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Between reality and simulation – dissolving generic boundaries in Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* (2009)

ABSTRACT
In their attempt to reflect the increasing sense of unreality and media-saturated culture, many contemporary writers show a particular penchant for blurring the boundaries between different generic territories. However, rather than employing typically postmodern subversive practices and metanarrative games in their appropriation of popular genres, post-postmodern writers tend to treat them with more appreciation and respectability, by recognising their potential in expanding new literary possibilities and reflecting the complexities of contemporary existence. Analyzing the overlapping between the mimetic and the fantastic elements inscribed in the urban representation of New York in *Chronic City*, the main aim of this paper is to demonstrate that Lethem's incorporation of the supernatural into a seemingly realistic urban fiction serves not only to foreground ontological instability of the projected world, but also as a world-building practice designed to dissolve generic boundaries so as to subvert the role of genre in the meaning-making process.
Keywords: genre; post-postmodernism; mimetic vs. supernatural elements; space

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In their attempt to reflect an increasing sense of unreality and media-saturated culture, many contemporary writers show a particular penchant for blurring the boundaries of different generic territories.

Although the concept of genre-blending is in no way new, the proliferation of generic crossovers within the post-postmodern[1] literary landscape seems to reflect a new shift in the treatment and absorption of popular genres. As Andrew Hoberek points out:

> there is difference between the transitional but still self-consciously 'literary' appropriation of popular genres' in the works of authors like Barth and Pynchon and a newer tendency to confer literary status on popular genres themselves. (Hoberek 2007: 248)

Thus, rather than employing typically postmodern subversive practices and metanarrative games in their appropriation of popular fiction, post-postmodern writers tend to treat them with more appreciation and respectability recognising their potential in expanding new literary possibilities and reflecting the complexities of contemporary existence.

Integrating elements of popular culture and fiction, Jonathan Lethem, with his "tendency toward collage and propensity for non-traditional genre-bending, and employment of surreal plots" (Hamilton 2010: 243), clearly falls into a category of experimental writers whose literary output defies fixed generic conventions and boundaries. Labelled as *genre bender* (Cadwell 2003), Lethem treats genres as tenuous and flexible categories which should be employed not so much for political or ideological reasons:

> The fact is, I used to get very involved … in questions of taxonomy of genre, and in the idea — which is ultimately a political idea — that a given writer, perhaps me, could in some objective way alter or reorganize the boundaries between genres.... Nowadays, I've come to feel that talking about categories, about 'high' and 'low', about genre and their boundaries and the blurring of those boundaries,

[1] For the discussion of post-postmodern characteristics see Stephen J. Burn's introduction to *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* and Andrew Hoberek's introduction to "After Postmodernism Form and History in Contemporary American Fiction".

> all consists only of an elaborate way to avoid actually discussing what moves and interests me about books — my own, and others. (Lethem 2003)

but rather to facilitate the process of artistic expression, in which the combination of generic structures and markers serves to generate new meanings and forms.[2] This idiosyncratic tendency makes Lethem, alongside other contemporary authors such as China Miéville, Michael Chabon, or Patrick O'Leary, fall into the category of writers who perceive genre-based materials as resources rather than constraints, and who dissolve the boundaries of genres themselves as well as the borders between genre fiction and literary fiction (Wolfe 2011: 15-16). This kind of genre-mixing poetics reverberates in most of Lethem's works, i.e. *Gun, With Occasional Music,* blends science fiction with hard-boiled detective novel, *The Fortress of Solitude,* combines a comic book with magic realism, *As She Climbed the Table* mixes a campus novel with a satire. However, rather than navigating the readers within the literary space and facilitating the meaning-making process, Lethem's peculiar employment of genres serves to decontextualize clichéd generic formulas to "keep the reader in an irritated state of unreality" (Clarke 2011: 33) and disorientation. This kind of surrealistic overtone reverberates in *Chronic City* (2009). Highlighting contemporary anxieties inscribed in the spatial presentation of post-9/11 Manhattan, the novel aptly incorporates supernatural elements into a realist urban tale. Seemingly mimetic, the familiar panorama of the American metropolis is totally disrupted by the sense of surrealism and unreality that permeates the city: the ubiquitous chocolate smell that engulfs the entire city, the tiger that stalks the streets with the power to destroy entire buildings, or a well-publicized romance with an astronaut stranded in outer space. Analyzing the overlapping between the mimetic and the fantastic

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[2] In his essay "Malebolge, or the Ordinance of Genre", Gary K. Wolfe addresses this phenomenon as "the non-genre genre" stories – the ones which are "informed by genre-based structures and sensibilities that they may convey a particular genre, and may open up to genre readings in a way different from how they open up to conventional readings" (Wolfe 2011: 15).

elements inscribed in the urban representation of New York in *Chronic City*, the main aim of this paper is to demonstrate that Lethem's incorporation of the supernatural into a seemingly realistic urban fiction serves not only to foreground ontological instability of the projected world, but also as a world-building practice designed to dissolve generic boundaries so as to subvert the role of genre in the meaning-making process.

In analyzing the mimetic dimension of contemporary literature, Ian Gregson attests that:

> much of the most powerful postmodern literature focuses on the relationship between the constructed and the real, which requires to draw upon the traditional realist techniques at the same time as it calls them into question with postmodernist techniques. (Gregson 2005: 15)

In Lethem's *Chronic City* this mimetic propensity resonates particularly in the introduction of a seemingly realistic plot, which is framed within an apparently familiar urban landscape of New York city. The main protagonist, Chase Insteadman, a former child television star, a man in his mid-thirties, lives in a temporally unspecified Manhattan. His life changes when he meets Perkus Tooth, a former rock critic for *Rolling Stone*. With a circle of weird friends: a ghost writer Oona Laszlo, a radical local politician called Richard Abneg and his girlfriend Georgina Hawkmanaji, Perkus sets out on a series of futile adventures portrayed against the mundane details of Manhattan's life: strange smell in the air, the constant rumblings along Second Avenue, the comings and goings of apartment residents. Apart from its sensory aspects, the emulation of the everyday experience of the real Manhattan is exacerbated by the inclusion of real geographical locations such as Chinese Garden Court at the Metropolitan Museum of Art or New York Society for Ethical Culture. This mimetic similarity extends also to the presentation of Manhattan's glittering social scene which, with its extensive panorama of dinner parties with Chase and Perkus at its heart, inevitably evokes the real social strata and glamorous engagements on the Upper East Side.

Apart from the level of plot and space organization, the mimetic resemblance between the fictionalized space of Manhattan and its

real-world equivalent resides particularly in the incorporation of various culture referents and real-life individuals into the novel, which irresistibly allude to the contemporary cultural zeitgeist. The showcase of cultural touchstones range from popular press titles e.g. The New Yorker or Rolling Stone, to TV shows such "The Gnuppet Show", a fictitious allusion to the "Muppet Show" and eminent literary figures Ralph Warden Meeker and his opus *Obstinate Dust* as an obvious reference to David Foster Wallace and his work *Infinite Jest*. Additionally, some of the fictitious characters are modelled on the real life personages: e.g. Russ Grinspoon described in the novel as "the lamer half of the well-forgotten seventies smooth-rock duo Grinspoon and Hale" seems to directly allude to Art Garfunkel, an American singer best known for his partnership with Paul Simon in the folk rock duo Simon & Garfunkel. The aforementioned mixture of the real and the fictitious is augmented by the inclusion of the real- world figures such as Norman Mailer or Marlon Brando whose ontological status in the narrative world of *Chronic City* is highly ambiguous. Their state of indeterminacy can be ascribed not only to the novel's unspecified temporal setting, but above all, to the characters' inability to determine whether they are dead or not: "I have to talk to Brando. Can you get his number? Brando? You mean Marlon Brando? I thought Brando was recently dead, but this was exactly the sort of thing I get mixed up about" (Lethem 2010: 81). Thus, while on the one hand the frequent references to the real-world figures contribute to what is an ultimately a more realistic representation of Manhattan, they are also a part of the distractions that serve to destabilize the ontological status of the projected world. As Matthew Luter points out: "*Chronic City* blurs the lines between fiction and reality effectively via Lethem's use of fictional celebrity characters, some of whom are clearly meant to be comparable to real famous figures while others have no clear real-world equal" (Luter 2015: 45).

In his analysis of the fantastic Todorov attests: "a generalized fantastic effect seems to be diffused throughout postmodernist writing, making its presence felt in displaced forms in texts that are not formally fantastic at all" (Todorov 1987: 74). Such ontological

incursion and displacement of the fantastic elements seem to resonate quite strikingly in the texture of the everyday life projected in *Chronic City*: a giant tiger of unknown origins is said to be prowling and destroying Manhattan streets. Portrayed initially as a destructive animal displaced in the urban metropolis, in the course of the novel, it transpires to be an out-of-control "machine, a robot, for digging a subway tunnel" (Lethem 2010: 163). In this surreal urban landscape, characters go chasing after artifacts called chaldrons, beautiful vases that turn out to exist only in the virtual world whose name, Yet Another World, seems to suggest that the world they are living in might also be virtual. The aura of the fantastic permeates also the climatic conditions of the fictitious New York: a gray fog covers the city, massive blizzards trouble the citizens, and a persistent chocolate smell floats in the air: "Then came the weird pervasive chocolate smell that floated like a cloud over Manhattan. [...] the smell was with you everywhere, with you in the apartment, too, though the windows were tight" (Lethem 2010: 173). Against this fantastic background, the story of Janice Trumbell, Chase's astronaut girlfriend "trapped in orbit with the Russians" (Lethem 2010: 11), who writes him letters which are published in the "war free" edition of the *New York Times,* adds an imprint of the unreal given the fact that "rather than jolting citizens out of complacency and forcing them to reassess their lives, it exists as 'daily newspaper fodder' and as 'soap opera' to provide reassurance and familiarity" (Peacock 2012: 10). Consequently, rather than generating characters' epistemological uncertainty and resistance to the supernatural, all of the fantastic elements in *Chronic City* are reduced to banality and ordinariness as the characters fail to be amazed by the paranormal happenings – nobody is able to explain the odd events happening in the city, and most of the characters accept the encroachment of the supernatural as a part of their everyday existence. The ontological status of the tiger as well as its supernatural ability to destroy the entire is never fully addressed or explained in the text. This neutralization of the fantastic effect introduces what Brian McHale calls "the rhetoric of contrastive banality" (McHale 1987: 77) as the characters' non-reaction to the violation of the natural laws

heightens the readers' amazement. The resultant confrontation between the real and the unreal serves a two-fold function: while the fantastic elements generate cognitive estrangement by displacing the readers' sense of recognizable reality, the mimetic referents sustain the sense of familiarity by implying a correspondence between the fictionalized Manhattan and its real-world counterpart.

As much as the fantastic elements contribute to the fabulation and defamiliarization of the urban representation in *Chronic City,* so do they perform a mimetic function by alluding and implicating real-world events through literalized metaphors. Such metaphorical extension can be traced in the ubiquitous grey fog that covers the city: "the gray fog stretched out to cover the lower reaches of the island. I ought to feel sympathy for the moneymen, ashen and dim in aspect, forgetful, sleepy, never quite themselves anymore" (Lethem 2010: 163) or the birds on the church's spire:

> On some days, while I'm watching the flock loop at the spire, a passing airplane putters at high layers past the top of my window frame, leaving a faint contrail. A planeload of people on their way somewhere from somewhere else, having as little to do with birds or tower as birds have to do with each other. (Lethem 2010: 68)

Clearly, while the presence of grey fog alludes to the lingering smell and ash of 9/11, the church's spire with a passing plane constitutes an obvious semantic reference to the terrorist attack on the twin towers. Evident as these connections may seem, the traumatic event of 9/11 is never fully acknowledged in the text, entering the novel through implication and absence generated by readers' inferences and deductions. According to David O'Gorman:

> Indeed, it is by not mentioning 9/11 – that is, by passing over the event in the style of conspicuous ellipsis in its narrative – that *Chronic City* offers an ironic, self-reflexive comment on the framing of reality in American media and political discourse following the attacks, providing a sense of just how large a space the event has taken up in the city's collective imagination. (O'Gorman 2015: 66)

Oscillating between the mimetic and the fantastic, the projected world in *Chronic City* clearly exemplifies the strangeness of living simultaneously in a real and unreal place. Its peculiarity manifests

itself primarily in the ontological instability of the multi-layered reality: "To live in Manhattan is to be persistently amazed at the worlds squirreled inside one another, the chaotic intricacy with which realms interleave" (Lethem 2010: 8), in which characters are obsessed with finding meaning behind the distorted representations that make up the city. In their paranoid quests for reality, Perkus fixates on chaldrons and Marlon Brando, which seem to him to be doorways that lead to something more real than the city he finds himself in. He calls the state where he can see things as they really are *ellipsistic:* "Ellipsis is like a window opening," he explains to Chase, and Perkus is convinced that the ellipses allow him access to "worlds inside the world" (Lethem 2010: 26). His virtualized quest for reality stands in sharp contrast with Chase's attempts to locate reality in the external world: "Buildings do persist," he reminds himself, "Manhattan does exist, things are relentlessly what they seem" (Lethem 2010: 34).

Ironically, in the multiple realities that make up the fictionalized Manhattan, all of the characters' attempts to frame the reality with seemingly tangible referents or events prove futile: the chaldron turns out to be a hologram existing only in the virtual world, whose name Yet Another World, seems to suggest that the world they are living in might also be virtual, Chase's relationship with a stranded astronaut Janice, turns out to be a public entertainment show staged for the entire city, with Oona playing Janice and ghostwriting her letters. Consequently, all of the things, which the characters perceive as the most real in their lives, prove to be virtual, a mere distraction from the substantive reality, and the reality itself "a replica of itself, a fragile simulacrum, full of gaps and glitches. A theme park, really! Meant to halt time's encroachment" (Lethem 2010: 389). Paradoxically, any attempt to find truth and meaning in this Baudrillardian virtualized reality turns out to be a lethal endeavour. To illustrate, Perkus's "investments in matters of authenticity" leads to his bizarre death by chronic hiccups. It is the grim conclusion that the novel posits: there is no way out of the layered images of the hyperreality, as Perkus points out,

> Daring to attempt to absolutely sort fake from real was an absolute folly that would call down tigers or hiccups to cure us of our recklessness. The effort was doomed, for it too much pointed past the intimate boundaries of our necessary fictions. (Lethem 2010: 449)

On an intratexual level, the intersection between the mimetic and the fantastic in *Chronic City* clearly posits that the contemporary metropolis provides a significant context for foregrounding contemporary anxieties about identity, digitization, or the war on terror as reflected in the landscape of the fictionalized and virtualized Manhattan. However, apart from its social preoccupations, the intrusion of non-mimetic elements raises also existentialist questions

> about what happens to a given story when a fantastic element intrudes into it, and this becomes a parallel interrogation into the question of what happens to a human existence when fantastic elements intrude. (Peacock 2012: 427).

In the case of *Chronic City*, the generic crossover between a realist and fantastic fiction serves to decontextualize fixed generic formulas and tropes not only to expose the reader to the alterity but also to reflect the displacement of an individual in a distorted and virtualized reality.

Extratextually, the process of incorporating fantastic tropes serves not only as a vehicle for foregrounding postmodern poetics of ambiguity, but more importantly, to thematize the role of genre and genre-borders in the process of constructing a fictional world as "a means of orienting oneself in geographical, ethical, and literary space" (Peacock 2012: 21). By blending mimetic elements, the fantastic mode as well as other generic conventions, Lethem attempts to destabilize the category of genre so as to disorient readers and critics respectively. While the former are forced to navigate and conceptualize a fictional world without stable reference points, the latter excel at coining new generic labels for the sake of transparency and consistency of the critical analysis. This ongoing generic hybridization inspired some of the critics, like Martin Horstkotte, to

come with the term the postmodern fantastic[3] to categorize a large body of texts which blend non-mimetic elements with postmodern techniques. On the other hand, Bruce Sterling coined the term *slipstream* fiction to categorize a large body of fantastic or non-realistic fiction that crosses conventional genre boundaries between science fiction, fantasy, and literary fiction. As much as Jonathan Lethem's fiction falls into these categories, it seems that his *genre bending* serves to reflect the growing unreality and strangeness of contemporary life and the displacement of individuals in their quest for substantial reality.

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[3] The appearance of non-mimetic elements in postmodern literature has been widely addressed in the literary criticism. In delineating the affinities between the fantastic and the postmodern, a number of theorists, such as Christine Brooke-Rose and Donald Morse, have gone so far as to equate the postmodern and the fantastic. While Brooke-Rose advocates that the mutual conversion of real/unreal typical of both the postmodern and the fantastic problematizes the seeming unreality of the late twentieth-century experience, in which "the real seems unreal, and the unreal becomes real to us (Brooke-Rose 1981: 4), Morse points to epistemological uncertainty and improbability as the shared qualities of both the postmodern and the fantastic texts (Morse 1989: 70).

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