

“We Are Making One Story, Yes?” - The Poetics of Interconnection in Postmodern Literature in a Global Age

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Abstract

During the last decades, theories of interconnection and linking have been in the centre of many academic discourses: what goes back to the ancient hermetic worldview that regards everything as connected has been taken up in studies on our globalised world, for example as relationality in the form of cosmopolitanism. Thus, society has been regarded as linked in areas as different as social networks or globalised markets. In this paper, it is shown how such interconnections are created by storytelling. For this purpose, three metafictional novels with a multiplot structure are analysed. In Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), storytelling helps two very different characters to search for their identity and a traumatic family past influenced by the Holocaust. In the novel, three textual levels and several narrators make it visible that the search for identity and the past is only possible by interlinked stories and a process of co-authorship. The intricate structure of Catherynne M. Valente's fantastic novel *Palimpsest* (2009) thematises the connection between human beings and their stories which even spans different worlds. Metafictional structures – especially the structure of the palimpsest – illustrate how the whole world consists of stories written on other stories. David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004) consists of six narratives set in different times and places which are connected by symbols, intertextual links, or intermedial adaptations. Hence, in the novel it is shown that despite wars, violence, and the struggle for power throughout history, human beings are connected across time and space – by their stories. By analysing these literary devices, a postmodern poetics of interconnection becomes visible that shows how human history is created by transglobal storytelling.

Keywords: *literature in a global age, cosmopolitanism, interconnection, postmodernism, metafiction*

1. "Everything is linked to everything else": Theories of connection and linking for the global age

Our world seems more than ever to be in a state of war, and division and separation become visible in xenophobia, racism, religiously motivated attacks, and civil wars. At the same time, however, theories of interconnection and linking have been in the centre of many different academic discourses in the last years. How do they visualise and discuss interconnection? And why does literature play the central role for highlighting and creating interconnection? In the following, it will be shown that interconnections in a global age are created by storytelling, as many postmodern novels illustrate. For this purpose, three metafictional novels with a multiplot structure are analysed – Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), Catherynne M. Valente's fantastic novel *Palimpsest* (2009), and *Cloud Atlas* (2004) by David Mitchell – where apparently disparate stories are linked by various literary devices that together create a poetics of interconnection.¹

¹ Whereas in theoretical approaches to phenomena of linking, the terms of connection and interconnection are often used interchangeably, the term connection mainly refers to the linkage between two elements while interconnection refers to connections among multiple nodes and can assume a more global meaning.

The concept of universal interconnection discussed in many academic fields goes back to the ancient hermetic worldview that regards everything as connected in a web of correspondences. In *Access to Western Esotericism*, Faivre states that "Symbolic and real correspondences [...] are said to exist among all parts of the universe, both seen and unseen. ('As above, so below.')

We find again here the ancient idea of microcosm and macrocosm or, if preferred, the principle of universal interdependence" (1994, p. 10). Far from being antiquated, this world picture has undergone periodical resurgences, for example in postmodernism where this concept "has recently been contributing to the development of a postmodern worldview of environmental and psychic relatedness, a re-enchanted cosmology of meaningful correspondences that would offer itself as a response to what is sometimes called the crisis of modernity" (Ivakhiv 1996, p. 237). This belief in "relatedness" and "a re-enchanted cosmology" is likewise crucial for many approaches to ecology. Spretnak, among others, shows that "Ecological postmodernism recognizes not only that all human beings are structurally related through our cosmological lineage, but also that all beings are internally constituted by relations with others, even at the molecular level" (1991, p. 20). The mechanisms creating such a cosmic connectedness will be analysed in the three postmodern novels.

During the last decades, it has become clear that we live in a "network society" and a "Weblike universe" (Barabasi 2002, p. 5) which is structured by connections in areas as different as social networks or globalised markets. Thus, as Barabasi states, "We have come to see that we live in a small world, where everything is linked to everything else." (2002, p. 7).¹ These theories concerned with connection are in fact connected to and make use of the umbrella term globalisation which is notoriously hard to define: While the dangers of globalisation are widely discussed², the concept of cosmopolitanism has been regarded as a reaction, a resistance strategy, or even a solution to the unequal power relations of globalisation. In this context, Moraru states that "the cosmopolitans read the world in terms of self-other interconnectedness" (2011, p. 6).³ Thus, on the one hand, we are confronted with the "leveling thrust of globalization" which often triggers the "resurgence of violent factionalisms, 'clashist' views, and crude antinomies such as we/they, the West/the rest, or 'McWorld'/'Jihad'" (Moraru 2011, p. 4). On the other hand, we encounter cosmopolitanism which emphasises our common humanity, a concept which presents a countermodel to egotism, the fear of the "other", and the foregrounding of difference.

2. Creating stories – creating interconnections: Postmodern literature

Each culture can be regarded as "a complex social network" (Barabasi 2011, p. 7), but how are those interconnections and links created? By foregrounding storytelling itself, postmodern fiction furnishes an effective vehicle for exploring the mechanisms of interconnection in a global age. For this purpose, three novels are analysed in which the often intricate multiplot structure as well as various techniques of metafiction mirror postmodernist doubts about truth and metaphysical security. In this way, storytelling time and again thematises its own mechanism; therefore, metafiction has been variously described as fiction with self-consciousness, self-knowledge, or self-awareness.⁴ In this paper, a poetics of interconnection is traced which is based on various metafictional techniques of storytelling.

2.1 *Everything is Illuminated*

In Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), storytelling is the vehicle for different characters to search for their identity and a traumatic family past affected by the Holocaust. In a typically postmodern metafictional manner, the author of the novel writes himself as a character into the story, a young American Jew journeying to the Ukraine to search for a woman called Augustine who had saved his grandfather's life during the Nazi liquidation of Trachimbrod, his family shtetl. He only has an old photograph showing Augustine and his grandfather and has contacted the Ukrainian Alex Perchov who becomes Jonathan's translator, although his English skills are very limited so that he has to invent new words and phrases. Alex' grandfather drives the car.

¹ See Easley and Kleinberg 2010 who approach such links by focusing on graph theory, game theory and strategic market interactions in networks as well as on the structures of information networks.

² These debates are summarised and commented on for example by Schoene 2010, 1-34.

³ See D'haen 2013 for an utilisation of Moraru's cosmopolitanism for an analysis of the novels *Omega Minor* and *Cloud Atlas*.

⁴ Compare Stonehill 1988 and Currie 1995.

During the journey, the three characters meet a woman who is the last survivor of the lost shtetl. She keeps the memories in labelled boxes in her house – one of the scenes that illustrates Foer's use of magical realist writing techniques especially in order to represent traumatic experiences. When the characters meet her, the story turns out not only to be relevant for Jonathan but also for Alex because his grandfather Eli played a major role in this story: When the Nazis came to Trachimbrod, they forced all inhabitants under pain of death to reveal the Jews in the town. In this situation, his grandfather revealed his best friend Herschel who was then immediately shot by the Nazis. By being confronted with the last survivor of Trachimbrod, the grandfather also recovers his memories and has to face the trauma he had never talked about.

The journey for recovering the past becomes the focal point for the multiplot structure of the novel which is at the same time full of metafictional reflections¹ on how to narrate the past and how to connect the stories. First, there is the account of Jonathan's journey to search for Augustine, the woman in the photo, and thus for his family history. This story is written down by Alex and is sent to Jonathan who corrects it. Second, Alex' letters form one strand of the plot; in those, he reflects on the writing process of the journey story and he comments on the third layer, the story of Jonathan's ancestors written by Jonathan himself. In fact, like the other plot strands, the letters are connected with the two other narratives: They are answers to Jonathan's letters to Alex (which are not presented in the novel) and they contain comments on Jonathan's text.

Thus, every text is dialogical and only comes into existence in the process of textual exchange, of reading, commenting, and rewriting. Metafictional devices such as the repetition of "We are writing... We are writing... We are writing..." (Foer 2002, pp. 212-213) repeated for one and a half pages in the novel effectively question and problematise storytelling as such: How can experiences be written down? How are truth and storytelling connected, and how much liberty to modify the story does a narrator have? Telling a story opens up various degrees of truthfulness, which makes the storytelling process one of continual negotiation between truth and fiction: "We are being very nomadic with the truth, yes? The both of us? Do you think that this is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred?" (Foer 2002, p. 179). Such metafictional reflections constitute a central device for a postmodern poetics of interconnection because they underscore the fact that the stories are not separate but instead connected by a process of co-authorship.

By reading, exchanging, commenting on, influencing, and "correcting" each other's stories, the seemingly separate quests for identity become connected. Writing a story together – although in markedly different voices and styles – leads to the revelation, in fact the "illumination" of the novel's title, that the past and present stories are really connected. This process of co-authorship, of connected storytelling, is shown in many instances in the text. For example, Alex writes: "I undertook to input the things you counseled me to, and I fatigued the thesaurus you presented me, as you counseled me to, when my words appeared too petite, or not befitting. If you are not happy with what I have performed, I command you to return it back to me" (Foer 2002, p. 23). By thus influencing each other and their respective stories, they become friends and connected in a closer way than any of them had thought possible. At times, the traumatic story that connects both of them becomes so painful that it is only possible to tell the story together: "Here it is almost too forbidding to continue. I have written to this point many times, and corrected the parts you would have me correct, and made more funnies, and more inventions, and written as if I were you writing this, but every time I try to persevere, my hand shakes so that I can no longer hold my pen. Do it for me. Please. It is now yours." (Foer 2002, p. 226).

This discovery of a connected past that has to be told by both of them together leads to a connected present, and the ensuing co-authorship not only connects stories in a temporal respect but also on a spatial level. This form of connected storytelling thus creates a transglobal connection: The search for a place – the shtetl Trachimbrod – turns out to be a connected search for the past that brings together different generations, perpetrators and victims as well as different nations. Past and present, it turns out, are connected by this act of storytelling: "Everything is the way it is because everything was the way it was" (Foer 2002, p. 145). Remembering is thus a connected effort, too: "With our writing, we are reminding each other of things. We are making one story, yes?" (p. 144). Confronting the trauma of the Holocaust is only possible together and collectively, because the different stories created in *Everything is Illuminated* indeed make one story.

The connection that is built up throughout the journey and the search for the past initiated by Jonathan also highlights the connection between the three men. As their past is connected, and their identities which they had perceived as very different

¹ For historiographic metafiction see Hutcheon 1995. She utilises Hayden White's theories as point of departure on her reflections on the connection between history and fiction. Also compare Wallraven 2014.

in the beginning merge. Alex writes to Jonathan: "Let us not praise or reproach. Let us not judge at all. We are outside of that already. We are talking now, Jonathan, together, and not apart. We are with each other, working on the same story, and I am certain that you can also feel it. Do you know that I am the Gypsy girl and you are Safran, and that I am Kolker and you are Brod, and that I am your grandmother and you are Grandfather, and that I am Alex and you are you, and that I am you and you are me?" (Foer 2002, p. 214). In the end, all characters realise that there is no separation between victims and perpetrators, between past and present when each character sees that "I am you and you are me." In the novel, the different textual levels and narrators – who reflect on the processes of storytelling and fiction-making – make it visible that the search for identity and the past is only possible by interconnected stories.

2.2 *Palimpsest*

Catherynne M. Valente's fantastic novel *Palimpsest* (2009) thematises the connection between human beings and their stories which spans different worlds and thus develops a global dimension. The novel focuses on two women and two men who discover a portal to the fantastic world of Palimpsest. It follows those characters who travel to and explore this mysterious world: Oleg, a New York City locksmith, the beekeeper November who lives in California, Ludovico, an Italian binder of rare books, and a young Japanese woman named Sei. Every character has lost someone or something important – a wife, lover, sister, or their direction in life – and is only left with a story of the past. Each of the characters is portrayed as living a solitary and isolated life and longing for fulfilment, and each of them spends a night with a stranger who has a tattooed map of a section of the city of Palimpsest somewhere on their bodies. When they enter into a sexual connection with the stranger, they travel to Palimpsest where they find a world full of meaning. By sexual connection they travel to the area carried on the skin of their sexual partner. When they awake again in the real world, they too are marked with a map of a different part of Palimpsest which other characters are eager to explore.

In the novel, various symbols are connected to each other: The tattooed mark, the map, writing, and the body become inextricably linked. From the beginning, the tattoos are like maps and create an access to the other world of Palimpsest: "November stroked the inside of Xiaohui's thigh gently, a mark there, terribly stark, like a tattoo: a spidery network of blue-black lines, intersecting each other, intersecting her pores, turning at sharp angles, rounding out into clear and unbroken skin [...] 'It looks like a streetmap'" (Valente 2009, p. 19). This map is created and expanded by a connection that is made physical and thus it becomes clear that this fantastic world is only created and written by interpersonal connections. Sexual connection and travelling to a foreign country are thus explicitly linked: "To touch a person... to sleep with a person... is to become a pioneer," she whispered then, "a frontiersman at the edge of their private world, the strange, incomprehensible world of their interior, filled with customs you could never imitate, a language which sounds like your own but is really totally foreign, knowable only to them. I have been so many times to countries like that" (Valente 2009, p. 26-7).

Crossing the borders to a country such as Palimpsest is only possible by crossing the borders of the individual body, an act which creates a web of interconnections between people. Yumiko tells her lover Sei about the map-tattoo: "It's ... like a ticket. And once you've bought the ticket, and been to the circus, ridden the little red train, then you can sort of see other people who've done it, too. They... walk a certain way. Smell a certain way. Their whole body becomes like an accent. And you always recognize your own accent. I recognized you" (Valente 2009, p. 43). Each character with access to Palimpsest walks "a certain way" and smells "a certain way." The tattooed map thus connects them, while their "own accent" remains. In this way, individuality and interconnection exist together. The mentioning of an "accent" also brings in the level of language; it hints at the personal stories that constitute the map. Hence, the map is only expanded when there is contact with a new character: "'Why did you bring me here?' [...] 'It's where I've got, Oleg. Only place I could take you. That's how it works. You sort of... lease your skin to this place. This is the part you saw on my chest, so this is where we end up'" (Valente 2009, p. 70). In this way, Palimpsest turns out to be a world made from different layers of stories.

Metafictional reflections and structures in the novel – especially the structure of the palimpsest – illustrate how life and indeed the whole world consist of stories written on other stories. In this sense, a palimpsest is a parchment which has been written upon twice or even more times, while each time the original writing has been erased in order to make place for another layer of writing. Since the writing has often been erased imperfectly, the traces of the underlying story are still present: "The palimpsest is an involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other" (Dillon 2005, 245). In *Palimpsest*, "otherwise unrelated" characters are suddenly brought in relation to each other because their stories become "entangled" and "intricately

interwoven." In the novel, the interconnection of various stories in the past and the present are reflected on as palimpsestuous layers: "Do you know what a palimpsest is, Ululiro? It's vellum, parchment that has been written upon and then scraped clean, so that someone else can write on it. Can't you hear us? The sound of us scraping?" (Valente 2009, p. 311). In this view, a palimpsest consists of stories of the past and the present and can also be written on again in the future. This temporal aspect will also be prominent in *Cloud Atlas*.

Access to Palimpsest does not only require bodily sexual contact with a stranger but in order to enter the world, four characters are connected to each other and from this point onwards their stories and emotions remain inextricably interconnected. The frog-woman Orlande welcomes the travellers to Palimpsest: "Thus it is that four strangers sit in the red chairs, strip off their socks, plunge their feet into the ink-baths, and hold hands under an amphibian stare. This is the first act of anyone entering Palimpsest: Orlande will take your coats, sit you down, and make you family. She will fold you four together like Quartos. [...] Wherever you go in Palimpsest, you are bound to these strangers who happened onto Orlande's salon just when you did, and you will go nowhere, eat no capon or dormouse, drink no oversweet port that they do not also taste, and they will visit no whore that you do not also feel beneath you, and until that ink washes from your feet [...] you cannot breathe but that they breathe also" (Valente 2009, p. 5). In this passage, two symbols link writing with creating a world and with interconnection: When the characters have to place their feet in an ink-bath, they quite literally become the creators of new maps and new stories. Second, the name "Quarto" for the four people who become interconnected when entering the world refers to the book format. In this way, people become books: they are written and folded. Apart from that, they remain connected in both worlds, since "What happens here happens there" (Valente 2009, p. 199). Thus, they feel everything one of them experiences, which illustrate their bodily and emotional connection by the maps and the stories.

Finally, in order to be able to stay permanently in Palimpsest, the four people have to find each other in the real world. Only when the interconnected people are linked in the real world, can the worlds be connected and the bridge be crossed. Ironically, in the "real" world, they cannot even talk to each other since they all speak different languages. What seems to separate them, however, is no issue in Palimpsest where they all speak the same language. It appears to be the special characteristic of the world of Palimpsest that human connections are made visible and palpable.

Essentially, Palimpsest is a world made up from stories that can only be created by interconnection to others, hence the travellers turn out to be co-dependent if they want to enter and even stay permanently in Palimpsest. On a more general level, the novel hints at the fact that worldmaking is a communal event dependent on interconnecting stories. The whole world only exists in connection to others and new stories only come into existence in connection to previous stories, as the concept of the palimpsest suggest. The world of *Palimpsest* turns out to be a network based on a community which is created by all the individuals together who meet, connect, travel. It signifies the all-encompassing interconnection created by stories and bodily contact of seemingly isolated individuals.

2.3 *Cloud Atlas*

David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004) consists of six nested narratives¹ set in different time periods and characterised by various generic features (such as traveller's diary, crime novel, dystopia) while being interlinked by intertextual references and symbols.² Each of these six tales is read, seen, or heard by the main character in the next. The first five stories are each interrupted at a pivotal moment. After the sixth story, which is told as a whole, the other stories are closed in reverse chronological order.

The first story and outer layer is "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing", a diary written in the middle of the nineteenth century by a Californian notary on his way home from the Chatham Islands. Before he is almost poisoned by a "doctor" who is after his money, he is saved by an escaped slave. Ewing's diary plays a role in the second story, the "Letters from Zedelghem", which is set in Belgium in the 1930s where Robert Frobisher offers himself as a muse to the famous composer Vyvyan Ayrs. During this time, he writes letters home to his lover Rufus Sixsmith in London and finds "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing." The third section of *Cloud Atlas* is the detective story entitled "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery" set in

¹ This structure has been analysed as "Chinese Box", or "Russian Doll"; compare O'Donnell 2015, 74 and Schoene 2010, 113.

² O'Donnell justly states that the stories in *Cloud Atlas* are "all intertextual in a triple sense: they bear multiple references to previous literary texts, to Mitchell's other novels, and to each other" (2015, 71).

California in 1975. The reader meets the now much older Rufus Sixsmith, a retired atomic engineer with a company whose dangerous plans are investigated by the young journalist Luisa Rey. Luisa meets Sixsmith and is given secret material about the criminal schemes of the company and also comes into the possession of Frobisher's letters to Sixsmith which connect these stories. The fourth part in the novel is constituted by the comic story "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish" set in Great Britain in the present day. Cavendish is a 65-year-old vanity press publisher and has to escape from his gangster clients. Cavendish's brother, fed up with Timothy's endless pleas for financial support, tricks him and books him into a nursing home from which Timothy cannot escape. There, he reads the manuscript of "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery." The fifth text, "An Orison of Sonmi-451," is set in the future in the dystopian state Nea So Copros (Korea). The story consists of an interview with Sonmi-451 who is a genetically engineered clone ("a fabricant") designed as a worker in a fast-food restaurant. In this totalitarian society, fabricants are created as slaves who are exploited by the "purebloods." Sonmi's story is connected to "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish" which has been made into a film which Sonmi watches. "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After" occupies the central position in the novel. In it, the protagonist Zachry lives in a post-apocalyptic society in the future on Hawaii. The people he belongs to are peaceful farmers without any technological equipment, and they are often raided by another tribe. The connection to the previous story is central for the lives of the people, because they worship Sonmi as a Goddess. The island is regularly visited and studied by a technologically sophisticated people known as the Prescients. When Zachry becomes suspicious of one of the visiting women and he sneaks into her room, he finds an "orison," an egg-shaped device for recording and videoconferencing. In the orison, Zachry sees Sonmi's interview.

All these texts are linked, since characters in other places and different times read or watch the previous stories. Robert Frobisher, for example, finds a part of Ewing's journal: "I came across a curious dismembered volume, and I want you to track down a complete copy for me. It begins in the 99th page, its covers are gone, its binding unstitched. [...] To my great annoyance, the pages cease, mid-sentence, some forty pages later, where the binding is worn through" (Mitchell 2004, p. 64). For the whole novel, this image of the story that survives even if it is incomplete, "dismembered", and "unstitched" is crucial because it turns out that all stories are interconnected. Frobisher is desperately searching for the missing parts of Ewing's story. Although he is not consciously aware of it, other people's stories take on a great significance due to the connection between them. Sonmi, for example, watches the first part of the film "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish" (p. 243), whereas Ayrs dreams of the future and of Sonmi's world: "I dreamt of a ... nightmarish café, brilliantly lit, but underground, with no way out. I'd been dead a long, long, time. The waitresses had all the same face" (Mitchell 2004, p. 80). These unexplainable connections already have a temporal aspect ("I'd been dead a long, long, time") but are not conscious but intuitive brought about by dreams and strange feelings. In the central story, Zachry finds Meronym's "orison" in which he watches Sonmi. Although he does not understand her, he feels strongly drawn towards her: "But I cudn't forget that ghost-girl neither, nay, she haunted my dreams wakin' and sleepin'" (Mitchell 2004, p. 278). The name "ghost-girl" draws attention to the connections that exist without the characters' awareness and "haunt" them.

Apart from the explicit reading or viewing of the other stories, the interconnections in the novel are created by subtle signs that the characters are unable to decode. First, there is the sense of déjà-vu, the feeling of "knowing" as well as the symbol of the comet-shaped birthmark that connects most of them. When Luisa reads Frobisher's letters, she reflects on the unfathomable feeling of connection she experiences: "the dizzying vividness of the images of places and people that the letters have unlocked. Images so vivid she can only call them memories. [...] Robert Frobisher mentions a comet-shaped birthmark between his shoulder-blade and collar-bone. *I just don't believe in this crap. I just don't believe it. I don't!*" (Mitchell 2004, p. 121-2). The fact that Luisa has the same birthmark is explained by her as coincidence: however, she has "memories" of another story being mysteriously linked to her life. Essentially, the connection of many of the characters by a "birthmark" evokes the idea of a blood connection over different times and places.¹ When Cavendish reads the manuscript of "Half-lives", he ridicules the idea of reincarnation that is behind the symbol of the birthmark: "One or two things will have to go: the insinuation that Luisa Rey is this Robert Frobisher chap reincarnated, for example. Far too hippie-druggo-new age. (I, too, have a birthmark, below my left armpit, but no lover ever compared it to a comet...)" (Mitchell 2004, p. 373). While ridiculing it, however, he at the same time reaffirms its existence.

¹ In the 2012 film adaptation, the same actors play multiple roles, which reinforces the notion of rebirth and interconnection of human souls transcending time and space. Compare O'Donnell 2015, 100.

The second device for creating interconnection in *Cloud Atlas* is the image of the clouds itself which evokes the idea of the transmigration of souls. The cloud atlas in the title is a map that is ever changing and can be compared to the constantly changing tattoo map in *Palimpsest* which each character expands and changes with his or her story. Clouds and souls are connected in an intricate way; hence, soul travel is connected with the cloud atlas, a connection that Zachry reflects on: "I watched clouds awobly from the floor o'that kayak. Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an' tho' a cloud's shape nor hue nor size don't stay the same it's still a cloud an' so is a soul. Who can say where the cloud's blowed from or who the soul'll be 'morrow?" (Mitchell 2004, 324).

This symbol is directly connected to the main topic in the novel, the reflections on history and civilisation, and the Social Darwinist "Eat or be eaten" (Mitchell 2004, p. 509). Instead of defining the "nature" of humanity, it is people's belief system which shapes humanity, as Ewing argues who becomes an abolitionist in the end: "If we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, of we *believe* divers races & creeds can share this world as peaceably as the orphans share their candlenut tree, if we *believe* leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & the Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass" (Mitchell 2004, p. 528). The interconnection of human beings is crucial to his reflections: "He who would do battle with the many-headed hydra of human nature must pay a world of pain & and his family must pay it along with him! & only as you gasp your dying breath shall you understand, your life amounted to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean! Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?" (Mitchell 2004, p. 529). In this way, the motif of the drops in the ocean is linked to the symbol of the clouds both signifying the universal interconnection of humanity. Hence, on the one hand, the history of humanity is characterised by the exploitation of other human beings, conquests, enslavement, genocide, colonialisation, and oppression. On the other hand, however, the interconnections also counterbalance these tendencies because human beings love and support each other and fight for freedom and equality, as all the interlinked stories show. These two opposing forces are thematised in all of the six stories in *Cloud Atlas*.

The interconnections – symbolised by the comet, the cloud, and the ocean – across temporal and spatial domains become quintessentially global. Since they appear random and unorganized, and on the whole more virtual, elusive, unfathomable than in the other two novels, it is drawn attention to the fact that connections exist naturally and just have to be noticed. Mostly people, however, are not aware of these connections of humanity as a whole and of the subtle signs that indicate their existence. Whereas in the novel they are not made conscious for the characters, the readers are able to decode them.

Finally, *Cloud Atlas* pursues the idea that while every story appears as new, it is nevertheless dependent on and connected with stories that came before and stories that will come after. Again, this evokes the concept of the palimpsest where old stories are always visible on the parchment and can be glimpsed through the new stories and at the same time form the foundation on which new stories are written. Hence, in *Cloud Atlas* it is shown that despite wars, violence, and the struggle for power throughout history, human beings are connected across time and space – by their stories.

3. Interconnection, Storytelling, and the Global World

In the last decades, society has been understood as a dynamic cluster, network, or web of narratives. In fact, storytelling has a crucial significance for the self-reflection and meaning production processes of societies in functioning as a cultural pattern of understanding as well as for critically questioning dominant cultural formations. Hence, it is a cultural force that enables human beings to make sense of a world that would otherwise be unstructured and is therefore an anthropological universal, as Roland Barthes states: "narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men, with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself" (1977, p. 79).

The three novels discussed not only stress the connection of stories in and for a culture but the transcultural interconnection that is created by storytelling, and together they create a postmodern poetics of interconnection: Whereas in *Everything is Illuminated*, the connection is created in a conscious process of co-authorship, in *Palimpsest* it is much more complex and convoluted. Here, multiple connections link all the stories in *Palimpsest*, which is essentially a world made up by all the past and present stories. In *Cloud Atlas*, the interconnections are more unfathomable still so that the characters and the

readers have to actively search for these interconnections in the forms of stories that are passed on and symbols that link humanity in a web of temporal and global interconnections.

As Schoene argues, "In the twenty-first century the task is to venture beyond our nationally demarcated horizons into the world at large and understand the domestic and global as weaving one mutually pervasive pattern of contemporary human circumstance and experience, containing both dark and light" (2010, pp. 15-6). His argument can be read as a call for thinking in a more interlinked way which signifies the opposite of a perception of human beings as singular, isolated, separate, and ultimately different. When Moraru states that "the cosmoderns read the world in terms of self-other interconnectedness" (2011, p. 6), interconnection is not only about *writing* interconnected stories but it is actually also the reader's task to search for it, to *read* for what connects all human beings – in life and in literature.

The three novels reflect on the topical issue of interconnections and thematise how they are created in a globalised world: The act of storytelling does not only connect human beings throughout history but with that also places, identities, and different worlds. Hence, with their meta-reflections on narration and their structure of multiple connected plots, these novels create a postmodern poetics of interconnection that proposes an antidote to wars, violence, the struggle for power that leads to fragmentation, a fear of difference, and a fear of the "other." In *Everything is Illuminated*, Alex asks Jonathan: "We are making one story, yes?" (Foer 2002, p. 144). If we are able to read these interconnections in a global world, we can see that the whole of humanity actually makes "one story."

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