

LEONARDO REVIEWS

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BOOKS

CLOUD ATLAS

by David Mitchell. Random House, New York, NY, U.S.A., 2004. 528 pp. Paper. ISBN: 0-375-50725-6.

Reviewed by George Gessert. E-mail: ggessert@igc.org.

Cloud Atlas is an “overwhelming masterpiece,” according to the *Washington Times*. “Never less than enthralling,” announces *The Wall Street Journal*. The *New York Times Book Review* proclaims author David Mitchell “a genius.” But do not let the blurbs put you off. These are not hype so much as a loss for words. From the first page it is clear that *Cloud Atlas* is an extraordinary book. Mitchell has a rare gift for language and for the kind of cliffhanging plots that most of us have become habituated to through movies and television. But most dramatically he has a gift for style, not just one but many. In *Cloud Atlas* he writes with the hardboiled flair of an investigative journalist, in the persona of a British composer from the 1930s, in the voice of a prisoner in a contemporary nursing home and in the manner of a 19th-century American diarist. In addition to his mastery of historical styles, Mitchell invents two languages of the future, one for a genetically engineered slave of a Korean corporation and another, funny and—once one grows accustomed to it—surprisingly beautiful, for a goatherd after the collapse of technocratic civilization. Through this play with style, Mitchell

explores the human condition in enough different times and places to suggest patterns that transcend historical circumstance.

The first of the six voices in *Cloud Atlas* is that of a San Francisco accountant on a business trip to the South Pacific in the 1850s. No actual 19th-century diarist would have written as intimately as Mitchell’s Adam Ewing (and I suspect no English homosexual from the 1930s would have written with the ferocity of Frobisher, the composer), but verisimilitude is hardly the point. At the Chatham Islands due east of New Zealand, Ewing is an accidental witness to the genocide of the Moriori, the islands’ original inhabitants. As a white American very much of his time, Ewing at first assumes that he has encountered a natural and perhaps divinely ordained process in which an inferior race is being replaced by its superiors. And yet he is repelled by the brutality and, eventually, befriends a Moriori trying to escape the Chathams for sanctuary in Hawaii.

Ewing the racist proves himself capable of seeing beyond race. But what is race? The worst violence is perpetrated not by the British, but by Maori displaced to the Chatham Islands by white colonists in New Zealand. The Maori and the Moriori, murderers and victims, are in effect one people. They speak variants of the same language (even their names for themselves are variations of the same word) and share numerous customs and beliefs. The Maori, however, have followed the path of violence, while the Moriori cultivated nonviolence. And so we are introduced to Mitchell’s metaphor for humanity as a cloud, interconnected and fragmenting, each part containing particles and possibilities of others, constantly flowing.

Ewing’s journal ends abruptly, literally in the middle of a sentence, and we find ourselves in 1931 with Robert Frobisher, a ne’er-do-well composer fleeing England and his creditors. In Belgium he insinuates himself into the household of Vyvyan Ayr, the grand old man of British modernist composers. Frobisher soon becomes involved with Ayr’s wife.

At this point the reader may well ask: What do the misadventures of musicians in 1930s Belgium have to do with the last of the Morioris—to say nothing of a Korean slave clone working for a futuristic McDonalds? Mitchell traces subtle connections that seem to indicate much larger forces at work. Frobisher discovers Ewing’s journal in the Ayr library. Ewing, Frobisher, the Korean slave and the last Moriori all have affinities: Each leaves familiar territory for the unknown and each encounters forms of murderous selfishness that suggest something eternally dark about human nature. There are hints that souls transmigrate.

But discontinuities outweigh continuities. In much modern literature and art we encounter heaps of fragments. Rimbaud’s *Season in Hell*, classical cubism, *The Wasteland* and Smithson’s sublimely mordant images of entropy are well-known examples. In *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell subsumes modernist fragmentation in mist, not the mist of romanticism or of obfuscation, but of particles interacting in infinitely various but exact ways. Interactions within the human cloud are beautiful, terrible, constantly surprising, sometimes wonderfully funny and always passing.

Reviews Panel: Peter Anders, Fred Allan Andersson, Wilfred Arnold, Roy Ascott, Curtis Bahn, Claire Barliant, René Beekman, Roy R. Behrens, Andreas Broeckmann, Annick Bureaud, Chris Cobb, Robert Coburn, Donna Cox, Sean Cubitt, Nina Czegledy, Shawn Decker, Margaret Dolinsky, Dennis Dollens, Luisa Paraguai Donati, Victoria Duckett, Maia Engeli, Enzo Ferrara, Deborah Frizzell, Bulat M. Galejev, George Gessert, Elisa Giaccardi, Thom Gillespie, Allan Graubard, Dene Grigar, Diane Gromala, Rob Harle, Craig Harris, Josepha Haveman, Paul Hertz, Amy Ione, Stephen Jones, Richard Kade, Curtis E.A. Karnow, Nisar Keshvani, Julien Knebusch, Daniela Kutschat, Mike Legget, Roger F. Malina, Jacques Mandelbrojt, Robert A. Mitchell, Rick Mitchell, Mike Mosher, Axel Mulder, Kevin Murray, Frieder Nake, Maureen A. Nappi, Angela Ndalanis, Simone Osthoff, Jack Ox, Robert Pepperell, Kjell yngve Petersen, Cliff Pichover, Patricia Pisters, Michael Punt, Harry Rand, Sonya Rapoport, Edward Shanken, Aparna Sharma, Shirley Shor, George K. Shortess, Joel Slayton, Christa Sommerer, Yvonne Spielmann, David Surman, Pia Tikka, David Topper, René van Peer, Stefaan Van Ryssen, Ian Versteegen, Stephen Wilson, Arthur Woods, Soh Yeong.

With each change comes a new quality of light cast backward onto earlier parts of the book.

In addition to the two plots that I have summarized, there are four others, each as riveting as a thriller, and each illuminating the others—or perhaps not, because the lives described in this novel (if it is a novel, and not some literary parallel to a Robert Altman film) are involved as much in digression as in anything else. Mitchell's humor often skirts tragedy, sometimes plunging right over the precipice, transforming our laughter into a component of loss. Not that Mitchell's tricks are mean spirited, but *Cloud Atlas* should satisfy even the most jaded appetite for irony. At the same time irony is not at the heart of the book. Irony, like nostalgia, rests on faith that normality, justice, rational order or goodness once prevailed. Although Mitchell accommodates these yearnings, his view of the human condition is not heavily dependent on them.

Instead, *Cloud Atlas* is informed by something akin to Darwinism and Buddhism. They offer explanations of human experience that imply no Garden of Eden and no fall, promise nothing like universal progress and suggest no direction to history (social Darwinism, Teilhard de Chardin and other misrepresentations of Darwinism to the contrary). Tentative Buddhist attitudes (“part-time Buddhism, maybe,” as the central character in *Ghostwritten*, one of Mitchell's earlier novels, puts it) provide one way for Mitchell's characters to live in a Darwinian world without falling into barbarism, denial or despair. These three threats assail and inwardly haunt the characters, who must deal with crimes that go unpunished and with the triumphs of bullies and thugs. What we call the “human spirit”—that is, what we treasure most about being the tentatively aware kind of creature that we are—endures in spite of the odds. Always marginal, always fragile, always unsure of itself and unlikely in its prospects, the human spirit is no more than a flea on a monster. But fleas, as one character observes, are difficult to eradicate.

Read *Cloud Atlas* for page-turning plots and for the joy of English used superbly well. Read it for the gorgeous symmetry of its structure. *Cloud Atlas* is an antidote to cynicism and to the dreariness of culture without transcendent vision. This is a map into the future.

PICTURING MACHINES: 1400–1700

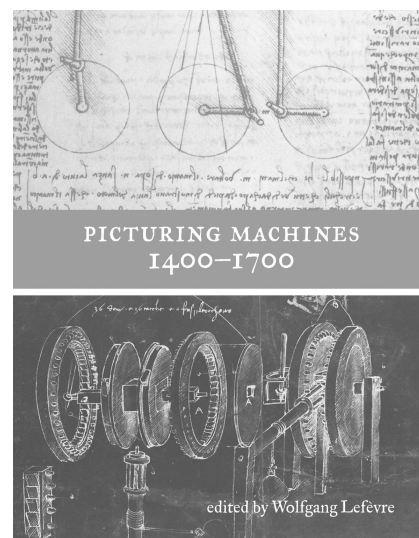
edited by Wolfgang Lefèvre. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2004. 354 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 0-262-12269-3.

Reviewed by Jan Baetens. E-mail: <jan.baetens@arts.kuleuven.ac.be>.

By the end of the Middle Ages, books and manuscripts on architecture, urbanism, fortification, machines, agriculture, engineering and so on were increasingly illustrated by technical drawings. Those drawings are astonishing for many reasons. First, there is, of course, the very fact of their appearance, for the presence of technical drawings in medieval writings on the same subjects was anything but common. Second, there is the admiration they still inspire today, for the technical illustrations of this period are no less intriguing, complex and inspiring than the better-known artistic or religious imagery. Third and most of all, there are the many riddles and questions raised for contemporary readers. Even for specialists, many questions of meaning and use continue to haunt these images, whose cognitive, epistemological, social and even ontological status is far from clear.

This collection of essays gathered by Wolfgang Lefèvre, senior scientist at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, does not attempt to give an overall view of the social and scientific meaning of the very different ways in which machines were represented by the book. As the editor repeatedly stresses in both his general introduction and the smaller introductions of the various sections of the books, *Picturing Machines: 1400–1700* tends to give priority to the close reading of key works, authors and transformations of the period under question. Yet, despite this methodological a priori, the editor's contributions manage very well to put the very specialized contributions of the nine essays in a wider and coherent perspective. Hence, the major importance of this book for all scholars interested in issues of visual literacy and topics such as ocularcentrism and the history of visual representation in Western culture.

How Wolfgang Lefèvre tackles the three reasons of interest mentioned above gives a very good idea of the capacity of this book to transcend the



apparent limitations of the close-reading approach to individual topics.

Concerning the very appearance of the technical drawings, the editor presents a clear survey of the paradigm shift in technical culture in the early modern image. As Lefèvre argues, the study of technical drawings cannot be separated from that of the global scientific culture at the end of the Middle Ages. The development of new forms of division of labor; the spread of new forms of knowledge propagation and, therefore, of learning and instruction; the complexification of knowledge in general, which was no longer exclusively a matter of transmission of skills and experience, but also of science and speculation; and finally the connection with new types of communication with readers, for instance with possible sponsors with a real interest and training in technological devices—all these elements explain the paradigm shift between the “oral” Middle Ages and the “visual” early modern age.

As far as the second aspect of our reading of these images is concerned, the book continues the very welcome break, now established in historical science studies, with the two stereotypes that have long hindered a more correct approach to technical drawings from earlier eras: on the one hand, the fascination exerted by the aesthetic qualities of the images (the fact that often these drawings were from the hands of “artists” such as Leonard da Vinci only increased this type of misunderstanding); on the other hand, the denial of any real technical and scientific value to images that seemed incredibly naive and ingenious (the