Michael Chabon's 'The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay' Re-Presenting the Historical Novel

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Abstract

Can literature represent reality? And, if so, is the novel the best genre to do so? Although these questions are not new in the field of literary studies, a number of postmodern authors – and subsequently literary researchers – have drawn attention to the mimetic potential of literature on the one hand and the problematic relation between fiction and reality on the other. One of these writers is Michael Chabon, who received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2001 for *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*.

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay is set in the past, but it is not a historical novel as it sets out to unmask historical novels as totalising narratives. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's terminology, Chabon's magnum opus can be described as an example of historiographic metafiction. Moreover, *Kavalier & Clay*'s rejection of the traditional historiographic perspective means an*other* perspective has to be embraced. And it is precisely this *otherness* (Foucault), this contrastive position in relation to the dominant point of view, that defines this new perspective.

Kavalier & Clay does not only question the boundaries of literature, but also of our universe and our view or description of that universe. The different 'ontologies' – as defined by Brian McHale – that run through *Kavalier & Clay* cannot easily be distinguished from each other and create ontological ambiguities that cause the novel to resist interpretation. Especially the combination of mythification and demythification causes ontological doubt as 'the world as we know it' is negated.

Keywords: Michael Chabon, The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay, postmodernism, historical novel

Introduction

Can literature represent reality? And, if so, is the novel the best genre to do so? Although these questions are not new in the field of literary studies, a number of postmodern authors – and subsequently literary researchers – have drawn attention to the mimetic potential of literature on the one hand and the problematic relation between fiction and reality on the other. One of these writers is Michael Chabon and it is his magnum opus *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, for which he received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2001[1], that provides the subject for this paper. *Kavalier & Clay* explores the limits of the material and art form of his choice. In what follows I will try to explain in what way Chabon's novel is a critique of the novel as a historical genre. It combines the epistemological crisis, characteristic of modernism, with the ontological crisis, typical of postmodernism, to create a postmodern version of the historical novel. Traces of this postmodern historical novel can be found throughout twentieth century world literature. Representatives of this strand of historical fiction are usually not regarded as a group, nor are they labelled as postmodern historical novels, but I believe they make up a strong undercurrent in contemporary literature.

Context

Before I tackle Michael Chabon's magnum opus, let me frame the literary context very briefly. From the 1960's onwards postmodernism got some traction in literature and the arts. One of the topics that dominated a lot of discussion back then – and today still – was the notion of the narrativity of history. Historiography is said to be based on facts, whereas fiction is based on a willing suspension of disbelief. Both, however, are narrative acts and language – as it turns out – may not be a perfect vehicle for facts. Even stringing together three simple facts creates causal implicature, which may or may not be intentional, as is exemplified by the following line taken from Rimmon-Kenan: "John Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, then his wife died, and then he wrote *Paradise Regained*." (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, p.17) From a literal, logical point of view, focusing on the temporal relation, this sentence can be considered an enumeration of three successive events. From a pragmatic perspective, however, this sentence is much richer. Borrowing J.L. Austin (1962) and J.R. Searle's (1972) terminology, this utterance can be described in terms of a speech act that consists not only of a locutionary, but also of an illocutionary and perlocutionary level. In other words, this utterance is not a random combination of linguistic elements; they have been combined and arranged with a specific purpose and effect in mind. Although in the example of Rimmon-Kenan, the implicature may be unintentional on the part of the speaker, it does clearly show the restricted mimetic potential of language for art. Human beings are narrative creatures and we read and write narratives into language. But if the relation between language and reality is problematic, then how can narratives, historiographic texts, or any other elaborate speech act, hope to portray reality?

This question struck especially hard in historical circles, as the historian's goal is and has been for centuries objectivity, to offer an impartial account of past events. A major contribution to this discussion arrived in the form of Hayden White's

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Metahistory (1973). *Metahistory* is a study of historiographic texts from various historical periods that came to the conclusion that none of these texts succeeds in being truly objective. A historian strings facts together, creating a chronicle, which he then spins into a narrative, much as in Rimmon-Kenan's example. In doing so a historian has to rely on narrative tools, and all the limitations they come with. They have to be studied not as exact mirrors of the past, but as literary, poetical texts. Even though they do not offer a *true* account of what happened, they are still rich sources of information. It is not the subject that has to change, it is the historian that has to adapt his approach. White's theory caused the inevitable merger of the domains of history and literature. In the literary sphere Linda Hutcheon launched the – what I believe to be – useful concept of historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon, 1988). The term applies to every text that aims to expose the totalising process that is present in any and every representation of the past. If a text dealing with the past shows self-awareness towards its own nature, then it is a piece of historiographic metafiction. The considerably vague definition is both the term's strength and weakness. Therefore, I will make matters more concrete by taking a look at Michael Chabon's *Kavalier & Clay*.

Case-study

Kavalier & Clay's epic scope spans three decades and two continents offering a peculiar view of the second half of the twentieth century; from pre-World War II Prague, over the bustling creative comic book scene in New York and an American outpost in Alaska during the war, to the suburban American dream of the fifties and sixties. The novel supports an extremely varied cast of characters, similar to Doctorow's *Ragtime*, including mythical, historical and fictional characters. The two main characters, however are Josef 'Joe' Kavalier and Sam 'Sammy' Clayman. Joe Kavalier is a Jewish boy who lives in Prague during WWII, where he is trained both as an escape artist by an *Ausbrecher*, Kornblum, a Houdini-like figure, and as an artist, specialised in drawing. When WWII breaks out he has to flee Europe in a box together with the Golem of Prague, a Frankenstein-like automaton, made out of clay, that is brought to life by a Rabbi. As the Jewish population of Prague do not want their Golem to fall into the hands of the Nazis, they hire Joe's mentor to smuggle it out of the city. Kornblum includes his student in his scheme and so Joe and the Golem leave Prague. Joe is welcomed in America by his cousin Sammy Clayman and the pair of them create a comic book hero, called the Escapist, loosely based on Joe's experiences.

But how then does *Kavalier & Clay* fit the bill of historiographic metafiction? Various strategies are deployed to create epistemological doubt in the reader. As a reader you no longer know what is true and what is not, what is historically accurate and what is not, which is precisely what historiographic metafiction sets out to do, to test the limits of what a text about the past can tell. The first thing *Kavalier & Clay* does, is exploit what Brian McHale calls the "dark areas" of history (McHale, 1987, p.87). Chabon relies on facts, but he dresses them up as it were. For example, when Joe has arrived in America he moves heaven and earth to find a way for his brother to join him. After a while Joe finds an available place for his brother on an ocean liner. Unfortunately, however, this boat is sunk by a German torpedo. There is a factual basis to this story, the events really took place as there is a newspaper article that tells of a boat carrying European refugee children that was sunk by a German torpedo, but the background story of one of the passengers is obviously a dark area. So, by filling

up dark area after dark area, epistemological doubt is created without actually contradicting the reader's knowledge or version of the past. A narrative web is spun out of a factual foundation, but by adding filled out dark areas its carrying capacity is tested. The second technique is the manipulation of paratextual elements. At times footnotes are used to offer additional factual information, which creates the illusion that what you are reading is a true account. A highly unlikely anecdote about Dali, can be accompanied by a footnote offering additional information about the time and place, which again, creates epistemological doubt. The third technique is what Fredric Jameson calls the combination of "incommensurable characters" (Jameson, 1991, 21-25). By combining historical figures such as Houdini and Dali, with fictional characters, the reader's disbelief is no longer suspended. It becomes difficult, if not impossible, for the reader to tell whether a character is a real historical figure, a fictional character or a fictionalised version of a historical character. Awareness creeps in that something is 'not right', not everything you're reading is 'true', yet not everything you're reading is completely made up either.

These are but three techniques that help in creating epistemological doubt, making it impossible for the reader to determine what actually happened and what did not, what is historically accurate and what is not. Besides epistemological doubt, *Kavalier & Clay* also creates ontological doubt. In order to explain this, I have to touch upon another postmodern topic that gathered a lot of attention. Postmodern fiction and historiography are also bound by their concern for the *Other's* perspective. The concept of the *Other* has a long history, but I am largely relying on the interpretation of poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, who saw an intricate relation between the *Other* and power. The *Other* is everyone who can be situated outside the centre of power. In literature, power is associated with the DWEM – dead, white, European, male – canon. So, the politically coloured version of postmodernism that was sparked by these theoreticians tried to re-write the canon, as it were, from a different point-of-view, the non-white, non-European and non-male. These efforts were rather successful as they sprung off a number of academic domains such as gender studies, post-colonial studies, ethnic studies etc. The postmodern preference for the *Other* world, however, has not been documented nearly as elaborately. With the *Other* world, I literally mean another – fictional – universe, which explains at least partially the postmodern preference for a number of genres such as magical realism, science fiction and steampunk.

One of the literary scientists that did comment on this postmodern aspect is Brian McHale. Brian McHale uses the term ontology in the same way as Thomas Pavel did. This is not in the traditional, philosophical sense of the word, as a description of *the* or *our* universe, but as 'a theoretical description of *a* universe' [italics are mine] (McHale, 1987, p.27). Fiction deals in possible worlds, these multiple worlds can (theoretically) be described and these descriptions are called ontologies. The literary application of ontology allows McHale to discuss both epistemological and ontological crises in literature. Let us have a look at *Kavalier & Clay*. I can discern at least four different universes, and consequently four different ontologies. There is the implied reader's universe, the fictional real universe, the comic book universe (revolving around the adventures of the Escapist) and the Jewish universe (especially in Prague and the story about the Golem). These different worlds are separate, but the boundaries can be crossed. Joe for example is able to move from one universe to another, but when he talks about the Golem as an actual 'figure' and not a folk tale,

other characters get suspicious. I will discuss this example further, but first I would like to address the relationship between the different worlds.

The relation between the fictional real and the reader's universe can be brought back to the situation we have been discussing up till now. There are no real conflicts between the reader's version of history and the fictional real version of history, but the dark areas are filled in. As a reader you are left wondering whether described events really did take place, but there's no way of telling as there are no violations of historical facts. The other two worlds are obviously very distinct from the fictional real and the reader's real universe. The Golem is brought to life, the Escapist engages in a fistfight with Hitler etc. History-as-we-know-it is drastically altered, even the laws of physics are tampered with. In this sense the four ontologies can be split in two: the reader's and the fictional real universe are 'true', or at least they aspire to verisimilitude, whereas the Jewish and the comic book universe are blatantly anti-realistic.

At the same time, however, there are also ties with the fictional real and the reader's real universe. The hero and sidekick formula of the superhero universe is mimicked in the fictional real. The dynamic of a duo of protagonists exists both in the fictional real and the comic book universe. Also, the Escapist's moral code is Joe's moral code. Basically, the Escapist does whatever Joe cannot. There is no ethical or moral grey area, there is only black and white. The comic book universe is what the world should look like according to Joe. Besides the ties with the fictional real, there is a strong bond between Jewishness and the birth of the comic book genre. As Sammy puts it:

> They're all Jewish, superheroes. Superman, you don't think he's Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing this name like that. Clark Kent, only a Jew would pick a name like that for himself. (Chabon, 2000, p.585)

The creators of some of the first and most important comic book series were Jews and their Jewish identity is reflected in their creations. Superman, for example, was created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster[2]. It tells the story and adventures of Kal-El, an alien with superhuman powers from the planet Krypton, who was sent to earth by his father just before his home planet was destroyed. Kal-El is named Clark Kent by his foster parents. As such, Kal-El possesses a double identity. On the one hand, he is a costumed superhero – arguably the first one of his kind. On the other hand, he is a journalist with a spectacularly normal life. It is not difficult to relate the character of Superman to the image of the wandering Jew and the theme of perpetual alienation. Moreover, destruction of his home planet can be linked to the destruction of Jewish Europe by the Nazis. Banished from his mother country, the wandering Jew keeps searching for a place to call home. He is a member of the chosen people, who have been greatly tested so that they may prove their worthiness. Whereas Kal-El's Superman identity reflects Jewish images and themes of mythical proportion, Clark Kent leads the life of the average American. The exact same narrative pattern can be traced in *Kavalier & Clay*, the Escapist is Joe Kavalier's alter ego. Whenever he assumes this persona, he is empowered and he is able to set the record straight. The redressing of the balance through the comic book universe, the creation of a world-as-

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[2] The plot of *Kavalier & Clay* borrowed some elements of the real biographies of Siegel and Shuster. Like Siegel and Shuster, Kavalier and Clay were conned and did not get the recognition and earnings they deserved.

it-should-be is thus not a personal, individual act, but a collective act. The comic book universe is an-*Other* universe in which the wrongs that were done to the Jewish people are made right. The result is a dialectic pattern: from thesis to antithesis. The underdog becomes the hero. The ultimate immigrant – coming from another planet – fights for his new country. The chaotic politics are simplified, resulting in a black-and-white moral situation. Joe rewrites history and in doing so gives power to the Jewish people.

There are characters that can 'travel' from one world to another or that exist in more than one world. McHale refers to these characters as having "transworld identities" (1987, p.35), although the concept is actually Umberto Eco's. If an entity – an object or subject – in one world differs from its prototype in another world only in accidental properties not in essentials and if there is a one-to-one correspondence between the prototype and its other-world variant, then the two entities can be considered identical even though they exist in distinct worlds. These characters are especially interesting because they are subject to mythification and demythification, that is they can acquire or lose their mythical status.

This sounds very complex, but it becomes clearer when we analyse a couple of examples. First, let us take a look at a scene in which Dali attempts an escape trick at a NY high society party. Whilst performing his escape trick, Dali gets trapped inside a diving helmet filled with water, but he is rescued by Joe Kavalier. Although these events appear highly unlikely at first glance, there is again a factual basis to this story. Dali was in NY at the time of the World Fair in 1939 and a similar diving helmet incident occurred at the International Surrealist Exhibition in 1936. As a reader you are now facing a problem as it is impossible to determine which Dali you are confronted with. Is the Dali of the reader's universe – a colourful figure in his own right – the same as the Dali of the fictional real, or do the two versions of Dali differ too much to grant him transworld identity? This interpretational crisis is not only situated on an epistemological level, but also on an ontological level. What is more Dali also acquires a mythical status, insofar that he did not already acquire this in the reader's real. The boundaries between the different worlds are blurred and in the process a myth is created around the figure of Salvador Dali.

The second example I would like to have a look at is the Escapist. Unlike Salvador Dali, who has a referent in the reader's universe, the Escapist is not ultimately grounded in the reader's reality. At the opening of the book the Escapist only exists within the realm of the comic book universe. He and his entire universe are the products of Sam and Joe's imagination, their attempt to redress the balance. However, near the end of the story, the situation shifts drastically as the Escapist performs his ultimate escape trick, namely escape the boundaries of his universe. Moreover, the Escapist forces the fictional real into a temporary suspension of disbelief as he performs an – at the time – extraordinary trick, jumping form the Empire State building. It is actually Joe who dresses up as the Escapist and performs the trick, but his costume serves its purpose and hides his identity. Now it is not only the reader, but also the general population of the fictional real, that is the target of the epistemological and the ontological crisis. Does the Escapist truly succeed in escaping his universe? For the general population in the fictional real, the crisis is complete as they are left in the dark about the Escapist's true identity. The Escapist even acquires a more mythical status by appearing in the fictional real. For the reader, matters are

not that simple, as Joe violates the one, essential rule of magic tricks, he confides the truth to his audience. The reader is aware that the Escapist is actually Joe. Consequently, by entering the fictional real universe the Escapist sheds part of his mythical status. The Escapist turns out to be an ordinary man, driven by paternal love and guilt.

The third example I would like to discuss is that of the Golem. This creature presents a complete epistemological and ontological crisis both in the fictional real and the reader's universe. In *Kavalier & Clay* the golem, though no longer alive, is transported from Prague to an American suburb and its security is a matter of life and death. Initially, the golem is only present through the story of Josef's childhood[3]. At the end of the novel, however, Sam is baffled when a box filled with mud ends up on his doorstep. This ontological breach is problematic as up to that point golems had no part in his ontology. Seeing the fictional 'real' resembles the reader's ontology, this transgression is difficult – impossible even – for the reader to process as well. To problematize this event even further it is not the anthropomorphic golem that turns up on Rosa and Sam's doorstep, but rather, it is a box of mud, with stickers from all over the world. Did the Golem travel from one world to another? Does he exist in both worlds at the same time? Is this the Golem Joe always talked about that has transformed? In McHale's terminology an ontological flicker is created as every attempt at interpretation hesitates between two or more ontologies. Moreover, by entering the fictional 'real' ontology, the golem is demythified; it has lost its mythical status, blurring the boundary between the fictional 'real' and the Jewish ontology even further. The Golem is no longer merely a myth – or is it? – as it is an actual, material, yet no longer living, creature.

Conclusion

These three examples show that *Kavalier & Clay* presents both an epistemological and an ontological crisis. Brian McHale distinguished postmodernism from modernism on the basis that the latter fixates on epistemological issues – hence its preference for stream of consciousness and multiple, shifting narrative perspectives – whereas the former also focuses on ontological issues. I have shown that *Kavalier & Clay* combines both crises. The result is a postmodern historical novel that not only cajoles the reader into an epistemological crisis, forcing him to question his historical knowledge, but also cajoles the reader into an ontological crisis, making him wonder in which world he is and what that world's relation is to his own. I'd like to end by pointing out that *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is far from the sole representative of this type of postmodern historical fiction. In fact I believe a number of canonical novels from world literature can be read in this light. John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of* Solitude, E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* and Louis Paul Boon's *Chapel Road* are all postmodern historical novels that combine epistemological and ontological doubt to a specific effect.

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[3] There is another link between the golem and Josef Kavalier. The golem that was brought to life by rabbi Juddah Loew ben Bezalel in order to protect the city was called Josef.

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