

Heterocosms of Machinic Desire: Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines Quartet* as Propulsive Dystopia

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ABSTRACT: Dystopian literature directed at teenage audiences has attracted much attention. Early twenty-first century global society and literature are pervaded by the sense that, to quote Philip Reeve, “the worst is yet to come.” Reeve’s *Mortal Engines Quartet* (2001–2006) addresses precisely such concerns. In my study, I focus upon the predatory mobile cities represented in the novels as constituting independent self-organising agents of deterritorialisation. Inverting Alfredo Bonanno’s idea of “propulsive utopia,” I propose a reading of the *Mortal Engines Quartet* as a propulsive dystopia already in the process of enactment. A specifically posthumanist reading would focus upon the nonhuman desires embodied by cities and cyborgs alike. “Traction Cities,” far from encapsulating evolutionary dead ends, actually represent the possibility of a completely deterritorialised subjectivity, an “asignifying faciality” to use Félix Guattari’s expression. These monsters of globalisation represent a line of flight we ourselves may follow, leading to an affirmation of asubjectivity.

KEYWORDS: dystopia, ecology, globalisation, Philip Reeve, posthumanism, utopia



Descending from the writing machine to the scene of dystopian social reality, we must acclimatise ourselves to the awareness of a future foreclosed to both human access and humanist values. The human element has become one element among many, always on hand to assist in the global reconfigurations of ever more inaccessible and inscrutable world (dis)orders. Machinic social reality catalyses connections, destratifications and rechannellings of energy, in the context of a general movement towards the exponential complication of social space. Such developments necessitate a writing machine already composed of machinic units. It is my contention that Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines Quintet* (*Mortal Engines*, 2001; *Predator's Gold*, 2003; *Infernal Devices*, 2005; *A Darkling Plain*, 2006) provide readers with a literary machinery whose eclectic intertextuality is well adapted to the conditions of early twenty-first century capitalism. Late capitalist literature, in order to be successful, must adapt itself to contemporary social conditions. Pragmatic transformations are, after all, only possible between certain boundary constraints. Objective material phenomena always circumscribe the process of artistic creation. Nevertheless, much of the magic of art resides in its ability to transcend the given. Janis Dawson in particular emphasises the eclectic, pastiche-like nature of Reeve's writing, noting that its textuality is filled with references to prior cultural articulations such as novels, films and fictional characters borrowed from nineteenth-century registers.¹ Nevertheless, Dawson views Reeve's postmodernism as highly ambiguous, for his novels never entirely abandon the pretence of a linear narrative and, furthermore, utilise standard *bildungsroman* tropes such as the adolescent search for identity. According to this train of thought, Reeve simply does not make the cut, for his postmodernism is one of style rather than substance. In spite of his "blending of genres" and mixing of "generic metaphors," Reeve remains thoroughly modern in Dawson's view.²

As opposed to human-centred notions relating to the narrative unfolding of subjective identity, I would argue for a speculative re-envelopment of the *Mortal Engines Quartet's* relation to subjectivity. Rather than highlighting the subjective strivings and desires of the various human protagonists, interesting though they are, I would emphasise the specific machinic aspects of Reeve's dystopian fantasy world.

This necessitates what could be described—not unjustly—as a highly selective reading. Simply put, not everybody and everything can make it in the end. Above all, we must ask what characterises the social environment described in *Mortal Engines*. Reeve’s world is one defined by a practice known as “Municipal Darwinism.” Many millennia in the future, we find a devastated Earth on the brink of ecological collapse. The landscape is decimated by mobile cities that consume one another in a ruthless struggle for survival: “it was only natural that cities ate towns, just as the towns ate smaller towns, and smaller towns snapped up the miserable static settlements.”³ Indeed, London, the first ever Traction City, is described in biological terms. Organised in a stratified manner, London’s various suburbs are separated; the lower layers, composed of engine rooms and sewage tanks, are called the “Gut.”⁴ Furthermore, each Traction City “feeds” upon other, less fortunate “prey.” The multiple flows that criss-cross Reeve’s narrative are the effects of a social reality that frees itself from human imperatives. Unknowingly, those who suppose themselves to be in charge of events are themselves beholden to an entirely machinic ideology of constant change. Through the words of London’s Lord Mayor, Magnus Crome, we hear nothing less than the enunciation of machinic propositions in the form of ideological banalities relating to the inevitability of transformation. In his insanity, Crome betrays the secret of absolute deterritorialisation in a monologue that, in spite of its inanity, deserves extensive quotation:

London will never stop moving. Movement is life. When we have devoured the last wandering city and demolished the last static settlement, we will begin digging. We will build great engines, powered by the heat of the earth’s core, and steer our planet from its orbit. We will devour Mars, Venus, and the asteroids. We shall devour the sun itself, and then sail on across the gulf of space.⁵

What does the mad desire for infinite growth signify? The double notion of dystopia/utopia is never far from Reeve’s concerns. Elizabeth Bullen and Elizabeth Parsons have identified *Mortal Engines* as a literary representation of political

anxieties connected with Ulrich Beck's "risk society."⁶ According to this view, the danger of an Earth rendered uninhabitable is what animates Reeve's novel. Yet it is difficult not to interpret this interpretation as a slightly conservative ecologist reterritorialisation of the *Mortal Engines Quartet's* highly ambiguous content. Not only is the Engineer's vision, as articulated by Crome, presented in comic terms, but radical environmentalism is also debunked. In the third instalment of the novel, we are introduced to a militant green group known as the Green Storm. Its leader is a robot-heroine, the resurrected form of Anna Fang, a former agent of the similarly oriented Anti-Tractionist League, a group of "static cities" that resists the deterritorialising power of the Traction Cities. Much of the Green Storm's military might—Fang included—is composed of "Stalkers," cyborgs assembled from spare parts and the corpses of dead soldiers. This circumstance in itself is a highly ironic commentary on the antinomies of utopian green politics.⁷ To make matters worse, the Stalker Fang, in her fanatical quest to "Make the Earth Green Again," later proceeds to reawaken a dormant military satellite (ODIN, or Orbital Defense Initiative), a "part of the American Empire's last, furious arms race with Greater China."⁸ Destructiveness, it would seem, is an unavoidable peculiarity of contemporary social realities. No metanarrative or political grand narrative exists that would unite all municipalities and countries. Even the inhabitants of the static settlements are only able to cooperate because of their common fear of consumption by mobile cities. It is in this sense as well that we may rightly call Reeve's world a "posthuman" one, not only because of the flagrant asymmetry between human and nonhuman agency (robots control entire polities, human life depends on technology), but also because any sense of a "human," universal or cosmopolitan identity has disappeared. What we have left is a disjointed, disaggregated and deranged global society, without any semblance of a global order. In other words, the epitome of postmodern culture.⁹

In the wake of a modernity that has proven catastrophic, what hope can there be for utopia? Alfredo Bonnano, in his article "Propulsive Utopia," identifies the utopian impulse with a desire for transcendence, "a desire to be beyond the abyss, well beyond it."¹⁰ The notion of "propulsive utopia," for Bonnano, stems from

revolutionary practice. It is inseparable from the “real movement” striving for intense social change and subversion of capitalist norms. Authentic anarchist praxis, we are told, must rediscover “the explosive potential of utopia,” in the form of a radical critique that destroys existing structures beyond the point of recuperation.¹¹ Utopianism, if it is to penetrate the barriers separating revolutionary enunciations from their realisations, must be radical and uncompromising. Not unlike idealists of the Green Storm variety, in another essay Bonnano even countenances the destruction of all existing forms of technology.¹² There is no such thing as good or bad technology, because technology in general is leading to an enslavement of all terrestrial life. This radical anarcho-primitivism is one that would destroy modern society. One cannot but help feel a sense of absurdity when confronted by such political ideologies. Surely, nobody, the author included, could ever have seriously contemplated such extreme political positions. Yet utopia is, to a large extent, about fiction and absurdity. What Bonnano denotes the “propulsive value” of a concept has nothing to do with pragmatic realities of any kind. Rather, he invites us to conceive of new, speculative constellations of thought. Above all else, speculation would be the ammunition of this anarcho-primitivist revolution:

The propulsive value of a concept cannot be understood in social terms if one limits oneself to examining existing conditions. In fact, there is no causal relationship between social conditions and a utopian concept. The latter moves within the real movement and is in deep contrast to the structural limits that condition but do not cause it. On the contrary the same concept can move around comfortably in the fictitious movement.¹³

It is this latter point that we may extract from Bonnano’s flagrantly unrealistic political philosophy. Concepts are endowed with an innate mobility; they can become detached from their environments and reintegrated, creating new connections, constructing new positions of oppositionality with regard to social structures. Utopian concepts, in particular, gain their power from their disconnective potential. They are capable of giving birth to new relations precisely because they sever us from an

unproductive and sterile past. But what of the element of unrecuperability, as emphasised by Bonnano himself? What are we to make of a radical critique that obviates any recuperability, in the name of an absolute deterritorialisation, in the name of a permanent, speculative fictional revolution? Dystopia, I propose, is precisely utopia unveiled as disgraced, disenchanting brute existence in its naked irredeemability.

Instead of a propulsive utopia, full of hopes pinned upon the illusion of a world “made green again,” Reeve shows us a world bereft of redemption. The most successful characters, such as the Doctor Frankenstein-like Dr. Popjoy, manufacturer of humanoid and animal Stalkers, or Nimrod Pennyroyal, con-artist and fake historian, are also the novel’s most morally reprehensible individuals, worse even than explicitly evil characters such as Stalker Fang. It is, to quote Oenone Zero, herself a “Resurrecter” of Stalkers, “all wrong.”¹⁴ Nobody is quite in a position to judge others. No metaphysical belief, no teleology has survived the series of catastrophes that have unleashed themselves on Earth over the millennia. History is a flood—an aimless, cascading, raging torrent. Chudleigh Pomeroy, historian and, much later, Mayor of a greatly changed New London, summarises the dystopian spirit aptly when he states: “I’ve studied History my whole life, and the one thing I’ve learned for certain is that you can’t stand against it. It’s like a river in flood, and we are just swept along in it.”¹⁵ Where does this leave the redemptive potential of politics? What can political action do in the context of a world ever more inhospitable to all forms of idealism and utopia? Andrew Robinson and Simon Turney argue for a “post-left anarchy” that would privilege a form of political action open to multiple lines of flight, without succumbing to the temptation to replace the present with “a new ‘present’ considered as a fixed or stable order.”¹⁶ In a post-catastrophic dystopian world, anarchism must give space for multiple creativities, without restricting itself to any form of binary coding. To avoid the trap of a false “deferred utopia,” Robinson and Turney recommend a politics based on unspecificity and non-identity.¹⁷ Post-left anarchy, as opposed to more standard forms of left wing politics, refuses “the idea of the separation of future and present.”¹⁸ There is no future to strive for, only a permanently

deficient present that we must somehow strive to make inhabitable and hospitable again. Yet a question still nags us: however reflexive an emphasis on “immanence and immediacy” may be, post-left anarchy does not seem to adequately conceptualise the multiplicity of desires unleashed by machinic social reality.¹⁹ What if desire in general, be it the desire for utopia, redemption or the nostalgic desire for remembrance, were nothing more than an aspect of artificial sedimentations, a trace whose function is the diversion of heterogeneous elements and energies into wasteful consumption?

An unsettling aspect of Reeve’s *Mortal Engines Quartet* is the absence of anything resembling an adequate knowledge of the past. Most of the human characters, and even some of the cyborg Stalkers (Shrike, Stalker Fang) are preoccupied with the issue of memory. Memories are never what they seem, while the distant past has faded into a mess of half-truths, alternative history and mythology.²⁰ Chronology, too, is “all wrong,” we cannot grasp for cues from a past that itself is little more than an imaginative construct. History is a product of the historicist imagination—speculative fiction here blends seamlessly with historical fact.²¹ Yet another sign of Reeve’s postmodernism? This could very well be the case, but the abandonment of a historical narrative or the pretence of a metahistorical truth is merely a preliminary stage in the description of posthuman society. Humanity, in the aftermath of catastrophe, is rendered open to dismemberment, in a literal and metaphorical sense. Slavery, too, is present in this inhumane social space: the most unfortunate are sold by private corporations to “Nuevo Mayan” cities: “lovely shows they have in them arenas. Gangs of slaves pitched in against each other, or fighting souped-up dismantling machines and captured Green Storm Stalkers. Blood and guts all over the shop.”²² The dismantlement of global society and cosmopolitan humanity creates space for atavisms, as well as the proliferation of Artificial Intelligence technologies that display ever more autonomy from human intentionality. If there is a space for anarchism, it is an anarchism that is not anthropocentric. Even the desires of some human protagonists are permeated by a technological reality that refuses to be reduced to anthropomorphic concepts, ideas and ideologies.

The machinic, we discover, cannot be restricted to conscious assemblages. In his relatively rarely cited book, *L'inconscient machinique* (*The Machinic Unconscious*), Félix Guattari proposes a machinic model of social life that avoids the pitfalls of reductivism or mechanistic concepts. According to Guattari's view, machines are never mere automata. Neither may they be cleanly separated from so-called natural entities, as living creatures already possess something of the machinic. Natural selection already contains within itself "an efflorescence of the most deterritorialized forms."²³ In this connection, Guattari cites the mutation of bird mating behaviours that become ever more automatic and schematic. Creativity, in the evolution of both natural and artificial systems, tends to free up ever more deterritorialized forms that become separated from their original contexts. These forms in turn become reintegrated, reterritorialised as schemes of deeply embedded behavioural redundancies. With regard to history, it is particularly interesting how Guattari seeks to distance deterritorialisation from any modernist notion of progress. With regard to the machinic social realities represented in Reeve's novels, *Municipal Darwinism* included, it is worth bearing in mind the following injunction:

The deterritorialized "solutions" selected by history are neither richer, nor more inventive than those of seemingly more primitive states. Thus, the fabulous acceleration of the contemporary technico-scientific phylum, considering that all is well, does not appear to shed light upon inventions which are intrinsically more "inspired" than those that have been promoted over several million years by the living phylum.²⁴

We cannot presuppose that the realm of technology is more complex than the various products of natural selection, but neither can we really infer that nature as a process of creative evolutionary experimentation is any less artificial. Reeve illustrates the untenability of the nature/culture divide with a very poignant illustration. Somewhere in North America, we hear unusual bird songs reminiscent of a bygone era: "birds were calling in the reed-beds, their songs echoing the car-alarms and mobile phone trills which their distant ancestors must have heard; sound-fossils of a vanished

world.”²⁵ This foray in media geology unveils pretences to a pure, unspoiled nature, for the natural can never be renaturalised.

As Guattari observes, the “gangrene” of deterritorialisation has taken over “every domain.”²⁶ This unsettling of form is pervasive in the tetralogy. For instance, we discover “Stalkerized insects and animals, a dog with the head of a girl,” a nightmarish apparition of cyborgs whose visual ferocity is sufficient to raise the suspicion of whether the “Young Adult” genre label is even appropriate for the work in question.²⁷ There is no escaping the consequences of evolution. History as artifice is, above all else, a product of the proliferation of abstract machines. Even long after the last car alarm has been silenced, millennia after the last automobile has been abandoned, the sounds of these antiquated vehicles live on, transformed into eerie bird refrains. Surely, this would qualify as a deterritorialisation of epic temporal scale. Even the most reflexive, the most self-conscious of assemblages is nothing but a collection of sedimentations, fossilised knowledges and pragmatics of uncertain origin. According to the ontology proposed by Guattari, there are no universals, no primary, given facts. Rather, reality itself is composed of “abstract machines that differentiate themselves.”²⁸ Instead of an amorphous matter, we must understand reality as a set of machinic multiplicities. Difference is primary, whereas unity is but a temporary product of divergent connectivities coming into alignment. Differential multiplicities traverse a space that is itself produced through contingent machinic enunciations, communications and material connections. If the novel as writing-machine is to properly account for the presence of energetically catalysed propulsive rhizomes, it must procure its energy from the relative irreversibility created by social evolution. In a world where the distinction between nature and culture has collapsed beyond repair, new, innovative connections are only possible through the mediation of the productive city. Already, there is talk in contemporary sociology of “pirate towns,” parasitical nomadic settlements characterised by informal, illegal economies, latching onto less mobile municipalities.²⁹ Perhaps a premonition of things to come? Following Bonnano and Guattari, we must realise that the “enunciatory power” of assemblages stems specifically from the fact that they are not compelled to adhere to existing

material realities.³⁰ Similarly to the retroactive sound-fossils displayed through the bird refrains, the work of the speculative fictional writing machine can be considered as generative of new realities, new modes of existence, new theoretical-experimental articulations of heterarchical organisational flows. Abstraction, too, can be a deterritorialising force, an expenditure of power with either positive or negative effects, depending on which perspective observation occupies. There is never only one form of territory available for the production of redundancies. Each form can be transformed into another.

Dismemberment means more than the destruction of anthropocentric concepts of social reality. Guattari unambiguously rejects notions relating sense to human-oriented intellection. In his view, the “diagrammatic economy of signs,” once it is brought into connection with the machinic realm, can produce “sense without signification,” a sense that remains “invisible to an anthropocentric vision.”³¹ This vision of a nonhuman reality is afforded by Dr. Popjoy’s Frankensteinian laboratory. Once the technocratic worldview gains ascendance, rationality separates itself from any anthropomorphic form. From within technocracy, a distinctly monstrous perception of a posthuman future emerges: “the frosty plastic sheets were dragged aside, exposing steel-plated centaurs with twenty arms and caterpillar tracks instead of legs, spider-Stalkers with clawed feet and machine-gun turrets in their bellies.”³² However reprehensible we as readers may find Popjoy’s cynical experimentation, can it really be differentiated from the, at times, perverse results of “natural” selection? Not only do machinic assemblages create new differences, they are also constructive of new intensities, new “vectorial fields” and “processes of destratification.”³³ Anthropomorphic sense is destratified, removed from technological change to reveal an almost sublime unworking and reengineering of forms. Evolution ceaselessly deterritorialises, breaking up structures and reworking pieces of the past into ever more bizarre future assemblages. Nothing really differentiates the mad scientist Popjoy from evolution itself. The machinic orients us towards ever more deterritorialised solutions, yet these are never more than stop-gap measures, transitory stages in the uncertain flow of history. Desire, Guattari reminds us, is never

solely subjective. Indeed, he goes to great pains to make his readers aware of the contingency of the correlation between subjectivity and freedom. “Freedom,” Guattari exclaims, “is not created with subjectivity!”³⁴ We must understand that the subject has no monopoly upon freedom. Freedom is the affordance of connections that are themselves constructs of machinic propositions, worldlings of heterogeneous positionalities within artificial space. Becoming is not the privilege of a self-emancipating conscious actant, but rather an ambient function of a generative environment, defined by Guattari as the “phylum” which traverses “individuals, species, and milieus.”³⁵

What should utopian politics make of the consumptive power of our ever more technological environments? The all-consuming spread of capitalist globalisation cannot be neatly separated from the realm of the natural. Instead, we must interpret the growth of these abstract energetic machineries as outgrowths of larger evolutionary processes and becomings. Deterritorialisation does not lead automatically to better outcomes for humanity or life in general. Indeed, one of the most important imports of Guattari’s work is the absence of even abstract universals as one of the precepts of ontology. Relating this point back to *The Mortal Engines Quarter*, what is particularly startling is the absence of any universal cultural norms or standards. Nothing really governs the behaviour of the various communities and political actors apart from a short-term cynical pragmatism. The deterritorialisation of refrains can easily lead to either archaic “hyper-territorializations” or a “chronographic enslavement” of human elements within an ever more repressive self-referent social structure.³⁶ Such structures abound in Reeve’s world. None of the Traction Cities may be said to be democratic entities. Enslavement is concomitant with a radical decline of human agency, as evinced by the rise of Artificial Intelligence-based systems capable of disobeying human imperatives and even foreclosing them altogether. The Stalker Fang, this autonomous robot, a strong cyborg woman with a mind of her own, attempts to rid the planet of humans once and for all with the ODIN laser satellite in the closing sections of *A Darkling Plain*. As Robyn McCallum notes, “the utopia envisaged by Stalker Fang is perhaps the only true ‘utopia’ in the series, in

the sense that it is precisely one which human beings cannot inhabit.”³⁷ Could the worldling of autonomous technological intentionality entail the final enslavement, or even eradication of the human element? For the moment, machinic enunciations have a need for human communication systems. But we are nevertheless left uncertain as to what positionalities and codings will survive. Reeve’s future is a fatally polluted one, a fantasy world whose woundedness is all too reminiscent, far too realistic for comfort.

The implementation of machinic realities and artificial geologies is never “reducible to a system of representation.”³⁸ Urban assemblages, infrastructures and pollutive sedimentations defy any sense of purpose. Instead of serving any single design or goal, mobile municipalities escape through unnatural crossings and dysfunctional transversals. The sheer scale of ecological transformation transcends our senses, leaving us inarticulate and powerless. With a keen cinematic eye, Reeve combines the sublime power of differences in scale with the foreboding political awareness of a completely urbanised future: “the things she’d thought were distant mountains were not distant at all. Nor were they mountains. They were Traction Cities so large that, when she first looked at them, her brain had simply not understood what her eyes were showing her.”³⁹ What else could post-utopian politics be in need of, if not a “cartography of abstract machinisms,” a mode of perception that refuses to renaturalise that which cannot be shoved back into the essentialism of a purified, clean “Nature”?⁴⁰ In Reeve’s all too realistic dystopia, even the mountains are artificial. The highest mountain on Earth—Zhan Shan, is of uncertain origin. Pennyroyal’s scepticism is unnerving, for questioning itself can lead to new forms of mental derangement, ambiguity and uncertainty. “Are these new mountains just the result of natural vulcanism, as we’ve always been told?” asks Pennyroyal, “Or are we looking at the results of Ancient technology gone atrociously wrong?”⁴¹ The fact that the reader finds no answer to such questions, or even as to when the events of the novels could be taking place (for us, the phrase “Traction Era” means nothing) entails a blockage of epistemic clarity.

As Peter Y. Paik notes in relation to dystopian science fiction, such narratives confront us with the question of whether utopian progressivist visions can survive if

society “is deprived of the technological advancement and economic abundance its citizens have come to take for granted.”⁴² Reeve’s tetralogy gives an unambiguously negative answer: subtraction of technological infrastructure results in a subtractive and degraded social reality, at least for its human inhabitants. A haze separates us from the past. Instead of a verified past or a stable present, let alone a certain future, we have a “phylum of concrete machines.”⁴³ The tetralogy constitutes an exemplar of the young adult genre, which is generally characterised ambiguity and transitoriness. Yet it would be mistaken to equate this lack of clarity with a merely generational perspective. Instead of a recognisably human society, based on the autonomy of the individual, Reeve suggests a dystopian future filled with mutant desiring flows. While the narrative appears to revolve around “the comings and goings of Tom and Hester,” it is misguided to overly privilege their impossible relationship as “a key part of the tetralogy’s structural fabric.”⁴⁴ The machinic reality of their circumstances has already precluded the possibility of a heteronormative family life. Sexual relations, too, are permeated by machinic layers of desire. This latter aspect is particularly evident in the implied homosexual relationship between Anna Fang and Sathya, a young commander of the Green Storm. After Anna Fang’s passing, Sathya’s desire remains intact, albeit deterritorialised into a perverse desire for Fang’s resurrection, culminating in the latter’s reanimation in the form of a misanthropic Stalker robot. Desire is never entirely human: it is always already a manifestation of the machinic unconscious.⁴⁵ Desire follows any pathway open to its outflow. Whether in the form of insane municipalities or humans loving machines, it unbinds flows of enjoyment and bliss into heterogeneous multiplicities always open to the logic of replacement, repositioning and play. One may experience intense joy from occupying a new position, a new sexual role, a new performance.

It is here that we may introduce the notion of the writing machine as “heterocosm.” The heterocosm, according to McCallum, is a future speculative fictional setting contingent upon present realities.⁴⁶ Under certain conditions, the present is capable of flowing into a universe of alternative realities, truths and scapes, through the semiological substance of writing. Can the Traction Cities themselves

serve as lines of flight, indications of interchangeable configurations waiting to come in the future? Desire, as evidenced by Sathya's tragically unrealisable love for her resurrected companion, is fully susceptible to "deterritorialization ... towards another potentiality."⁴⁷ Once rendered separate from territorial restrictions, machinic indexes come to synchronically assemble the conditions of their own movements. Of the ruins of London, we read that "everything was so twisted, so jumbled-up, so distorted that it was hard to say what it had been before."⁴⁸ This distortion pertains to the narrative of the tetralogy in general. Machinic potentialities become capable of owning the means of movement, independently of human presence. If the novels are about what it means to be human, as Bradford and her colleagues suggest, one can say with just as much veracity, that they are also about what it means not to be human, and in a broader sense, what it means not to mean anything. Through the deterritorialisation of refrains and libidinality alike, the machinic is mixed with the organic, the natural with the artificial. All is artifice, all of history is a social-material operation of various scapes, be they mediascapes, landscapes or cityscapes. In a museum, we find the most unlikely of scenes, an ambient atmosphere of residual Hollywood nostalgia, serving as the substrate for a superbly haunting experience:

a projector rattled, showing copies of some of the fragments of film which had survived from before the Sixty Minute War. Armoured knights rode through a burning wood, their shadows stretching up the smoke; flying machines lifted into a tropical dawn; a little tramp walked down a dusty road; ground cars chased each other like tiny cities; a man dangled from a broken clock high above some enormous static settlement, and, in soft, beautiful close-ups rose the dreaming faces of the screen goddesses.⁴⁹

This mediascape, composed of fragments of a world that has disappeared several millennia prior to the events of *Mortal Engines*, serves as a stark reminder of how far the process of deterritorialisation can progress. All that remains of the American Dream are a few incoherent pieces of film, transmitting the empty gazes of "screen

goddesses” whose fantasies have been relegated to the pure and empty form of dead time.

Is Philip Reeve correct in his assertion that “the end of the world is just no fun any more?”⁵⁰ Has the dystopian novel as genre reached the point of exhaustion? Can speculation bear any more of the desiccation and dismemberment visited upon it by the dystopian imagination? The evident popularity of dystopian fiction suggests that the consumer appetite for distasteful and inhuman heterocosms is far from satiated. As distinct from Reeve’s nostalgic humanism, however, we have attempted to uncover a nonhuman mode of interpreting dystopia through a suitably deformed reading of his tetralogy. Disappearance of anthropocentric political norms need not entail some overarching fatalism, or humanism with a sad face. Writing is always excessive, and necessarily transgresses genre boundaries. In this sense, whether Reeve’s work even qualifies as young adult or adult reading is of secondary relevance. What matters is what comes to matter within the post-apocalyptic world of the novels themselves. If there is a theoretical take-away from the *Mortal Engines* tetralogy, it is that writing and memory can survive our downfall. The Stalker Shrike outlives all organic humans, functioning as a “remembering machine.”⁵¹ The twilight of the human should not be equated with the sunset of writing. Memory outlives its contents, and this lesson is impossible to incorporate into any humanist vision of what culture should be. Although humans are mercifully still present, they could just as well be absent in Shrike’s time, for we know full well that he would be capable of remembering independently of any human contact. The writing machine as catalysis for machinic enunciations has not yet reached its point of apogee. It is never a case of deterritorialisation attaining a maximum level and then petering off. Deterritorialisation continues into the infinity of an inscrutable time.

Once we learn to observe the concrete operations of concrete propulsive machinic assemblages, we find “a deterritorialization working within both forms and matters while generating deterritorializing forms and deforming matters.”⁵² If anything, the reduction of form to formlessness, as well as the consequent generation of degenerate forms, is what characterises Reeve’s *Mortal Engines Quartet*. Be it the

Earth or the human element, all coordinates must be deformed and reprocessed. Deformation plays a key role throughout the novels that compose Reeve's masterpiece. My strongly dystopian reading accords with a mode of pessimistic political philosophical inquiry that highlights the distance between the possibility of humanistic political action and the stark reality of dystopia.⁵³ This pessimism is qualified by the possibility of new becomings beyond the sphere of the human. While the planet is reduced to a muddy mess by the Traction Cities and the artillery of the supposedly environmentalist Green Storm, the human element in turn is pulped into a bloody mess. Out of this formlessness, strange forms emerge. As we have seen, even supposedly natural birds are rendered strangely artificial through their evolutionary adaptations of machinic enunciations such as car alarms. More pointedly, human primate aggression, too, is resurrected and transformed into clanking, aggressive cyborg monstrosities by the Green Storm militants. A Stalker, while attacking intruders, paints "patterns of bloody footprints like the diagram of some violent dance," reducing the human invaders to "bundles" reminiscent of "old clothes."⁵⁴ Are these bloodthirsty killing machines abstract artists, painting the ground with the abject traces of a disappearing, dismembered, disarticulated humanity? The process of deformation, similarly to any other deterritorialisation, cannot be closed off. Ironically, it is the resurrected who appear to be the most dangerous to human life. The refrain, boomerang-like, strikes down human arrogance.

Referring back to Robinson and Tormey's reading of Bonnano, we may underline the affinity between the idea of propulsive utopia and movement: "propulsive utopia is not simply propulsive in the sense of generating action, but in that it exists in the field of movement, becoming and agency, not in the field of fixity, being and structure."⁵⁵ As we have seen, propulsive value itself can come to be detached from its utopian origin, and it fully capable of transforming into a fundamentally misanthropic vision of a world without anthropomorphic life forms. "Humanity," the ruthless Stalker Fang informs us, "is a plague."⁵⁶ Such a viewpoint is at the very least latent within ecological discourses, and the figure of the transformed cyborg Stalker Fang can easily be read as an ironic reflection upon deep, or even dark

ecology, so perilously close do nature-centric tendencies come to a generalised hatred of humanity.⁵⁷ The heterogeneous tendencies of machinic desire coalesce into an “assignifying faciality,” a subjectivity dead to human meaning or perception, yet thoroughly open to complexity, change and movement, a “trans-subjectivity.”⁵⁸ Heterogeneity cannot allow virgin configurations to remain intact. Involutionary functions and static structures must collapse into absolute, limitless decomposition. Composition, as conceptualised through the ruthless power of social and natural selection, demands the periodic repetition of decomposition. Every innovative function involves a prior collapsed disorder. Like the “endlessly tumbling papers and pens and plastic cups and frozen astronauts” that populate the gothic realm of dead space, we, too, are predestined to tumble into the desubjectifying abyss of the labyrinth of disappearance.⁵⁹ Emptiness is paramount, we are decomposition, and nothing remains apart from time’s disordered, frantic loop. The field of movement is perfectly capable of surviving the absence of human subjectivity. Such is the uncomfortable truth exemplified by the *Mortal Engines Quartet*. The active energy of propulsive dystopia is successfully channelled into a vision of a nonhuman machinic future that remains productive, avoiding the double danger of sterility and fatalism. We have every reason to remain faithful to the vision of a machinic phylum, for the end of a certain species or a certain way of being need not entail automatically the foreclosure of evolution or complexity. To paraphrase Robinson and Tormey, the machinic is “something which comes into existence interstitially, in the gaps and holes in the system.”⁶⁰ Would post-left anarchy be itself a product of an artificial social selection? If this truly is the case, then we discover in the figure of the mobile Traction City a line of flight that is the denouement of rhizomatic abundance, an excess that emerges from within ostensibly human structures as cutting-edge, technologically integrated flesh.

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NOTES

¹ Janis Dawson, “Beneath Their Cheerful Bunny Faces, His Slippers Had Steel Toe Caps’: Traction Cities, Postmodernisms, and Coming of Age in Philip Reeve’s *Mortal Engines* and *Predator’s Gold*,” *Children’s Literature in Education* 38, no. 2 (2007): 143.

² Dawson, “Beneath,” 144.

³ Philip Reeve, *Mortal Engines* (London: Scholastic, 2001), 11.

⁴ Reeve, *Mortal Engines*, 130.

⁵ Reeve, *Mortal Engines*, 298.

⁶ Elizabeth Bullen and Elizabeth Parsons, “Dystopian Visions of Global Capitalism: Philip Reeve’s *Mortal Engines* and MT Anderson’s *Feed*,” *Children’s Literature in Education* 38, no. 2 (2007): 128.

⁷ Philip Reeve, *Infernal Devices* (London: Scholastic, 2005), 50.

⁸ Philip Reeve, *A Darkling Plain* (London: Scholastic, 2006), 404–405.

⁹ I use the term “postmodern” here in the Lyotardian sense of denoting a social space devoid of universal grand narratives. This usage in itself is not intended to be exhaustive, and it would be foolhardy to argue otherwise. Nonetheless, it is my view that Lyotard’s use of the phrase does approximate the general atmosphere of a postapocalyptic social reality, situated as it is among the ruins of twentieth century utopian projects. See: Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

- ¹⁰ Alfredo Bonnano, *Propulsive Utopia*, 4, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/alfredo-m-bonanno-propulsive-utopia>.
- ¹¹ Bonnano, *Propulsive Utopia*, 5.
- ¹² Bonnano, *Propulsive Utopia*, 20.
- ¹³ Bonnano, *Propulsive Utopia*, 5.
- ¹⁴ Reeve, *Infernal Devices*, 119.
- ¹⁵ Reeve, *A Darkling Plain*, 405.
- ¹⁶ Andrew Robinson and Tormey, Simon, "Utopias Without Transcendence? Post-Left Anarchy, Immediacy and Utopian Energy," in *Globalization and Utopia: Critical Essays*, ed. Patrick Hayden and Chamsy el-Ojeili (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 157.
- ¹⁷ Robinson and Tormey, "Utopias," 158.
- ¹⁸ Robinson and Tormey, "Utopias," 159.
- ¹⁹ Robinson and Tormey, "Utopias," 161.
- ²⁰ For instance, according to common knowledge at the time of the novel's events, America was "discovered in the year 1924 by Christopher Columbo, the great explorer and detective." Philip Reeve, *Predator's Gold* (London: Scholastic, 2003), 29.
- ²¹ Dawson, "Beneath," 150.
- ²² Reeve, *Infernal Devices*, 104.
- ²³ Félix Guattari, *The Machinic Unconscious: Essays in Schizoanalysis*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Los Angeles: semiotext(e), 2011), 119.
- ²⁴ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 120.
- ²⁵ Reeve, *Infernal Devices*, 97.
- ²⁶ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 119.
- ²⁷ Reeve, *A Darkling Plain*, 227.
- ²⁸ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 29.
- ²⁹ AbdouMaliq Simone, "Pirate Towns: Reworking Social and Symbolic Infrastructures in Johannesburg and Douala," *Urban Studies* 43, no. 2 (2006): 357–370.
- ³⁰ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 46.
- ³¹ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 59.
- ³² Reeve, *Predator's Gold*, 228.
- ³³ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 69.
- ³⁴ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 127.

- ³⁵ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 127.
- ³⁶ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 113.
- ³⁷ Robyn McCallum, "Ignorant Armies on a Darkling Plain: The New World Disorder of Global Economics, Environmentalism and Urbanisation in Philip Reeve's *Hungry Cities*," *International Research in Children's Literature* 2, no. 2 (2009): 221.
- ³⁸ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 171.
- ³⁹ Reeve, *Infernal Devices*, 209.
- ⁴⁰ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 174.
- ⁴¹ Reeve, *Predator's Gold*, 24.
- ⁴² Peter Y. Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota), 145.
- ⁴³ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 193.
- ⁴⁴ Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 103.
- ⁴⁵ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 196.
- ⁴⁶ McCallum, "Ignorant," 223.
- ⁴⁷ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 255.
- ⁴⁸ Reeve, *A Darkling Plain*, 201.
- ⁴⁹ Reeve, *Infernal Devices*, 265–6.
- ⁵⁰ Philip Reeve, "The Worst Is Yet to Come," *School Library Journal* 57, no. 8 (2011): 34.
- ⁵¹ Reeve, *A Darkling Plain*, 567.
- ⁵² Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 138.
- ⁵³ Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse*, 181.
- ⁵⁴ Reeve, *Predator's Gold*, 256.
- ⁵⁵ Robinson and Tormey, "Utopias," 165.
- ⁵⁶ Reeve, *A Darkling Plain*, 538.
- ⁵⁷ Bradford et al., *New World Orders*, 102.
- ⁵⁸ Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious*, 326–327.
- ⁵⁹ Reeve, *Predator's Gold*, 235.
- ⁶⁰ Robinson and Tormey, "Utopias," 170.