
Cathartic Fables, Fabled Catharses: Photography, Fiction and Ethics in Graham Swift's *Out of this World*

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The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

ANTONIO GRAMSCI, *PRISON NOTEBOOKS*

No matter when it is written, every story from now on will be from before Auschwitz.

MAURICE BLANCHOT, 'AFTER THE FACT'

Graham Swift's writing space may with some justification be described as the liminal zone between a now-defunct modernity and a tentative and tantalising postmodernity, to be created out of the debris of the past. As the author puts it himself in a video interview conducted shortly after the publication of his novel *Out of this World* (1988), his main interest is in the exploration of the 'no man's land' between 'some past, traditional world' which has irreversibly disintegrated and an elusive sense of 'a viable, vital future' which would avoid the pitfalls of the past:

So I'm interested in people who are caught between a traditional world and a sense of a viable, vital future. It's that sort of no man's land that interests me, and I'm not so sure that that isn't the position of a lot of people nowadays. I mean, we're seeing so many of our visions of the future prove delusory, whilst we cannot really go back to the old, traditional world, or when we do, we do it in a rather crass sense, you know, evoking some sentimental vision of England,

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Britain, in the past, which no longer pertains, even if it did a hundred years ago, and there are obvious political examples of that, like the Falklands episode, which was so absurdly grotesque, you know, it's very disturbing.¹

This comment acutely captures the precarious situation of many of the characters in *Out of this World*, who find themselves wandering between two worlds, one dead but eminently resurrectable (cf. Gramsci's 'morbid symptoms'), and another full of promise but still struggling to be born. The novel reflects at great length on the part (to be) played by photographic and textual representation in mediating this critical transition. My aim in this article will be to analyse this mediating process and to assess its ethical import at this particular historical juncture.

At first glance, the function ascribed to both photography and fiction is an unequivocally liberatory one. *Out of this World* engages with a range of major events in twentieth-century history, including the two world wars and the Nuremberg trials, the Vietnam War, the landing on the moon, the colonels' coup in Greece, the IRA bombing campaign and the Falklands/Maldivas conflict. Many of these events have been witnessed at close hand by Harry Beech, one of the novel's main figures, who has pursued a successful career as a photojournalist capturing harrowing images from the world's trouble spots. During his professional days, Harry was driven by a desire to open people's eyes to the woes of the contemporary world: 'Seeing is believing and certain things must be seen to have been done. Without the camera the world might start to disbelieve'.² He used to say that photography should be about 'what you cannot see', not just because 'it is far away and only the eye of the camera will take you there', but also because 'it happens so suddenly or so cruelly there is no time or even desire to see it, and only the camera can show you what it is like while it is still happening' (H 55). By 'hold[ing] open the shutter when the world wants to close its eyes' (H 92), Harry hoped to produce images that could speak directly to people's conscience. He held the view that photographic evidence, being 'truth positive, fact incarnate and incontrovertible' (H 205), has the potential to strip away layers of ideological sediment which

¹ Qtd. in David Profumo, Interview with Graham Swift, ICA, 1988, *The Roland Collection of Films & Videos on Art – Writers Talk: Ideas of Our Time*, 25 July 2000 <<http://www.roland-collection.com/rolandcollection/preview/W82.ram>>.

² Graham Swift, *Out of this World* (London: Picador, 1997), p. 107. All subsequent citations of this novel will be included in the body of the text. The page number will be preceded by the initial of the narrator of the section from which the passage in question is taken, with H standing for Harry and S for Sophie.

have historically prevented people from assuming their ethical responsibilities towards their fellow men. According to Harry, 'The problem is what you don't see. The problem is your field of vision' (H 119); hence also his fantasy of taking '[a] picture of the whole world' (H 119): 'The ultimate photo. All of it, the whole of it, everything' (H 38). In extending the limits of sympathy far beyond the bounds imposed by one's immediate field of vision, photography seems to provide a solution to the problem posed by the novel's motto: 'What the eye sees not, the heart rues not'.

Apparently, the same purpose is served by textual representation to the extent that it aspires to a condition of overwhelming realism, as *Out of this World* clearly does. The novel proceeds by constant reference to photographic images, whether real or imagined,³ whose primary function appears to be to confer upon the text the mimetic authority traditionally attributed to photography. If, as Nancy Armstrong argues in *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism*, since the mid-nineteenth century fiction has derived its realist credentials from fidelity to a 'shadow archive'⁴ of photographic images which has come to define our notion of the real, *Out of this World* presents itself as the prototypical realist novel.⁵ In addition to relying on a straightforward realist aesthetic, *Out of this World* hinges on a traditional plot structure and uses a conventional cast of characters. Through the first-person narratives of Harry and his daughter Sophie, it tells a fairly familiar story of estrangement and reconciliation, of divergent paths that meet again. Alienated from one another ever since their father and grandfather Robert Beech was killed in a terrorist attack in 1972, Harry and Sophie attempt to come to terms with the past through their interlocking monologues, with the assistance of a

³ The pervasiveness of the photographic metaphor in the main narrators' reminiscences and confessions is remarked upon by Patrick Parrinder: 'What they remember, what they look forward to, and the way in which they project their lives, are all, in effect, a series of visible scenes: still photos, or moving pictures, captured from a particular standpoint (their own), fixed and developed, and then stored as if in some psychic album' (Patrick Parrinder, 'Verbing a Noun', Rev. of *Out of this World*, by Graham Swift; *Three Farmers on their Way to a Dance*, by Richard Powers; *The March Fence*, by Matthew York; and *What is the Matter with Mary Jane?*, by Daisy Waugh, *London Review of Books* 17 Mar. 1988, 17, p. 17).

⁴ Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002), p. 27.

⁵ Michel Morel similarly interprets *Out of this World*'s appeal to photography as a way of reinforcing the realistic illusion: 'Le texte semble alors s'appropriier l'effet photographique par une sorte de dérivation hypertextuelle, cette dérivation lui conférant la force persuasive de la plaque photographique marquée par la trace matérielle de l'événement vécu Comme si l'écriture cherchait à s'effacer devant un effet de réel supérieur, effet quasiment mimologique' (Michel Morel, 'Out of this World: Le romancier, pourvoyeur d'images malgré lui', in *Graham Swift ou le temps du récit*, ed. Michel Morel et al. (Paris: Ed. Messene, 1996), 19-27, p. 24).

dream-woman and an analyst respectively. The narrative inexorably moves towards their final reunion, which is not actually recounted in the text, but which seems bound to take place within the fabulous logic of sorrow to salvation or – to use the novel's preferred terminology – mud to air. Thus, the text would seem to suggest that redemption can be had, and that discord can be overcome through a concerted investment in the healing powers of love and narrative communication.

This good news show does not go unchallenged, however. The sense of moral optimism which the novel projects is tempered by the doubts expressed by several characters about the ethical efficacy of both photography and fiction. Disillusioned with his former profession, Harry reflects that, rather than exposing ideological mystification, photography actually promotes it:

I used to believe once that ours was the age in which we would say farewell to myths and legends, when they would fall off us like useless plumage and we would see ourselves clearly only as what we are. I thought the camera was the key to this process. But I think the world cannot bear to be only what it is. The world always wants another world, a shadow, an echo, a model of itself. (H 187)

The 'new myth' which the world so craves is that of 'its own authentic-synthetic photographic memory' (H 189). In true Baudrillardian fashion, Harry wonders: 'When did it happen? That imperceptible inversion. As if the camera no longer recorded but conferred reality' (H 189). Rather than putting us in direct contact with the world, the sheer mass of visual images by which we are bombarded on a daily basis effectively makes the real disappear into hyperreality. Despite its pretensions to mimetic verisimilitude and truthfulness, photography in the age of simulation ends up producing a sense of reality-loss. Thus, it can be seen to fulfil the same reality-obscuring function as the myths and legends which it was expected to dispel.⁶

⁶ The notion that technological advances are taking us back to square one instead of leading us forward into a bright and radiant future also underlies Harry's wry comment on the fact that some of the astronauts on the Apollo missions 'got religion' (H 13): 'The irony of it. That we should have spent centuries shedding superstition and actually evolving the means that would get us up into Heaven. Only to discover that, all along, *He* was there first' (H 14). Harry's fairly bleak assessment of the current state of the world is shared by the author himself, who argues that 'there's plenty of evidence for a lack of real progress in the world, real improvement, despite obviously a lot of technical improvement' (qtd. in Profumo, ICA interview). Significantly, however, Swift refuses to be classified as a fatalist. Confronted, in another interview, with 'explicit' and 'implicit' statements which he has allegedly made to the effect that 'there is no future' and that 'the future is already the past', he responds rather sharply that 'I'm not

In particular, photography appears to collude with the myth of the sovereign subject, one of the basic tenets of modernity. As Susan Sontag points out, photography celebrates the imperial self: 'To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power'.⁷ Sontag detects 'something predatory' in the act of taking a picture:

To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder...⁸

In fact, the analogy of the camera and the gun is frequently invoked in *Out of this World* by both of the main narrators. Sophie observes that 'You can shoot with both. You can load and aim with both. With both you can find your target and the rest of the world goes black' (S 77). The cameramen and photographers at her grandfather's funeral are compared to snipers (S 84) and seen to be 'waiting in full ambush... Primed and loaded' (S 85). When Harry and Sophie walk through the lych-gate, 'they all fired away' (S 85). Harry, for his part, recalls that, as a serviceman during the Second World War, he 'was taught the parts and use of a camera in much the same manner as rifle drill' (H 49). He too is struck by the resemblance between camera and gun when he is caught off his guard by a swarm of photographers covering the death of his father: 'The flash-bulbs, like pistol shots' (H 93).

If it is indeed the case that 'the world cannot bear to be only what it is', i.e. that the confrontation with a demystified reality is a frightening and horrific (non-)experience, photography makes it possible to reduce the unsettling impact of this traumatic encounter. Harry recounts how the camera seems to confer 'a heady sense of immunity' on news photographers finding themselves in the most dangerous situations: 'The camera seems to make them invisible, invulnerable, incorporeal. They are like those immortal gods and goddesses who flitted unharmed round the plain at Troy' (H 121). A photo is 'a reprieve, an act of suspension, a charm' which

sure that I've made those statements rather than characters in my novels, particularly in *Waterland*' (qtd. in Catherine Bernard and Gilles Menegaldo, Interview with Graham Swift, in *Graham Swift ou le temps du récit*, eds. Michel Morel et al. (Paris: Ed. Mes-sene, 1996), 9-18, p. 15).

⁷ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), p. 4.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

allows one to remain unaffected in the face of potentially overwhelming events:

If you see something terrible or wonderful, that you can't take in or focus your feelings for – a battlefield, the Taj Mahal, the woman with whom you think you are falling in love – take a picture of it, hold the camera to it. Look again when it's safe. (H 122)

The alliance between photography and tourism, which the novel also touches upon, can be explained by reference to the same detraumatizing logic. As Sontag writes,

The very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel. Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter.⁹

A similar analysis is put forward by Sophie: 'I used to think, Why is it so desperate, so sad, so urgent – everyone taking the same pictures? And I'd come to this conclusion: They are trying to possess something that doesn't belong to them' (S 130). Using a camera is a way of maintaining one's self-assertiveness when confronted with situations that might pose a threat to one's self-conception. By reducing the outside world to one's own terms, one effectively absolves oneself of the responsibility to negotiate the demands of alterity. Rather than denouncing indifference and effecting a genuine moral transformation, then, photography appears only to confirm people in their habitual patterns of thought and behaviour.

Throughout his career as a photojournalist, Harry struggled with the profound ambivalence of photographic representation. For all his missionary zeal, he was well aware that his ambition to awaken people's conscience by shoving the naked truth down their throats was counteracted by an aestheticising tendency within photography itself which could never be entirely suppressed. However, this realisation did not stop him from trying to achieve just that:

When I took that photograph I thought to myself, if not in so many words: Let this have no aesthetic content, let this be only like it is, in the middle of things. Since I knew already that photos taken in even the most chaotic circumstances can acquire, lifted from the mad flow of events, a perverse formality and poise. (H 106).

⁹ Ibid., pp. 9–10.

The kind of ‘straight photography’ which Harry favours strives to ‘[a]void beauty, composition, statements, symbols, eloquence, rhetoric, decorum, taste’ (H 92), but cannot help being always already contaminated by these elements. As aesthetic artefacts, pictures meant to shock and to disturb can produce the very opposite effect of the one intended.

This state of affairs is exacerbated, according to Harry, by the fact that nowadays photographs are often required to tell stories to satisfy the demands of a smug and complacent public which has no taste for the kind of ‘unaccommodatable fact’ that Harry seeks to transmit:

People want stories. They don’t want facts. Even journalists say “story” when they mean “event”. Of the news photo they say: Every picture tells a story – worth two columns of words. But supposing it doesn’t tell a story? Supposing it shows only unaccommodatable fact? Supposing it shows the point at which the story breaks down. The point at which narrative goes dumb. (92)

The rivalling conceptions of the relationship between photography and narrative, which Harry plays off against each other in this passage, can be usefully reformulated in terms of the tension between the two dimensions of photography which Roland Barthes calls *punctum* and *studium*. If the *studium* represents the world of codes, of culture, of conventionalised context, the *punctum* refers to a moment of breakdown in the photograph’s cultural coding: ‘The second element [i.e. the *punctum*] will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me’.¹⁰ By privileging the readability of the *studium* at the expense of the traumatic force of the *punctum* – for example, by considering the photograph as the vehicle of a meaningful story – one ‘tame[s]’ the photograph, ‘temper[ing] the madness which keeps threatening to explode in the face of whoever looks at it’.¹¹ Such, according to Barthes and Harry, is the way in which society tends to deal with photographs. Their fascination, however, is with the *punctum*, the photograph’s self-shattering power, and the confrontation with ‘the wakening of intractable reality’ which it invites.¹²

The trouble with narrativisation, according to Harry, is that the domestication of unaccommodatable fact which it inevitably entails amounts to an

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Fontana, 1984), p. 26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

abdication of ethical responsibility which may lead in dubious directions. This is apparent from his remarks on the Nuremberg war trials, which, as a fledgling news photographer, he had been sent out to cover. The directives which he had received for this, his first foreign assignment, were clear:

I was looking, as my employers were looking, as the whole world was looking, for monsters. Goering, Hess, Keitel, von Ribbentrop... Capture in their faces the obscenity of their crimes, capture in their eyes the death of millions, capture in the furrows of their brows the enormity of their guilt. Jodl, Sauckel, Kaltenbrunner... (H 101)

The story which people wanted to hear and see was one of crime and punishment, in which a bunch of devilish arch-villains, whose very physical appearance betrays the magnitude of their crimes and the full extent of their guilt, are made to pay for the atrocities which they committed. By finishing off these monsters, the world can finally return to business as usual, secure in the knowledge that the horrors of the Second World War have been properly dealt with and laid to rest. However, Harry is forced to conclude that this reassuring narrative is contradicted by the facts: 'But I didn't find monsters. I found this collection of dull, nondescript, headphoned men, thin and pale from months in prison, with the faces of people in waiting rooms or people co-opted into some tedious, routine task' (H 101). Finding his mission to capture the monstrous face of Nazism thwarted, he realises that what he should put before the world is precisely the fact of this 'terrible ordinariness':

I thought: So what is there to capture? And then I realized. It is this ordinariness I must capture. This terrible ordinariness. The fact of this ordinariness. I must show that monsters do not belong to comfortable tales. That the worst things are perpetrated by people no one would pick out from a crowd. (H 102)¹³

The fact that monsters are not necessary for extreme evil, that there can be such a thing as 'routine atrocity' and 'casual' killing carried out by normal

¹³ Interestingly, Rony Brauman, one of the makers of the controversial documentary film *Un spécialiste* (1999), based on original footage of the Eichmann trial, claims to have wanted to demonstrate the exact same thing: 'Eichmann n'a pas le visage du SS ivre de violence et de sang. Mais il est monstrueux par son caractère ordinaire...' (qtd. in Sophie Bouniot, 'La solution finale: L'ordinaire monstrueux', Interview with Rony Brauman, *L'Humanité* 5 June 1999, 16 Oct. 2002 <<http://www.humanite.presse.fr/journal/1999/1999-06/1999-06-05/1999-06-05-023.html>>). I will have occasion to return to the Eichmann trial – an event conspicuous by its absence from *Out of this World* – later on.

individuals, is something which people ‘cannot comprehend’ and which is therefore ‘pushed to the remote borders of the mind’ (H 102). Rather than taking on board this unaccommodatable fact, they prefer to cling to a self-absolving monster story which precludes any need for moral soul-searching:

And they watch, almost with glad relief, when the unthinkable facts of a decade are unloaded on to the figures of twenty-one men who are placed, as it were, on a stage with the entire world as audience, and the whole thing takes on the solemnized aspect of ritual. Nothing is more edifying than a courtroom drama. Nothing is more conscience-cleansing than an exhibition of culprits. Nothing is more cathartic than the conversion of fact into fable. (H 102-03)

The fable which is meant to close the book on the Second World War and to foster an unburdened present conveniently avoids the thorny issue of ordinary people’s implication in the extra-ordinary event of the Holocaust. Harry, however, relentlessly insists on the commonalities between the accused and other people. He describes the faces of the crowd of people – mostly ‘members of the Allied occupying forces and administration’ (H 103) – gathered outside the prison where the executions had been carried out as wearing a look of ‘murderous exultation’, and comments that ‘[t]hese too were the faces of ordinary people’ (H 104). About the executioner who is said to have deliberately bungled the hangings of the condemned so that at least some of them ‘died slowly and horribly’, Harry provocatively asks: ‘Was this a crime against humanity?’ (H 104). Thus, a connection is suggested between the executioner’s ruthlessness and the offences committed by his victims. The implication appears to be that, for as long as the world refuses to face up to the self-critical requirements of historical understanding, the murderous cycle will continue uninterrupted.¹⁴

¹⁴ That the post-war world has largely evaded the hard task of coming to terms with a harrowing past is evidenced by the reconstruction of Nuremberg, a city which had been laid waste during the war. According to Harry, post-war Nuremberg seems designed to excise the historical events of 1940–1946, taking tourists back to a pre-war fantasy and drawing attention away from the key historical events which took place there:

Since 1946 this intricate product of the centuries has been rebuilt. It is not real, of course. It is a modern reconstruction, but is has been painstakingly done – so I am told – as if to re-conjure a world before certain irreversible historical events had happened. Now, Nuremberg is one of the chief tourist towns of Germany. People go for these picturesque reconstructions, mixed with genuine remnants of the old, for the fairy-tale spires and gables. The one-time site of Nazi rallies and the scene of the War Trials are of secondary interest. (H 103)

As Paul Smethurst points out, in thus providing an easy escape from history, the reconstructed city of Nuremberg represents ‘an exercise in post-traumatic defence against the past by a whole people’ (Paul Smethurst, *The Postmodern Chronotope: Reading Space and Time in Contemporary Fiction* (Amsterdam: GA, 2000), p. 277).

Harry's musings on the Nuremberg trials are indebted, of course, to Hannah Arendt's well-known analysis of the 'banality of evil',¹⁵ which was occasioned by the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann. According to Seyla Benhabib, Arendt was 'among the first to encourage facing the facts of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust in all their naked horror'.¹⁶ Attending the Eichmann trial as a reporter for *The New Yorker* – i.e. in much the same capacity as Harry – Arendt was struck by the fact that the defendant lacked any of the demonic qualities attributed to him by the prosecution. Irritated by what she viewed as the chief prosecutor's courtroom dramatics, she insisted on the need to resist the temptation to make a shocking, outrageous reality comprehensible in terms of reductive commonplaces. Against the tradition, which saw evil in metaphysical terms as ultimate depravity, corruption or sinfulness, she argues that the phenomenon which 'stared one in the face' at the trial was precisely 'the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*'.¹⁷ While 'it would have been very comforting indeed to believe that Eichmann was a monster', Arendt maintains that '[t]he trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal'.¹⁸

For Arendt, the crucial lesson of the Eichmann trial was that such everyday vices as 'thoughtlessness' and 'remoteness from reality' can 'wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man'.¹⁹ Though this should not be taken to mean that all of us share culpability for the Holocaust,²⁰ it does suggest that a painstaking process of self-reflection and self-questioning may be in order to avoid a recurrence of past horrors. As Dominick LaCapra writes, 'all of us in the postwar world are, in one way or another, implicated in – indeed fractured and dispossessed by – the events of the Holocaust and under the obligation to come to terms with them in a manner that does not simply

¹⁵ A rather misleading phrase which, understandably, has created a great deal of confusion. As Seyla Benhabib explains, 'The phrase the "banality of evil" was meant to refer to a *specific quality of mind and character* of the doer himself, but neither to the deeds nor to the principles behind those deeds' (Seyla Benhabib, 'Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 65–85, p. 74).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev. and enlarged ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 287.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

²⁰ An argument explicitly rejected by Arendt, who, in an imagined address to Eichmann, points out that 'there is an abyss between the actuality of what you did and the potentiality of what others might have done' (*Ibid.*, p. 278).

deny or repress their radically disorienting import'.²¹ After all, 'denial of transference [i.e. the 'implication of the historian in the processes he or she studies'²²] and the need to work critically through it encourages blind repetition and return of the repressed'.²³ Only by engaging in the arduous process of working through trauma can one legitimately hope to create a future which will be truly otherwise, not a stale repetition of the past but something radically new and as yet unimaginable.

The primary instance of a return of the repressed in *Out of this World* is undoubtedly the Falklands War, whose threatening shadow looms large over the narrative. Not only is the time of the narration made to coincide with the beginning of this conflict – the novel being explicitly headed with the date 'April 1982' – but the characters' repeated allusions to it also ensure that it is never far from mind.²⁴ The Falklands episode may be seen as a symptom of Britain's failure to come to terms with the trauma of its loss of prominence in the world. In the post-war period, Britain's status changed from a world power to a middle-sized country with chronic economic difficulties. Its political and economic downfall was sealed by the Suez crisis of 1956, which conclusively signalled the end of British imperial power. Britain's decline sparked a national identity crisis and gave rise to a profound sense of insecurity, which the Falklands War was expected to assuage if not altogether surmount. Indeed, the conflict with Argentina was seen by many as 'a priceless opportunity' to 'lay the ghost of Suez – that haunting moment when Britain's Great Power pretensions were finally unmasked'.²⁵ The war, which – in Margaret Thatcher's words – was to 'put the Great back into Great Britain', became 'a national exercise in myth making', acquiring the stature of 'a kind of Suez in reverse'.²⁶ The

²¹ Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996), p. 97.

²² Ibid., p. 72.

²³ Ibid., p. 87.

²⁴ *Out of this World* is mentioned by Nigel Leigh in his discussion of the impact of the Falklands War on English fiction as one of very few 'literary' novels to engage with the conflict, if only through 'passing references' – the dominant mode of dealing with the issue, as it turns out (Nigel Leigh, 'A Limited Engagement: Falklands Fictions and the English Novel', in *Framing the Falklands War: Nationhood, Culture, Identity*, ed. James Aulich (Buckingham: Open UP, 1992), 117–28, p. 124). Overall, Leigh writes, 'the Falklands has had only a limited effect on British writers and their literature' (*Idem*, p. 127). As far as *Out of this World* is concerned, however, I would argue that the Falklands War is more than a passing reference. Indeed, as a powerful instance of the dangers attendant on the resurrection of discredited mythologies, its presence in the text adds greatly to the poignancy of the novel's ethical vision.

²⁵ Paul Greengrass, 'Foreword', in *Framing the Falklands War: Nationhood, Culture, Identity*, ed. James Aulich (Buckingham: Open UP, 1992), ix–x, p. ix.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. ix–x.

conflict was enveloped in a fervent new age rhetoric expressing ‘a moral idea of England that is confident and steeped with evangelical fervour’.²⁷ As a result, ‘a potent narrative developed which was cogent, pervasive and persuasive, despite the fact that it was built on the spurious foundations of partial understandings of national history and contemporary conditions’.²⁸ Reliant on hazy, rose-tinted memories of Empire and two world wars and oblivious to Britain’s current predicament, this narrative of national pride and moral superiority – ‘a lethal fix of jingoism and xenophobia’²⁹ – has been characterised as ‘Blimpish nostalgia’.³⁰

In *Out of this World*, the Falklands is invoked as a warning against the revivification of decrepit and obsolete ideologies. As Swift has repeatedly stated in interviews, he sees the Falklands as ‘an example of an event which in some grotesque, farcical way illustrated the fact that there is a myth, and it can suddenly be revived, and there is a great urge to make it real. I think it’s utterly misguided, but it’s there’.³¹ The nostalgic resurrection of outworn mythologies precludes the construction of a truly new, post-modern, post-imperial future. The embrace of salvific narratives provides no real solution to the contemporary crisis of meaning but fatally obscures the problem. The pursuit of redemptive meaning offers no genuine catharsis but a false semblance of it, enabling a comfortable return to the old ways which, if anything, ensures that the future will be no less catastrophic than the past. Indeed, the novel paints a rather sombre picture of human history, presenting it as a long succession of variations on the age-old theme of violence and bloodshed. The Falklands War, for example, is regarded by Harry not just as an imitation of Victorian imperial campaigns but as a faithful re-enactment of the Trojan War. Thus, the official send-off ceremony for the HMS Canberra at Portsmouth leads him to reflect:

It wasn’t even a re-run, with twentieth-century props, of grand Victorian send-offs for illustrious imperial expeditions. It was the Trojan War all over again. Someone had raped our precious Falkland Isles, so the ships must sail. And somewhere, in a sacred grove, behind the harbour, before the bands could strike up and the ships

²⁷ James Aulich, ‘Introduction’, in *Framing the Falklands War: Nationhood, Culture, Identity*, ed. James Aulich (Buckingham: Open UP, 1992), 1–12, p. 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁹ Greengrass, ‘Foreword’, p. x.

³⁰ Aulich, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

³¹ Qtd. in David Profumo, ‘The Attraction of the Pessimistic View’, Interview with Graham Swift, *Sunday Times* 6 Mar. 1988, G9, p. G9. See also Swift’s comments on the Falklands War in the passage quoted in the opening paragraph of this article.

slip their cables, someone had discreetly cut the throat of a modern-day Iphigeneia. (H 186)

The world appears to be caught up in a grim cycle of war and misery, with the destructive patterns of the past being re-enacted in each new present moment. As Hermione Lee points out in her review of *Out of this World* for *The Observer*: 'There's no decline or progress, just monstrous repetition'.³²

In light of all this, the novel's dependence on a classic narrative formula may seem strangely paradoxical. If, as I have argued, the text is indeed concerned with the possibility of coming to terms with the past and inventing a radically different future, its continued adherence to the logic of denial or repression does not make any sense. After all, one does not liberate the future from the prison of the past by perpetuating the very mechanisms which have consigned it to the dungeon in the first place. It seems to me that a great deal of critical dissatisfaction with the novel's fictional strategies can be traced back to this apparent paradox.³³ In effect, several commentators object to the discrepancy between the chaotic and overwhelming nature of the fictional universe and the rigid conventionality of the form meant to contain it. According to Jonathan Coe in *The Guardian*, for example, the novel 'lacks ... a radical approach to structure which would in some way reflect the sheer mess of the events with which it attempts to deal'.³⁴ Coe's observation, that *Out of this World* represents 'an essential [sic] tidy sort of novel' which 'never quite reaches' the point 'where the story "breaks down"³⁵ is taken up and further developed by Michel Morel, who calls attention to the 'facture classique'³⁶ of a text which leaves the reader 'maître d'une image lisse et globalisante qui naturalise l'univers de fiction en tant que tel'.³⁷ Morel alleges that, for all its criticism of the sinister pseudo-catharsis offered by photography, the novel

³² Hermione Lee, 'Shutter and Lens', Rev. of *Out of this World*, by Graham Swift, *The Observer* 13 Mar. 1988, 43, p. 43.

³³ It is worth pointing out that *Out of this World* holds the dubious honour of having received the worst reviews of all Swift's novels to date – which is not to say that the novel was trashed by the critics across the board, only that it was generally greeted with distinctly less enthusiasm than Swift's earlier and later offerings. The casual reader of the carefully selected euphoric blurbs which the novel carries may be forgiven, however, for coming away with a rather different impression.

³⁴ Jonathan Coe, 'Jagged Edges', Rev. of *Out of this World*, by Graham Swift, *The Guardian* 11 Mar. 1988, 22 Aug. 2002 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,98881,00.html>>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Morel, 'Out of this World: Le romancier, pourvoyeur d'images malgré lui', p. 24.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

actively encourages complacency and conscience-cleansing on the part of the reader: 'Ce qui frappe ici, c'est que le texte paraît autoriser chez le lecteur des démarches de perception et de pensée qui sont dénoncées en matière de document photographique'.³⁸ According to Morel, the mock-cathartic recuperation of textual representation sadly goes uncensured in *Out of this World*: 'Comme la contemplation photographique, la lecture se fait cathartique, et ceci de façon à peine distanciée. La crise du sens paraît surmontée'.³⁹ In other words, the reader comes away from *Out of this World* assured of the fulness of his or her own identity, the self-evidence of his or her preconceptions and the correctness of the frames in which he or she habitually seeks to enclose the world.

In my opinion, Morel's reading ignores an important dimension of the novel which sheds a very different light on this matter, namely the irony surrounding the redemptive pretensions of the narrative. Indeed, to my mind *Out of this World* performs an insidious critique of the traditional model of textual organisation to which it is so obviously indebted, denouncing it as a ploy to hold a traumatic reality at bay, and to reassert the spontaneous dogmatism of the self in the face of a discomfiting and dislocating alterity. The cathartic logic which the narrative enacts and promotes is exposed as a cop-out solution to the problem of coming to terms with a disenchanted world which holds out little hope for the future. The manner in which the novel goes about its debunking business is by ironically mimicking the conventional model for dealing with trauma, and by having its characters loudly dispute the theoretical premises of this approach and subsequently express their bemusement at being caught up in its clutches.

Ostensibly a novel about the triumph of story-telling, *Out of this World* yet shows clear signs of unease with the programme in whose service it is deployed. First of all, pace Morel, it seems to me that Harry's trenchant critique of the conversion of fact into fable has repercussions beyond the field of photography which may have originally prompted it; indeed, it acts as a warning for the reader not to be seduced by this procedure wherever it manifests itself – that is, including in the fictional narrative which he or she is reading. Harry's remarks all but impede easy consumption of the fabulous story at hand and incite the reader to a resisting reading. Taking the narrative at face value is rendered even more difficult by the fact that the protagonists themselves turn out to look upon the redemptive course on which they are set with great scepticism and disbelief. Harry and Sophie

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

find their journey towards healing and reconciliation to be so steeped in cliché, facile and expedient they can hardly believe what is happening to them.

Harry in particular makes no attempt to hide his incredulity at the easy ride he is getting. Being saved from numbness and despair by a pretty young wife in an idyllic picture-book cottage seems just too good to be true:

Miracles shouldn't happen. Picture-books aren't real. The fairy-tales all got discredited long ago, didn't they? There shouldn't be thatched cottages still, tucked away among green hills. You shouldn't be able to advertise in the local papers for an assistant and fall in love with the very first candidate who comes along. (H 79)

Much to his amazement, Harry finds himself pressed into playing the part of a character in the very kind of fairy-tale or fable which he knows to be an illusory way of escape from trauma. Settling into his role, he describes the healing process which he is made to undergo at Jenny's hands in terms suggestive of a cover-up operation: 'She makes me feel that the world is never so black with memories, so grey with age, that it cannot be re-coloured with the magic paint-box of the heart' (H 141). Far from being confronted head-on, Harry's haunting past is conveniently overpainted and thus obliterated through the intervention of fairy-tale magic.⁴⁰ Sophie is no less astonished than Harry at the ease and smoothness with which all tensions and turmoils are being resolved. The prospect of being reunited and reconciled with her father at the latter's wedding fills her with a sense of unreality:

Shit, I know this is pure theatre, I know this is like a bad movie, like the way it isn't. But what's the point of life, and what's the point of goddam movies, if now and then you can't discover that the way

⁴⁰ Many critics have expressed their dismay with the novel's excessive use of cliché at the level of characterisation. These complaints tend to centre on the attractive young woman who is rushed in to rescue Harry from his dark memories. Jenny stands accused of inspiring such 'unconvincing writing' that 'one would really rather have seen Harry slog it out alone, on the road to reconciliation' (Anne Duchêne, 'By the Grace of the Teller', Rev. of *Out of this World*, by Graham Swift, *Times Literary Supplement* 17 Nov. 1988, 275, p. 275). In the same vein, Adrian Poole denounces the 'emergency treatment' administered by the 'unusually conventional figures' of Harry's dream-girl and Sophie's analyst (Adrian Poole, 'Graham Swift and the Mourning After', in *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction: International Writing in English since 1970*, ed. Rod Mengham (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 150–67, p. 161).

you thought it isn't, the way you thought it only ever is in movies, really is the way it is?. (S 145)

Interestingly, *Out of this World* drops the pretence of being a bad movie in the end. Though the narrative is inexorably drawn to the fulfilment of its promise of healing, reparation and revival, the reader's desire for closure is ultimately thwarted. Indeed, the narrative ends 'up in the air', literally as well as figuratively. Harry and Sophie both find themselves on board an aeroplane in the last section of the novel which they narrate. When Sophie's voice goes silent, we know her to be en route to England with her two sons, and Harry, in the final section of the text, fondly reminisces about a flight which he once took with his father. A veteran of the First World War, Robert made a point of attending the celebrations marking the tenth anniversary of the 1918 Armistice in France. These proceedings were lost on his son, however, who was entranced by the wonders of air travel which he had just tasted for the first time. The Armistice 'meant nothing' to Harry, his thoughts being on 'that astonishing aerial journey and the equally astonishing one we would have to make back' (H 206–07). On seeing Europe from the air, Harry was struck by the absence of visible boundaries between nations, which made 'the demarcations of maps and atlases' seem 'a sham' (H 206). The novel ends with a lyrical evocation of an 'age of air', i.e. an era of international co-operation, solidarity and understanding, which has supposedly superseded the 'age of mud', i.e. the era of strife and misery epitomised by the muddy and bloody trenches of France:

I can see now that throughout that homeward journey his [Robert's] feet must have been, so to speak, still on the ground, still caught in the mud. And I was being lifted up and away, out of his world, out of the age of mud, out of that brown, obscure age, into the age of air. (H 208)

It seems to me that there are at least two layers of irony at work here. On the one hand, the fact that Sophie and Harry are left hanging in mid-air, is arresting in that it frustrates traditional readerly expectations. Eventually, the promise of redemption and reconciliation which has kept the reader hooked for so long is postponed indefinitely to a moment beyond the time-frame of the narrative. The novel's inconclusive ending can be seen to throw into doubt the validity of the redemptive logic by which the narrative set such store. Indeed, the suggestion is that the moment of apotheosis which the story seemed to be working towards, cannot simply

be taken for granted. Nothing guarantees, for example, that Sophie's plane will not crash before it reaches its appointed destination – as did another plane soaring to mythical heights earlier in the narrative, that of Harry's first wife Anna, which unceremoniously slammed into Mount Olympus. That *Out of this World* does not uncritically go along with the consummation of mythical redemption is also apparent from the fact that the euphoric vision of a continent without boundaries with which the novel ends is subtly undermined by another ironic echo from the past. As we all know, the age of air whose arrival is so triumphantly announced by Harry went on to produce another devastating world war, whose haunting presence is felt throughout the novel. Being fought largely from the air, the Second World War – in which Harry served as an aerial photographer documenting the destruction after Allied bombing raids – did indeed dissolve boundaries, but in hostility rather than co-operation.

We can concur, then, with Patrick Parrinder, who, in his astute review of *Out of this World* for the *London Review of Books*, states:

We are not going to get out of this world, with its accumulations of images and memories and deposits of mud, as easily as all that; the power and fascination of each of Swift's novels, including this one, rest on some such dogged affirmation.⁴¹

The bottom-line of *Out of this World*'s reflection on photography and fiction as ways of engaging with the exigencies of our contemporary situation is indeed a dogged affirmation of the need critically to work through the traumas of the past and to avoid becoming mired in self-defeating strategies of denial. Complacent attempts to compensate for trauma through a hasty investment in essentially narcissistic ideologies are shown to entail an evasion of ethical responsibility and to sacrifice the possibility of the future on the egotistical altar of short-term expediency. While the novel does not presume to offer any clear-cut formulas or ready-made solutions for navigating our post-traumatic condition, it spares no efforts in identifying pressures, possibilities and pitfalls that will have to be confronted if the future is to be anything other than a depressing and debilitating reprise of the past.

⁴¹ Parrinder, 'Verbing a Noun', p. 17.