> Religion, Capitalism, and Cannibalism: An analysis of “An Orison of Sonmi-451”

> Religião, Capitalismo e Canibalismo: uma análise de “Uma Rogativa de Somni-451”

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Abstract

This paper analyses the fifth story from David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004), concerning Sonmi~451’s life, resistance, and death in Nea So Copros (a dystopian futuristic plutocratic State set in Korea). We will briefly present the novel’s structure, along with insights from other commentators. Afterwards, there shall be three sections: 1. On Religion, 2. On Capitalism, and 3. On Cannibalism, addressing three types of oppression: (i.) ideological control through religious discourse; (ii.) labour-related subjugation, involving the systematic extraction of economic productivity and political obedience; and (iii.) corporal domination, as fabricants (non-naturally born) are viewed as exploitable product-bodies. We hypothesise that Mitchell describes a full *dispositif* when it comes to their means of production, surplus extraction, and power relations.

Keywords: Cloud Atlas (2004). Religion. Capitalism. Cannibalism.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a quinta história do romance *Atlas de Nuvens* (2004) de David Mitchell, referente à vida, resistência e morte de Sonmi~451 em Nea So Copros (uma versão distópica plutocrática futurista da Coreia). Apresentaremos brevemente a estrutura narrativa do romance, trazendo contribuições de outros comentaristas. Posteriormente, haverá três seções: 1. Da Religião, 2. Do Capitalismo, e 3. Do Canibalismo, abordando três tipos de opressão: (i.) controle ideológico baseado em discursos religiosos; (ii.) subjugação laboral, com a extração sistemática de produtividade econômica e obediência política; e (iii.) dominação corporal, na qual fabricantes (nascidos artificialmente) são vistos como corpos-produtos exploráveis. Nossa hipótese é que Mitchell descreve um *dispositivo* completo de seus meios de produção, extração de excedentes e relações de poder.

Palavras-chave: Atlas de Nuvens (2004). Religião. Capitalismo. Canibalismo.

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1 Cloud Atlas

The first (and in this case, also the last) story told by Mitchell in *Cloud Atlas* (2004) is titled "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing". It revolves around the journey of the eponymous American notary to the Chatham Islands in New Zealand, dated to the year 1894, retold in the form of a field journal (written as personal notes by the author). Aboard the ship Prophetess, Ewing encounters the doctor Henry Goose (who, by the end of the story, is revealed as an antagonist), who treats him for an illness caused by a worm, and Autua, a slave of the extinct Moriori ethnicity who had clandestinely boarded the ship and ultimately saves his life.

Already in this story, there are manifestations of the main thematic axes that thread through and connect the narratives of the book. These encompass the issue of slavery or exploitation in general, which is linked to the theme of cannibalism, both in its literal and metaphorical senses, as expressed in the maxim "The weak are meat, the strong do eat"[1]. This maxim is first articulated by the cynical Goose in opposition to a historical-anthropological philosophy advocated by another character. Additionally, the possible theme of reincarnation is present, symbolised by the birthmark in the shape of a comet that Adam Ewing shares with the protagonists of the subsequent stories, such as Sonmi~451.

The subsequent story ("Letters from Zedelghem"), told through a series of correspondences dated 1931 between the protagonist, the musician Robert Frobisher, and his lover named Rufus Sixsmith, deals with Robert's stay at the Belgian residence of the English composer Vyvyan Ayrs. He is in a weakened state and therefore hires Frobisher to assist him in composing. During his time in Belgium, the protagonist reads Adam Ewing's travel journal and composes the so-called *Cloud Atlas Sextet*, a name that echoes the title of the book. This relationship of homonymy is not coincidental, as the sextet is divided into two parts, the first of which features each instrumental solo interrupted by another, and these interruptions are then resumed in the second part, mirroring the narrative structure of Mitchell's work itself.

The dynamic between Robert Frobisher and the elderly Vyvyan Ayrs and his family becomes increasingly problematic, eventually leading the protagonist to commit suicide. In his farewell letter, Frobisher alludes to various historical events and posits that they are all destined to be repeated *ad infinitum*, reflecting

[1] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 430.

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a cyclic, Nietzschean conception of history[2]. This interaction with the parallels between the narratives that constitute the book is notable. Continuing in line with the previous tale, the authorship of the archive we read pertains to the sender of the letters. There is no omniscient narrator of the events; rather, it's a first-person epistolary account in which the narrator of everyday life (Robert) does not simply exist as a character but also as a name that operates polyphonically with David Mitchell, the actual writer.

"Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery", perhaps the most conventionally structured chronicle within the book, is divided into short chapters narrated in the third person and with a detached tone. It recounts the story of Luisa Rey, a journalist who becomes accidentally trapped in an elevator with Dr. Sixsmith, a physicist and former lover of the late Robert Frobisher, in 1975. Following this fortuitous encounter, the protagonist becomes entangled in a dangerous investigation related to a potential scandal involving the nuclear energy company Seaboard Power Inc. in Buenas Yerbas, California. After Sixsmith's death under highly suspicious circumstances, Luisa Rey discovers and reads her old correspondences with Robert Frobisher, explaining the reason why we only have access to half of the letters: much like Luisa, access is only granted to the immanent document that resonates polyphonically within the work.

The fourth story, set in the 21st-century United Kingdom, is titled "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish". In this story, Cavendish, an editor, narrates the tale of how one of his authors was imprisoned for pushing a literary critic off a building, which transformed his book into a massive success and led the writer's brothers to demand substantial debt repayment. Timothy Cavendish seeks help from his brother to settle the debt, but instead of aiding him, his brother arranges for him to be confined to a nursing home from which he must escape. Throughout the narrative, once again, the protagonist reads the immediately preceding story, this time in the form of a manuscript for a novel that he intends to adapt into a film (signalling the intention to change the medium of dissemination of the archive).

"An Orison of Sonmi~451" is the first of two stories set in the future. Presented in an interrogation recording, it deals with the life of Somni~451, an employee of a fast-food chain, one of many others employees lab-produced and cloned exclusively for this role, in the nation of Nea So Copros, a plutocracy that

[2] H. J. Hicks. "*This Time Round*": David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas and the Apocalyptic Problem of Historicism, 2016, p. 55-76.

constitutes a corpo-empire-centered around a reunified Korea, where different attributes of the current two Koreas are combined and exaggerated to create a dystopian setting.

In her state of capitalist slavery, Somni~451 undergoes a process of "xultation", a ceremony that would supposedly make her more intelligent and independent than other common clones. After witnessing the horrors of the Nea So Copros regime, she joins a revolutionary group that would take her as a martyr. Moreover, cannibalism is present as a hyperbolic metaphor for the bodily exploitation of labour, as the corpses of the clones are recycled for "general purposes". The conclusion of her confession, with an extremely cynical tone, reveals to the reader that Somni~451's entire journey was nothing more than a false flag operation orchestrated by the Nea So Copros regime. The protagonist's last wish before her execution is to finish watching a film inspired by the misadventures of Timothy Cavendish, a character whose story was immortalised by cinema in the previous centuries.

Finally, the last story, "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Evrythin' After", is narrated retrospectively by Zachry, a peasant from a tribal community in a post-apocalyptic Avá-Ih (Hawaii, before the loss of part of the complex language) that worships the goddess Somni, an image derived from the historical figure of Somni~451. This is the first chronicle in which the protagonist-narrator does not bear the birthmark in the shape of a comet[3] – here, it belongs to the deuteragonist Meronym, an outsider from a society that still possesses some of the advanced pre-Fall technology of pre-cataclysm humanity, in which industrial civilisations like Nea So Copros have perished.

The temporal-narrative structure of the book has already been discussed before[4]. Its first half is organized in a linear chronological order, and, after the conclusion of "Sloosha's Crossin' and Evrythin' After", the book proceeds to conclude all the previous narratives, this time in reverse chronological order, thus

[3] This section recounts how Meronym, an anthropologist, saves Zachry, a native, from death at the hands of an enemy tribe. Here, an interesting parallelism emerges in relation to the first story, "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing". The difference is that while in the first story, the narrator-protagonist is an outsider with the birthmark of the comet, whose life is saved by a Pacific islander, here the roles are reversed. In this case, Zachry, a Pacific islander, and the narrator-protagonist, has his life saved by Meronym, an outsider bearing the comet birthmark. This birthmark symbolizes a chain of successive reincarnations, with the cycle closing with an inverted image of its beginning.

[4] Gustavo R. da Silva; Eberval G. F. Júnior, *Atlas de Nuvens*: Uma leitura possível por meio de Walter Benjamin, p. 157-170, 2022.

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starting with the second-to-last time period, that of "An Orison of Somni~451", and ending with the conclusion of "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing".

From this description, one could say that David Mitchell's book can be abstractly conceived as a sort of narrative *Matryoshka*, also known as a Russian nesting doll. After all, the work is composed of several nested stories, each somehow fitting within the context of another, their texts being quite literally enclosed within frames of the texts of previous stories, creating a sense of layers and depth, akin to the way smaller *Matryoshka* dolls fit within larger ones. Recurring themes, motifs, and symbols create thematic echoes across all the stories, providing cohesion to the book as a whole, much like the consistent design and painting style of *Matryoshka* dolls ties a set of them together. Just as each *Matryoshka* adds a new physical layer to the set, each one of the narratives adds further depth and complexity to the overall story. The reader peels back the narrative layers of the book, revealing an interconnectedness of characters, thematic interplay, and broader philosophical questions dealt with in the text.

Much like opening each doll in a *Matryoshka* set to reveal the one(s) within, this narrative nesting provides a rich and layered reading experience. However, the *Matryoshka* is not the only conceptual model for the understanding of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. A more process-oriented approach conceives the narrative flow as the movement of a boomerang, which is propelled forwards before eventually turning backwards mid-air. This model is only possible because the later narratives, rather unusually, are nested within the earlier ones, and not the other way around, as one would expect from other examples of embedded narratives:

> The boomerang structure of Mitchell's novel, whereby the chronologically prior narratives end up swallowing the chronologically later narratives in the second half of the novel, destabilizes the temporal constraint implicit in most embedded narratives—that tales-within-tales are presupposed as antedating the narratives within which they are embedded[5] [6].

[5] J. A. Parker. *From Time's Boomerang to Pointillist Mosaic*: Translating Cloud Atlas into Film, 2015, p. 131.

[6] This problem was also noticed by Hicks (*"This Time Round": David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas and the Apocalyptic Problem of Historicism*, 2016, p. 73): "*Cloud Atlas* enacts a sort of time travel. But not, precisely, historical time travel. Mitchell's ability to capture moments in time through style and genre could, indeed, be argued to suggest that those time periods were distinct and that our recognition of them is predicated on this distinction. That is, the shifting styles and genres themselves index the linear passage of time. However, Mitchell himself seems to resist this understanding, destabilizing the historical implications of the various genres by breaking them up and reversing their order. This highly visible manipulation denudes the genres of their temporal specificity".

Therefore, as will be shown later in this text, there is an intimate correlation between the narrative structural form of Mitchell's book and its content. Like a swallowing of stories that get eaten by the chronological one that comes before, cannibalism is also a thematic issue of this story. Being repeated as a general subject in all six stories (with different relevance and appearance among them), the idea that one is being consumed, swallowed, by another will be the guiding thread of this paper. Furthermore, having established a connection between narrative form (a concept previously explored by many of the aforementioned commentators) and narrative content, and based on the concepts of surplus and ideology, this paper aims to analyze the fifth story, "An Orison of Sonmi-451", from David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004), concerning Sonmi~451's life, resistance, and death in Nea So Copros (a dystopian futuristic plutocratic State set in Korea) in three axes: Religion, Capitalism, and Cannibalism.

2 On Religion

Capitalism is a purely cultic religion.[7]

According to Anderson[8], "*Cloud Atlas* meditates on belief and religion". Regarding its content, in "An Orison of Sonmi-451", the religious agency in the capitalist plutocracy has its most explicit expression in these quotations: "An abbey had stood there for fifteen centuries, until corpocracy dissolved the pre-consumer religions after the Skirmishes"[9]. It can also be seen in the following quotation: "Siddhartha had other names, she told me, mostly lost now. Her predecessors knew all the stories and sermons, but the old Abbess and senior nuns were sentenced to the Litehouse when non-consumer religions were criminalized"[10]. Mentioned in the second part of the story, the idea of a "non-consumer religion" or "pre-consumer religion" implies its counterpart, the only allowed religion, the consumerist one.

Besides these quotations expressing how the Corpocracy excluded other forms of religious discourses in order to remain the only power and institution able to produce subjectivities and ways of living, there are several discursive

[7] Walter Benjamin. *Capitalism as religion*, 1996. p. 288–291.
[8], Hephzibah Anderson. *Time and emotion study*, 2010.
[9] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 292.
[10] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 294.

examples of how their social and cultural existence is interpreted by thought religion. In fact, even Somni coming into consciousness is called "ascension", which creates some parallel with the figure of Jesus[11] himself: after his condemnation and martyrdom, he is crucified and then He ascends in body and soul. Different from Hicks's[12] interpretation of Sonmi – "most conspicuously, the term "soul" has lost its spiritual connotations and now refers to the identity/bank chip implanted in each consumer's fingertip" –, we defend that this term has not lost its religious connotation, rather it has been reinterpreted under a new form of religious discourse, the State-capitalist one. As Benjamin[13] said: "Capitalism has developed as a parasite of Christianity [...] until it reached the point where Christianity's history is essentially that of its parasite – that is to say, of capitalism". In the most hyperbolic way, this is what Mitchell is arguing for when structuring capitalist oppression through this ideology: the intricate relationship between labour exploitation and Christianity.

As Sonmi tells the Archivist after feeling Papa Song: "I would also have a Soul implanted in my collar so I could come and go on campus as I pleased"[14]. Their citizenship is conditioned by the word "soul" because religion organises their whole gnoseology. As she tells the Archivist: "Catechism Seven: 'A Soul's value is the dollars therein'"[15]. Thus, to understand Nea So Copros's corpocracy and society, it is vital to explore Mitchell's vocabulary to describe it, especially because it is through this perspective that Sonmi~451 becomes conscious of her subjugation and joins an abolition movement.

More frequently in the first half of the story, during her time serving as an employee/ slave at Papa Song, Mitchell builds a whole ideology for Sonmi's life. Already in her second answer to the Archivist, she states: "Our seer and aides gather us around Papa's Plinth for Matins, we recite the Six Catechisms, then our beloved Logoman appears and delivers his Sermon"[16]. Their labour guideline is called "catechisms", which can be defined as a summary of the principles of the Christian religion in the form of questions and answers, used for the instruction

[11] As Hicks (*"This Time Round": David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas and the Apocalyptic Problem of Historicism*, 2016, p. 70) also noticed: "On one level the martyr Sonmi-451 and Buddha are doubles in the text—her ascension itself is the fabricant equivalent of the Buddhist state of Enlightenment".
[12] H. J. Hicks. *"This Time Round"*: David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas and the Apocalyptic Problem of Historicism", 2016, p. 68.
[13] Walter Benjamin. *Capitalism as religion*, 1996. p. 288–291.
[14] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 197.
[15] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 288.
[16] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 165.

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of Christians. Their boss, the figure of Papa Song, called Logoman, is *beloved*, as if he were a saint or a deity, and his daily pronunciation that ignites their workday is called "Sermon", a religious discourse addressing a scriptural, theological, or moral topic, usually expounding on a type of belief, law, or behavior within both past and present contexts by a preacher.

In the same way, when finishing her testimony, Sonmi also uses this same concept: "I refer to my *Declarations*, Archivist. Media has flooded Nea So Copros with my Catechisms. Every schoolchild in corpocracy knows my twelve 'blasphemies'[17] now"[18]. In this sense, both ideas were always being reiterated to create a literary atmosphere that expresses the general ideology built to *conduct conducts* and normalise workers and consumers. Moreover, when telling her story to the Archivist, she remembers one of the occasions she reunited with one of her former working colleagues, another slave at Papa Song: "I asked, Are you happy, Kyelim~889? Enthusiasm lit her smile as she nodded. Happy is a word in the Second Catechism: 'Proviso I obey the Catechisms, Papa Song loves me; proviso Papa Song loves me, I am happy'"[19].

This mechanism continues through several other answers, e.g., "They sang Papa Song's Psalm"[20], as psalms are a collection of poems and songs expressing worship, praise, and prayer to the Lord. It is considered one of the most important parts of the Bible and is often used in Christian liturgy. It keeps going with the following examples: "What in the name of Holy Corpocracy are you doing here?"[21], and "Let's pray to the Immanent Chairman"[22], when at the University after feeling Papa Song. Still, in the first part of the story, the indication that Sonmi should become a revolutionary also suggests that she should do it through the same vocabulary, which is something that she accepts as if it was the only option: "Wing~027 warned me, 'Sonmi~451, you must create Catechisms of your own'"[23]; "a viable alternative to corpocratic ideology"[24]; "ascended fabricants need a Catechism"[25].

[17] Blasphemy is not only lying, but rather is the act or offense of speaking sacrilegiously about God or sacred things; it is a profane talk, it is not in the secular sphere of life.
[18] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 310.
[19] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 210.
[20] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 303.
[21] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 183.
[22] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 185.
[23] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 185.
[24] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 295.
[25] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 308.

Thus, reinforcing our hypothesis, their whole perspective and reading of their social reality is constructed on a religious basis, and it does not only happen with workers' subjectivity but also with the Archivist, a State bureaucrat. After Sonmi tells him about the industrial cannibal system, his first reaction is to say: "The charge is preposterous, no, it's unconscionable, no, it's blasphemy! [...] The Beloved Chairman would never permit it!"[26]. Is it worth noticing that it escalates: firstly, the Archivist says this accusation is *preposterous*, then *unconscionable*, and, lastly, that it was the worst available option, the most absurd one, a *blasphemy* because their beloved government would never authorise such a sin. It can also be seen in the following quotation: "You've described not 'business' but... industrialized evil!"[27].

In another moment, it is also possible to see how he sees his society and government as signs of salvation, almost as a Heaven on Earth:

> Nea So Copros is the world's only rising sun! Pre-Skirmish East Asia was the same chaos of sickly democracies, democidal autocracies, and rampant deadlands that the rest of the world still is! If the Juche had not unified and cordonized the region, we would have backslid to barbarism with the rest of the globe![28]

Additionally, when hearing about Sonmi's mission, his first reaction was to interpret it as a religious messianism, not a type of secular revolution: "So Union hid its interlocutor, its... messiah, in a colony of recidivists? Messiah: what a grandiose title for a Papa Song server"[29].

This proves that the corpocracy worked from both sides to establish its religious ideology throughout its culture. Thus, as Krisztán[30] indicated: "The dulling of clones is a form standardisation to convince the public of their lack of individuality and character, thus their lack of human nature, so that their enslavement and utilization on the market would be justified". This ideology not only operated as a way of enslaving workers under sub-human conditions, but it also served as a way of controlling consumers' minds into accepting it. Eventually, Sonmi realised this mechanism and stated: "to enslave an individual distresses

[26] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 304.
[27] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 305.
[28] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 288.
[29] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 292.
[30] Daniella Krisztán, *Cannibalism as a Metaphor of Consumerism in David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas*, 2019, p. 108.x

the conscience, but to enslave a clone is merely like owning the latest mass-produced six-wheeled ford"[31].

Going further, she also understood the basis on which this ideology has been built:

> My fifth *Declaration* posits how, in a cycle as old as tribalism, ignorance of the Other engenders fear; fear engenders hatred; hatred engenders violence; violence engenders further violence until the only 'rights,' the only law, are whatever is willed by the most powerful[32].

Hence, the Juche is the most powerful one and uses fear to violate the rights of its population. It happens mostly as they control all flux of information; its ideology is so well established that we see how people perceive things differently over time and according to their experiences, how people's thoughts and beliefs were manipulated, and how history keeps changing, for every individual has a different notion of the truth. And Mitchell also suggests how an individual's belief is constructed upon their experiences and their perception of reality

Finally, regarding the form of this story, it is also curious to notice that Sonmi's testimony worked as a confession, as if she were a believer, and the Archivist was the priest. Its structure operates in a way that she confesses, talks, and produces a subjectivity of her own based on how she enunciates about herself, especially because "Sonmi's testimony plays a huge role, as, over time, Sonmi became remembered as a goddess"[33]. Therefore, as a messiah, she grew up as an enslaved clone, died as a revolutionary, but later survived as a religious idea.

3 On Capitalism

The State cannot go against the nature of things.
Marx, 1996.

Surplus value is the portion of labour's value that the capitalist captures. No productive worker in capitalism can avoid generating this excess, and it never returns to them. Because exploitation of waged labour is foundational, producing surplus value is intrinsic to the system. Marx[34] observes that wages are held to the

[31] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 191.
[32] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 306.
[33] Daniella Krisztán, *Cannibalism as a Metaphor of Consumerism in David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas*, 2019, p. 100.
[34] Karl Marx, *Manuscritos econômicos e filosóficos*, 2001, p. 65-71.

bare minimum needed for workers' survival and reproduction, ensuring the class persists. Under such conditions, the worker's own activity (and the wealth it creates) propels their material and social decline. Misery, therefore, arises organically from the very structure of capitalist labour. On the market, labour receives a monetary "fair price" set by exchange value (competition, supply and demand), not by workers' needs[35]. Even at this price, part of the labour performed remains unpaid; that uncompensated remainder is surplus value. Thus, wages may look equitable in market terms, yet exploitation endures. Building on Marx, Mitchell casts the worker as the system's "sacred battleground", where the clash between paid labour and appropriated surplus is laid bare.

The shift from the traditional to the capitalist master alters the very discourse of domination because workers have been dispossessed of communal property[36]. All parties are alienated, though differently: capitalists by the compulsion to valorise, workers by estrangement from their product. The worker's labour creates value and thus surplus value, folding their very existence into capital's logic. Subjectivity and social subjection align within the master's discourse[37], and this deprivation that defines the proletariat also grounds the possibility (and necessity) of revolutionary rupture. Surplus value lets capital seize the extra wealth workers create while veiling the relations behind that seizure. Workers may feel underpaid and demand higher wages, but such struggles usually mark the ceiling of their political awareness. Adjusting the wage "quantum" can shrink or enlarge the capitalist share, yet surplus value persists: the obstacle is not the pay level but the underlying exploitative relation that continually channels unpaid labour to capital.

Hence, the extraction of surplus value depends on a device that obscures the relations enabling that extraction. Althusser[38] calls this device *ideology*: an immanent, structural imaginary woven through social life, not merely a false picture of reality. Because ideology is integral to the social totality, it endures even as particular forms change; under capitalism, it meshes with the apparatuses that secure capital's rule. Ideology supplies a lattice of representations (images,

[35] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis (Book XVII), 2007.
[36] Karl Marx, *Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood*, 1842.
[37] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis (Book XVII), 2007.
[38] Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capital Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,* 2014, p. 219.

concepts, rituals) imposed on individuals without entering conscious thought, thereby shaping how they experience their world. As Althusser observes:

> The reproduction of the dominant ideology is not simple repetition [...] of given institutions, defined once and for all by their function. Rather, it is the combat for the unification and renewal of prior ideological elements, which are disparate and contradictory, within a unity conquered in and through the class struggle in opposition to prior forms and new antagonistic tendencies. The combat for the reproduction of the dominant ideology is a combat that is never over; it has to be taken up again and again, and always under the law of the class struggle.

One of the results of this ideological structure is the maintenance of a plutocracy based on a slave-analogous system. The exploration of labour and the extraction of workers' energies are the basis of their political obedience and economic productivity. However, in order to make it accessible for everyone, a certain discourse had to be created over this means of production. How to make slavery accepted again? In Mitchell's words: "To enslave an individual troubles your consciences, [...] but to enslave a clone is no more troubling than owning the latest six-wheeler ford, ethically. Because you cannot discern our differences, you believe we have none"[39]. Their solution involved equalising the working bodies with the engines and machineries. Somni's clone-based nature, her lab-creation, expels her (and her fellow proletarians) from the standard notions of nature and humanness.

> The treatment of fabricants is merciless: they are regarded as nonhuman, forced to work brutal hours in conditions that often would be fatal for nonmodified humans. Sonmi-451, whose name is a clear play on Bradbury's Farenheit 451, is a "server" at a fast-food franchise and is required to work 19 hours a day for 12 years. In Mitchell's future, the treatment of clones is emblematic of a more pervasive dehumanization of the "corpocratic" regime, which construes its population as "consumers" rather than "citizens".[40]

What Hicks noticed, however, is that not only is there a categorical displacement for clone-works, but also there is a switch for everyone there: from humans to nonhumans (to maintain economic productivity), and from citizens to consumers (in order to maintain consumerism). As Mitchell[41] textually made explicit: "It motivates the downstrata: 'Work, spend, work'". About that, Gregson[42] defended that "the superseding of Nature to the activities of a consumer capitalism [...] is so destructive that it produces a culture which is mentally ill". The argumentative function of the genetic engineering plot in this

[39] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 184.
[40] H. J. Hicks. *"This Time Round"*: David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas and the Apocalyptic Problem of Historicism", 2016, p. 77.
[41] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 279.
[42] Ian Gregson, *Postmodern Literature*, 2004, p. 119.

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narrative is to express very explicitly that the trajectory for scientific advancement was ostensibly devoid of morality, exposing its societal poisoning. In Nea So Copros, the last society before the doom of modern civilisation, humans are manufactured as commodities, as non-human Others that contrast in nature with the "true bloods" – in this case, the naturally born. It is from the confession of one of these genomed slaves that the narrative unveils the projected cost of human consumption. Somni, who works in a McDonald's-style diner, only exists to serve and satiate the appetites of ravenous consumers[43].

As Knepper[44] defended, "in Sonmi's world, economic profitability and neoliberal governance result in the production and death of fabricants. Moreover, the narrative exposes a world of excluded and peripheral subjects whose lives are easily expunged in the interest of the state". Although we do not agree that it only regards a fictional "neoliberal governance", as it lacks several characteristics necessary for categorizing this political system as neoliberalism – such as the mentality of self-governing as an entrepreneur of themselves[45] –, we are aligned about the expunged peripheral bodies. However, instead of seeing this as a "result" of this "economic profitability", we argue over the idea that this is exactly what sustains this State and way of production. Exploration of labour, exhaustion of bodily energies, ideological obedience, etc., are the basis of Nea So Copros' structure.

Moreover, as the societal requirement of the consumers is to spend, the "soul" narratively appears as their right to consumerdom; this is what defines their individuality by the State in the form of a microchip that is implanted in their index finger. The "*salto mortale* of the commodity"[46], in this regime, has been technologically transformed and embedded into the very essence of the body in the form of a microchip. Therefore, in Nea So Copros, slavery has evolved into a dual nature; the stigma of servitude, and the characterisation of a "deficiency", a certain "lack" that results in an incapacity to progress within society or change their conditions; they are trapped in a cycle of ceaseless labor repetition. About

[43] P. Ferguson. *"Me eatee him up"*: cannibal appetites in Cloud Atlas and Robinson Crusoe, p. 153, 2015.
[44] W. Knepper. *Toward a Theory of Experimental World Epic*: David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas, 2016, p. 111.
[45] Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la Biopolitique,* 2004; P. Dardot & C. Laval, C. *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, 2017.
[46] As the moment when the commodity, after the production process is completed, is destined for the market; when its nature, as useful work that produces use values, is confirmed. If a commodity does not find a buyer in the market, then its use value is lost, as well as the capital expended on it (Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,* 1993).

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that, Somni inquired: "how such an insignificant-looking dot confers the rights of consumerdom on its bearers yet condemns those lacking one to an xistence of abject servitude or worse"[47].

Thus, as a story about the history of oppression, *Cloud Atlas* traces the causes of this "coming apocalypse all the way back to Ewing's nineteenth-century colonial account"[48]. As a repetition of gestures of oppression[49], Sonmi's testimony shows that the purpose of her existence, like that of their colleagues, is to be a (not so) modern type of slave – in Somni's words: "We are just slaves here for twelve years"[50]. Living in gaps in the wall and never leaving the restaurant, the clones personify the very productive structure: they are extensions of the means of production. As said in "An Orison of Sonmi~451": "one's environment is a key to one's identity, but that my environment, Papa Song's, was a lost key"[51]. Without a distinction between someone and their environment, nor a distinction between their (non)humanity and value (as an asset and investment) of their physical bodies, those clones just could not see a way out of their oppression[52].

Therefore, to seize the means of production means to take control of their own subjectivity: in this case, autonomy, by fighting their ideology, is the first revolutionary act – that is why it is important for men to "'become conscious of this conflict and fight it out'[53]. The class struggle is thus expressed and exercised in ideological forms"[54]. Moreover, as Mitchell[55] said: "Maybe the answer is not a function of metaphysics, but one, simply, of power", in this sense, although it might sound like a Kantian question, it is, in fact, about something else. These clones, in order to fight against their oppression, need to, firstly, recognize the agency of this ideological apparatus, to invent a counter-conduct based on disobedience. This reading goes against Eve's[56] interpretation of *Cloud Atlas* as a conservative book:

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47 David Mitchell*, Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 335.
48 P. Ferguson. *"Me eatee him up"*: cannibal appetites in Cloud Atlas and Robinson Crusoe, p. 153, 2015.
49 Gustavo R. da Silva; Eberval G. F. Júnior, *Atlas de Nuvens*: Uma leitura possível por meio de Walter Benjamin, p. 157-170, 2022.
50 David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 208.
51 David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 205.
52 Sara Jane Johnston-Ellis. *David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas*: "Revolutionary or Gimmicky?", 2010.
53 That is a direct quote that Althusser collects from Marx in the Preface to "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy".
54 Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capital Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,* 2014, note 11.
55 David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 418.
56 Martin P. Eve. *The Conservatism of Cloud Atlas*, 2015.

> Others will undoubtedly disagree, but my reading here leads to several answers to these questions which all bring to light the potential conservatism of *Cloud Atlas*. In its excessive diegesis, the novel can either represent only mediation itself or a philosophy under which its popularity excludes radicalism and betrays an implicit normativity.

This reading shows no textual evidence to support its non-radical view of Mitchell's book. In fact, it goes against its extreme position of resistance, as it would even lead to violent counter-conduct acts:

> That ship must be destroyed. Every slaughtership in Nea So Copros like it must be sunk [...] The shipyards that build them must be demolished. The systems that facilitated them must be dismantled. The laws that permitted the systems must be torn down and reconstructed [...] Every consumer, xec, and Juche Boardman in Nea So Copros must understand that fabricants are purebloods, be they grown in a wombtank or a womb. If persuasion does not work, ascended fabricants must fight with Union to achieve this end, using whatever force is necessary.[57]

This revolutionary posture is not far from Fanon's[58] theoretical take on the liberation process, which also had the most aggressive oppression system as its historical background: "violence alone, perpetrated by the people, violence organized and guided by the leadership, provides the key for the masses to decipher social reality. Without this struggle, without this praxis there is nothing but a carnival parade and a lot of hot air". During the struggle for liberation in which Mitchell is referring to, Nea So Copros' artificial sentinel "morality" is to be smashed; their oppressive values, the triumph of the consumers over the producer slaves; their economic enlightenment and false liberty ought to be destroyed. "Those values which seemed to ennoble the soul prove worthless because they have nothing in common with the real-life struggle in which the people are engaged"[59]. Therefore, Mitchell's "supposed glorification of violence as socially and psychologically liberating"[60].

4 On Cannibalism

The trope of cannibalism is pervasive in Mitchell's narrative as a whole. In fact, the general matryoshka-like narrative structure of the book[61] can, similarly, be interpreted of as a story folding upon itself, as if trying to devour itself:

[57] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 307.
[58] Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* 2004, p. 96.
[59] Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* 2004, p. 11.
[60] N. Gibson, *Dialectics got the upper Hand*. Fanon, Violence, and the Quest[ion] of Liberation, 2019, p. 103.
[61] Gustavo R. da Silva; Eberval G. F. Júnior, *Atlas de Nuvens*: Uma leitura possível por meio de Walter Benjamin, 2022.

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> With imagery recalling the ancient myth of the Ouroboros, the serpent that eats its own tail, Mitchell critiques an economy based upon unbridled consumption which his vision suggests can only lead to a metaphorical, and ultimately literal, self-consumption[62].

This is an image which also lends itself well to the overall themes of *Cloud Atlas*, arranging the work's very form in such a way that it becomes attuned to its content, since "the structure of the ouroboros subverts the underlying logic of colonisation. By disrupting the linear timeline of Western culture, Mitchell challenges the rhetoric of progress"[63].

As in the other *Cloud Atlas* stories, the act of cannibalism is sometimes explicitly mentioned seemingly *en passant* by the characters: "Sonmi testifies that Yoona abducted a boy in order to escape a dinery owned by Papa Song Corp, but that she did not intend to 'eat him and spit out his bones' as a cannibal would (201)"[64]. The phrasing of this quote, and particularly the use of the verbal form "would", is very conspicuous, as it seems to imply a disconnect between the literal and symbolic acts of cannibalism: while the fabricants are nourished by the processed fluids of their deceased peers, the actual cannibals are the citizen-consumers of Nea So Copros (more on this later).

Thus, the trope of cannibalism serves both as a literal and metaphorical device to depict and critique the exploitation and commodification of people in the profoundly dehumanising hyper-capitalist society of Nea So Copros. Thematically, as Ferguson[65] showed, it serves as quite an eloquent metaphor for the destructive nature of unchecked capitalism in general: "If cannibalism is at the base of the Nea So Copros economy of consumption, so too, Mitchell's novel suggests, is it in our own". It is also reiterated by Knepper:

> For Mitchell, an ambivalent aesthetics of global cannibalism serves as a way to encode, critique, and exceed the logic of unfettered global capitalist accumulation, especially as the text self-consciously problematizes its role as a "global cannibal" of world culture and status as a commodity fiction to be consumed in the global literary marketplace[66].

The fabricants' plight is a direct result of a system which prioritises profit over human (and arguably nonhuman, since the humanity of the fabricants is

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[62] P. Ferguson. *"Me eatee him up"*: cannibal appetites in Cloud Atlas and Robinson Crusoe, p. 154, 2015.
[63] L. NG. *Cannibalism, Colonialism and Apocalypse in Mitchell's Global Future*, 2015, p. 118.
[64] W. Knepper. *Toward a Theory of Experimental World Epic*: David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas, 2016, p. 110.
[65] P. Ferguson. *"Me eatee him up"*: cannibal appetites in Cloud Atlas and Robinson Crusoe, 2015, p. 154.
[66] W. Knepper. *Toward a Theory of Experimental World Epic*: David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas, 2016, p. 93.

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somewhat ambiguous) dignity, mirroring real-world scenarios in which the vulnerable masses are consistently exploited for the economic gain of the privileged few. When it comes to the economy of Nea So Copros, this is not limited to the exploitation of physical and intellectual labour but also extends to the literal physical consumption of the fabricants' very beings, effectively signifying the ultimate erasure of their identities and worth. This logic extends to the very life and death of Sonmi herself, as in the end she is revealed to have been a proverbial "sacrificial lamb" all along:

> The image [of cannibalism] puts Western elites in close proximity to the act of cannibalism itself, and the novel to follow demonstrates that the rich frequently eat up the poor, molars included. What matters in this global act of cultural and actual cannibalism is the kind of spin given to it in the domain of public discourse: the Sonmi narrative at the center of the novel, where low-class workers are literally fed into the system of global corporatism, only offers the most gruesome portrayal of such unspeakable acts. At the very end of this section, Sonmi tells her interviewer that her whole life and the resulting biography were merely created for the sake of narrative, to "manufacture consent" and appease the public during the government's passing of even more restrictive legislation[67].

As Bayer showed, there is a metaphorical critique of socio-economic disparities, using cannibalism as a symbol for the exploitation of the lower classes by the elites. It suggests that the rich "consume" the poor by exploiting their labour and resources. Sonmi's narrative provides a gruesome depiction of this exploitation in the context of Nea So Copros corporatism. Her life suggests a creation of manufactured consent, a term used in media studies to describe how media can shape public opinion to support the status quo, even when it's harmful. In this case, the ideological discourse was used to pacify the public as the government could implement an oppressive regime without being seen as such Regarding the manipulative use of Somni by the corpocratic regime (and speaking of form and content), this act of metaphorical and literal systemic cannibalism and sacrifice illustrates the treacherous mechanisms with which the ruling class manages to exert control over wider society and its policies.

Even a regime as blunt as that of Nea So Copros fears being deemed overly capricious by the public, thus creating the necessity for convenient narratives based on false flags operations. Such double facedness serves the purpose of creating a veneer of moral legitimacy, thus strengthening the grip of ideological control and political compliance in the minds of those who are not yet completely disillusioned by the current state of affairs. Take, for instance, Marx's comments on the legality of the theft of wood, where he highlights the contrast between the

[67] G. Bayer, *Perpetual Apocalypses*: David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas and the Absence of Time, 2015, p. 352.

actions of the pirates of Tidong and the Provincial Assembly. The pirates use physical violence to control their prisoners, while the Assembly manipulates the legal system to maintain control. Marx suggests that the form of the law is essential, but it does not reflect the true content; it becomes an empty facade. In his words:

> The pirates of Tidong break the arms and legs of their prisoners to ensure control over them. To ensure control over wood thieves, the Provincial Assembly has not only broken the arms and legs but has even pierced the heart of the law. We consider its merit in regard to re-establishing some categories of our trial procedure as absolutely nil; on the contrary, we must acknowledge the frankness and consistency with which it gives an unfree form to the unfree content. If private interest, which cannot bear the light of publicity, is introduced materially into our law, let it be given its appropriate form, that of secret procedure so that at least no dangerous, complacent illusions will be evoked and entertained. We consider that at the present moment it is the duty of all Rhinelanders, and especially of Rhenish jurists, to devote their main attention to the content of the law, so that we should not be left in the end with only an empty mask. The form is of no value if it is not the form of the content.[68]

That is why it is relevant to understand that Mitchell also depicts cannibalism in another way, extending it beyond its literalness to encompass metaphorical dimensions. Following the religious vocabulary, as previously presented in this paper, provocative parallels can be found, for instance, with the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation in the Eucharist. In Catholic theology, transubstantiation refers to the transformation of bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ. Thus, the Eucharist, signifying spiritual nourishment and unity with the divine, can be starkly juxtaposed to the grotesque consumption of fabricants' flesh in Mitchell's narrative, with more than a subtle touch of irony. Indeed, the fabricants at Papa Song Corp go about their lives in accordance with corporate “catechisms” and feed on a substance called “soap”. The primary function of “soap” within Nea So Copros is to provide nourishment for the fabricants. Sonmi-451 and her peers are conditioned throughout their lives to believe in a mock-religious dogma according to which they ascend to a higher existence upon retirement, only to be cruelly butchered and unceremoniously processed into “soap” for their peers. This grotesque cycle of life and death underscores the dehumanising treatment of fabricants, reduced to a mere renewable resource within a system designed for maximum efficiency and profit.

This act of feeding fabricants with “soap” derived from the deceased bodies of their own kind alludes to the self-perpetuating cycle of exploitation. It graphically illustrates the ultimate consumption of the exploited individual by the

[68] Karl Marx. *Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly*. Third Article. Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood, 1842.

system, where even in death, fabricants serve the needs of the society system by which they are devalued. The literal consumption of their bodies by their peers further dehumanises and objectifies them, stripping away any remaining semblance of individuality or dignity they might have once had.

In addition to its use as sustenance for fabricants, “soap” is also consumed by pureblood humans as a recreational drug. This practice reveals the extent of moral decay and ethical erosion in Nea So Copros. The purebloods' use of "soap" as a drug is indicative of a society that not only exploits its underclass but also derives a certain twisted satisfaction from their suffering and dehumanisation. The consumption of "soap" by humans introduces a dark irony to the narrative. While fabricants are systematically exploited and consumed, pureblood humans willingly ingest the product of this exploitation for leisure. This act of consumption underscores the detachment and desensitisation of the ruling class to the plight of the fabricants. The use of "soap" as a drug blurs the lines between necessity and indulgence, highlighting the pervasive commodification of life in this dystopian society.

Moreover, one might also argue that the metaphor of fabricant-based “soap” extends well beyond the confines of Mitchell’s narrative, serving as a critique of contemporary issues regarding exploitation and (un)ethical consumption under capitalism. It encourages readers to reflect on the consequences of their consumption methods, as well as their socio-economic behaviours. Additionally, it highlights how modern society and its capitalist means of production similarly exploit vulnerable populations for both economic gain and libidinal purposes.

4 Final Considerations

This paper has examined the multifaceted layers of oppression as depicted in “An Orison of Sonmi-451” in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. By dissecting the narrative through the intersecting lenses of religion, capitalism, and cannibalism, we elucidate the many mechanisms of ideological control, labor exploitation, and corporeal domination in the dystopian society of Nea So Copros. This argumentative process aimed, thus, to reveal how Mitchell constructs a comprehensive *dispositif* that intricately ties together the means of production, surplus extraction, and power relations within this futuristic plutocratic state. As a *dispositif*, these frameworks (physical and symbolic cannibalism, religious

discourse, ideology, regulated spaces, controlled time, etc.) are presented all around Mitchell's narrative and society. In a Foucauldian understanding of the concept, "designating a heterogeneous network of discourses, practices, sites, and screens", it "describes power not as something housed within state institutions and legal codes nor as something one can possess and wield over another, but as an everyday effect of strategic relations and resistances"[69].

Following that way of mapping relations of power, our analysis underscores the profound interplay between these oppressive structures and their impact on Sonmi-451's life, resistance, and ultimate demise. Through religious discourses, the State (r)e(i)nforces subjective chains, shaping the fabricants' beliefs and behaviours to align with its exploitative agenda and capitalist framework based upon labour subjugation, transforming individuals into mere tools and resources for economic productivity. In this very sense, the practice of cannibalism starkly illustrates the extent of corporeal domination, quite literally reducing fabricants to consumable commodities, stripping them of any semblance of human dignity, something which is presented as a fate worse than death: "Even Yoona~939 chose death over slavery"; "nothing is more heinous than the enslavement of your tribe"[70].

The narrative provides a poignant critique of contemporary socio-political systems while also serving as a cautionary tale regarding the dehumanising potential of unchecked power and exploitation. By presenting a dystopian future that mirrors many aspects of our present reality, *Cloud Atlas* challenges readers to reflect on the pervasive and insidious nature of oppression in its various forms. One might thus posit that "An Orison of Sonmi-451" is a profound (albeit fictionalised and hyperbolic) commentary on the mechanisms of control and exploitation inherent in modern capitalist societies. Mitchell's portrayal of Nea So Copros offers a compelling and disturbing vision of a world where economic, ideological, and corporeal subjugation converge to create a totalitarian regime of unprecedented scope and brutality.

Through this narrative, Mitchell critiques existing power structures while inviting us to envision a future where such oppressive systems are dismantled and replaced with more humane and equitable alternatives. This might seem contrary to the story's cynical and pessimistic ending in the book (although not in the movie), but the worship of Sonmi as a deity by Zachry's people in "Sloosha's

[69] R. Crano, *Dispositif*, 2020.
[70] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 289-295.

Crossin' an' Evrythin' After" hints at an eventual toppling of Nea So Copros' system in the timespan between these two narratives. Therefore, Mitchell's apparent cynicism regarding political revolution does not equate to an absolute rejection of it, nor a Fukuyamic resignation in response to the *status quo*. Rather, the author's nuanced emancipatory position is actually made quite explicit in his work: "All revolutions are (the sheerest fantasy), until they happen, then they are historical inevitabilities"[71].

[71] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004, p. 289.

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