

Narrating the New Age of EXtREmes

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The year 2021 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of the Canadian writer and visual artist Douglas Coupland's debut novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991). The book made Coupland the involuntary voice of a generation. What it also did, however, was set the course for Coupland's future literary and artistic inquiries into the world's increasing permeation with ever-accelerating change. When *Generation X* was first published—Coupland reminisces—history seemed to be “finally emerging from locked-in syndrome. The Soviet Union was over. Liberal capitalism was triumphing. Music changed completely. It became a cliché that every other advertising montage showed someone sledge-hammering the Berlin Wall” (“Douglas Coupland on Generation X”). The world, in other words, was gaining on velocity. Over the next three decades, history was overtaken by change. Exponential in nature, the change has not only transformed the very fabric of reality but also drastically shortened the distance between what is and what will be, leading to the emergence of what Coupland calls “the extreme present” or “the superfuture.” The sense of the growing amalgamation between the present and the future has informed most, if not all, of Coupland's fiction published since 1991. Still, it took time and a cohort of like-minded individuals for the concept of the extreme present to fully form.

In March 2015, together with his two friends, Shumon Basar and Hans Ulrich Obrist, and with the help of the graphic designer Wayne Daly, Coupland published *The Age of Earthquakes: A Guide to the Extreme Present*. In the book—which the authors themselves characterize as a graphic speculative remaking or a twenty-first-century update of Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium Is the Message* (1967)—the trio focus on the multiple ways in which late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century technological developments have both rewired time-space and influenced human perception and experience thereof (Coupland et al. “A Book”). The extreme present, Coupland et al. argue, denotes contemporary individuals' sense of inhabiting the future yet being unable to keep pace with time and time-related change, both of which seem to only “procelerate,” i.e. “acceleratingly accelerate” (*The Age* 51).

While to a large extent (dis)missed by the general public, *The Age of Earthquakes* has attracted a considerable following in the art world. In 2017, November Paynter, both an avid fan of the book and the Artistic Director at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Toronto, Canada, invited Coupland, Basar, and Obrist to curate an exhibition based on the book's subject matter. “Kind of imagine what it would be like to walk through it—to walk through the book,” she told them (qtd. in Collins). While the trio accepted the invitation, it was not that book that they chose to turn into an exhibition. Displayed first at MOCA (September 2019-January 2020), and then—in an extended form—at Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai (January-August 2021), “The Age of You” combined the trio's provocative koans and dicta with the visual and audio works of over seventy contributors (photographers, visual artists, designers, filmmakers, and

musicians), and served as a prequel to Coupland, Basar, and Obrist's next collaborative literary endeavor, i.e. *The Extreme Self: Age of You*, published in late June 2021.

The Extreme Self expands on the ideas put forward in *The Age of Earthquakes*. Using what Coupland et al. call "the digital vernacular of memes" ("A Book"), the book posits human personhood as the dubious pivot of the extreme present: central to the scene yet—pardon us—fracked, i.e. reduced to a resource and opened to extraction and manipulation. The advancement and gravity of the human self's predicament was revealed in 2016, i.e. the year of no return. Once the extent of Cambridge Analytica's complicity in Donald Trump and the Brexit campaigns was exposed, people's relationship to data could no longer be seen as innocent (Basar qtd. in Munz). The fact that data ran the world was old news. Yet—Coupland et al. insist—"if 'data is the new oil', then 2016 was the equivalent of a global oil spill that can't be reversed" ("A Book"). The global society's realization of the ease with which information can be procured, instrumentalized, and weaponized to alter the progression of history has spilled onto every aspect of reality and further radicalized the world which by then was already losing its grip on the idea of being moderate and was, instead, increasingly flouncing between extremes. Enter the Age of You.

The inspiration behind *The Extreme Self* is the British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, and specifically Hobsbawm's 1994 book *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*. Each of the chapters in *The Extreme Self* "update[s] Hobsbawm's] concerns about the 20th century to the 21st century" (Basar qtd. in Munz), and—at the speed of a screen scroll and in the format of a Twitter/Instagram feed—articulates the seismicity of the extreme transformation the global world is undergoing. "The Age of You," Coupland et al. argue, "is the new Age of Extremes" (*The Extreme Self* 46-47). It is the age of not only the extreme self but also extreme space (is there really a difference between the tangible and the virtual anymore?), extreme time (real time, no time, what day of the week is it?), extreme nature (is the plague nature's checkmate? does Coronacene herald the demise of the almighty human?), extreme knowledge (or ignorance, for that matter), extreme emotions (engineered by algorithms; wait, what? you honestly thought they were real? LOL), extreme lies (we meant post-truth, sorry), extreme ambiguity (are there still any binaries?), extreme power (the leaders we democratically give voice to take away *our* voice—how did *that* happen?), extreme entitlement (we're so worth it), extreme inequality (... divide, the health divide, the digital divide, the gender divide, the education divide, the access divide, the clean water divide, the you-name-it divide), extreme nationalism (there's us and there's those from "the shithole countries"), extreme (in)visibility (Dear Shoshana, please tell me who's looking, and why don't they ever stop? Yours, Prudie), extreme authorship (copyright is dead, long live brainsourcing!), extreme networkedness (the data, the metadata, the linking, the embedding, the reposting, #the_all-powerful_hashtag), extreme work (face it, you're dispensable: Grammarly writes better than you do and Siri is more of a therapist than you'll ever be), extreme loneliness (is being in a crowd tantamount to being together?), extreme anger (hate wars, revenge porn, stalking, defaming, the comments section), extreme indifference (*shruggie*), extreme banality (truth be told, when the apocalypse arrived, all most of us did was hoard toilet paper and noodles). Extreme gibberish. Extreme everything.

The gibberishy and nauseating feel is central to the experience of the extreme present. What characterizes contemporaneity is not just the constant mutability and radicalization of virtually every sphere of life but, above all, the speed at which the change tsunami proceeds. “We’re not built for so much change so quickly,” Coupland et al. assert (*The Extreme Self* 59). The incongruity between the human mind and the velocity and profoundness of the ongoing change causes what Shumon Basar calls “‘Change Vertigo’: that unsettling sense of drag where the future arrives at a faster pace than our psychological, emotional and political capabilities can cope with” (“Thirty”). Stripped of sexy phrasing, change vertigo amounts to the overpowering and unyielding anxiety most people experience in confrontation with contemporaneity. The pervasiveness of the feeling reverberates in current literary and cultural scholarship, the academia being, after all—or at least aspiring to be—the litmus paper of the *Zeitgeist*.

We all dabble in the now now. Not so long ago, courses in contemporary North-American literature or culture began after World War II. “Now,” Chihaya et al. argue, “we are all engaged in the field of contemporary studies”; some of us have “even taught courses based entirely on texts published within the calendar year of the course” (1). What Chihaya et al. call “the discipline’s new openness to the extreme present” is definitely a response to both the post-millennial outburst of artistic creativity and contemporary individuals’ interest being increasingly limited to what they are directly enmeshed in. Still, it appears to stem as well from a form of academic FOMO, i.e. anxiety at falling behind the curve, failing to address issues while they are still contemporary or, worse yet, missing milestones as they happen (Chihaya et al 1-2).

At the same time, however, we wish to stress the fact that the frantic pace of change and the interconnectedness of the contemporary (virtual) world that we have delineated above do not by any means preclude a certain degree of situatedness as a vantage point from which an individual is experiencing the extremeness of the present moment. With the essays gathered in this special issue of the *Polish Journal for American Studies*, we would like to extend our scholarly gaze onto the various faces, so to speak, of the EXtREme 21 as experienced and articulated within the sphere of North-American cultural production. The twenty-first century has already offered plenty experiences of the extreme: from the pivotal event of the terroristic attacks of 9/11, with which the century infamously began for the US and the world at large, through the financial crisis of 2007-2008, Trump’s presidency, the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements, to the Covid-19 pandemic. These are only the most crucial events and phenomena that have exacerbated the twenty-first-century individual’s sense of anxiety, alienation, unequal opportunities, and—especially recently—an increasing dependence on the virtual. What we wish to present to the readers is a sort of scholarly assemblage, if you will, with individual authors offering a closer look at one particular aspect or context of the extreme (North-American) present, all of them contributing at the same time to the overall picture of agitation, fear, and a sense of overwhelming isolation inherent in the experience of the present moment.

The profound solitude of the contemporary individual is the subject matter of Vanesa Menéndez Cuesta’s article titled “T@pped into the W3rldWideWeb: C0nfiguring [Net(I)Ana(S)],” which constitutes a captivating analysis of the phenomenon

termed by the author *Alt [C]Lit* poetry. Through her close reading of several poems by writers associated with the movement, Cuesta argues that contemporary experience of alienation and disembodiment characteristic of the virtual world is to a large extent conditioned by the urban milieu in which many of these young poets live and work.

Two following articles, in turn, address the literary articulations of very real threats to communal and individual safety in the form of terrorist activities. In her contribution titled “Going to Extremes: The Representation of Discrimination after 9/11 in Fiction” Ingrida Eglė Žindžiuvienė presents an overview of the major features of 9/11 literature, focusing primarily on the phenomenon of anti-Arab violence in the wake of terrorist attacks. Her case study—Laila Halaby’s 2007 novel *Once in a Promised Land*—provides an illustration of the claims made in the essay inasmuch as it presents both the collective and personal trauma of its Muslim American characters spawned by the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

This is followed by Inna Sukhenko’s article “Fictionalizing Nuclear Terrorism in US Nuclear Fiction: James Reich’s *Bombshell*,” in which the author discusses Reich’s 2013 novel, arguing that the conflation of the factual and the fictional in the genre of nuclear fiction contributes to fostering readers’ knowledge of the nuclear industry and its agenda. Sukhenko also shows how Reich contextualizes the narrative of his young female terrorist within radical feminism’s crusade against male-ruled nuclear industry.

A yet another threat to individual and communal safety is posed by climate change and the possibility of climatic apocalypse. In her contribution “Managing Fear in a Risk Society: Pretrauma and Extreme Future Scenarios in Nathaniel Rich’s *Odds Against Tomorrow*,” Anna Gilarek analyzes the culture of fear as delineated in Nathaniel Rich’s cli-fi novel *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013). The novel’s focus, Gilarek argues, is to a large extent pre-apocalyptic, as it investigates the pretrauma contemporary people experience as a result of environmental risks. Foregrounding the protagonist’s traumatic responses to future, as yet unrealized events, the novel demonstrates the ruthlessness with which capitalism both preys on contemporary people’s anxiety and commodifies risk.

The subsequent three essays in this issue show the experience of the present moment as conditioned by an individual’s situatedness, understood in terms of sex, race, social class, and the like. First, in his article titled “Becoming Horse—Capitalism and the Human Identity: An Analysis of Boots Riley’s *Sorry to Bother You*,” Mateusz Myszka focuses on the descriptions of horse-humans in Boots Riley’s 2018 film. Reading the creation of the hybrids as a metaphor for modern class relations, Myszka draws on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming-animal” to comment on capital’s instrumentalization of technology and point to the ways in which hybridization assists the reconstruction of subjectivity and channels revolutionary change.

Aleksandra Różalska in her “Transgressing the Controlling Images of African-American Women? Performing Black Womanhood in Contemporary American Television Series,” in turn, analyzes the portrayal of black womanhood in two TV series, *Scandal* and *How to Get Away With Murder*. Różalska is interested in particular in how these television productions address the prevailing stereotypes of black women, including the mammy, the Jezebel, and the angry black woman.

Finally, Izabella Kimak and Zbigniew Mazur in their essay “Race, Violence,

and the City: Chicago's Black Urbanity in Contemporary American Film and Literature" treat the city of Chicago as a useful model for the articulation of fossilized race relations in the contemporary US. Analyzing three recent films—*Native Son* (2019), *Widows* (2018), and *The Hate U Give* (2018)—Kimak and Mazur argue that the continuing division of American urban areas into clearly demarcated racial zones inevitably leads to outbreaks of violence, police brutality against Blacks being a case in point.

The concluding essay of this issue, Jovana Vujanov's "The Emptiness of Hardcore: Consuming Violence in *Hotline: Miami*," is a case study of one more articulation of violence. Examining the indie game *Hotline: Miami* (2012), Vujanov shows how with the use of what she calls "the ludification of excess," the game both comments on gamified violence and highlights the problematics and ethereality of (media) consumption.

On a final note, as we are writing these words, the twenty-first century's extremeness shows no signs of abating. The Covid-19 pandemic is still ravaging the world, laying bare both the inequalities between various countries and systemic inequalities within individual states. The latter is especially clear in the case of the US, where—as Sonali Deraniyagala argues in her review of Lawrence Wright's recent book *The Plague Year: America in the Time of Covid* (2021)—

[d]isasters are... unequally destructive.... Black people and Latinos contracted the virus at a rate three times greater than whites, partly reflecting the ways economic need could lead to greater exposure. Children from low-income households experienced a 60 percent drop in math learning. There was barely a change for those from better-off homes.

Race and social class are not the only factors that have had a bearing on individuals' experience of the pandemic; gender is another one. If, as we have argued above, the academia can function as the litmus paper for the society at large, it is telling that "[w]omen academics have faced disproportionate work-life balance challenges during the pandemic and are more likely to have reduced their research hours than men" (King and Frederickson 1). These arguments corroborate the point that we have made above: that one's situatedness heavily affects one's individual perception and experience of the various (extreme) phenomena that make the twenty-first century what it is. It remains to be seen what other extremes the world will have to face in the decades to come.

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