a novel tracing the aftermath of the *iustitium* then such significance only reaches its full meaning in the description of Ono’s only postwar encounter with his former student. Crucially, it is the shift in language I wish to focus on here. Ishiguro’s assonance-filled phrases which subtly emphasise the small details of the scene change markedly into what is, for Ishiguro, an almost savage depiction of a broken, destroyed and washed-out world:

I suppose I might mention here that I have seen my former protégé, Kuroda, just once since the end of the war... I was walking somewhere, making my way through what was left of our old pleasure district... Beneath his umbrella, he was hatless and dressed in a dark raincoat. The charred buildings behind him were dripping and the remnant of some gutter was making a large amount of rainwater splash down not far from him. I remember a truck going by between us, full of building workers. And I noticed how one of the spokes of his umbrella was broken, causing some more splashing just beside his foot.

Kuroda’s face, which had been quite round before the war, had hollowed out around the cheekbones, and what looked like heavy lines had appeared towards the chin and the throat. And I thought to myself as I stood there: “He’s not young any more.”
He moved his head very slightly. I was not sure if it was the beginning of a bow, or if he was just adjusting his head to get out of the splash of rainwater from his broken umbrella. Then he turned and began to walk off in the other direction. (77-78)

Even when Ono is about to be unforgivingly cut off by his mentor in the pavilion at the Takami Gardens, Ishiguro’s language remains resolutely subtle and almost sumptuous. In that moment, Ono relates: “as I made my way around the pavilion, lighting lantern after lantern, the gardens around us, which had become still and silent, steadily faded into darkness” (176). The assonance and sibilance here lend a sense of aesthetic pleasure to the scene and even of harmony, despite the harshness with which Mori-san is about to treat Ono. Even in the midst of their falling-out, Ono continues to describe the scene as beautiful – if increasingly foreboding – with language that is still a pleasure to read: “there was a strange mixture of light in the pavilion as the sky continued to set. . . . But Mori-san’s figure remained in silhouette, leaning against a post, his back to me” (178). Of special note is the preponderance of beautiful light in this scene. The setting sun merges with the shading from the lighted lanterns to throw even the beginnings of betrayal into elegant silhouette. This is very far from Ono’s description of his postwar encounter with Kuroda. The “skeletal remains,” the “burnt-out” and “charred” buildings, the “remnant of some gutter,” the “broken” spoke of Kuroda’s umbrella and the “strange shock” of his expressionless look all signal the sense that even the mode of interpreting and describing the world has forever altered for Ishiguro’s characters in the aftermath of the war. Even the atmosphere has, literally, changed. From a pavilion lit by paper lanterns and the strange mixture of light in the sunset we have instead a scene which contains thirteen separate words referring to rain. The deluge is, naturally, figurative. If Kuroda cannot see Ono well enough to acknowledge
him, it is partially because all he can experience clearly is the rain of aftermath sluicing off his broken umbrella, the inadequacy of which for protection from the storm reflects the inadequacy of Ono’s own earlier efforts to prepare his protégé for the bad weather ahead. In this scene An Artist of the Floating World shows powerfully that, in several ways, it is only possible to understand the magnitude of what can go wrong, when state power runs amok in the state of exception, after the event; during its aftermath.

Ishiguro shows his readers that we only truly know the state of exception when we are amidst its detritus and wreckage. The difficulty in describing the state of exception theoretically is why Agamben resorts to the imprecise language of “legal mana” in his chapter on the iustitium. Fiction has a theoretical and philosophical role to play in talking about recent changes in the failure of politics and of democracy; it is just that philosophy would not grant that space because of fiction’s reliance on the figurative. Surely, however, the simultaneous emptiness and presence of anomie, and the discursive power of the state of exception, are enough to signal that the empirical language and methodology of historical and philosophical analysis are insufficient to characterize what Beckett once called, of course, “the unnameable.” This is the function of Ishiguro’s fiction, to let us know what it might be like in the state of exception and its aftermath and, crucially, to draw attention to the feedback loop between art and life: the sense that art is contingent upon the communities it emerges from, and should thus not be relied upon as a mystical bullet with which to shoot down state power. A Pale View of Hills and An Artist of the Floating World let their readers know that these may appear to be just representations, but art like Ono-san’s does play a role in the decisions society makes. In Artist, that decision is the backing of an autocratic regime in a war of foreign conquest, but the power of Ishiguro’s critique
inevitably throws into very sharp relief the importance of the novel for discussing the excesses of political power.

*Coda*: “*Wherever it was I was supposed to be*” – *Never Let Me Go and the camp without borders*

Ishiguro’s fiction underscores the importance of Agamben’s theory of sovereign power by drawing out the consequences of allowing the state of exception to take root, and Ishiguro’s later novel *Never Let Me Go* provides a potent turning point in my project – towards the hyper-contemporary and futuristic media and technology-focused texts of Don DeLillo and William Gibson – by illustrating life under a state of exception that is not tied to history, as those of the Amritsar massacre and World War Two very much are. It might seem difficult to see the state of exception at work in Ishiguro’s 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*, since camps, wars, bombs and sieges are very far from the action of the text. However, at the risk of giving the Nazi juridical theorist Carl Schmitt too much attention, it is necessary to once more recall his phrase “sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception” (quoted in Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 11). My project is as concerned with the power to declare the state of exception as it is with the state of exception itself. From this perspective, the power to create, indoctrinate and kill the characters of *Never Let Me Go* in a way so recognizably (or, perhaps, seemingly unrecognizably) ruthless, in the context of contemporary society, must be great indeed. More pertinent still, *Never Let Me Go* reads like a requiem for the possibility of life in the absence of bio-politics, the camp, and aftermath, making real Agamben’s claim that the state of exception is the condition of modern democracy.
In comparison to the heavy-handed critique of science in novels like Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, one of the few other works awarded the dubious prestige of literary science fiction by critics, *Never Let Me Go* is not about cloning or about the patriarchal cabal of “science” that harbours designs on wiping us all out\(^4\). The lesson of the story of Kathy and her friends, their journey through school at Hailsham, early adulthood at the cottage retreat, and death at the hands of the state as it seeks to harvest their internal organs, is not that we should cease genetic research or be damned to a morally abject future. That Kathy, Ruth, Tommy and the other Hailsham graduates are clones is merely what Darko Suvin would call a *novum*: a new thing designed to introduce a novel way of looking at the world (Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 64). As Gabriele Griffin notes, “at the heart of *Never Let Me Go* is the question of the relative status of the clones and of what it means to be human.” (Griffin, 653) Or, rather, I would claim that the novel addresses something more like what it means to be “alive” and to have rights to fair treatment by others. Part of the thrust of the novel is to unpick the potentially divisive effects of delineating beings by terms like “human” versus “clone” or “animal.” Other readers, such as the aforementioned Atwood, frequently report that the children in *Never Let Me Go* give them “the creeps” just as for “Madame,” the governor of Hailsham, who recoils in disgust from her charges, refusing even to touch them (Atwood, “Brave New World,” Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 32). I do not share this reaction. To me, Kathy’s concerns about friends, work and sex seem almost parochially normal childhood anxieties. Instead, it is the way she and her friends are treated – even in their supposedly privileged school – which gives me the creeps. I have already suggested that *A Pale View of Hills* can be read as a warning of the human consequences of the state of exception by portraying the costs of its aftermath, paid by citizens in

\(^4\) James Wood of the New Republic opened his 2005 review of Ishiguro’s novel by opining that the text should be “treasured” because of its success in “literary terms” (Wood, “The Human Difference”).
the absence of those in power who were responsible for starting the war. *Never Let Me Go* returns to that warning, but is all the more disturbing for the apparent absence of war. *Never Let Me Go* posits the ramifications of the notion that the state of exception may be declared whether or not the city, or in this case the state, is under attack (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 4-5).

The peculiarly horrifying irony of the alternative England of *Never Let Me Go* asking its living organ doners to take care of their dying friends, before being called to “complete” themselves, is a literalization of the political evil involved in reducing life to a discourse of usefulness, of asserting a political mandate for declaring the valuation of life (Ishiguro 217, 257). As I noted in Chapter One in the discussion of Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, for Agamben sovereign power, and thus the power to pronounce the state of exception, was reborn in the twentieth century in the extraordinary claims made over life by the Nazi regime (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 149-150). *Never Let Me Go* also critiques the claims that politics seeks to make over life, but in portraying the dark economics of organ exchange, that involve eliminating any prospect of the state’s clone-citizens having any substantive rights at all (they are about as far from the right of “Habeas Corpus” as it is possible to be), Ishiguro once more emphasises that the power to declare the state of exception is not solely about the juridical order. In expounding the poisonous mix of bio-politics and post-industrial economics, Ishiguro realizes something of the impact of what a twenty-first Century bio-politics might feel like to its subjects.

I wish to position *Never Let Me Go* in-between my chapters on Ishiguro and DeLillo/Gibson because it not only reads like a novel that is the essence of aftermath, but because it seems finally to close – in an echo of the dispirited closure in later Rushdie novels – the avenues of possibility opened up at least partially by *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*. The book reads like the essence of aftermath because everything has been
decided for Kathy and her friends in advance. The policy of creating these children and then killing them after a pleasant childhood has been implemented well before the start of the novel. Kathy is already between age seven and eleven when she starts recalling her time at school, for she differentiates between boys in “our year” and those in “Senior 3” (7). Due to this location in medias res of the cloning program, the text does not relate the existence of any debate over the fate laid out for Kathy, Tommy and Ruth.

This is not an escape story and, indeed, Never Let Me Go might be best described as an anti-escape novel: as Miss Emily says stonily to Tommy at the close of the text: “No, Tommy. . . . Your life must now run the course that’s been set for it” (Ishiguro, 243). The pathetic naiveté of Kathy and Tommy’s plan to go to their ex-headmistress and governor with proof that they are in love and that both can produce good art, in the hope of a reprieve from “completion,” both assures its failure and guarantees sympathy from us (235-236). Nevertheless, it is here that Ishiguro also finally closes down a crucial path of opportunity for his characters’ ability to respond to their changing and hostile environment. Art, which appears in An Artist of the Floating World as partial and conflicted, but still varied and responsive to the world around it – be that the beauty of paper lanterns or the ideology of militarism – is here reduced to a parody of debates over use-value and function. For much of the novel (Tommy begins plotting the retroactive placement of his art in the school archives as early as Part Two) the lead characters convince themselves that their art promises something good (176-177). That it ends up not making a jot of difference to “the course” of their lives can only be described as a significant failure, but it is a failure that, Ishiguro implies, was built-in from the start of his characters’ development. Kathy and Tommy apply the rules of art – happy ever after – to both their work and their relationship. That these rules fail them does not surprise us, but in the context of
Ishiguro’s self-reflexive criticism of his own work in *Pale View* and *Artist*, this failure should prompt us to wonder what Ishiguro is trying to say about the potential efficacy of his own book in the face of the state of exception. The kind of ending he offers his readers is, like the final lines of *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, something of an epitaph.

Ishiguro’s novels argue for the living, rather than the legal, consequences of the state of exception and, despite critics like Leona Toker and Daniel Chertoff insisting that Kathy and her friends “have not been victimized by the school,” their whole world resembles nothing if not a camp in the Agamben mould, where the ability to pronounce on the fate of those living inside surrounds Kathy and her friends (Chertoff and Toker, 176). When Kathy is, as a “carer,” given the freedom to drive around the countryside, as opposed to being imprisoned at Hailsham or at the Cottages, the camp seems to move with her. All she is left with is a blasted heath where her helpless boyfriend Tommy screams in frustration before going home to die (250-252), and at the close Kathy must stop alone, in front of a windswept plain, barbed wire and rubbish blowing in the wind, to conclude that there is nothing she can do, only “to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be” (263). Although it is a difficult task to achieve, I will seek, in my final chapter, to retreat from the despair of *Never Let Me Go*, and instead move into readings of works – in the form of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and William Gibson’s *oevre* – that challenge the ubiquity of sovereign power. These are two novelists who, while nevertheless focusing on a critical aspect of state and state-sponsored power that Agamben ignores, in the form of the impact of media and technology on contemporary life, also represent the possibility of rebelling against these forces that are so emblematic of twenty-first-century existence.
Chapter Four: An Empire of Technology and Violence: DeLillo and Gibson’s vision of counterculture

Introduction

When considering Agamben’s work on emergency power in contemporary politics, Rushdie’s discussion of the key role of state force and oppression in postcolonial life, and the concern displayed by Ishiguro for those caught in the aftermath of such events, I see a thread of despondency running through the frayed and patched-up tapestry of much contemporary fiction. At times it seems more of a barely-visible fog characters and events must drift through, intangibly but inevitably saturating the atmosphere of the novels, until little but ghosts of longed-for past lives and histories remain.

The close of *The Moor’s Last Sigh* is particularly apt for, as Moraes ponders his family’s oblivion alongside what he sees as India’s political and sectarian self-destruction, he dreams of a sleep where he may awaken “in a better place and time.” Having travelled as far as Spain in pursuit of Vasco Da Gama, a man whose uncontrollable hybridity has engendered an almost total shattering of his personality, Moraes finds, of course, that the tragic reality of fragmented modern life extends far beyond the borders of India, into a whole world shot through with nightmarish selfishness and absurdity. The senseless murder of the selfless Japanese artist hired, and then imprisoned, by Vasco is a salient gesture by Rushdie in this regard but, with the heaping of tragedy upon tragedy happening throughout the narrative of Moor’s life, such a gesture is more of an epilogue to the text’s melancholy than a necessary component of it.

It hardly seems necessary at this point to revisit the gradual accretion of sadness in Atwood and Ishiguro’s representations of the aftermath of state power and violence. *Never Let
Me Go in particular is an almost perfect abstraction of the concerns Ishiguro raises in *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, taking the effects of war and its aftermath on those left at home, and transposing them to a green and pleasant land where “war” is not even a notional excuse for the actions of those in power. In uncovering the almost inevitable recourse to terror and violence of an ends-driven state politics Ishiguro, like Atwood in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is doing more than writing a dystopic fiction. Both Ishiguro and Atwood are responding to the same zeitgeist that motivates Agamben in the writing of both *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*. The increasing desire of the state to claim ownership of the biology of citizenry and the natural world alike, points toward an accelerating trend in state actions to bypass altogether the idea of a representative politics (democratic or otherwise) in favour of sovereign power: the power to ignore the written and unwritten rules ensuring the rights of living beings within the purview of the state.

It seems, at first, that Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* continues this despondent theme, threatening to turn the thread into a governing pattern. The central character, Jack Gladney, says at the start of the novel: “there is an expressway beyond the backyard now . . . a remote and steady murmur around our sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream” (DeLillo, 4). The simile of the river Styx here, of the land of the dead waiting at the freeway for Jack to unwittingly pass-over to, asleep and defenceless, is a key theme of the novel. As the critic David Cowart points out, the obligatory scene for any depiction of American life, the shopping mall to which Jack takes his kids, comes to seem a bizarre presage of death:

The scanners occupy a liminal space: they equip "terminals” towards which the shoppers shuffle in portentous lock-step. "Regardless of age" they are on their
way - though DeLillo is too subtle, too committed to understatement to use the phrase - to "check out." (Cowart, 90)

The world of *White Noise* is filled with imminent, almost immanent, threats to Jack and his family’s existence. Mysterious off-prescription drugs, reference to car crashes, the mad rush to firearms and violence by Jack near the close of the novel, even the hilariously off-putting department of Hitler studies which Jack runs at his University, all serve to suggest that the Freeway Styx is not only outside the backyard but encircling the Gladney household almost entirely. The very structure of the novel centres around the chapter on “The Airborne Toxic Event,” revealing that the very bedrock of the text is made of the seeming immanence and inevitability of death.

Mark Osteen’s book on DeLillo entitled *American Magic and Dread*\(^5\) conjures perfectly the looming sense of the fatal in *White Noise*, *Underworld* and other novels. However, what is equally interesting for my project, as I have already subsumed “magic realism” under “tragic realism” in Salman Rushdie, is where the “magic” of Osteen’s title falls-in to the ominous melancholic thread of *White Noise*. The word “magic” often brings with it a sense of appreciation and wonder, yet many of DeLillo’s most magical uses of narrative and language come at moments, like the expressway or the airborne toxic event, that seem closest to representing the fear of mortality. In short, the moments of wonder in *White Noise* frequently seem to come from the dread, rather than acting as a counterweight to it. Even though the irony and pastiche-laden style seems to conjure energy from the most comically grim subject matter, it

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\(^5\) From a line spoken by DeLillo’s Ballard-inspired character Murray J. Siskind, the importance of whom I shall return to below.
nevertheless emerges from a textual world that always has the darkness of the underworld murmuring quietly at its borders.

Nevertheless, I wish to suggest that DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and the worlds of Gibson’s dark novels of technocracy and paranoia, are markedly less “tragic” than much of Rushdie’s novels, and that *White Noise* in particular is less dreadful than it might first appear. I have been proposing throughout this study that each novelist, in his or her own way, while not flinching from representing the abuses of sovereign power, is also far from conceding inevitable discursive primacy to it. The aim of my final two chapters is to argue that both DeLillo and Gibson see the path away from the misuse of such force as contingent upon acting counter-culturally.

By the “counter-cultural” I mean acting in a way which culture and society might deem impermissible, other or, indeed, contrary. Specifically, what DeLillo and Gibson share is an assertion that violence should not be a special tool monopolised by the state. These novels follow their characters in performing what William Gibson would call, in a phrase borrowed from hip-hop, “jack moves” (Gibson, *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, 184, 187, *Pattern Recognition*, 91): unpredictable, frequently excessive decisions or actions which serve to challenge or even unravel the established order. Gibson does not explain precisely what he means by the jack move or where the phrase comes from, for to do so would be to undo the rebellious connotations of the idea in the sense that, if you do not know or cannot work out what “jack moves” means, then you are probably not part of the novel’s self-selecting audience (the phrase seems to be taken from hip-hop tracks, such as NWA’s “Straight Outta Compton”). There is a kind of power that, all too frequently, is used to impede individual and social rights and protections which Agamben’s philosophy – and indeed any project which limits its focus mostly to history or the juridical sphere – obviates. This is a force which post-Marxists like Docherty and Jameson are highly
aware of, and it is what Jameson describes as “the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital” (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 37), or what is sometimes called the information society: media, communications and post-industrial production, or simply – for DeLillo in *White Noise* – television, cars, and electronic information.

The depiction of violence as a problematic but potentially powerful component of non-cooperation with the forces of state or capital – and particularly how those powers employ television, internet, and other tools of the information society – is a key technique of both DeLillo’s *White Noise* and much of the oeuvre of William Gibson. DeLillo’s novel reminds us that powerful institutions and structures seek to co-opt violence, as Benjamin claims, for a reason: violence, even in the hands of one individual, is potent and potentially disruptive. DeLillo not only shows this but, to an extent, performs it. His meta-fictional character Murray J. Siskind is modelled on J.G. Ballard for a reason: Ballard was an author. The violence in *White Noise* may only be fantasy, but the way in which it makes the prose soar away from conventional narrative and representation proves, for me, the importance of violence in art as a counter to power.

*As Wild as Wilder: how immersion in violence and anarchy declaws post-industrial capital*

Perhaps the signature moment of *White Noise* is when Jack and Babette Gladney’s youngest child Wilder, miraculously rides his tricycle across all eight lanes of the freeway at the close of the novel, without even a scratch. That this breaks the circularity of dread in the text (literally, of course, if we read the Styx-esque expressway as encircling the lives of Jack and his family) is an important moment, and one that has been rightly focused on by several critics.
What is just as interesting, though, is the event that initiates this bringing of newness to the world of *White Noise* which is a flash of madness and unpredictability by Wilder. It makes very little sense that Wilder would suddenly decide to ride down the hill at the back of the house, manage to break through the fence, and careen across the highway. Despite what the similarities between DeLillo’s character Murray Siskind and the author of *Crash, The Atrocity Exhibition* and others, DeLillo is not Ballard, and his characters do not generally have impulses to commit vehicular suicide. Wilder is just a child, and children sometimes do childish and irresponsible things, but DeLillo goes to some length in the text to demonstrate the almost uncanny maturity of Jack’s two children. For me it is the very inexplicability of Wilder’s instant of madness, that plunges him into the intimidating stream of vehicular violence surrounding his house, which frees him and, to an extent, his parents, from the prison of American dread.

The importance of violence to the rejuvenation, and indeed freedom, of DeLillo’s characters in *White Noise*, is underlined in the moment when Jack decides to shoot his wife’s lover, Willie Mink. This incident signals the importance of behavioural unpredictability in the text, of which Wilder’s crazy beeline across the expressway is only the last and most prominent example. By acting in such a way that society might consider them crazy or insane, DeLillo’s characters achieve a kind of escape from the imprisoning systems of modern life. Throughout the novel, the protagonist, Jack, is trapped in inaction and fear. As his friend, Murray J. Siskind points out, fear of death is so all-encompassing that Jack even resorts to a kind of immortal avatar to try to stave it off:

> Helpless and fearful people are drawn to magical figures, mythic figures, epic men who intimidate and darkly loom....Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you. I understand completely. . . .
It’s totally obvious. You wanted to be helped and sheltered. The overwhelming horror would leave no room for your own death. (DeLillo, 287)

Jack’s helplessness is, in Murray’s reading of it, darkly-comical. He almost never goes to work, and occupies his time with eternally throwing out garbage (this is a nice foreshadowing of *Underworld*), going to the bank or the mall, or driving his children to school or from the airport (258 and 262, 46 and 83, 90). However, Murray’s interpretation, of why Jack resorts to inventing a Department of Hitler Studies, is perhaps couched too much in his own ability to beat the system. This is, as I shall suggest, Murray’s function in the novel, that of neutralizing the power of media and state over his body and actions through a parodic over-emphasis on what media and state use to leverage that power: the collision of violence and consumer capitalism. His comic similarity to J.G. Ballard is the most generous kind of homage, the character’s self-parodying irony bringing Ballard to life in the text in a way that a more serious espousal of that novelist’s interests could not. Using the looming power of Hitler to counter the force of mortality is the kind of thing that Murray would do, rather than Jack, for as we see at the start of *White Noise*, Jack’s course on “Advanced Nazism” is far less imaginative.

Gladney’s only class is “a course of study designed to cultivate historical perspective, theoretical rigor and mature insight into the continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny, with special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms, three credits, written reports” (25). The focus here, on the mass appeal of the movement and the NSDAP’s expertise in achieving this through rallies and events deliberately designed for politicized broadcasting, contrasts with Murray’s version of why Jack resorted to studying Hitler. Jack, at the start of the novel, sees his only way out as a retreat into “historical perspective” and a subject of study whose over-determined use of aesthetics and media provides a counterweight to the invisible systems of banking and television,
as well as the hidden dangers of the airborne toxic event, off-prescription drugs and conspiracies hidden in his family’s garbage. Jack’s idea is not to fight fire with fire, death with Hitler as avatar of doom, but to withdraw into another, historical version of “white noise.” Jack’s course on “Advanced Nazism” is a symptom of his inaction rather than a Murray-esque foray into excess.

What bears closer attention is Jack’s course description of a class that will “cultivate . . . mature insight into the continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny.” Most prominent is the humour, as DeLillo mocks his character for presenting his own personal interest in Nazism in the dissembling context of detached and necessary academic research. The truth, as Murray divines, is that the “mass appeal” of the Nazis should, in fact, be written as the “massively appealing” nature of fascist tyranny for Jack. His response to the villains of television, industrial systems and violence in America is to shelter in an almost comically (because horrifically) exaggerated version of those things from history: but this is because he seeks similar power of his own, and hence the inappropriate mimicry of Hitler.

Nevertheless, hidden in the joke at Gladney’s expense is a more serious question, which is where, in fact, is the sovereign power, the power to strip or establish rights and freedoms, located in *White Noise*? Most criticism seems to agree that the dominant force in *White Noise* is that of modern technology and the industrial, economic and media systems that it enables. At the culminating moment where Jack shoots Willie Mink, Mark Osteen has it that Gladney has become “an instrument of the technology he once feared: rather than using the gun, the gun is using him” (Osteen 186). David Cowart goes farther, reading in *White Noise* a prophecy of global doom caused by technology:
[In *White Noise*] the world offers an abundance of systems and structures that promise to confound mortality and deliver fulfilment. These structures are the products of a culture dominated by advertising, dubious politics, suspicions of conspiracy, and accelerating developments in technology and science, which become more terrifying as, addicted, the world discovers the trade-off between, on the one hand, environmental havoc and, on the other, convenience and mastery over our environment and our everyday lives. (Cowart, 78)

As of 2010, recent events, such as the late-noughties environmental and economic crises, have of course gone some way to underscoring this reading. The crash of 2008 was, in a very DeLillo-esque fashion, as much a crash of the promises made by and on behalf of our economic and ideological systems as it was of the structures themselves. A less well-developed aspect of Cowart’s critique lies in his equation of “convenience” and “mastery” over everyday life. I would agree that the characters in *White Noise* do not lack convenience, with cars, dishwashers, garbage collection, proximate freeways, televisions everywhere, and professional lives that seem to involve little to no work, but it seems a bold claim that anyone in the novel outside of Murray has any control over her life, let alone mastery.

The most well-used phrase in *White Noise*, “it’s obvious,” comes into play here. These words are uttered when the answer is, in fact, very rarely clear, and the phrase serves to highlight how opaque much of the world of *White Noise* seems to its citizens. One need only think of Jack’s anxious wait to see if the invisible automated bank system will approve of him enough to give him his money (46); Old Man Treadwell and his sister getting lost for two days in a shopping mall (57-58); the drug Dylar and its side-effect of not being able to distinguish words from things (193); how much of the Gladney family’s lives centre around the television (51, 104,
the constant sleepy mouthing of brand-names like Visa and Panasonic: all these moments signal that, in many ways, convenience over life and the environment comes with a decrease in mastery of those things.

Nevertheless, Cowart’s conflation of convenience and mastery does help to break down the simplicity of Osteen’s binary claims about technology either using or being used by the self, for there is a more complex exchange happening in the novel, which signals a different kind of power struggle: the conflict within each character over whether to be, as Murray would put it, a killer or a dier. Specifically, the problem for the main adult characters of the novel is that, with the exception of Murray, they are all diers. Naturally, we all die, but Murray is saying that Jack and those like him seem perfectly happy to accelerate the process, hanging around waiting passively for other people, things or forces to kill them well before their date with an aortic aneurysm or brain haemorrhage. Hence the wonderful active nature of passivity, of being a “dier:” the act of not acting makes you die sooner. While the Gladney children have not reached this point yet, in some ways they are either getting to that stage or are doomed to follow their parents into it. Steffie, in a telling moment, volunteers to be a simulated casualty in an emergency exercise, lying as inert on the ground as a deceased Ballard character, appearing as part of the landscape.

In this reading, the tyrannical villain in White Noise – the source of the kind of power that imprisons the Gladneys in their near-nightmarish suburban and media cage – is not technology and capitalism, but the characters themselves, who elect in a sort of numbed trance, a state of “white noise” if you will, to submit to an existence that is wilfully passive, on the terms of an equally numbed society and an anaesthetizing world which denies all effective agency. Our

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6 Babette’s father Vernon asks “were people this dumb before television?” (249)
characters trap themselves willingly inside the borders drawn by the modern river Styx, never willing to act lest the death that murmurs on the expressway swallow them up. If this is true, however, then it also shows the potential DeLillo’s characters have for asserting agency over their own lives. Wilder achieves the far side of the babbling expressway because he risks entering the chaotic stream of violence surrounding American domestic suburbia. In *White Noise*, the characters must risk violence of some kind to gain their freedom from this prison, for otherwise they implicitly consent to violence, one of the most potent tools of the techno-industrial complex, only ever being used against them. DeLillo provides us with a metaphor for the importance of having recourse to some kind of sovereignty other than state or economic powers, where rules of behaviour or of action imposed from without may be challenged, but he does it in a way that seems markedly different from the American myth of self-fashioning and renewal, of the rifle buttressing the sanctity of self and property. Rather, the expression of opposition to state and corporate power, DeLillo’s novel suggests, must come from an edge of crazy excess, of inexplicable unpredictability, for only the random seems to offer something different from the ubiquitous power of the technocratic state: the white noise of ideology resonating from the television set and the fluorescent lights of the shopping mall.

*We are our own villains: sovereign power begins at home*

Deciding where the threats lie, then, affects in a critical fashion how to read the novel. If I agree with Osteen and Cowart that the tyranny in *White Noise* lies in the industrial technology and media that seem to underpin so much of the action, then the subject of the novel is indeed the havoc humankind is wreaking, both on the environment and on the concrete, suburban world. In
turn, the message would be that the omnipresent fear of death in the text is a natural consequence of our characters being threatened by industrial systems and structures that are powerful, yet invisible, and so are impalpable and largely irresistible. Mark Osteen elucidates this reading by reference to the critical Airborne Toxic Event chapter as a cipher for the otherwise hidden action of technology and consumer capitalism in the novel:

The toxic cloud seems to elude description; people are fascinated with it because only such catastrophic occurrences escape the mediation that turns everything else into tired formulas. . . . In the toxic cloud the death that hides in commodities erupts like the return of the repressed. (Osteen, 177)

The presence of the almost clichéd literary trope of “the return of the repressed” here is a signal that Osteen may be over-simplifying matters. It is the concept of death lying dormant in everyday objects that I wish to interrogate most thoroughly for, while the toxic cloud is an important event in the text, I do not think it is true that the event in some way re-informs the supposedly “tired” world of the novel.

Osteen has precedent for his interpretation of the poisonous cloud uncovering the toxicity of the rest of the Gladneys’ environment. Tom LeClair, in a much earlier book published in 1987 entitled In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel, claims that after the airborne toxic event “Gladney, his family, and the town of Blacksmith look just as they did before this new kind of technological disaster, because its effects are invisible to the naked eye” (LeClair, 209). LeClair agrees with Osteen and Cowart here, in reading White Noise as a warning against a new kind of industrial terror, one which – in the name of convenience and/or mastery – is invisibly
destroying both the novel’s characters and its environment. Crucially, for all three critics, it is the invisibility of this effect which not only makes it more frightening but, ultimately, more potent.

I wish to supply a different reading of the airborne toxic event which is that, while it does indeed change the world of *White Noise* radically, it reveals almost precisely the opposite of what Osteen, Cowart and LeClair claim. More accurately, it is the very invisibility, of all of what LeClair calls the “effects” of this enormous, terrifying disaster, which discloses the real truth that hides in commodities in *White Noise*. The fact is that there is very little substantive threat at all in the novel from the toxic cloud or from shopping malls, expressways or pharmaceuticals, and that the terror and the fear of death at the heart of the text are, indeed, man-made, but only in the sense that they are almost entirely mind-forged, invented by passive, self-pitying characters intent upon being “diers.”

DeLillo is not just being ironic in the absurd scene where Jack fails to find out any useful information from the on-site expert about what effect his exposure to the deadly toxic cloud might actually have. The SIMUVAC agent talks of the event and its potential effects on Jack as if he were praising a new ultra-sophisticated television with no reference at all to what one might want to watch on it. Rather than speak of any effect the toxin might have in the world, the expert presents the cloud so impressively that it seems like a television advertisement. Bubbling effervescently in the generalised language of marketing and government info-speak, his description of the event seems to constitute nothing but itself, basking in its own magnificence to such an extent that there is no point in it affecting something other than itself:

Anything that puts you in contact with actual emissions means we have a situation....This is not your everyday cirrus. This is a high-definition event. It is
packed with dense concentrations of byproduct. . . . It’s the two and a half
minutes standing right in it that makes me wince. Actual skin and orifice contact.
This is Nyodene D. A whole new generation of toxic waste. What we call state of
the art. One part per million million can send a rat into a permanent state.

(DeLillo, 138-139)

The SIMUVAC man, tapping away behind his keyboard, says nothing of the kind of “situation”
here, the significance of the event is that it is “high-definition” rather than portentous or
indicative of any effect. “Byproduct” only means that there is other stuff, for want of a better
word, in the cloud than Nyodene D, but again the ramifications of this could not be less clear.
The absurd circularity of the conversation becomes explicit with the move from “state of the art”
to the “permanent state” of the infected rat. What sort of “state” this rat ends up in should be
fairly terrifying, given that the agent says “if I was a rat I wouldn’t want to be anywhere within a
two hundred mile radius of the airborne event” (141). However, the linguistic link between
“permanent state” and “state of the art” is too close together here to be coincidence. It rather
seems that, much like the consumer who buys a high-tech product after being saturated by its
lifestyle television advertising, the rat has also been permanently admitted into the hallowed state
of the art. That Jack has difficulty explaining to Murray the threat the exposure poses to his life
is a significant hint that the unravelling, in the novel, of the omnipresent fear of death is possible.

The potential for this unravelling of the dread power of technology and industry lies in
the same source as its potency, that being the mentality, actions and words of Jack and his fellow
diers. The dying mentality is still strong in Jack after his encounter with the SIMUVAC agent
despite his absurd non-description of the threat to Jack’s life. Jack’s reaction to the SIMUVAC
agent signals the invisible, intellectual power of death’s discursive tyranny in the novel. The
agent says to Jack: “I wouldn’t worry about what I can’t see or feel. . . . I’d go ahead and live my life. Get married, settle down, have kids. There’s no reason you can’t do these things, knowing what we know” (141). The irony here is of course that, despite the positive ring to the agent’s words, Jack has already done the things that for the agent constitute living life. To Jack the dier, this surely implies that he has now lived, and Nyodene D is thus shuffling him on to the next stage: the barcode scanner at the final shopping mall.

Despite being encouraged to not worry about what he “can’t see or feel,” Jack’s representation of his plight reverts inevitably to the prospect of his not-so-imminent death: “that little breath of Nyodene has planted a death in my body. It is now official, according to the computer. I’ve got death inside me. It’s just a question of whether or not I can outlive it. It has a lifespan of its own” (151). This reaction epitomizes the attitude of amused resignation out of which Murray has to wrench Jack, a process which culminates in Wilder’s crossing of the expressway. The critical reactions to tyranny in *White Noise* seem to follow this despondent pattern. They are seduced by the atmosphere of resignation, the fog of melancholy that engulfs much of each character’s life, and they produce readings which, despite the very real melancholia of the text, are not reflective of the way that the novel changes throughout, for critics often prefer to always read an inescapable negative power in the text’s technology and violence. Consider Osteen’s reading of the beautiful sunset at the close of *White Noise*, after Wilder has been miraculously not-killed by the multi-lane freeway:

> The colours that produce this sublime aesthetic effect are another byproduct of the toxic cloud. This residue contaminates the view: the god of nature has been soiled by the devil of technology. The sunsets retain the blend of terror and wonder, of dread and magic, first borne by the toxic cloud. (Osteen, 189)
For Osteen, the most we can hope for is a nice view as cancer eats us from the inside as we gape in stereotypically postmodern irony at the empire of the techno-industrial complex. In contrast with his assertion that the sunsets “retain” the qualities of the toxic cloud, I would argue that there are significant differences between that earlier point in the novel and the closing sunset. Osteen unknowingly signals this change with his very choice of words, that the sunsets “retain the blend of terror and wonder, of dread and magic, first borne by the toxic cloud,” for my argument is that there is no “retention” at the close of the book, but in fact something rather new.

The sunset watchers at the close of *White Noise* have discovered that all is not dreadful in the world, as we see while Jack muses, watching from the expressway overpass:

The sky takes on content, feeling, an exalted narrative life. The bands of color reach so high, seem at times to separate into their constituent parts. . . . It is hard to know how we should feel about this. Some people are scared by the sunsets, some determined to be elated, but most of us don’t know how to feel, are ready to go either way. . . . Certainly there is awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous categories of awe, but we don’t know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don’t know what we are watching or what it means, we don’t know whether it is permanent, a level of experience to which we will gradually adjust, into which our uncertainty will eventually be absorbed, or just some atmospheric weirdness, soon to pass. (324-325)

I might read this passage as an allegory of closing epiphanies, an elevating rapture of the human ability to adapt to the most invasive of technological or industrial tyranny. The bands of color lifting and breaking up into the atmosphere, transcending previous categories of awe, could lend weight to this interpretation. However, this does not fit very well with the new sense of balanced
uncertainty in Jack, which contrasts markedly with his conviction, after exposure to the toxic event, that Nyodene D has condemned him to unspecified death. As he speaks to Murray in that central chapter, Jack is so certain of his own dreadful situation that he actively interprets the SIMUVAC’s agent’s advice to not worry as evidence of a new death that has been “planted” inside his body. The irony at that moment, that it has taken toxic exposure for Jack to come to the realization that, of course, we all eventually die at an undetermined point, is unavailable to Jack, who instead continues to be more fixated on the certainty that his destiny is ruled by dread. By contrast, what is new in the passage above is the intermediate state between wonder and dread into which Jack and his fellow sunset watchers have entered. Most significantly, Gladney questions the permanency of his state. The idea that he might regress, that all their “uncertainty” may “eventually be absorbed” is still lurking around in Jack’s mind, but it is now suddenly possible for things to change, for the techno-industrial dread to “pass.”

That the state of being for the Gladneys has significantly changed at the close of *White Noise*, rather than continuing under technological oppression, is supported most clearly of all by the fall into impotence of what I have argued is the signature symbol of the book. Techno-industrial dread, the empire of technology and violence, are being “passed over” in the book’s final act, for Jack and his family stand observing the sunset from the vantage point of the overpass spanning the Styx-esque expressway. The force that has so intently circumscribed the action of *White Noise*, the babbling of dead souls lapping at the Gladneys’ lives at home, in the car, at the shopping mall, in aeroplanes, from the air, out of the television set, and from the very minds of the characters trapped in the mentality of being “diers,” is finally not only crossed but literally risen above by Jack, his family, and other locals. They penetrate the vehicular river Styx and also elevate themselves so that they can see over and beyond its curtain, to “content, feeling,
an exalted narrative life” (324). This phrase is, for me, meant to be read more literally than it might first appear. The Gladney family is finally given life in the narrative in the sense that Wilder’s miraculous traverse shows them that they are free to act, to pass over dread and the techno-industrial complex that has encircled them for much of the text. David Cowart has it that: “One can read Wilder’s transit . . . as a metaphor for the precarious and doomed passage of the living among the dead, whose great congress they must eventually join” (Cowart, 81). While this happy, because temporary, sense of avoidance is one of the nice aspects of the image of Wilder furiously, but safely, pedalling himself through freeway traffic, what I would emphasize is that it is the act of “passage” that is most important. The living are, indeed, doomed to join the dead but, at the close of the novel, the Gladneys have also begun to realize that, until that happens, they are like Wilder, alive, which is the opposite of dead, rather than being in a waiting room for death.

Jack says, after hearing of Babette’s Dylar affair, that “all plots move in one direction” (199), but in the final section of White Noise Jack finally subverts the novel’s narrative of death, culminating in Wilder’s transit and the vision from the overpass. What I will focus on now is how he does that, for Wilder’s traversal of the deathly roadway hints at the quality needed for this kind of action. David Cowart observes that “Wilder survives immersion in a stream of potential violence, the stream of traffic that contributes its own white noise to the Gladney environment” (Cowart, 82). The point here is less one of “survival” and more of “immersion.” Wilder escapes to the far side of the babbling expressway because he risks entering the chaotic stream of violence surrounding him. In White Noise, the characters must risk violence against themselves to gain their freedom from this prison, for otherwise they implicitly consent to violence, one of the most potent tools of the techno-industrial complex, only ever being used as
an all-powerful threat against them by the forces of state-sponsored corporatism. With his representation of violence, DeLillo provides a metaphor for the importance of having recourse to some kind of self-determination other than state or economic powers, where rules of behaviour or of action imposed from without may be challenged, but he does it in a way that is different from the American myth of self-fashioning and renewal, of the gun protecting the self and property. Rather, the expression of autonomy, DeLillo’s novel argues, must come from an edge of crazy excess, of inexplicable unpredictability, for only the random seems to offer something different from the ubiquitous power of the technocratic state: the white noise of ideology beaming from the television set and the baleful lights of the shopping mall.

*Death in Theory: the role of the intellectual in perpetuating power structures*

The centrality of violence to personal agency is seen most clearly in the moment where Jack’s decides to go out and shoot his wife’s lover, Willie Mink, at the behest of Murray Siskind. This is, of course, linked more widely to Murray’s Ballardian politics of the embrace of violence. This is probably the most difficult aspect of the novel, for Murray’s speech about violence, and being a killer rather than a dier, is potentially uncomfortably close to Fascist ideology. Nevertheless, it is a critical part of *White Noise*, and one I shall attempt to rehabilitate from its potential kindred with such unpalatable politics.

The most important point about Murray and his ideas is that both he and they are funny, and the passage on the benefits of being a “killer” is one of the most absurdly comic parts of the novel. The humour functions as a deflection-device, bouncing the reader off the surface of
Murray’s words and into more figurative possibilities of meaning, with the aim of puncturing the mysterious power of the ideology of organized violence by the state:

“I believe, Jack, there are two kinds of people in this world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers. We don’t have the disposition, the rage or whatever it takes to be a killer. We let death happen. We lie down and die. But think what it’s like to be a killer. Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up. It explains any number of massacres, wars, executions.”

“Sounds pretty awful.”

He seemed to shrug. “Slaughter is never random. The more people you kill, the more power you gain over your own death. There is a secret precision at work in the most savage and indiscriminate killings. To speak about this is not to do public relations for murder. We’re two academics in an intellectual environment. It’s our duty to examine currents of thought, investigate the meaning of human behaviour. But think how exciting, to come out a winner in a deathly struggle, to watch the bastard bleed.” (291)

Before hearing about winning the “deathly struggle” and watching “the bastard bleed,” it is the humour in Murray’s words which signals that a Fascistic discourse of social Darwinism is not what he has in mind. The laughter comes from the absurdity of Murray’s extension of the rules of capitalism, of the storing up of credit, into the distinctly unconnected world of killing people. Of course you do not get a sort of get out of death free card if you kill someone, but the very
absurdity is not only amusing but also reflects explicitly on those original rules, so dominant in America, of storing up credit and making money. Part of the humour comes from how Murray so casually breaks the taboo – particularly in academia – of anything other than a total disgust at violence and killing, but there is a disturbing sense of reality and critique, at least in a North American context and its high levels of gun deaths, behind the joke.

That “we let death happen” is only figurative, for none of us has any option in our journey to the final check-out till. The less equivocal comedy here is that Murray objects to what he sees as widespread, placid agreement with the finality of mortality. He objects to the attitude; he wants, as he says later in a different context, a bit of “the old can do spirit.” The fact that death is inevitable is, ironically, not the frightening part for Murray, it is that “we lie down” as we do it, making the metaphor for acquiescence real in an uncanny sense. Murray likens post-industrial society to a pack of sickly dogs crouched in their respective corners, defined by their knowledge of the inevitable injection of lethal barbiturates. For Murray, we lie down even in the absence of being put down.

If we read this passage and focus on the mentality of being a killer, rather than the act of killing, we may explain the almost absurd care Murray takes in emphasising the hypothetical nature of the conversation. “Think what it’s like to be a killer, and think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person” (my emphasis). Murray says that they are only speaking, that he and Jack are academics in an intellectual environment and that they have a “duty” to “examine currents of thought” and to “investigate . . . human behaviour.” Naturally, Murray doth protest too much, as I shall come to, but there are reasons, beyond covering up his excitement for real, visceral violence, that Murray packs his speech full of the hypothetical of “theory.”
My most controversial and, for this project, most disturbing reading of “theory” here is that Murray implicates high-level intellectual thought in the chain of events that leads to any number of massacres, wars, executions. “Slaughter is never random,” inevitable or inexplicable, much as its organisers might want to claim, in the manner of the “spontaneous uprisings” of “righteous anger” decried by Rushdie or the “destiny” of imperial Japan in Artist of the Floating World. The implicit nature of Murray’s critique is what allows its meaning to cascade through several different representative layers, achieving a level of complexity which opens the possibility of critiquing the role of thought in slaughter, while not crudely blaming intellectual pursuits for the act of killing. The phrase “in theory,” in particular, sustains several distinct readings, the simultaneous existence of which serves to slip complex analysis into what appears at first to be an ironic and flippant speech.

In the phrase, “think how exciting it is, in theory to kill a person in direct confrontation,” “in theory” appears to act initially as a kind of de-fusing mechanism, seemingly securing Jack and the reader in the realm of the speculative, but the effect is deliberately undercut by the juxtaposition with the very non-theoretical “direct” idea of killing. Theory then appears rather as an enabling device, providing a thin smoke screen for Murray and Jack’s vicarious exploration of the attraction of killing. This reading involves a literal reading of the final lines of the quotation: the pleasure lies in the visceral moment of leaving the loser bleeding to death in the dust. However, if I apply a little reader’s licence, if I read the phrase a little faster than normal, for instance by eliding the first comma, I might end up with something like this: “think how exciting it is in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation.” In this reading, we alter the object of excitement from killing a person to killing a person in theory or, literally, the theory of killing. This is different from defusing the discussion as “theoretical,” from treating the killing
and its thrill as speculative, for here the excitement and thrill come from constructing a theory of killing. My reading is that this is what “explains any number of massacres, wars and executions:” the theory of killing is as exciting to its thinkers as the act itself. For Murray, we need to understand the role of thought and systems of thought in major events, be they state sponsored slaughter or the fate set out for all of us, in the overwhelming barrage of media and technological white noise, which say that listeners may as well lie down in front of the TV to die.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the empire of technology and violence deployed against the characters in DeLillo’s novel and, and as I shall claim, in the work of William Gibson, relies on creating fear, or in *White Noise*, dread. To rebel, both authors represent their characters as having to act counter-culturally. In the passage of killers and diers, this involves breaking the social taboo, and particularly the cultural and intellectual taboo against discussing, and, perhaps, perpetrating violence if it is not performed and circumscribed by the state. Murray, in transparent homage to J.G.Ballard, embraces the visceral experience of violence, or at least the contemplation of violence, as a way of both conjuring and undermining the power that the state and its institutions reserve for themselves when they ban the use of violence by citizens. The idea is to take (discursively, at least) one of the state’s most potent weapons that, as Benjamin reminds us, is so important that the state seeks a monopoly on the use of violence, in order to protest against the different rules and conventions in place for the juridical system, on the one hand, and the citizenry on the other.

The final lines in Murray’s speech say that “to speak about this is not to do public relations for murder. . . . But think how exciting, to come out a winner in a deathly struggle, to watch the bastard bleed.” It is tempting to read this moment as Linda Hutcheon reads postmodern poetics, that is to say a reinscription of the move from the theory of violence to its
actualisation, in order that both ideas might be challenged (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 3). In that case, both the move toward the attempted murder of Willie Mink, and also the intimation that Jack and Wilder escape because they immerse themselves in violence, are ironical. I would thus be able to argue that any similarity between Murray’s philosophy and a Fascistic fetish for the survival of the fittest through conflict, is deliberately sending up such right-wing ideologies. Such a reading, however, would have to account for why it is that Murray is so at home in the world of *White Noise*, and why Jack’s belated move to divest himself of inaction by hunting down his wife’s lover is an explicit response to Murray’s wish that he cease being a “dier” and become a “killer.”

The whole point of the killers and diers passage is, in fact, that Murray and Jack are doing “public relations for murder.” There is far too much protestation that the two are just thinking, that they are talking in theory, that they are merely academics in a non-violent intellectual environment (this, of course, is most certainly ironic), for the reader not to think that both Murray and Jack are craving to reach beyond the theoretical threshold of killing. However, the abstracted murder that Murray looks towards needs to be thought of in terms of the mental prison our characters inhabit within the contemporary river Styx of the expressway. Murder, for Murray, is the end-point of a freedom-orientated thought process, in that it responds most immediately to the immobilising fear put into the characters by the techno-industrial complex. Put simply, the world consistently threatens to kill the Gladney family (even if, as with the airborne toxic event, that threat appears to be largely virtual), and Murray’s philosophy shows Jack that wrestling back the monopoly on mortality is critical to finally crossing the river of high speed automobiles surrounding him and his family.
DeLillo’s wider concern in the novel is that it is not the imminence of death that imprisons its characters, but instead the threat of that mortality. The techno-industrial organs of commerce and the state circumscribe the actions of the Gladney family through conditioning mental, as well as physical, life. I have already shown how indeterminate the risk of death from Jack’s exposure to the airborne toxic event is, and this is the tipping point after which we may see the manifestation of Osteen’s American dread as decidedly toothless outside of the characters’ own minds. Steffie lies down to die in only a simulated emergency exercise (206). Jack listens to testimony from a passenger of a near–plane-crash at the airport, only to have his elder daughter Bee appear at his elbow having survived just fine her latest of “thousands of miles alone” (93); car crashes have more of a presence in Murray’s seminar than they do outside it (218); the smoke alarm upstairs goes off because only the battery is dead, rather than because the Gladneys are burning alive in their house (8); and “Death, or Death’s errand runner” lurking in the Gladney’s back garden at night is, in fact, Vernon Dickey, Babette’s father, who is trying not to wake them up (242-244).

Vernon seems to give away what, in White Noise, is blamed as the source of the dying mentality and of the characters’ inaction in the face of encircling fear, when he asks: “were people this dumb before television?” (249) Reading White Noise as an indictment of human indoctrination by anaesthetising flickering boxes is certainly a reading that is encouraged by the book. The near-plane-crash seems inescapably conjured by Heinrich’s call to the family six pages earlier; “come on, hurry up, plane crash footage,” and more general dread seems to proliferate in the wake of the television, which is the only significant source of information for the characters in the novel. As Jack proclaims to Orest: “fifty thousand people a year die of snakebite. It was on the television last night,” and Orest replies: “everything was on television
last night” (268). Heinrich goes further and literalises the deathly indoctrinating power of the media, claiming that even its electromagnetic waves are deadly: “where do you think the deformed babies are coming from? Radio and TV, that’s where” (175). DeLillo’s indictment of TV and, just as importantly, human reactions to it, reaches a kind of horrible apotheosis when news media descend in a morbid frenzy on a murder scene, following the digging machines for hours in the hope of more bodies being found (222). As the announcer looks more and more forlorn at the lack of a mass grave, Jack tries not to feel disappointed (223). Even the cover of the Picador paperback features a disembodied, floating white screen facing out toward the reader, and a small child looking directly into it. We are positioned, like the faceless boy, as little more than passive observers falling into the light of television white noise, a powerful indictment of the new empire of technology and violence distributed through baleful, ever watchful Cathode Ray Tubes and Liquid Crystal Displays. It is in this context that the novel’s more controversial representations of violence should most properly be read, as an attempt by characters like Murray to prompt his friends to wrest themselves away from the passivity of their lives in front of the television through passivity’s opposite: a necessarily extreme attempt at activity through a violence that wrests its power away from its exclusive ownership by the state. However, when compared with the novels of William Gibson, this approach seems decidedly limited. The television, or its white noise spouting equivalent, will always be there, in domestic homes across the world. By calling for such an antagonistic relationship with this particular technological commodity, DeLillo risks his idea of freedom becoming contingent upon a relationship with the very thing he hates. William Gibson, on the other hand, proposed a more integrated relationship between his narratives and the technology and power used by the techno-industrial complex, and it is to his work that I therefore now turn.
William Gibson responds to state and corporate use of technology and violence in an outwardly similar way to DeLillo. His characters perform jack moves in order to escape what are described in *Pattern Recognition* as “the scary connections” (Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 91) of the hyper-connected world. However, I claim that Gibson goes decidedly further in attempting an entire writing style defined by the “jack move:” a strategy which I term “spatial narrative.”

The objective of the jack move, as explained in *Pattern Recognition*, is “either deliberate but extremely lateral, thus taking the competition or opponent by surprise, or . . . simply crazy” (91). In Gibson’s fiction, the spatial narrative at work in the environment and in the image itself is an attempt at taking narrative discourse itself so far into the realm of the unfamiliar that it takes writing itself “by surprise.” While it is an extreme response to the domination of discourse by the techno-industrial power at work in the modern nation-state, I want to argue that it is effective in proffering an antagonistic response to prevailing power structures and the discursive arenas in which they are framed.

Recall what Agamben has to say about the concentration camp, which is the most important consequence of sovereign power and the state of exception being allowed to dominate our political systems, that “the camp is the state of exception made spatial” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 169-170). What better way, then, to resist the reach of sovereign power than to produce a way of writing, in Gibson’s spatial narrative, that conceives anew of the spaces we inhabit and repudiates the ultimate grip sovereign power seeks to claim over public space, in the form of the camp? While Agamben claims that, in places as disparate as the former Yugoslavia, Nazi Germany and the modern-day United States, the state of exception “is starting to coincide with
the normal order,” Gibson instead proposes an abnormal order, through finding a way of representing the world counter-culturally by reconceiving the ways in which we view the space we live in (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 12, 38). This is the role that fiction may play in responding to sovereign power and the state of exception that Agamben does not anticipate. Gibson’s spatial narrative demonstrates that conceptions of space are multiple, and still open to interpretation and representation, such that sovereign power does not necessarily have the last word in deciding on the concept or meaning of the space it seeks to colonise. I do not wish to downplay the fact that, as Ishiguro’s novels demonstrate so well, the power of the state is such that it can effectively grab whatever space it wants, but Gibson’s elegant and challenging representations promise the possibility of creating and renewing zones and habitats which the state does not fully understand or know of, such as the invisible virtual walled city of Hak Nam or the lawless shanty town of “The Bridge.”

Gibson is, as I discuss momentarily, frequently celebrated as some sort of technological prophet which might seem to limit his role as resistor against the techno-industrial complex and the corporate states that support it, but it is actually not true to say that Gibson is pro-technology. He is, in fact, rather suspicious of the possibilities offered by the information society and the techno-industrial complex. By techno-industrial complex, I mean a modification of Eisenhower’s original exhortation, to beware the military-industrial complex, in favour of a phrase more suited to an age where high-tech communications and gadgets have become so commonplace that they seem to saturate modern life. This is an integrated industry, with raw materials for things like batteries and aluminium emerging from mines in Canada, African states and Russia, shipped to giant live-in plants in China like those of notorious manufacturer Foxconn, and sold all over the world as parts in a giant consumer-capitalist industry of smartphones, laptops, televisions and
luxury cars. However, it is the inescapable ubiquity and self-fulfilling necessity of it all, such that Jack cannot have money without an ATM, or that I cannot write or submit this project without a computer and email, that causes me to dub the technology I speak of in this chapter, and the violence that it can do in the wrong hands, as an “empire,” a description I have not read in criticism of Gibson or DeLillo. Gibson understands the negative possibilities of this kind of world, and his cautious approach is taken up precisely because he recognises that technology is, to a large extent, neutral. It is what is done with technology, communications and media that is important. The technology that sometimes almost overwhelms his novels is thus sometimes turned against its institutionalised wielders: but these victories are, at the same time, always partial and impermanent.

Small victories against a seemingly insurmountable consumer-capitalist, techno-industrial machine are what links Gibson with DeLillo, for the characters in Gibson’s oeuvre must, just like those of White Noise, rebel in more than thought. They co-opt the violence of the state and of the third stage of capital, forming new worlds, identities and languages. It is here, in the link between identity and representative strategies, that Gibson is doing something new and exciting with regards to the kind of power that may be used to strip his characters of home, intellect and interpretative rights in the world: in spatial narrative he creates a new form of storytelling. This representational strategy turns the imprisoning world of DeLillo’s Highway Styx and Pattern Recognition’s nausea-inducing advertising into phenomena that are far less powerful and threatening, by portraying representation as an entity that is always renewable and renewing. If, as Rushdie claims, “redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it,” then Gibson’s radical revisioning of the new empire of technology and violence at work in contemporary life is a significant stride in moving towards that change (Rushdie, Imaginary
This is a move away from power uninterested in the benefits of citizenry, community and society, and toward the kind of pattern recognition that might inform future politics.

My discussion of Gibson is split into two main sections. The first consists of an exploration of the idea mooted in *Idoru* and *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, namely that writing human experience of the world can be made up of a network of representational “nodal points” rather than a linear sense of beginning and end, of cause and effect. This section centres around how the Bridge trilogy of *Virtual Light*, *Idoru* and *All Tomorrow’s Parties* performs spatial narrative through the movement of characters between and within “nodes” of key geographical or visual space. The second part describes the visual styles and language of Gibson by reading them with the homages of Mamoru Oshii’s films *Ghost in the Shell 1* and *2*. By reading Gibson through the ghostly montage techniques of those two films, one can see that Gibson’s novels negotiate a human experience that has the potential to find depth in surfaces and images. While there may be initially a hard, glossy surface, Gibson’s writing shows how human contact changes that hard, opaque nature into something with depth, and there is potential for a spatial story often in the most unforgiving of images, environments, or spaces.

Gibson’s critique of the techno-industrial complex lies in this representation of depth in surface and image, rather than in his depictions of technology. Fredric Jameson praises Gibson’s 1984 debut novel *Neuromancer* for its mesmerizing figuration of contemporary technology that offers a “privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imagination to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself” (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 37-38). Indeed, Gibson is infamous as the inventor of the word “cyberspace” and for the first sustained attempt, with “the
matrix” in that first novel, at imagining an Internet-esque virtual world. Yet what is fascinating about Gibson’s career is in fact how ambivalent his representations of technology are. The history of Gibson’s work tells the story of how the promise of technology as a universal tool for countering hegemonic power structures came to seem, quite precisely, a fiction, and how fiction must always be finding new ways to provide narratives that at least attempt to escape the discursive dominance of the state and other users of sovereign power. In this sense, technology is only useful by proxy.

Gibson’s first and most well known book, *Neuromancer*, was published in the same year of the translation of Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* as well as the publication of the first chapter of Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, and even now it seems equally innovative. The subsequent two books in the trilogy riffed more extensively on representations of the matrix, a three-dimensional virtual network spanning the globe, as a counter-cultural sandbox, a sandbox where those subcultures disenfranchised by society in the trilogy might regain agency. Nevertheless, while the second novel, *Count Zero*, celebrates both an anti-state and anti-corporate orientation forged in the fresh zones of technological action, by the trilogy’s conclusion in 1988 with *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, that new world had become a lot less inviting. Readers are confronted, for example, with the distinctly unsettling prospect of a dead major character from *Neuromancer* only living on, impotently, as a digital construct in the matrix, perhaps emblematic of the fading potential of that alternative construct.

By the time of the “Bridge” trilogy, spanning 1993 to 1999, Gibson’s representations of the communicative ramifications of modern hardware have become more consistently ambivalent. If they wish to recapture counter-cultural potential, his anti-heroes have to search for
“nodal points” of potential change, hidden in a landscape, both virtual and physical, now inhabited by corporations and digital celebrities just as at home as our rebels. The virtual world is now less of a sandbox and more of a dangerous zone of surveillance and data-mining. Today, Gibson has abandoned the figurative possibilities of technology almost altogether. The main character of 2003’s *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce Pollard, presents her high-tech media malaise quite literally, by wanting to vomit every time she is exposed to heavily advertised trademarks and logos. Further, *Spook Country*, perhaps in a nod to the prevalence of automated surveillance systems in the so-called “war on terror,” presents a mess of overlapping networks almost entirely populated by competing intelligence agencies rather than communities of anti-heroes.

With the benefit of hindsight, Jameson was not entirely correct to valorize Gibson’s use of technology as the key aspect of his grasp of contemporary power, but he was right elsewhere in *The Cultural Logic*, when he wrote of *Neuromancer* that “one is tempted to characterize it as ‘high-tech paranoia’” (Jameson, 37). Jameson made this claim in 1984, while the tagline for 2003’s *Pattern Recognition* is “It’s only called paranoia if you can’t prove it.” So, sweepingly, one way of describing Gibson’s twenty-year oeuvre is to say that it represents twenty years of novels of paranoia. The connection between spatial narrative and paranoia lies in Gibson’s close affiliation with the novelist Thomas Pynchon. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon describes “paranoia” as the reflex of “seeking other orders behind the visible,” and William Gibson’s novels very much encourage an understanding of the character of what is beyond the visible in contemporary images, zones and spaces, like the “zone of indistinction in which fact and law coincide” that Agamben claims characterizes the state of exception (Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 187, Agamben, *State of Exception*, 26).
The hidden virtual zone created by hackers and digital outcasts of “The Walled City” in the trilogy *Virtual Light, Idoru* and *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, is paralleled by an extra-juridical shanty town, built by a disenfranchised community, on a disused bridge appropriated from the city; a town that gave the series of novels its moniker “The Bridge Trilogy.” The Walled City and The Bridge are both lands where – recalling Agamben’s description of how the state of exception is achieved through co-opting the juridical order – *necessitas legem non habet*, where necessity has no law, in which communities take on part of the power created or utilized by the established order (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 24). *Hak Nam* or “The Walled City” in *Idoru* and *All Tomorrow’s Parties* is a re-creation of a real, historical space that originally existed in Hong Kong following, in part, imperial conflict over that territory. It was left behind by the Chinese after ceding Hong Kong to the British, but was not formally part of Hong Kong (and thus British jurisdiction) either. It thus grew into a haven for the disenfranchised and illegitimate, at its height containing some thirty-five thousand residents in a two-hundred by one-hundred metre plot of land. What sounds like a shanty town looked more like an incredibly condensed version of an entire city. *Hak Nam* had been a problem for both states for a number of years, falling as it did outside the British and Chinese territories, effectively creating a free zone for organized criminal gangs, or “Triad,” to operate from (*Newsline*, “Kowloon Walled City”). The virtual version of Hak Nam in Gibson’s work is a space hidden in the digital world, and takes its inspiration from what Agamben might call the zone of juridical vacuum, of the *anomic* space of the original Walled City:

And then the thing before her: building or biomass or cliff face looming there, in countless unplanned strata, nothing about it even or regular. Accreted patchwork of shallow random balconies, thousands of small windows throwing
back blank silver rectangles of fog. Stretching either way to the periphery of vision, and on the high, uneven crest of that ragged façade, a black fur of twisted pipe, antennas sagging under vine growth of cable. And past this scribbled border a sky where colors crawled like gasoline on water.

“Hak Nam,” he said, beside her.

“What is it?”

“‘City of darkness.’ Between the walls of the world.” (Idoru 181-2)

Gibson uses The Walled City as an analog for imagining the nature of radical spatial invention possible by rethinking and re-presenting image and space. The virtual world is filtered in Gibson’s prose through a sieve of industrial metaphors and reference to artificial, yet beautiful substances, emphasizing that what I term, from Foucault, “interstitial” space, space that is “in-between,” may still be conjured in language (Foucault, The Order of Things, xvi). I wish to emphasise here the representation of technologically-enabled space that violates representational rules like the consistency of grammar, with non-sentences like that which begins “accreted patchwork,” and the existential challenge of conceiving of a city between the walls of the world. Gibson writes counter-culturally in order to provide, as well as write about, new interpretative space.

“The Bridge” is also a metaphorical link to reality in the novel, for it translates interstitial, virtual space into a representation of our more familiar physical universe. The shanty town (again, the phrase is completely insufficient) of The Bridge is also built upon what was already there, a failed grand public work fallen into disuse. One character in Virtual Light speaks
with pride of how the city’s homeless and destitute one night gathered at the chain fence blocking off entry to the bridge, and, reaching a flashpoint of collective energy, swarmed over the sharp barriers, passing up carpet, clothing and wood to enable passage over the barbed wire. The police arrived, he says, but could not risk a charge into the massed ranks of densely-packed people in full view of the circling TV helicopters (Gibson, 86-89). So instead, the city pretends that “The Bridge” does not exist, and allows it to continue because of the difficulty of evicting those who live there. The residents built tiny shacks all over the roadway, and when they ran out of space started to build up, using the bridge gantries as support and lashing points. It sounds, of course, like impossible fantasy, until we remember that The Walled City in Hong Kong was once an imperial fort and that, in the twentieth century, those outside the state and the law found another use for it. Gibson’s fictional play with carving out new space, in the ruins of areas made by the established order, encourages a lack of acceptance of that order’s idea of the proper use of space: one description of The Bridge disavowing the purpose of the entire modern project of great works:

As ever, it stirred his heart to see it there, morning light aslant through all the intricacy of its secondary construction.

The integrity of its span was rigorous as the modern program itself, yet around this had grown another reality, intent upon its own agenda. This had occurred piecemeal, to no set plan, employing every imaginable technique and material. The result was something amorphous, startlingly organic. At night, illuminated by Christmas bulbs, by recycled neon, by torchlight, it possessed a queer medieval energy. By day, seen from a distance, it reminded him of the ruin
of England’s Brighton Pier, as though viewed through some cracked kaleidoscope of vernacular style. (Idoru 58)

Here, the original modern project has disappeared beneath its new inhabitants’ “secondary construction,” a potent analog for the way in which the constituting power that creates new socio-political structures, both repressive and not, necessarily builds on what has gone before. Indeed, for Gibson, the city’s concern with building grand projects, rather than housing the less fortunate, has ironically provided this other reality with the “integrity” it needed to work in the first place. There is also the notion here that what was steel and concrete has acquired a “startlingly organic” nature through the action of its new inhabitants, a useful metaphor for the possibilities of re-conceiving of the form and function of a space. Through not respecting the chain-link border Virtual Light’s fictional state had placed around this disused, uncertain zone, the invading community has created, precisely, a zone of anomie or juridical nonspace highly reminiscent of Gibson’s Walled City.

A critical aspect of William Gibson’s different, counter-cultural representation of space is that these kinds of thematic experimentations, of narrating the space behind the visible, are mirrored in his writing style. “Spatial narrative” is best illustrated by example. Gibson’s Bridge trilogy is built on the arresting fashion in which Gibson anchors his stories in “nodes” (Gibson, All Tomorrow’s Parties, 106). Nodal points are a textual conceit, manifested in the talent of the character Colin Laney. Laney can read the world in a remarkably different way, to the extent of reading a version of the future, by identifying conventionally invisible areas of information flow, where something important is happening or will happen. The places of action in Gibson’s novels may be read as textual figurations of Laney’s more metaphysical nodal idea that, especially when linked together, describe narratives of space: “the ‘history’ Laney discovered . . . was that shape
comprised of every narrative, every version” (Gibson, *Parties*, 165). By making the geography of the city a canvas upon which to trace his narrative of space, Gibson repudiates the subordination of space to sovereign power in Agamben’s formulation that “the camp is the state of exception made spatial” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 169-170). A crucial part of this narrative “shape” in the Bridge trilogy is how character action impacts on those nodal spaces, and two passages from the opening of *All Tomorrow’s Parties* explore the suggestion that human experience in the novels is often linked irrevocably to the interactions characters have with these nodal spaces:

> He could easily cut his way out through the wall. Yet the psychological space is powerful, very powerful, and overwhelms him. He feels very far from Shinjuku, from Tokyo, from anything. (Gibson, *Parties*, 5)

Here, Yamazaki is not only psychologically overwhelmed by the stench of Laney’s disgusting tent, in the Shinjuku underground system, but his overthrow is linked directly to being far from the nodal spaces he “feels” supported by. He is overwhelmed spatially as well as sensorially. When the shaken Yamazaki emerges from the fetid tent and subway tunnels, his reconnection with normality is described in highly visual terms which nevertheless trace a moving narrative arc.

That Gibson is aiming towards a narrative focused through connected concentrated spaces, is supported implicitly by Dani Cavallaro in *Cyberpunk and Cybertculture* when she asserts that “exploring the structural and formal traits of several cyberpunk fictions is somewhat akin to embarking on a fantasy voyage down a sprawling continent of megacities” (Cavallero, 153). For Cavallaro there is an implicit relation between interstitial nodes (Cavallaro sees
“megacities”) and narrative (her “fantasy voyage”), although it is not just large urban cities that
act in this structural story. Cavallaro is more accurate when she equates Gibson’s combination of
multiple stories with the figuration of the body and city space as narrative canvas, in that “fuzzily
symmetrical stories based on the interweaving of disparate yarns and discourses could be seen as
narrative equivalents of the ambiguous, equivocal maps drawn by technoscience on both the
body and the city” (Cavallaro, 159). Cavallaro identifies how important the placing of the body
or the human into the larger textual space (in this case “the city”) is to Gibson’s narrative. What
particularly interests me here is the ontological equivalence, in terms of how narrative is
constructed, between city and human body, and how both are being mapped by Gibson in a
similar way. Cavallaro underscores the inescapable influence of technology on body that calls
me to refer to the forces shaping information society as an “empire,” yet she also emphasises the
notion that the relationship has the potential to be more reciprocal: that writing, or acting, back is
possible. I am attracted to Gibson’s idea of metaphorically tying the body more closely to its
habitat, and vice versa, because it links our habitats to our lives in a visceral, explicit way, as
Yamazaki finds when he is not able to destroy Laney’s tent by cutting through its wall. This
close connection with living space and environment, both for Gibson’s characters and in his
writing style, offer a way of interpreting the world where it might be harder for other forces to
repurpose those spaces.

A key example of how this ontological similarity works lies in one of the poignant
culminations of the story of the bridge in All Tomorrow’s Parties, where an evocation of
Konrad’s dead wife Lise leads to a meditation on the importance of a sense of time and self
beyond the “interior”: 
Interior time gone rudderless now, unmoored by a stranger’s reconstruction of Lise’s face. The hands of the watch trace a radium orbit, moments back-to-back. He senses some spiral of unleashed possibility in the morning, though not for him.

The bridge, behind him now, perhaps forever, is a medium of transport become a destination. (Gibson, 273)

Konrad’s words trace a narrative of understanding, from the metaphysical notion of time to the encoding of that idea with spatial meaning. The visual space described by the luminescent watch hands, as they travel through air and time, is linked explicitly to the interpretation of the bridge. In its textual centrality and significance, which echo the narrative relevance of the larger nodes in the trilogy, Konrad’s watch leads directly to the reinterpretation of the background space of the bridge that, in its status as “destination” of Konrad’s own narrative, has enabled the human re-encoding of its diverse “shanty” spaces. As with the watch, the bridge expands as an “unleashed possibility” from a place of function to a space of narrative effect, to a space of “destination.” It is the action of the characters of the Bridge trilogy that describes the story of urban and super-urban space in such a strikingly immediate fashion. Konrad’s fond memories of Lise are conjured in the context of the failure of interior depth and his own experience of being drawn to the novels’ interstitial spaces, much as Thomas Docherty describes the magnetic pulling effect of The Beaubourg on the culture of Paris (Docherty, 18).

A useful theory relating to the depth Gibson’s characters find in visual space, and thus the contribution it makes to constituting the narratives, is Adriana Cavarero’s idea of heroic action in Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood, a text I addressed briefly in my third chapter:
Heroic action . . . has the merit of highlighting the constitutive coinciding of *being* and *appearing* that defines the totally exhibitive character of identity. This is an identity that, far from corresponding with a substance, is entirely expressive.

(Cavarero, 23)

Although Cavarero is largely referring to political self-representation, in many ways this concept of the creation of identity through action lends itself to talking about the act of writing very well. Both characters and space have “identity” in fiction, particularly in Gibson’s work. Just as the visual node of Konrad’s watch leads to a new thought about the meaning of the bridge, or as Yamazaki’s reassuring connection to the visual space of Shinjuku traces an emotional story of disquiet and relief, so these connections, when read with Cavarero, draw out the mutually constitutive importance of being and appearing to the identity of characters and the spaces in which they act. In other words, the action of Gibson’s characters in key visual spaces forms the identity, the story, of that space. Cavarero’s idea allows the argument that the action of Gibson’s characters, so well isolated by several critics, is not merely *self* expression, but an expression of how their being, their ontological state, is linked to their movement to and from spatial narrative nodes. Gibson’s fiction implies that our own movement and action in space has the potential to redefine that space, that going out into the street or onto the internet inevitably has an impact on those spaces. Gibson’s writing suggests that harnessing that impact though “jack moves” might be one way to achieve a kind of personal or collective autonomy that is not inherited from the white noise of media outlets or advertising.

The most obvious example of identity being formed in visual space may be read in the “Bridge” of the Bridge trilogy. The Bridge is an interstitial habitat (people live and work on the disused structure) that is not only a site, or a node, of action but also a visual space on the street
that tells a story solely by its presence. This story occurs in the movement of the characters to
and from the Bridge and the other mapped-out nodes that Dani Cavallaro calls “megacities” of
story. The nature of Gibson’s characters is formed in the links they stretch in their journeys to,
from and within geographical “nodes” of action that are primarily represented by a unique
image: the Bridge, Harwood’s tower block, the beach of Neuromancer, the aleph of Mona Lisa
Overdrive, even the human construct of the Idoru, and so on. For me, the visual ontology of the
Bridge, its status as visual space, is what grounds Gibson’s disparate characters, technologies and
plots, and which provides the geographical site which links them all together.

Gibson’s writing narrates how the action and movement of fictional characters may link
differing geographical and virtual, metaphorical locations together, to form expressive narratives
of spaces. Cavarero shows how important the appearance of those spaces and characters is with
her metaphor of the blinded man tracing the outline of a stork on his garden lawn, in his etching
of meaning on the geography of his garden merely by walking on it (Cavarero, 1-3). Chevette,
the bicycle courier, emblematises that new narrative, her identity formed by shuttling to and fro
across zones and neighbourhoods, her bios – or the fact of her biological existence – in space as
important as her movement between those spaces. Unlike data sent over digital networks, which
has little narrative relation to space, lacking as it does a beginning and an end in its speed-of-
light ubiquity, Chevette’s physical movement provides “a degree of absolute security in the fluid
universe of data” (Gibson, Virtual Light, 85).

The most significant way in which Gibson’s characters act to produce the “jack-move” of
spatial narrative is, however, rather more subtle, and is best shown by comparison; in this case
with Mamoru Oshii’s films Ghost in the Shell 1 and 2. I claim that Gibson and Oshii show how
the human gaze itself generates a narrative of spatial depth in the surface of what is seen. What is
revolutionary in the narratives of both Gibson and Oshii is, counter to the post-Marxist critique of contemporary “postmodern” fiction as shallow, the depth their characters find in even the most opaque of their surrounding visual images and surfaces. It is this depth that underscores the ownership that society and culture may assert over even the blankest of surfaces or images in public space.

**Ghost writing: the narrative depth of the image**

Renewing our relationship with our frequently hostile, techno-industrial surroundings involves, in Gibson’s novels, finding depth in even the hardest or most abstract surface. This is often combined with movement in terms of montage, or movement along a street or up the non-space of the matrix. This tells the story of our existence in space interestingly because it is, in Gibson’s words, “about what being hard and glossy does to you” rather than about being hard and glossy: the classic attack that this fiction is, in some way, superficial (Quoted in McCaffery, “An Interview with William Gibson,” 280). This story of depth in the surface reveals the nature of space, and spatial existence, in Gibson, and Oshii’s *Ghost* films, as one where the constituting narrative forces are acting in an always unfamiliar way. Scott Bukatman introduces this idea by highlighting how Gibson’s writing style in *Neuromancer* always makes strange the experience of reading it: “the work is best experienced as something other than narrative – poetry, perhaps – so that the images may perform their estranging, disembodying functions” (Bukatman, 152). Bukatman does not argue that *Neuromancer* is not narrative; rather, he asserts that what readers might seek to read as narrative is experienced as something different. What emerges from Bukatman’s statement that is new is the idea that Gibson might make strange his images and
visual space as an authorial strategy, in order to comment on the nature of the writing of those spaces. Gibson may make his own writing strange in a way that always creates the possibility of the existence of something behind the surfaces of the hard images and image-based spaces he represents. Gibson himself implies as much in his interview with Larry McCaffery, in language which provides a concrete link with the importance of excessive action in DeLillo’s version of counter-culture: “It was the gratuitous moves, the odd, quirky, irrelevant details, that provided a sense of strangeness. So it seemed important to find an approach that would allow for gratuitous moves” (McCaffery, 275). I would translate “gratuitous moves” rather literally, for it articulates the importance of the movement in Gibson’s writing that is so often present in the images of space, to the extent that a language of visual movement may be said to articulate the dimensions, and hence the nature, of that space more effectively than a description of the space itself: “The crowd descending like a single organism into the station’s airless heart. . . . Yamazaki and his small burden of information go down into the neon depths.” (Gibson, Parties, 1) Beyond its designation as “station,” there is no information about Yamazaki’s surroundings on the first page of All Tomorrow’s Parties. Somehow, what is necessary for reading Yamazaki’s action is present here without his visual background functioning as context, as contrast. Rather, what is necessary seems more to be that the Shinjuku station surfaces are represented through being traversed. Gibson suggests that by going out into their environments and acting in them, his characters contribute to the meaning and ownership of those spaces. It is less convincing for sovereign power to claim or designate ownership of a space if it is contested in this way.

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. remarks, in a phrase that recalls the debate about whether Gibson’s style is “about what being hard and glossy does to you,” that it is the movement of Gibson’s characters which “gets them through” their world:
Cyberpunks . . . their hip grace gets them through an amoral world, facing a future which, for all intents and purposes, has gone beyond human influence, and where the only way to live is in speed, speed to avoid being caught in the web and getting rubbed out . . . the speed of thrill substitutes for affection, reflection, and care. . . . Movement all the time, in plot, in theme, in style, and in syntax.

(Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 192)

That their grace, their speed, or whatever moniker one chooses to give Gibson’s cyberpunk characters’ constant shifting in visual space, “gets them through” their world has, of course, more than a colloquial meaning. Again, I would choose to translate the critic’s words literally: it is the characters’ movement that gets them through their web-like world, in more than just a travelling sense, for to choose to always move through the image-world both defensively mimics the action of that world and actively avoids appropriation by it, which is critical for a contemporary existence the politics of which is dominated by sovereign power. As already implied, this outcome is not limited to Gibson’s characters, for in such a consistent writing policy Gibson is deliberately drawing attention to the writing itself, which also performs a similar process.

Pattern Recognition’s “the footage,” the viral video series of haunting abstract images that provides the mystery the heroine must travel to Russia to uncover, is in some ways the end point of Gibson’s attempt to counter culture through writing in “jack moves” and ensuring that his conception of space is endlessly deferring and resistant to appropriation by the established, normal order. As we have seen with The Bridge, Gibson’s novels often contain near-direct micro-versions of their conceptual selves, and “the footage” is a meditation on the metafictional aspects of reappropriating the images of modern space in writing:
Whenever the media do try to pick it [“the footage”] up, it slides like a lone noodle from their chopsticks. It comes in mothlike, under radar evolved to detect things with massive airframes: a species of ghost, or “black guest” perhaps (as Damien had once explained hackers and their more autonomous creations are known in China). (Gibson, Pattern Recognition, 52-53)

As the hard, glossy images of the visual space of the world slide by Gibson’s characters, deferring meaning and relevance, so the characters and writer engage with that process and drag that image-based culture into meaning. The novel’s depiction of “movement all the time” comes in under the reader’s interpretative radar, conditioned to “detect” and screen out visual space in favour of narrative, and in so doing achieves narrative depth in hard visual images.

Bruce Sterling supports this reading of Gibson, though unintentionally, in inadvertently identifying style as the textual area from where this wider meaning of the depth of the image emerges:

Many cyberpunks . . . often use an unblinking, almost clinical objectivity. It is a coldly objective analysis, a technique borrowed from science, then put to literary use for classically punk shock value. . . . Cyberpunk . . . favors “crammed” prose: rapid, dizzying bursts of novel information, sensory overload that submerges the reader in the literary equivalent of the hard rock “wall of sound.” (Sterling, 348)

Sterling presents Gibson’s style as the all-consuming moment of what he sees as a trendy lifestyle movement, an attempt at a unified sales pitch that Darko Suvin identifies adroitly in his humorous attack on the “disparate” content that is listed by Sterling under the cyberpunk “label” (Suvin, On Gibson and Cyberpunk SF, 365). However, it is the very inadequacy of Sterling’s
breathless phraseology that highlights the importance of the aspects of Gibson to which he responds genuinely. Specifically, Sterling implies that he has been affected by the novels’ juxtapositional power, of the depth found in the image-based style that he clearly enjoys because he believes that it may be read as pure surface, as superficial. Sterling finds Gibson both full of “analysis” and “shock,” a critique that would be nonsensical (and is nonsensical in its original pseudo-cool context) if he did not gloss his reaction, further down on the page, with the idea of the “hard rock ‘wall of sound.’” Here, Sterling does indeed find value in shock. In the identification of Gibson’s crammed style with a disparate cultural referent, Sterling unwittingly hints at the prospect that the style is definitively metafictional, and metafictional in a way that does violence to cultural expectations of writing.

Characteristically, this aspect of Gibson’s work emerges subtly, and it is understandable that Sterling misinterprets it. The centrality of the filmmaker to Gibson’s concept of writing, while reaching apotheosis in Pattern Recognition, stretches as far back as the third book in the Neuromancer trilogy: “Becker had found himself with an embarrassment of riches, hours of glossy documentation. His response was a savage, stuttering montage” (Gibson, Mona Lisa Overdrive, 134). Much of the trilogy, too, appears to collect disconnected, narrative-less image and movement sequences that resemble Sterling’s “wall of sound,” but they, like Becker’s documentary, emerge from a masked background of content that describes a greater narrative re-assembled by Gibson. Such is the “dizzying” power of the image in Neuromancer that it sometimes, returning to Bukatman, literally becomes poetry, encapsulating Gibson’s search for counter-cultural fiction writing (Sterling, 348):

And one step in that dance was the lightest touch on the switch, barely enough to flip –
and his voice the cry of a bird
unknown,
3Jane answering in song, three
notes, high and pure.

A true name. (Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 309-310)

The opening “-now,” epitomizes many of Gibson’s concerns, as evinced by the antagonist of *Pattern Recognition*, Hubertus Bigend, when he claims that “futures like our grandparents’ have insufficient ‘now’ to stand on. We have no future because our present is too volatile” (57). The “-now” is how the reader has experienced the novel’s spatial narrative, because, in deliberate contrast to its Chandler-esque techno-noir plot, *Neuromancer* is so representationally unpredictable and volatile. The voice of the AI, represented on his beach as a child, is “the cry of a bird,” recalling the hang-gliding children wheeling overhead in Freeside. The cry is unknown, just as 3Jane’s cry of the “true name” is never known to the reader. Here, Gibson acknowledges that the attempt at writing a narrative of visual space will always necessarily be a partial one, that it will sometimes conjure invisible referents, but the act of renewing and reconceiving the relationship between narrative and space is by definition an effective resistive tactic against the appropriation of space, and conceptions of it, by the sovereign power which is “starting to coincide with the normal order” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 12, 38).
For Damien Broderick, *Neuromancer* is built on “a syntax which performs and emblematises the interior and exterior worlds of the novel” (Broderick, 81). Broderick’s comment emphasises how the play with sentence form in the almost poetic quotation, about the cry of the bird above, is relevant to Gibson’s treatment of interior and exterior worlds, but it also raises the question of how the representation of inner worlds in particular works in the context of my argument that he writes a new kind of narrative told through surface images. To answer this question, it is useful to read Gibson alongside perhaps the most successful homage to *Neuromancer* and its social and cultural impact: Mamoru Oshii’s *Ghost in the Shell* films.

A key sequence in the film shows *Ghost in the Shell*’s Major Kusanagi floating to the surface of the sea after her “Ghostdive,” seeing herself in the perfect mirror of the under-surface that is backlit by the setting sun. As Kusanagi breaks the surface the film cuts to her perspective, and we see her reflection disappear, to be left with the empty sky distorted by the patches of water left on her face plate (Depicted in Appendix 1). The following cut holds her face in full frame, and the process has evidently moved her. In her subsequent conversation with Batou on the boat, and especially the following montage of her wandering the city in the rain, it becomes clear that Kusanagi feels frightened that she may no longer exist in any meaningful way. This feeling is initiated mainly by the disappearance of her image in the under-surface of the sea, but it is far from being caused by that moment, as the audience may come to read through the rainy city montage. Instead, it is the impersonal surfaces of that city that apply their glossy meaninglessness to Kusanagi, most profoundly in the shop window dummies, that she sees through the window alongside her own image reflected in that same glass. It is a store (depicted in Appendix 5) that claims that it is in the business of “ensuring lifelike performance.”
This power of glass in *Ghost* to reflect back a harshness that epitomizes the hard concrete and glossy technology of the visual space of both Oshii and Gibson, and also to suddenly allow translucency, is what mimetizes most powerfully the stylistic-image strategy of Gibson’s own work. Not only do these many-faceted surfaces achieve multiple narratives of image, but *Ghost’s* montage reveals the two-way interaction between image and subject, in showing both how the city defines the cyborg Major as surface, as her mechanical components, and in demonstrating how her gaze impacts on and reads the meaning of those surfaces. A key moment in *Neuromancer* comes when Case reads a hologram through the eyes of his partner, Molly (the technological mechanism by which he does this is unimportant here). At first, all Case sees is an image, he is unaware of the potential of images in the novel for rewriting narratives of personal and spatial identities, and the hologram that the villain Riviera leaves in wait for him is both constituted by Case/Molly’s reading, and also constitutes their idea of Riviera’s self:

> A dark wave of rubble rose against a colorless sky… The rubble wave was textured like a net, rusting steel rods twisted gracefully as fine string, vast slabs of concrete still clinging there. The foreground might once have been a city square; there was a sort of stump, something that suggested a fountain. At its base, the children and the soldier were frozen. The tableau was confusing at first. Molly must have read it correctly before Case had quite assimilated it. (Gibson 2001, 251)

The two-dimensional surface of the hologram that nonetheless tells a three-dimensional story of a scene, and narrates the beginning of a human life (Riviera), is not some technological fantasy: the idea reflects television, art, and historical photographs, as well as being a mirror of the visualisation inherent in how a textual narrative is “read.” As Kusanagi’s identity falters and
loses its place in the glossy facades of the, ostensibly human, city in *Ghost* that is becoming overtaken by corporate frontages at the centre and neglected urban decay at the periphery, so Case’s reading of the surfaces of *Neuromancer* through the constituting effect of his own gaze (his matrix-obsessed mind creates the concrete reinforcing as “a net”) inevitably constitutes our own reading of the image and visual space, as being deeper than it might appear.

Returning to Thomas Docherty, one can read *Ghost*’s relevance to Gibson as lying in that fleeting moment between gaze and vision, between apprehension of the surface and the depth of interpretation, when Kusanagi questions the existence of her own “ghost,” or her own soul:

> The current state of technology has rendered all the rules of modernity redundant. We no longer live in a world organised by the polarity of appearance versus reality, for instance; our world is the world of the simulacrum in which there are only appearances and disappearances, and no claims can be made upon any fundamental ontological reality at all. (Docherty 1996, 257)

*Ghost in the Shell*’s reflection on the novels finally allows Gibson readers to disavow what Docherty implies about postmodern literature in general: that the prevalence of simulatory visual spaces supersedes the depth associated with modernist narrative. Kusanagi’s visions of herself in the *Ghost* city montage, summarized in shots 2 to 4 in the Appendix, may be read as writing the narratives *in between* the appearances and disappearances of the self in image-driven culture. As she looks up (in her yellow jacket) and thinks she sees herself, she looks down in another time (in her evening clothes) and, just glimpsing what looks like her doppelganger, looks away (in her yellow jacket again), thoroughly unnerved. Later, as she gazes into the dummy-laden shop window promising “lifelike performance,” she wears her evening suit once more (Appendix 4).
It is a moving sequence, learning well from *Blade Runner’s* montage of the death of Zhora, where her corpse organises the reflective broken glass into which the camera, and we, look. Like *Blade Runner*, *Ghost’s* city montage is moving because its images articulate the perfect confusion that results from the play between the inner and outer worlds of the character and text. *Pattern Recognition’s* Cayce Pollard’s inner world is not only constituted by what she calls the “mirror-world” (25), rather aggressively in the form of her nausea-inducing allergy to brand labels, but it also constitutes her narrative of that surface world:

Tokyo doesn’t so much sleep as pause to allow crucial repairs to its infrastructure. She’s never actually seen soil emerge from any incision they might make in the street, here; it’s as though there is nothing beneath the pavement but a clean, uniformly dense substrate of pipes and wiring. (Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 130)

What Cayce sees in image, on the surface, is the ubiquitously efficient Japanese road repair crew. However, what she reads from that image is very much part of her narrative of identity in the world-space: she looks, exactly, for something “beneath” the surface, and reads the prosaic repair of tarmac she finds there as a constituent of the self-narrative of image that has given rise to her brand-allergy. Everything beneath the image must be “clean” and uniform for Cayce, like a blank sheet of paper that she must, literally, write on, in the form of grinding the Levi’s lettering from the buttons of her new jeans and cutting the labels from her clothes, her “CPUs” or “Cayce Pollard Units” (141). She does this in order to reverse the constituting flow of identity from visual space to her. It is because Case attaches inner significance to not seeing “soil” appear, from beneath the artificial disappearance of the outer world, that she must write her own soil, her own story of depth, in the images that form her world. Gibson’s emphasis is on the importance of our ability to do this, to actively interpret our spaces and worlds rather than having the
interpretative process forced upon us from without. This concept is essential to the possibility of dissenting from state and corporate designations of our habitats, because without autonomous determinations and readings of space there are no grounds for disputing its appropriation from without.

The presence of Major Kusanagi’s “ghost” in the interpretative depth between image and understanding is very much related to the way Gibson gives new life to narratives of contemporary images and visual space, in effect re-colonising areas culturally associated with techno-industry. That “ghost” in the films seems to denote the idea of a kind of “soul” or “life essence” is particularly apt here. However, this Japanese affinity for exploring the particular style of Gibson (Ghost in the Shell is nothing if not an explicit homage to Gibson’s work, as I outline below), as explained by Takayuki Tatsumi, also uncovers the final relevance of ghost-image-writing to narratives of visual space, explaining precisely why that complexity of image depth is necessary for spatial narrative:

The imported term “cyberpunk” caught the eyes of so many people that it rapidly transgressed the boundaries of any generic categories, and came to refer to anything having to do with dead-tech environment, hypermedia activity, and outlaw technologists. It was, like cyberpunk itself, a semiotic ghost. (Tatsumi, 370)

The contrast of Tatsumi’s critique of “cyberpunk” with Sterling’s is striking, for he isolates immediately the referential, deferring nature of Gibson’s term as indicative of how the always transgressive nature of the novels (“cyberpunk itself”) is written and read as emergent from style and from language. What is particularly insightful is the idea that such depth in the reading of
image-symbol, in language, is interpreted as “a semiotic ghost.” A Gibson novel is in many ways constructed of semiotic ghosts in the sense that its identity frequently lies in signs or symbols that, while still serving to convey meaning, portray that meaning only as trace, as with the fleeting personalized vision of the “net” of rubble Case reads in Riviera’s hologram.

The sequel to Major Kusanagi’s adventure, *Ghost in the Shell 2*, uses its own position on the sharp point of technological advancement to narrate its spatial narrative literally in its image-form, a feat impossible even for Gibson, by painting its two-dimensional drawn characters on a three-dimensional computer-generated background. Further, it adds its own ghost to the Gibsonian spatial narrative by centring its montage, instead of on Kusanagi’s unnerved walk through the city, around the burning of robotic doll figures: a disquieting vision of human self-consumption that is itself echoed by Gibson’s wide-eyed drug taking characters, who consume pills in an attempt to escape that same objectified synthetic numbness (Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 184).

Donna Haraway acknowledges the importance of specifically “visual” space to science fiction’s relevance to reality, when she emphasises that “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (Haraway, 149). Haraway even features as a character in *Ghost in the Shell 2*, a police analyst called “Haraway” who talks, smokes, discusses childbirth, and then raises the panel that houses her eyes away, over her forehead, in order to implant some other piece of visual equipment. However, it is the critic Haraway’s table of semiotic changes from modernism to postmodernism in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* that throws into sharp relief the final link between Oshii and Gibson. Two entries in the table claim a movement from one writing technique to another:
Here Haraway claims that postmodern science-fiction projects a writing of simulation instead of representation, and surface instead of depth. I wish to question this notion with regard to Gibson. Haraway’s critique is uncannily similar to the criticisms of much contemporary fiction by figures like Docherty and Fredric Jameson, who argue that image has replaced more meaningful ideas of space and narrative. Instead, I argue that the constantly-moving, constantly-character-negotiated image space in Gibson’s novels upon which the writing and reading of all his space is built, necessarily compresses these ideas in order to tell a more resonant narrative of the modern human experience of space. In *Neuromancer*, visual space, or “surface,” does not defer to “depth,” but instead reads depth *with*, rather than within, it. The artificial intelligence “Wintermute” has the ability to animate, or change the role of, passive objects like public telephones, thoroughly disturbing the novel’s characters:

The phone nearest him rang. . . . Faint harmonics, tiny inaudible voices rattling across some orbital link, and then a sound like wind . . . “Hello, Case.” . . . A fifty-lirasi coin fell from his hand, bounced, and rolled out of sight across Hilton carpeting. . . . He hung up . . . On his way back to the lobby, his cigarettes forgotten, he had to walk the length of the ranked phones. Each rang in turn, but only once, as he passed. (Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 121)

Here, the public telephone, an object defined by its universal visual form and by the invisible depth it implies – in the form of billions of possible other contact points worldwide and a highly hack-able networking system – compresses Haraway’s opposition of surface and depth almost
entirely. By having each phone ring once in response to Case walking past them, that depth of massive interconnectedness and possibility is symbolised by a simple, quotidian ring tone, turning the phone from an object activated only by the mechanical action of the insertion of coin into slot, into a symbol for the vast depth of the media-industrial complex, the physical appearance of which frequently only occurs in seemingly harmless consumer items. The way in which this narrative of visual space disavows the position of Haraway and others, that narrative, or depth of meaning, must be located behind or beyond the more superficial surfaces of the text, is extrapolated in *Ghost in the Shell*’s “floating museum,” in the narrative-of-shots of a vast military tank appearing out of entirely empty space (Appendix 6 and 7). Appendix 6 pictures a shot from the Major’s perspective, down the sights of her rifle, as she looks at the innocuous-looking car she has been pursuing. After this shot, we see that Kusanagi is very much at home in the world of deep space for, instead of breaking cover, she lowers her gun and takes a further look, shown in 7, when she notices the fuzzy outline of the waiting gun-platform just in time to duck out of the way of its incoming shots. This moment may encapsulate the reason for Oshii and Gibson’s concentration on surface in their wider narratives of human experience of visual space, for it literalizes how their texts always take one more look at, always add a sense of strangeness to, the most hard or glossy of spaces, and it also strongly implies that modern narratives of the world may not proceed convincingly without doing so: and what better way to emerge from the shadow of sovereign power, the kind of power so difficult to anticipate that it may create a concentration camp, than to encourage revolutionising conceptions of the very space we live in. As Cayce asserts near the opening of *Pattern Recognition*, with an elegant reference to the cascading narrative initiated by those few visual moments of the film of the Kennedy assassination: “Zaprudered into surreal dimensions of purest speculation, ghost-
narratives have emerged and taken on shadowy but determined lives of their own” (Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 24). Such multi-layered living narrative is constituted in Gibson’s novels always on the basis of a narrative of image-driven visual space.

**Conclusion: Pattern Recognition**

Tarkovsky, someone had once told her, had filmed parts of *Solaris* here, using the expressway as found Future City.

Now it’s been Blade Runnered by half a century of use and pollution, edges of concrete worn porous as coral. – William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 146)

The dislocating effect of “Blade Runnered” here is located right after the non-fictional Tarkovsky reference, which situates the reader’s contemporary artistic experience as a future anachronistic colloquialism. Nevertheless, in typical Gibson style – as with his unexplained use of “jack move” – these references are left to hang, producing a figurative meaning the extent of which is rather dependent on the reader and her knowledge of speculative fiction and culture. This final chapter of my project too, in many ways, raises more questions than it answers. I would suggest that my demonstration of the comprehensive operation and various meanings of Gibson’s spatial narrative is an effective way of countering the veiled attacks of Suvin and Csicsery-Ronay Jr. on Gibson’s work as simple style rather than narrative: *Neuromancer* is totalised as “utopia” and “self-annihilating” respectively (Suvin, *On Gibson*, 356 and Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., 183). More importantly, Gibson’s work expounds upon the role of contemporary literature in responding to major ideas like sovereign power and the state of exception. In
questioning fundamental cultural concepts, such as the notion of stable physical space and the fundamental contrast between surface and depth, Gibson’s novels remind us that, unlike the artists of the floating world in Kazuo Ishiguro who are all too happy to subordinate culture to the prevailing political climate, fictional writing can and does play a role in querying paradigms: be they in politics or elsewhere. Indeed, the elegance with which Gibson intertwines complex narratives of human identities with visual spaces, spaces that he shows help to form those lives, is possibly one of the most cogent rebuttals I have read to the all-encompassing nature of the kind of power that may authorise a concentration camp. Works like *White Noise* and *Pattern Recognition* signify the depth of representation available to the writer even when faced with images and surfaces that seem to promise little but a baleful empire of the promotion of commodities and suppression of counter-cultural instincts, all at the whim of state-approved or sponsored corporatism with seemingly limitless power to reshape our world. However, in the same way that Cayce’s visual space is, inevitably, disconcertingly ahead of its roots, where “high-end Japanese hotels interpret Western breakfasts the way the Rickson’s makers interpret the MA-1,” so also an attempt to interpret the narrative told by Gibson’s visual spaces is to occasionally be outdone by the comprehensiveness of the design, just as the Japanese breakfast is far ahead of the Westerner, Cayce, who ordered it (Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 138). Gibson’s novels are not attempting a completely stable depiction of our spatial experience but more of a “spinning of the given moment’s scenarios,” a necessary change in thinking about what the future might hold underscored by Hubertus in *Pattern Recognition*:

> Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which “now” was of some greater duration. For us, of course, things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents’ have insufficient “now” to stand on. We
have no future because our present is too volatile. . . . We have only risk management.

The spinning of the given moment’s scenarios. Pattern recognition. (Gibson, 57)

It is perhaps enough, therefore, to establish the aspects of “change” that Gibson’s spatial narrative induces in its reader’s ideas of spatial and narrative forms, strategies and images, and to state that this emphasis on the ever-present possibility for an autonomous reading of “our present,” for the recognition of patterns in how the world works, is an important discursive base for dissenting from the “zone[s] of indistinction” that mask the action of sovereign power in our political, juridical and cultural systems (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 26).
Conclusion

I have recently been re-reading the closing chapters of the books that gave me inspiration for this study, works such as Jameson’s *Cultural Logic* and Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. It was the preface to Hutcheon’s text that struck me the most, in the moment where she warns the reader against searching for “any claims of radical revolutionary change” in her chapters to come (Hutcheon, *Poetics*, ix). Just as Rushdie backs away from sacralising literature at the close of *Imaginary Homelands*, I wish to step back from the transformative representational possibilities I have found myself ascribing to Gibson in my final chapter (Rushdie, 427). I wanted to end my project with the rare kind of literature that does, bravely, show its characters taking on power like techno-media conglomerates or state-sponsored paramilitary action and, unlike Rushdie or Ishiguro’s heroes, actually winning. I do think Gibson has a potentially more constructive engagement with the threat of corporate and state power than my other authors in this dissertation. However, I remain unconvinced that literature actually “does” anything verifiable outside its own pages, as Jameson seems to think postmodern texts do by their supposed promotion of consumer capitalism, and I thus find analysing the level of Gibson’s engagement exceedingly challenging. I attempted to imply as much by claiming that Gibson’s representative and narrative innovations might, in redescribing the world, be making a step towards changing it – rather than claiming any actual change – but I cannot prove even this and, to an extent, neither would I wish to. Like many of my colleagues – such as Nick Mount who delivers a lecture every year on the importance of resisting “use value” as a defence of challenging novels like *Lolita* – I resist the imperative that literature must “do” something, like feed the hungry or overthrow oppressive regimes, for that demand would leave a very empty world indeed. There would be very little culture for someone like Gibson to counter. Questions
of “use” are, of course, always relative. As Jack Gladney says, referring to death, “all plots move in one direction,” and all human action is, to me, equally limited by the transience and temporary nature of existence (DeLillo, *White Noise*, 199).

What my project has done is to show that the ideas of some of the novels here achieve something of a dialogue with those of Agamben, which in turn throw *Homo Sacer* and *The State of Exception* into sharper relief, particularly their flawed reliance on figurative ideas, arguments and descriptions of phenomena that, at several points, I think the novels in my project address more convincingly. Just as importantly, those books show that it is not enough to confine yourself as a thinker, philosophical or fictional, to the juridical context and consequences of tyranny. Ishiguro’s novels in particular underscore that the effects on life of extreme uses of political power resonate for long after the event in question, providing an ethical objection to sovereign power that is inexplicably lacking in Agamben’s argument. Most importantly, however, the confluence of ideas from Agamben and the authors in my study provides opportunities to open up new readings of major novels, from tragic realism, through aftermath, to new, rebellious ways of telling stories like Gibson’s counter-cultural spatial narrative. It is these alternative readings that I continue to be most excited about as a result of this project.

I can say also that writing this dissertation has given me a great appreciation for the people who took the risk during the theory wars of putting authors and philosophers together in literature departments. This project has helped me more fully understand a diaspora of contemporary novels, coming as they do from multiple postmodern, postcolonial and transnational perspectives, to an incalculably greater and more satisfying extent than I had hoped. This result is, naturally, as much sour as it is sweet in that, for example, it has forced me to acknowledge what I probably now believe is a failure in the political project of my favourite
author, Salman Rushdie. I also cannot escape the implications of the chronology of the books I ended up focusing on over my wider argument here, for only three primary novels and films, out of the twenty-two or so I address, have been published after the year 2005. This might partially be because this was when I started my PhD, so there are probably some natural limits to do with research time acting here, but I do spend extensive time talking about *Shalimar the Clown* (2006) and *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), and I did spend significant research time on Ishiguro’s *Nocturnes* (2009) and Gibson’s *Spook Country* (2007) before deciding that they not only added little to my project but were also simply not as interesting as some of their authors’ other works.

In my opinion, Rushdie, Ishiguro and Gibson have not published a novel as good as their best since the year 2005, although Gibson’s best book, *Pattern Recognition*, is close, having emerged in 2004, and *Never Let Me Go*, published in 2005, is right on the cusp. I am not sure why this is so, but there does seem to be an eerie similarity between these post-2005 novels from all three authors, which is that they are simply not as politically-engaged as their predecessors. *The Enchantress of Florence* is a particularly interesting case, for Rushdie’s prose is vastly improved in that novel, its sparkling variety and deftness of touch very much back in tune with *The Moor’s Last Sigh* and *The Satanic Verses*. However, the novel never seems to quite do justice to its auspicious beginnings. As an unabashedly huge fan of Rushdie’s work, I doubt anyone was wishing a return to form more than I was and, upon galloping through the first few chapters, I remember thinking with joy that finally, almost ten years on from *Moor*, Rushdie was at last back on song. However, upon finishing the book I realised that the effervescent prose I had celebrated was by far the most impressive feature of the book, while the content had – as I argue in my chapter on Rushdie – never made it beyond a kind of fantasy world of long ago Mughal-India more reminiscent of the magic non-place of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* than
the overwhelming, shimmering streets of fire of burning Brickhall in *The Satanic Verses* or the Pakistani slums turned to ashes in *Midnight’s Children*.

In short, Rushdie’s work is almost unequalled in impact and quality when he is addressing big political concerns: India’s independence in *Midnight’s Children*; shared colonial histories, the nature of religious ideology, and British immigrant life in *The Satanic Verses*; and the battle between hybridity and communalism in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. In my opinion, with *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and its lighter subject of Rock and Roll; *Fury* and its bizarrely hyper-personal, psycho-sexual response to 9/11; and *Shalimar the Clown* with its semaphored and confusing anthropomorphising of a disputed “Indian” province in the form of the character of Kashmir, Rushdie abandoned the grand, multi-headed political subjects and narratives which so excited and sustained him in those earlier big novels, and his work became less substantial as a result. If pushed, I would suggest that this has happened because Rushdie really has despaired over the prospects of his original political project, which was promoting multiculturalism and hybridity in its battle against tragic realism. September 11th 2001 produced a freezing of an already cooling attitude to migrants in Rushdie’s adopted country, the United States, and ever since then both his most recent homes, Britain and the US, have increased rather than decreased the number of wars they have been involved in against the Muslim world. The excesses of sovereign power have been unmatched in recent history since the attacks on the two towers, with illegal wars, CIA torture flights, drone strikes in non-combative “allied” nations like Pakistan and the persistence of Guantanamo Bay all examples of why Rushdie can hardly feel upbeat about the prospect of the state of exception receding any time soon.

The eerie similarity I spoke of between Rushdie and my other two key authors lies here, in the confluence of politics and quality. Ishiguro followed *Never Let Me Go*, four years later,
with an almost unconscionably lightweight collection of short stories in *Nocturnes* that, while beautifully written and poignant as individual character studies of romantic loss or professional dissatisfaction, contrast almost absurdly with the heart-rending exhortation to sympathy for the other and for legal protections for all life, human and non, in his previous work. William Gibson is just as guilty in this regard, having followed a superb critique of mass-market advertising and its physical effect on city space and on the human body, in *Pattern Recognition*, with a retreat into a fairly basic narrative web of conspiracies and intelligence agents, in *Spook Country*, that seems to run from the political zeitgeist rather than, as his previous book did, confront it. Again, I do not know why these authors changed their subject matter so drastically – beyond a laudable aim to experiment – but I can argue with some weight that it is the abandonment of serious politics that makes their novels equally less serious. Indeed, I would like to point out that Rushdie’s latest text – *Luka and the Fire of Life* – is in fact a companion piece to *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, returning us once more to a sparkling collection of short stories in the fantasy world of a non-terrorist-ridden, golden Kashmir. While I too would like to visit that Kashmir, or a Japan unscarred by firebombing and martial law, or a contemporary life where the techno-industrial complex does not survive on the promotion of dread and consumer capitalism through wall-to-wall advertising and the imprisonment of its population in the urban jungle, I do not think that sovereign power and the state of exception are going anywhere in the near future.
Appendix

1. Major Kusanagi floats toward the surface after her dive in *Ghost in the Shell* (© Oshii & Manga Entertainment, 1995).

Kusanagi looks back up to where she sits/was sitting in *Ghost in the Shell* (© Oshii & Manga Entertainment, 1995).

Kusanagi – in her dress once more but with a jacket – views herself in a shop window among the ghosts of the city in *Ghost in the Shell* (© Oshii & Manga Entertainment, 1995).

Kusanagi looks down her rifle sights at an unprotected vehicle in *Ghost in the Shell* (© Oshii & Manga Entertainment, 1995).
Kusanagi notices the cloaked machine shielding the car in *Ghost in the Shell* (© Oshii & Manga Entertainment, 1995).
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