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Apes in the Plan: An Unpublished Typescript by Jonathan Lethem

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Apes in the Plan is a typescript by the US novelist Jonathan Lethem, stored at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. This typescript comprises a complete unpublished novel, written c.1983–1986. Part I of the present article describes this text, identifies key precursors, explains its likely aesthetic sources and clarifies its place in literary and cultural history. Part II then integrates this text into the longer narrative of Lethem's oeuvre by highlighting and analysing specific continuities between this text and Lethem's later, published work. The analysis thus contributes to the understanding of Lethem's work as a whole, by emphasising the continuity of certain themes and motifs from an earlier stage than has previously been recognised. The analysis demonstrates that even as Lethem left behind *Apes in the Plan* as a piece of juvenilia, he also continued to work with prominent aspects of this text, including character names, science fictional features, social critique, an interest in animal life, and a heightened awareness of language. An advocate of cultural 'second use', Lethem would find a second use for some of the elements that he had first deployed in *Apes in the Plan*.

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Part I: Text and Sources

Introduction & Rationale

Apes in the Plan is a typescript by the US novelist Jonathan Lethem.¹ It is stored as part of the extensive Lethem collection in the archives of the Beinecke Library, at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. The collection was established when Lethem sold his papers to Yale in 2016, and can now be consulted by scholars. The typescript is stored alongside other typescripts of Lethem's novels, including a complete earlier version of his first published novel *Gun, with Occasional Music* (1994), and a partial version of his fourth published novel *Girl in Landscape* (1998). The collection also includes a large amount of material from Lethem's teenage years including drawings and home-made comic strips: amid these is stored a partial early attempt at a novel, *Heroes* (c.1979). *Apes in the Plan*, however, is distinctive in the collection as the complete text of a novel that has not, to date, been published.

The present article is based on study of this unpublished archival material.² It aims firstly to provide a factual account of this text, bringing new information into the public domain. This information is relevant to the study of Lethem's writing especially, and by implication to broader cognate fields such as the study of contemporary US fiction. Second, the article identifies key precursors for the work, explaining its likely aesthetic sources and clarifying its place in literary and cultural history. Third, the article integrates this text into the longer narrative of Lethem's oeuvre by highlighting and analysing specific continuities between this text and his later, published work. The analysis thus contributes to the understanding of Lethem's work as a whole, by emphasising the continuity of certain themes and motifs from an earlier stage than has previously been recognised.

The article also stands as a case study of the analysis of unpublished early work by contemporary authors. In a sub-field like Blake Studies or Joyce Studies, it is common for such a text to be posthumously published and discussed in terms of its relevance to the author's later work. James Joyce's *Stephen Hero*, the first manuscript of what later became *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is a notable example; it was written around 1904, published in 1944, and has been part of the discourse of Joyce Studies ever

¹ Jonathan Lethem, *Apes in the Plan*: YCAL MSS 1131 Box 3 f, typescript from the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Page references in parentheses in the body of this article correspond to the page numbers on this typescript.

² I here express my gratitude to the following individuals who have helped to facilitate the writing of this article. First, the librarians at the Beinecke Library for their prompt, courteous and expert assistance on consulting the Jonathan Lethem papers. Second, the author Jonathan Lethem for giving written authorisation to quote from this typescript in a scholarly context. Third, Professor Martin Paul Eve for his encouragement that I pursue this research project and his insightful comments on a draft of this article.

since. With living authors like Lethem, early works that were not published are less often brought into print. With recent but deceased authors, though, certain cases exist such as the posthumous publication in 2014 of two stories by Octavia E. Butler, whose papers are held at the Huntington Library in California.³ In other cases such texts, while not published, become available in archives for scholarly consultation. Since 2014 the Harry Ransom Center in Texas has held the early story 'Shorn' by David Foster Wallace, who died six years previously.⁴ In a further example, *Minstrel Island*, an unfinished musical on which Thomas Pynchon collaborated with John Kirkpatrick Sale in 1958, is preserved in fragmented form at the same archive.⁵ It is thus sometimes possible for the authorial corpus of contemporary or recent writers to be expanded by additional material, whether this enters the public domain in print or is cited by scholars following archival consultation. *Apes in the Plan*, in the present article, becomes a further example of such archival enlargement of a corpus.

What will become clear, in the latter half of this article, is that *Apes* is not merely an isolated typescript that Lethem left behind in going on to success. Rather, somewhat as with Joyce's manuscript mentioned above, evident continuities exist between this typescript and Lethem's later work. One reason that the present inquiry matters – that readers, and certainly scholars, of Lethem's work, should have the chance to know about *Apes* – is that the typescript holds elements which, to use its own imagery, will evolve in the work that is more widely known.

Given the amount of brand new material to be synthesised here, the present article is divided into two parts. Part One describes the typescript then identifies key sources and intertexts. Part Two then traces the themes and motifs of this typescript through Lethem's subsequent career.

Description of the Typescript

Apes in the Plan is typed on 216 pages of Letter-size paper (8.5 x 11 inches, the closest US equivalent to A4). The text includes a title page (stating: 'Apes in the Plan / by / Jonathan Lethem') and a page headed 'A Note on the Setting'. Underlining is consistently used for emphasis or highlighting in this typescript (and will accordingly be used in quotations from the text in this article). The main text of the novel occupies the subsequent 213

³ See Alison Flood, 'Unseen Octavia E Butler stories recovered', *Guardian*, 30 April 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/apr/30/unseen-octavia-e-butler-stories-recovered-science-fiction>.

⁴ See Megan Barnard, 'Unpublished David Foster Wallace story donated to the Ransom Center', *Ransom Center Magazine*, 16 May 2014, <https://sites.utexas.edu/ransomcentermagazine/2014/05/16/unpublished-dfw-story/>.

⁵ See Stephen Mielke, 'Thomas Pynchon: An Inventory of His Collection at the Harry Ransom Center', <https://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/fasearch/findingAid.cfm?eadid=00442>.

numbered pages. The text was produced on an electric typewriter, according to a *New York Times* report that mentions it.⁶

Page 1 of the typescript is unusually busy, including: first, Lethem's name and address in Berkeley; second, a word count of '53000 words'; third, the title and author's name again; fourth, an epigraph from a lyric by the rock band Devo; fifth and last, the beginning of Chapter One. Each subsequent chapter is numbered (with numbers in underlined written characters, not numerals), and announced at the top of a new typescript page. The text comprises nineteen chapters. Across 213 pages, this makes for an average of eleven pages per chapter.

The novel is typed with double spacing. The text contains several misspellings or typographical errors. In some cases, Lethem has corrected an error by hand. At the top left of every page is a running header, manually typed, in the form: 'A.I.T.P./page [number]'. Arabic numerals are used here except on the second page where Lethem writes out the number 'page two'. Most likely he changed from this practice to Arabic numerals upon realising the scale of the task of numbering ahead. This running header gives the impression of a typescript that has been created with some deliberation and determination: not merely for the private amusement of the author, but with the intention of submitting the work to publishers. This sense is strongly corroborated by the presence of the author's address and telephone number on the opening page. They are included because the text is intended for circulation to other, possibly interested parties. The word count also appears to be given as relevant information for a possible editor or publisher. The typescript is thus a professional artefact, not merely a personal memento. This view is supported by the fact that the Beinecke Library holds two identical copies of this typescript, as though they were produced for professional distribution.

The address is also relevant for dating this text. The folder containing it says, in pencil in Lethem's hand: 'Apes in the Plan / (2 of 2) / Circa 1980'. Lethem was born in February 1964; circa 1980, he was sixteen. It appears that *Apes in the Plan* was commenced slightly later than that. In a 2015 conversation with his college contemporary Jill Eisenstadt, Lethem recalls: 'I was working on a novel by the middle of my freshman year [...] the book *before* my first novel, one destined to end up in a drawer. It was called *Apes In The Plan* – a lyric taken from a Devo song'.⁷ 'Freshman year' here is 1982–83, which indicates that *Apes* was commenced by the early months of 1983. In a 2006 piece entitled 'My First Novels', Lethem has mentioned *Apes in the Plan* as follows:

⁶ Jennifer Schuessler, 'Inside Jonathan Lethem's Oddball Trove', *New York Times*, 1 January 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/01/books/inside-jonathan-lethems-oddball-trove.html>.

⁷ Jack McKeon, 'Death Keg: An Early 80s Flashback with Jill Eisenstadt and Jonathan Lethem', *Literary Bennington*, 13 November 2015, <http://www.literarybennington.com/literarybennington/death-keg-an-early-80s-flashback-with-jill>.

Just before my nineteenth birthday I began a book called *Apes In The Plan*, a heedless attempt to splice J.P. Donleavy to Philip K. Dick and Devo (whose song, Jocko Homo, was the source of the title). I wrestled with this manuscript for more than three years, an effort that superseded my career as a college student, becoming an autodidact's (or drop-out's) self-assigned thesis work. *Apes* wasn't any good, but by the end I'd learned something, and my next writing, a series of short stories, was better. Some were eventually published.⁸

'Just before my nineteenth birthday' places the commencement of *Apes in the Plan* in late 1982 or early 1983. 'More than three years' suggests that work continued on the text until at least 1986. Lethem began residence in Berkeley in 1984 and returned from California to his native New York in 1996. We can conclude that Lethem began drafting the novel in early 1983, but that the typescript under discussion here is a later draft, from the mid- or later 1980s: 1984 at the earliest, but more likely 1986 or later, once Lethem had finished 'wrestling' with this text. Any earlier drafts of this novel would appear to be lost or destroyed.

Content of the Novel: Fictional World

Apes in the Plan takes place in the 21st century (16), thus at the very least two decades later than its time of composition. Its location is America, but the country has been transformed, as explained in the 'Note on the Setting':

It should be assumed that the United Reclamation Areas comprises an area far less than that of the original United States; possibly only a sprawling metropolis on the eastern seaboard of the continent. The suburbs have knit together to make the distinctions of separate cities an irrelevant memory. It might also be assumed that similar nations exist in the adjacent territories; fractions of the previous whole, as insular as the Areas, and as provincial. (n.p.)

The tone of this note is itself intriguing. 'It should be assumed' provides a kind of instruction to the reader, but 'It might also be assumed' leaves ambiguity. Either the author is withholding information and giving the reader only hints to go on about the wider fictional world represented in the text, or the author himself does not know the whole truth about this fictional world beyond what is seen in the text. A combination of both options is likely. Despite the seeming effort at explication made by this note, the

⁸ It may be noted that in some printed retrospective references to *Apes in the Plan*, the second word of the title is capitalised. Jonathan Lethem, 'My First Novels', *Bookforum*, June/July/August/September 2006, republished at <https://jonathanlethem.com/my-first-novels/>.

novel does not otherwise engage in the provision of extensive, systematic information about its universe; it is content to let the reader piece together what they can. There is little reason to assume that Lethem has an entire global setting worked out but withheld from the reader. It is most plausible to take ‘It might also be assumed’, and ‘possibly only a sprawling metropolis’, as leaving him in the same place as the reader, improvising with as yet incomplete knowledge.

‘The original United States’ indicates that the USA as known up to the 1980s no longer exists. In its place, for the purposes of this text, are the ‘United Reclamation Areas’. ‘Reclamation’ implies that something has been lost, and thus needs to be reclaimed. The novel’s setting, it seems, follows an event that has made much American territory uninhabitable and in need of ‘reclamation’. Given the date of composition, the most immediate candidate for such an event is nuclear war. Lethem’s second published novel, *Amnesia Moon* (1995), which was also begun around 1982 and rewritten in a period lasting over a decade, does commence in a scenario where it is widely accepted that such an apocalyptic event has taken place. Yet the text of *Apes* itself contains no specific reference to such an incident. It is merely a plausible inference from the author’s opening note.

Less ambiguously, this note informs us that the action takes place on the eastern seaboard of North America, and furthermore in a ‘sprawling metropolis’ now covering that area. The formulation sounds akin to ‘The Sprawl’, the urban setting for William Gibson’s inaugural trilogy of cyberpunk novels: *Neuromancer* (1984), *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988). Gibson’s first fiction appeared while Lethem was writing *Apes*. We can hypothesise either a direct influence on the revision of Lethem’s text (say, after reading *Neuromancer* in the mid-1980s) or, just as likely, a convergence of fictional visions and themes arising from actual geographical and sociological trends of the period and from fictional precursors.

Within these approximate coordinates in time and space, *Apes* presents a future American society with noticeable differences from 1980s reality. These features of the fictional world become apparent gradually, and normally through quite offhand announcements by the novel’s third-person narrative voice, from which the reader must infer the fictional scenario. This scenario includes the following. The US (or URA) Presidency is now a dual role: there are two Presidents, husband and wife, and this has been the case for some time. One of the current Presidents, the husband Florian, remembers ‘the other Presidents: the six before him, with wives in power, and the forty some-odd solo presidents before that’ (83). At the time this was written the USA was governed by its fortieth President, Ronald Reagan, so this projects the novel between six and fifteen Presidencies into the future. Taken literally, with each President holding office for either four or eight years, this places the novel’s setting between 24 and 120

years into the future from the time of composition. There is no guarantee that Lethem has actually worked out this political pre-history in precise detail; nonetheless the text at least gestures at it.

The Presidents are the apex of a society and economy in which a 'Lottery' randomly assigns a given citizen to manage a business. It seems also that in doing so, a citizen is assigned a 'Family' – which is thus an artificial rather than biological unit. Thus, for instance, the text refers to 'Six years ago, when the employment lottery had plucked the Tooth family name from the undesignated lists and assigned it the arbitrary vocation of silverware manufacturing' (8). The reference is to Perkus Tooth, the novel's central character, who begins the novel in his office at the silverware business Tooth Knife and Fork (6). The economic system is further outlined in an expository 'recollection' from Perkus:

Government Incentives make the whole thing work, Perkus recalled. They provide the appeal for the employment lottery system: with the government behind you, failure was impossible. If there's someone out there, Perkus thought wryly, with a better silverware product than mine, I'm still safe. I've got insurance. He had better assemble a family and get assigned in the lottery or he can just forget it. And thank god for that, Perkus thought. I'm not up to a competitive market; I can barely manage to operate a monopoly. The monopoly the government, in the form of the lottery, has dropped into my lap. (30)

As this passage makes clear, Perkus has no special aptitude for managing this business, his role being merely a random assignation. The phrase '[h]e had better assemble a family' also strongly suggests that families are commercial groups, not natural ones. In the opening scene Perkus meets a 'family' member, Aunt Miriam, who we may later infer is not biologically his aunt; she also refers to his Uncle Felix (2). Perkus privately starts, then deletes, a memo entitled 'Why I Hate My Family' (5). This apparently reflects not profound neurosis of a Freudian type, but rather frustration in bureaucratic, professional life. Another character thinks of 'That horrible silverware factory [...] and poor Perkus stuck there, with all his relatives' (13).

The joint Presidents Florian and Maxine Buckler discuss their role in upholding this social and economic system. Encouraging a downbeat Florian, Maxine stresses:

We hand out jobs on television. [...] The Presidential assignment is the model, the template. It's the most examined employment circumstance, so to speak, in the world. [...] We have to provide a functional model of on-the-job satisfaction. [...] The average assignee has to believe there's at least two workers who wouldn't quit their assignment for all the tea available. We're the model. (141)

The Presidents too, it appears, have been ‘assigned’ to their jobs by lottery, like anyone else. Their job, as described here, is rather akin to that of a modern monarchy: to provide an icon of good cheer to their nation. Maxine’s statement also suggests that for most citizens, work is undesirable drudgery.

A distinctive aspect of the novel’s commercial world is the labelling of many goods as Republican or Democrat. The first sign of this is Perkus Tooth’s use of a ‘depressant’ drug: ‘The package bore the seal of the Republican endorsement, the letter R inscribed neatly within a triangle’ (4). Numerous further examples appear. The ‘Psychic Advisor’ Agatha Highseed has ‘Democratic Endorsement’ included on a digital sign outside her business (23). In the Johnson Bar and Lounge, the food and drink that Perkus and his friend Elko Dunstable order is all ‘Repub endorsed’. (This appears to confound the possibility that in this politicised environment the Johnson Lounge is named after Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson.) The TV programme that Perkus watches in this establishment concludes by revealing its ‘affiliation: Repub’. ‘That was probably’, Perkus said to himself, ‘a part of the deal for the Johnson Lounge: keep the television tuned Republican’ (33). In a slightly more extensive reference, we see that the parties have also moved into shampoo: ‘Perkus instinctively disliked supporting either the Dems or the Repubs when he didn’t have to. Unfortunately, this was a case where he had no choice: he had dandruff too strong for any Independent or Soc products. Only a particular Dem shampoo worked at all’ (52). The incident demonstrates not only that the two dominant parties of the USA have, in the URA, penetrated deeply into everyday life through consumer goods, services and media, but that other, smaller parties have tried to do the same. (We could hypothesise that ‘Soc’ means ‘Socialist’ party.) Yet it does not exactly suggest a polarising politicisation of these spheres; if anything the reverse. The two parties appear to have become depoliticised, made into equivalent blocs of corporate money and influence, perhaps analogous to Coca-Cola and Pepsi. Lethem’s gesture, sprinkling this motif of party-political influence through the text with minimal explication, hints at a larger critical perspective on the relations between politics and corporate and financial power.

The employment market may function randomly, but much power in the URA rests with a body called the Census. This body is equivalent to the police and secret services, with a strong emphasis on covert surveillance. During the novel we encounter several characters working for the Census, and others who are nervous of its intrusions. A major character is Robert Smith, introduced as ‘Census Director’ at the start of Chapter Six. Lower down the chain of command is ‘Break-in coordinator Brenda Family’ (94), who commands Census operatives in seizing evidence from the homes of suspects.

Perkus Tooth moves through a distinctive urban environment. Between his office and his home, he commutes in a car which consists of ‘carriage and driver-pod’, though ‘[s]pace, of course, existed on the frame of the carriage for three other passenger pods’ (7). Driving happens mainly below ground, where a developed urban environment exists: ‘As Perkus sped along the underground free-way the built-in storefronts became more and more tidy and legitimate looking, eventually even fashionable and chic as he drew close to center’ (8). The underground city parallels the world above ground. Here is the Tooth Knife and Fork building:

Despite the office spaces inside, which bordered on plush, the facade of the building remained a delapidated, black warehouse, much like the rest of the urban wasteland in its proximity. It was only as businesses and residences approached center that they became fashionable or even attractive in appearance, and the Tooth family silverware building was far from the nearest center. (8)

‘Center’ appears to correspond to ‘central business district’, or even, in American idiom, ‘downtown’. It is clear from the text that there is more than one ‘center’ in the NRA. Perkus meditates on the concept:

All roads, Perkus thought, lead to center. That’s why they call it that, right? But Perkus could also remember when center was just the shortened version of a longer phrase: Urban Reclamation Center. Yes, Perkus thought, all roads lead to center, to a point. But after a while, if you keep going, you get to another center, and then another. Each solipsistically believing itself to be the real center, the core, the middle, where everything originates, when in fact it’s really only part of a series. Just like people, Perkus observed. (8)

The claim about solipsism echoes the author’s note, with its phrase ‘as insular as the Areas, and as provincial’. Putting that note and this passage together, we can posit that the east coast sprawl contains a series of Urban Reclamation Centers, each corresponding to one of the Urban Reclamation Areas. Each one of these, as Perkus intuits, is parochial and inward-looking, tending to forget the existence of other adjacent areas with their own centers. It is conceivable that these centers are intended to correspond to historic conurbations in the area – such as Boston, New York, Washington DC and Baltimore – though this is not confirmed by the text.

The world of *Apes in the Plan* heavily features technology that is advanced from the time of its composition. Cars, we have seen, carry a range of ‘pods’ and drive on underground freeways. The Census has placed surveillance in numerous locations across society, such

as a camera on the freeway that is ‘peeking and probing with its infraphotography’ (9). Entering an entertainment complex, customers pass through a ‘robot-gate’ in which they are ‘checked for weapons, identified by personalized ultrasonic coding and billed for the visit’ (9). Homes include audio-visual ‘video tapestry’, and such useful devices as self-cleaning carpets and lights that react automatically to movement (45). Some changes are slight, like a ‘doorhorn’ rather than a bell (47). A shower can be ‘paused’ with a button rather than switched off with a tap (47). Perkus’s office desk is ‘tangled with phone lines and computer jacks’ (3): the latter, at least, were still comparatively unfamiliar in the mid-1980s. We soon see some of this communications technology in action: ‘Perkus leaned forward and flicked a small switch on the underside of his desk-top, causing a keyboard to descend from the comm-unit above his head. The tiny screen blinked on, glowing with a pale green luminescence’ (4). He jettisons items into a ‘trash-tube’ (6). More generally, paper has been replaced by ‘papyrus’ (3): a substance, often mentioned in the novel, that seems to be recycled paper. Perkus encounters this not only in communication but as wrapping for a burger:

For use in food packaging it was criminally low-grade papyrus. Not only were traces of older, more garishly printed packaging evident in the papyrus, but certain fresh, first generation garbage was discernable. [...] Wasn’t there some law, he wondered, that only second- or third-generation trash could be pressed into the papyrus used in the food industry? Or had that regulation been scrapped, along with so many others, as impractical? (28–9)

Papyrus seems to be thin, recycled paper, in this case so low in quality as to show traces of its former use. The combination of recycling and the scrapping of ‘impractical’ regulations hints at a shortage of this substance, as though ecological conditions in the United Reclamation Areas have made the manufacture of fresh paper increasingly difficult. At the same time, the Census uses high technology such as the ‘Quick Red Fox’ (90), ‘Quick Brown Fox’ (109), or ‘Fly’ (157): portable devices for maintaining surveillance, similar to what would later be known as drones.

One of the most advanced technologies shown in the novel is a form of virtual reality. This leads us to a final, very notable feature of its fictional world: entertainment. In Chapter Two Perkus and Elko go to a facility called Great 75 to play a ‘kinesthetic game’ called Ten, which is ‘by far the most popular scenario overall’ (15). Each player enters a private booth and applies ‘kinesthetic wristlets’ and a headset, activating an ‘encephalic program’ that immerses them in ‘the dream-state of Great 75, Scenario 10’ (17). The term ‘virtual reality’ was not yet as widespread in the 1980s as ten or twenty years later, but it gives a fair indication of the mode of the game. The virtual experience finds the

player, in a new body and clothes, on a tropical beach, seeking the beautiful woman Bo as a sexual partner. Bo is largely elusive, which encourages players to keep returning and spending more on chasing her; but Perkus Tooth, unusually, has been able to win the game. The game is based directly on the film *Ten* (1979), in which actress Bo Derek plays a character who is the inspiration for the kinesthetic object of desire. Dudley Moore is the male lead in this film, and accordingly Elko, on logging in to the game, reflects: 'I can tell, he heard himself think, that I am Dudley. I feel his body move in mine. I am Dudley' (18).

This future homage to *Ten* is only one instance of a broader pattern. Beside 'catching Bo', other games in the series are said to involve the goals of 'rescuing the hostages, freeing the princess from the DeathStar, apprehending the Repub burglars, or any of the other theoretically impossible, unreachable goals' (13). These goals have in common a period setting. The 'hostages' likely refer to the hostage crisis in which, in late 1979, fifty-two US diplomats and citizens were captured at the US Embassy in Tehran, in the wake of the Iranian Revolution. US special forces made a failed attempt to rescue the hostages in April 1980, which may well be the direct referent of Lethem's phrase. 'Freeing the princess from the DeathStar' refers to the plot of the film *Star Wars* (1977). 'Apprehending the Repub burglars' strongly appears to refer to the burglary of the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office complex in June 1972, on behalf of the re-election efforts of Republican President Richard Nixon. In short, all four items belong to a time span of less than a decade, from 1972 to 1980. This period covers Lethem's own childhood and teenage years prior to commencing work on *Apes in the Plan*.

The period's cultural centrality is explicitly announced in the novel. 'Great 75', the name of the gaming facility, evidently refers to the year 1975. It appears that all the games played there evoke the events and stories of the 1970s. Perkus first sees a group of 'Great 75 fanatics' who 'stood out like sore thumbs, dressed in their seventies costumes; flared jeans with rainbow pockets, hip-huggers, mirrored sunglasses and generic, medium-length haircuts' (9–10). The theme is accentuated when, walking to their gaming booths, Perkus and Elko again pass 'a loud group of Great 75 fanatics. They were dressed according to the dictates of Seventies fashion; one was carrying a pet rock. Perkus recognized a mood-ring on the hand of another. It's not like that for me, Perkus though. I don't love the Seventies that much' (15). Perkus and Elko themselves are 1970s enthusiasts to some degree. Not only do they repeatedly take part in a virtual reality version of a 1979 film; Perkus's apartment also contains a 'video tapestry' which switches to a 'kaleidoscopic collage of Darth Vader, brandishing a glowing sword of light' (50). Perkus, a 21st-century man, is familiar with the villain of the *Star Wars*

saga (films from 1977, 1980 and 1983), but Elko disapproves of their more outwardly ‘fanatic’ contemporaries. Elko accuses them of ‘[r]efusing to live in their own century’. Perkus protests mildly that they are not so different: ‘They could be us. [...] I mean, we could be them. It’s just a question of degree’. Elko refuses to accept this logic: ‘They take it too far. It becomes ludicrous, a parody. They’re finally an insult to those of us who take it seriously’ (15–16). Nonetheless, a trendy bar-room crowd can be described as ‘young and fash – quite seventies’ (28).

Four points can be highlighted in summary here. First, Lethem’s future society is shown to have a system of entertainment, which coexists with its system of work. The impression is that the former is almost as routinised and industrialised as the latter, rather in the manner of Theodor W. Adorno’s description of modern leisure.⁹ Second, this entertainment system does not merely involve consuming non-interactive narratives (such as films) but rather deeply immersive, game-like virtual reality experiences that remove the player from the real world for a set period of time. This enhances the impression that the entertainment is a form of escape from an unappetising reality. Third, these forms of entertainment in the novel appear to generate, or reflect, enthusiasm for cultural memories of the 1970s. Plainly, this is the period immediately before Lethem wrote the novel and most familiar to him. In this sense the role of the 1970s as a cultural focus in *Apes*’ future appears all too convenient.

Nonetheless, fourth, Lethem also shows a certain reflexivity about this theme, as 1970s retro-enthusiasm becomes an object of discussion and criticism. The 21st-century characters who ‘refuse to live in their own century’ could be a more thoroughgoing reprise of those already involved in retro culture by the time of the novel’s writing. This moment had already seen, for instance, 1950s revivalism in the TV programme *Happy Days* (1974–1984) and the film musical *Grease* (1978); during the novel’s composition this would be compounded by such films as *Back to the Future* (1985) and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), and a wave of revivals of 1950s style and aesthetics.¹⁰ Therefore, while the novel’s highlighting of the 1970s as a privileged field for cultural revival may initially suggest a lack of imagination from its young author, a more benign view can be taken of his project here. That the materials of this wave of cultural nostalgia are those immediately available to Lethem is so evident as to take this gesture beyond a mere lack of creative energy. Part of Lethem’s insight is to perceive at a young age, and at a relatively early stage in the development of retro culture, that the 1970s could indeed

⁹ See Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Free Time’, in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* ed. J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), pp.162–170.

¹⁰ On the history of 1950s revivalism in the 1970s and 1980s, among other such recent instances of retrospective culture, see Elizabeth Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London: Reaktion, 2006), and Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to its Own Past* (London: Faber, 2010).

be recycled this way. The process would in fact take much less time than *Apes* implies.¹¹ The later Lethem could recognise this process, as in the early years of the 21st century he would write extensive retrospective essays about the culture that he grew up with in the 1970s, as collected in *The Disappointment Artist* (2005). In this sense the fascination with the period projected forward in *Apes* would also turn out to be enduring for the author in subsequent decades.

To summarise thus far: *Apes in the Plan* presents a 21st-century American society based in the limited space of the 'United Reclamation Areas'. It is a hi-tech world, but one dulled by anomie, in which VR entertainment is used as an escape. The economy functions according to the random workings of a lottery, which also serves as a source of televised entertainment. Political parties are deeply embedded in the economy, though the Presidents seem to have been selected by lottery. Considerable political power is exercised by the state apparatus of the Census.

Content of the Novel: An Additional Dimension

One can readily imagine how, having composed such a fictional setting, a young author could have produced a story from it: whether following the everyday life of Perkus Tooth and friends in this novel environment, or developing greater intrigue and action around the activities of the Census or of crime, espionage or rebellion. Curiously, though, Lethem did not do this. The actual story of *Apes in the Plan* introduces a whole other dimension to the scenario outlined. A group of powerful and ancient alien beings come to earth by inhabiting the bodies of Perkus Tooth, the psychic Agatha Highseed and a young man named Jim Nothing. The central story consists mainly of, on one hand, Perkus's struggle to understand and cope with what is happening to him, and, on the other, the campaign by the state, especially the Census, to understand and contain this threat.

The arrival of the alien consciousness is announced when Perkus meets Jim Nothing in a bar and has an out-of-body experience. After 'a wave of wooziness and derangement [...] flooding his senses with static', he sees himself from above, having become 'a ghost', '[f]loating, unfixed in space'. He believes that he is the disembodied 'soul' of Perkus Tooth: 'I'm probably expected to leave now, to dissipate, get lost' (36–37). Instead, this disembodied consciousness abruptly returns to its body, but still stranger experiences follow. While in the shower, Perkus again becomes 'weightless, desensitized', and

¹¹ Writing in a British context, Michael Bracewell would opine that the 1970s 'happened again in the 1990s – the Retro Ricochet of popular regression to the sites of adolescence. [...] It could be said that we haven't had any new popular culture in the 1990s, we've simply had the recent past again, focusing on a selective memory of the 1970s'. *The Nineties: When Surface was Depth* (London: Flamingo, 2002), pp.203–4.

realises that the droplets of water have stopped in mid-air, then started to flow upward as though time has been reversed (52–53). As he emerges from the shower, '[the] light in the room seemed somehow different, bent back against itself' (54), and Perkus finds that he has transformed into an ape. Perkus even gains the consciousness and character of this ape: 'This ape creature had once lived, millions of years in the past, and he was Perkus' distant relative, his ancestor. The ape's name was City Born, and he lived to be 38, surviving, at the age of 26, the loss of his foot in a hunting accident' (55). As a result, the ape Perkus now has only one foot, and one of his human feet has been separated from him: he sees it 'undeveloped, on the tile floor of the bathroom'. Perkus swiftly metamorphoses once more back to human form, only now with a new foot, leaving behind the severed one for the Census to discover and impound later in the novel.

It emerges that Perkus is not the only ape. Both Agatha Highseed and Jim Nothing have ape selves into which they also transform. In doing so these characters enter a different landscape: a 'veldt' (125), a 'vast, desolate landscape' (127), a 'vast sandy plain under the iridescent purple sky' (108). In this growing landscape the apes are accompanied by 'miniature houses': 'Their surfaces were complicated with circuitry, and ornamented with tiny, blinking lights. [...] they formed a little village in the dunes' (128). This alternative space opens up amid the customary world of the NRA. The Census tracks the three apes to a building and is able to view their alternate reality expanding inside it. We gradually gain explanatory background to this, especially when the three ape-citizens are apprehended for questioning and Perkus, who has become the most insightful into the situation, explains matters to the Census and the dual Presidents:

'We've all been possessed by ancient deities from another star-system. [...] God-like beings. [...] they haven't had bodies for billions of years. They're just spirits. They can hardly even remember what their bodies were like. [...] they had something to do with creating, uh, life on earth. At least it was partly their idea'. (183)

The alien beings have names: The Iron Doggie, The Duke of Shiny Water, The Happy Nest of Strangers (183–4). In a further meeting, Perkus expands on their history:

'They became voluntarily insane. [...] They had a sort of built-in alarm clock, to wake them up and make them sane when enough time had elapsed. [...] They were an intelligence system far greater than us, but they're in their senility. [...] They transcended their physical form and then discovered, too late, that it signaled the beginning of the end for a race. They gave up their bodies'. (191–92)

Perkus at this point is fading away after the effort of being occupied by an alien. But he gives one further key passage of information:

‘A long time ago there was a race. I don’t know what they looked like, but they were builders. They built houses. Really great houses, with all sorts of unusual features. [...] Then the race died [...] and the houses lay vacant. [...] Then the bugs moved in. [...] The bugs inhabited the houses, and the houses helped them: built things for them, taught them. [...] After a while, somewhere between the autonomous personality of the mechanical house and the collective intelligence of the hive, they became a new kind of thing. [...] The bugs-in-houses had a slave race. [...] Indentured apes. Apes-in-waiting. That’s us. Earth is an ape farm. That’s all’. (193–94)

Lethem’s fictional scenario has now reached a plane of extraordinary ambition. What was already a complex enough futuristic setting has been eclipsed by a back-story of cosmic immensity. We are not given much to go on in imagining the ‘bugs’ or ‘nests’: for such new unfamiliar objects, they are not introduced with the thoroughness that a reader might hope for. From one alien statement, it appears that Earth is only the latest destination for an alien life-form that has exhausted itself elsewhere:

our own experience of what constituted ‘life’ led us to believe that human beings were incomplete, a mere third of the required unit. We recalled our own version so fondly, and, in our madness and lack of existence, saw your planet as a chance to duplicate our previous success, to try again. (44)

The story ends with the three alien consciousnesses departing their human hosts. Perkus accordingly disappears, returning only as a voice to address Jim Nothing and in the kinesthetic game to say goodbye to Elko Dunstable. The characters of the Census and state seem able to return to a degree of normality.

One further element of the narrative needs to be mentioned in closing this description: most of the novel’s chapters end with a separate section voiced by the space-being called The Iron Doggie, which possesses Perkus during the novel. These sections have all-capitalised headings like ‘A SHORT MESSAGE FROM THE IRON DOGGIE’ (10) and ‘AND NOW A WORD FROM THE IRON DOGGIE’ (26). In a sense, then, we have been given the story of the space beings from an early stage, though not in a linear manner that is easy to comprehend. The last chapter of the novel concludes without one of these interjections, reflecting the fact that the alien consciousness has departed. The last statement from this voice appears at the end of the penultimate chapter:

One last visit, one last chapter; increasingly, the storyteller is aware that as his story draws to a close, so does he; that he exists only because the story exists; that he exists because there is a story about a time when he existed. Being a story, you see, must eventually mean being that story’s conclusion. (204)

This declaration arguably makes sense diegetically, as the culmination of the ongoing commentary from this voice, but it also has the effect of a metafictional statement. In referring to ‘one last chapter’, when there is indeed one chapter to go, it clearly appears to refer directly to the novel *Apes in the Plan* itself. In this sense, an extra layer of artifice is built into this already unusual and disorienting text.

Genre Context

The unpublished character of this text has made it appropriate to describe it in detail. Now we are in a position to situate the novel and to trace key themes in relation to precursors and sources.

Apes in the Plan is a science fiction (SF) novel. It is set in a fictional future version of the real Earth, in which technology has advanced through scientific development. It illustrates the use of this technology and its integration into social life. The novel partakes in key activities associated with SF. One has been particularly influential in critical writing: the concept of cognitive estrangement proposed by the critic Darko Suvin.¹² In this model, SF works to ‘estrangle’ a reader’s relation to reality through the insertion of unexpected features not encountered in real life. Examples of this in *Apes* are numerous and could include the various technological innovations listed earlier, such as robot-gates, self-cleaning carpets, miniature surveillance units, or ‘papyrus’ as a new form of paper. Unexpected features of *Apes*’ future that are not in themselves technological but social are also ‘estranging’. The role of political parties in social life and commerce is a good example; the lottery as economic basis is another. These features take aspects of reality as known at the time of the novel’s composition (such as the two main US political parties and corporate sponsorship) and present them in a new configuration. The reader encounters something very familiar (‘Dem’ or ‘Repub’) but in a context that is unfamiliar. A familiar feature of reality is thus estranged and perhaps made newly available for critical reflection.

The other half of Suvin’s formulation, ‘cognitive’, cordons SF from other forms of narrative which also present fictional worlds distinct from the real world – such as fantasy, fairy tale and Gothic. ‘Cognition’ implies that the estranging innovations of SF are based in the known laws of empirical reality, as discovered by science. Much of the science implied in a text like *Apes* may be, at the time of composition, imaginary. For instance, the ‘kinesthetic’ virtual reality experienced by Perkus and Elko had no real-world equivalent yet in the mid-1980s. Nonetheless, in purporting to derive from

¹² See Darko Suvin, ‘Estrangement and Cognition’, in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp.3–15.

scientific advance, such innovations qualify as ‘cognitive’ in Suvin’s sense and help to locate the novel as SF rather than another form of fantasy. It may readily be observed that *Apes* in fact contains phenomena that do not seem clearly and definitely scientific in this way, and might evade Suvin’s schema. We shall return to this aspect of the text.

What were the sources of the young Lethem’s SF narrative? From interviews and essays we have a good idea what science fiction he had read at this time. In a 2001 interview he states that ‘I read what felt to me then – 1975 through 1980 – like the entire backlist of science fiction. I read science fiction like a machine’, adding a long list of authors (*Conversations* 35). Lethem wrote *Apes in the Plan* having already read a large and diverse amount of SF, and the novel was formed on the basis of familiarity with the genre’s tropes and motifs. To a degree, one can posit the sources of particular features of *Apes* in particular SF authors and texts. For instance the interpenetration of party politics and commerce could draw on the satirical fiction about commerce and advertising produced by Cyril M. Kornbluth and Frederik Pohl, in their co-written novel *The Space Merchants* (1952) and elsewhere.¹³ Yet it is equally pertinent to see the SF background of *Apes* as generic: as a composite set of modes and motifs that apply to a large corpus of SF texts. Any reader of SF magazine fiction from the 1950s, for instance, would be used to innovations like robotic domestic appliances, alternative transport networks, or computerised communication units as recurring features across a range of writers. Critics have deployed the term ‘the megatext’ to denote the cumulative mass of innovations, motifs and themes across the genre. Damien Broderick explains it as ‘the huge body of established moves or reading protocols that the reader learns through immersion in many hundreds of sf short stories and novels (and, with significantly less sophistication, from movies, television episodes, and games). The sf megatext comprises a virtual encyclopedia and specialized dictionary’.¹⁴ By these lights, *Apes in the Plan* is a novel written with awareness of the SF megatext, which also – like any new SF narrative – adds to this accumulation with its own ideas.

Dick in the Plan

Lethem himself has said relatively little in public about *Apes in the Plan*. But in what he has said, one SF author has been clearly cited as a source: the US novelist Philip K Dick (1928–82). We have already noted Lethem’s statement that *Apes* was ‘a heedless attempt to splice J.P. Donleavy to Philip K. Dick and Devo’, and in the *New York Times*

¹³ This theme of the pervasiveness of sponsorship in domains as yet unknown would find another instance in David Foster Wallace’s novel *Infinite Jest* (1996), where calendar years are renamed after corporate products. This is a reminder of the science-fictional aspects of Wallace’s project.

¹⁴ Damien Broderick, ‘SF Megatext’, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/sf_megatext. See also Damien Broderick, *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1995).

report announcing Lethem's unpublished papers, he is quoted as calling *Apes* a 'fake Philip K. Dick novel'.¹⁵ This source is not surprising, as Lethem has made it plain that Dick was a touchstone for him in youth, and he has subsequently returned to Dick's work. In 2002 he introduced an extensive collection of Dick's short stories. In 2009 he served as editor of a collection of thirteen of Dick's novels for the Library of America. In 2011, with Pamela Jackson, he co-edited an edition of the massive meditation *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick*. In two essays ('You Don't Know Dick' and 'Crazy Friend'), Lethem has explained in detail the importance that Dick's work assumed for him from his teenage years on. Dick's novel *Ubik* (1969) was so important to Lethem that he had an icon from the story (an aerosol can) tattooed on his arm. He later wrote a poem in tribute to the novel.¹⁶ Still more specifically, Lethem was a key member of the Philip K. Dick Society, working on and contributing to its newsletter, while living in Berkeley – where, as we have seen, he produced the extant typescript of *Apes in the Plan*.¹⁷ We can thus reliably follow Lethem's own statements to posit that while *Apes* draws on a generic SF mode and tropes, it also more specifically draws on the example of Dick.

What does *Apes* take from Dick? We can posit four tendencies. First, most simply, Dick's fiction shares a general trait with most SF: it depicts a technologically advanced reality.¹⁸ Items of technology are often introduced without explanation, implying the reader's familiarity with them, in a standard SF narrative strategy. The technical innovation in Dick's fictional futures include hover-cars; flying taxicabs piloted by talking robots; doors which talk to their users and demand payment for transit; regular space flight for civilian transport; laser guns; cryogenic freezing that preserves human life in perpetuity; and androids of human appearance and artificial manufacture. *Apes in the Plan*, as we have seen, introduces its own battery of technical innovations. Some

¹⁵ Schuessler, 'Inside Jonathan Lethem's Oddball Trove'.

¹⁶ For the poem, first published in 2015 in *Black Clock*, see 'To *Ubik*', in Jonathan Lethem, *More Alive and Less Lonely: on Books and Writers* ed. Christopher Boucher (New York and London: Melville House, 2017), pp.183–184. For the other items mentioned here: Jonathan Lethem, 'Introduction' to *Selected Stories of Philip K. Dick* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: 2013 [2002]), pp.vii–xii, also reproduced as 'High Priest of the Paranoids' in *More Alive and Less Lonely*, pp.173–179. Philip K. Dick, *The Philip K. Dick Collection* (3-volume boxed set), ed. Jonathan Lethem (New York: Library of America, 2009). Jonathan Lethem and Pamela Jackson (eds), *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011). Jonathan Lethem, 'You Don't Know Dick', in *The Disappointment Artist* (London: Faber, 2005), pp.77–83, and 'Crazy Friend', in *The Ecstasy of Influence* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), pp.39–67. Lethem's *Ubik* tattoo is mentioned in this last text on pp.51–52. The essay also very glancingly mentions *Apes in the Plan*, alongside three other titles of attempted novels in this period: '*White Lines*, *Fractal Days*, and *Satisfying Lack*' (p.52). Lethem scholars must regretfully accept the loss of these other early efforts.

¹⁷ Lethem tells the story of his work with the Philip K. Dick Society in 'Crazy Friend', pp.45–46, and 'You Don't Know Dick', p.81.

¹⁸ See Adam Roberts' claim that science fiction might be more accurately called 'technology fiction', though he seeks a philosophically sophisticated, non-reductive use of the word 'technology': *The History of Science Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), pp.9–15, 18.

of these are akin to those featured in Dick. The self-cleaning carpet, for instance, is reminiscent of the domestic technology that we witness in the apartment of Joe Chip in *Ubik*. In general, *Apes'* landscape of hi-tech items whose use is taken for granted is strongly in tune with Dick's fiction.

A second, more specific similarity can be found in the atmosphere of *Apes'* world. It is not a dystopia (like Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or J.G. Ballard's sequence of climate-driven disaster novels, works with which Lethem was highly familiar), but it is downbeat.¹⁹ It depicts characters wearied by their jobs, who go on with a futuristic office life because they have to. The very first pages of *Apes* clearly signal this: we begin in Perkus Tooth's office, where Perkus seeks to avoid engagement with business associates and his secretary presents him with a list of missed calls: 'In her boredom, she had alphabetized them' (2). Trying to get rid of his business associate Aunt Miriam, he 'immediately commenced trying to look busy, which in this case consisted of opening a desk drawer and squinting meaningfully at its meaningless contents' (3). Perkus feels 'trapped' in his office: 'like a cramped box, the walls lined with filing cabinets, the comm-unit pressing down from the ceiling above his desk. [...] My desk, he admitted to himself, is a reflection of my life' (3). Perkus takes drugs to soothe the angst of being at the office: we may find it ironic that he uses 'depressants' to counter what seems like depression (4). Leaving the office early, he instructs his secretary to take the rest of the day off: "'Yes Mister Tooth'", his secretary chanted after him' (7). We are a long way from space opera. This brand of SF immediately offers us not derring-do with laser guns or space battles, but a technically enhanced version of the sort of bureaucratic routine that might be seen in situation comedies and satires of the period (from, say, Billy Wilder's 1960 film *The Apartment* to the 1970s UK television series *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*).

As we have seen, escapist entertainment is also used to counter the anomie of this repetitive life – though the escapism is itself repetitive. Technical innovations are taken for granted (just as telephones or cars are in the 1980s) and mostly do not visibly increase human happiness or excitement. Lethem himself, writing in 2002, would describe Dick's work in terms that relate closely to this atmosphere:

a perfectly typical 1950s obsession with the images of the suburbs, the consumer, the bureaucrat, and with the plight of small men struggling under the imperatives of capitalism. [...] Dick's characters, in novels and stories written well into the 1970s, go

¹⁹ On Lethem's familiarity with Orwell and Ballard, see *Conversations with Jonathan Lethem* ed. Jaime Clarke (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), pp.35, 52, 53, and 'The Claim of Time' in *The Ecstasy of Influence*, pp.84–87. Subsequent references to *Conversations with Jonathan Lethem* will be given parenthetically in the text as *Conversations*.

on working for grumbling bosses, carrying briefcases, sending interoffice memos, tinkering with cars in driveways, sweating alimony payments, and dreaming of getting away from it all – even when they've already emigrated to Mars.²⁰

Interplanetary emigration has not yet occurred in *Apes in the Plan*, but it is clear that Perkus Tooth, the harassed and depressed office manager, directly re-enacts this aspect of Dick, as perceived by Lethem. The theorist Fredric Jameson, a pioneer of SF studies in the 1970s, has similarly written of Dick:

This is [...] a literature about business, and in particular the sector of image and illusion production. Its 'average heroes' – an older, populist, Capraesque type of small employees such as record salesmen, self-employed mechanics and petty bureaucrats – are caught in the convulsive struggles of monopoly corporations and now galactic and intergalactic multinationals, rather than in the *Star Wars* feudal or imperial battles.²¹

One of many examples of this milieu in Dick can be seen in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968: henceforth *Androids*), when bounty hunter Rick Deckard visits the Bay Area Scavengers Company, inquiring with a 'severe, grey-haired switchboard woman' amid the firm's 'purely office employees'. She directs Deckard to Mr Ackers, the personnel manager: 'a prissy, tiny, bespectacled individual, merged with his plethora of paperwork'.²² Perkus Tooth could recognise Ackers' situation. *Androids* is set on Earth, whereas Dick's novel *A Maze of Death* (1970) is set on spacecraft and distant planets. But even this novel commences with the deeply characteristic declaration: 'His job, as always, bored him'. Bureaucratic complaints have an interplanetary setting: 'This damn inventory-control job bores me [...] Routine work – this ship is too large and in addition it's overstaffed. I'm a useless standby module'. Another character, loading his spacecraft, is overcome with self-doubt:

Going from one no-good job to another. I'm a loser. [...] Look at the job I'm doing loading this damn stuff in here. He gazed about the interior of the noser, conscious of the ungainly piles of clothing, books, records, kitchen appliances, typewriter, medical supplies, pictures, wear-forever couch covers, chess set, reference tapes, communication gear and junk, junk, junk.²³

²⁰ Lethem, 'High Priest of the Paranoids', in *More Alive and Less Lonely*, pp.174–175.

²¹ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), p.347.

²² Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (London: Grafton, 1972 [1968]), p.68.

²³ Philip K. Dick, *A Maze of Death* (London: Gollancz, 2005 [1970]), pp.7, 20.

These examples corroborate Lethem's description of Dick as a writer who carries the mundane, bureaucratic frustrations of 20th-century America into his imagined hi-tech futures. Adam Roberts' summary of Dick would also apply to *Apes in the Plan*: 'His best novels take thoroughly quotidian characters, often suburban, usually unexceptional, and rake through their (and our) preconceptions about the world around them'.²⁴

In Dick too, as in *Apes*, media provide a distraction from the wearying world. Thus in *Androids*, the media personality Buster Friendly broadcasts for 23 hours per day: 'The Buster Friendly Show, telecast and broadcast all over Earth via satellite, also poured down on the emigrants of the colony planets'.²⁵ In Dick's novel *Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said* (1974), the protagonist Jason Taverner is a pop music singer who also hosts a weekly TV programme with 30 million viewers in a dystopian and authoritarian society. As these examples suggest, Dick repeatedly pays attention to forms of entertainment and media which, by keeping the population distracted or sated, help to maintain a degree of social stability. A related feature is Dick's amused parody of advertising slogans, notably in *Ubik* where every chapter commences with an italicised piece of futuristic ad-speak: for instance '*Perk up pouting household surfaces with new miracle Ubik, the easy-to-apply, extra-shiny, nonstick plastic coating. Entirely harmless if used as directed. Saves endless scrubbing, glides you right out of the kitchen!*' (70).²⁶ In the context of *Apes* this formal feature has particular resonance, as it may well be a key inspiration for the pronouncements of The Iron Doggie that close each chapter. These have a similar punctuating role in relation to the main narrative, and their invocation of advertising or media discourse ('AND NOW A WORD FROM THE IRON DOGGIE' [26]) recalls *Ubik*'s appropriation of a comparable tone. From these various instances, and from the descriptions given by Lethem and Jameson, we can perceive a Dickian mood and attitude which is, at the least, echoed in *Apes in the Plan*.

A third major point of comparison lies in Dick's abiding interest in power and the functioning of society. Dick's fiction repeatedly expresses scepticism about governance and authority. Government in his work rarely appears as legitimate, democratic and accountable. More often it appears opaque, bureaucratic and oligarchical, when not simply tyrannical. Governing entities in Dick typically manipulate citizens and, in Noam Chomsky's phrase, manufacture consent, through such strategies as the threat of war, the fear of coercive law enforcement, and the pacifying effects of mass media

²⁴ Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, p.240.

²⁵ Dick, *Androids*, p.59.

²⁶ Philip K. Dick, *Ubik* (London: Gollancz, 2006 [1969]), p.70.

or advanced technology.²⁷ Among numerous examples, a strong instance can be found in *Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said*, in which a post-democratic USA is governed by a dictatorial Director, and power is maintained by a militarised National Guard and police force. Dick's short stories, first published in SF magazines, also demonstrate such an imagination of power: in 'The Defenders' (1953) and 'Foster, You're Dead!' (1955), structures of paranoia and mutual suspicion among citizens derive from the era of 'Mutually Assured Destruction' by nuclear weapons.²⁸ Indeed, in Dick's fictional worlds, a cataclysmic war has often already occurred when the action begins.

Apes in the Plan partially resembles this blueprint. As noted earlier, the setting in the United Reclamation Areas hints at prior nuclear destruction, though this is not confirmed in the text. The novel directly focuses on the heart of power and governance through the dual Presidents, who are shown to be not omnipotent but insecure and uncertain of their own power. *Apes* also shows us the workings of state agencies of coercion and surveillance in the form of the all-encompassing Census, which is feared and resented by its citizens. The Census deploys new technology, culminating in the 'Wolf Project', a robot with artificial intelligence and armed with deadly weaponry including a nuclear warhead. Nonetheless the Census, like the Presidents, is not shown as all-powerful. It is barely adequate to the challenge of the alien beings who drive the plot. Its director Robert Smith is driven by irritation, insecurity, petty resentment and lust. In the midst of his interview with the alien visitors, he is envious of the marriage between the two Presidents: 'Florian's got someone to lean on at moments like this. I'm on my own' (185).

In this sense power is humanised; its frailties are revealed. This too is a tendency recognisable from Dick's fiction. The Police General in *Flow My Tears*, Felix Buckman, is shown to have an emotional crisis of conscience in which he questions the validity of his society. The bounty hunter Rick Deckard in *Androids* has a vexed domestic life, even before the novel's events place his own humanity in question. In *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), the senior Japanese official Tagomi finds his conscience, and his sense of reality, in crisis as he struggles to coexist with Nazi domination of North America. Part of the implication that *Apes* shares with Dick is that individuals in power may be as uncertain, neurotic and internally conflicted as the supposedly ordinary people over whom they exercise authority.

²⁷ The phrase has come to be strongly associated with Chomsky, but he himself gave much credit to the co-author of the book with this title: see Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988). Lethem focuses on related questions of media, ideology and hegemony in his book *They Live* (Berkeley, Soft Skull, 2010).

²⁸ See Lethem's discussion of Dick and nuclear war in 'Life After Wartime', in *More Alive and Less Lonely*, pp.185–192.

The social model of *Apes*, in which economic and political activity are distributed by lottery, has been described earlier. This aspect bears comparison with the tendency of Dick, and much other SF of his generation, to conceive of social models which are distinct from known reality yet also extrapolated from aspects of it.²⁹ In Dick, examples would include two social innovations in *Androids*: the cult of Mercerism (in which citizens watch a TV channel showing a religious guru) and the mood organ through which a citizen can precisely and artificially manipulate their own emotional state. But the single most pertinent Dick text here is his first published novel, *Solar Lottery* (1955). In its fictional twenty-third century, global power is shifted at random between accredited individuals via ‘twitches’ of ‘the bottle – the socialized instrument of chance’.³⁰ In an early passage of exposition Dick explains that ‘[n]obody knew what came next. Nobody could count on anything. Statistical prediction became popular ... the very concept of cause and effect died out. People lost faith in the belief that they could control their environment; all that remained was probable sequence: good odds in a universe of random chance’ (*Solar* 20). An obscure idealist, Leon Cartwright, is thus elevated to the equivalent of interplanetary President, here called the Quizmaster. Dick downplays the role of randomness as the novel proceeds, as the previous ruler seeks to regain power by force, and Cartwright finally reveals that his own elevation in fact came from gaming a system that he had decided was unjust (*Solar* 177–78). Nonetheless, as a founding concept in the debut novel of Lethem’s first literary model, governance by chance makes *Solar Lottery* highly plausible as a key influence on *Apes in the Plan*.

A last feature of Dick’s science fiction is pertinent to *Apes in the Plan*. Dick wrote of future worlds transfigured by science and technology. But he was not a writer of ‘hard SF’, which works through the precise causal logic of a coherently imagined scientific development.³¹ Dick’s imagination was also metaphysical. In the last decade of his career (and especially in the wake of a mystical experience that he claimed to have had in

²⁹ The fiction of Robert Sheckley, a writer often compared to Dick and well known to Lethem, is noteworthy here. Sheckley’s stories often function as satires upon aspects of human behaviour and society by positing extrapolated versions of them. In ‘Seventh Victim’ (1953), for instance, a game of assassins and targets dubbed The Big Hunt functions as entertainment and as a way of channelling social aggression. See *Store of the Worlds: The Stories of Robert Sheckley*, ed. Alex Abramovich and Jonathan Lethem (New York: NYRB, 2012), pp.14–29. The co-editors’ Introduction (pp.vii–xi), though a joint effort, makes plain Lethem’s appreciation for Sheckley.

³⁰ See Philip K. Dick, *Solar Lottery* (London: Gollancz, 2003 [1955]), p.5. Subsequent references to this text will be given parenthetically as *Solar*.

³¹ For definitions of ‘Hard SF’, see Peter Nicholls, ‘Hard SF’, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/hard_sf, and Kathryn Cramer, ‘Hard science fiction’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.186–196. See also Jonathan Lethem’s own understanding of the subgenre in ‘My Year of Reading Lemmishly’, *London Review of Books*, 10 February 2022, pp.27–32 (p.27).

1974), he accentuated what was already a strong strain in his work towards comparative religion and mysticism. For Dick, the line between science and religion, the mechanical and the mystical, is difficult to draw with clarity. That which appears scientific and material may acquire mystical status, and that which is mystical is also explained in elaborately technical terms. Late in *Ubik* the protagonist asks an immaterial avatar just what *Ubik* is. The answer he receives is not, as we may expect, spiritual, but a long passage of apparent pseudo-science: 'The negative ions are given a counterclockwise spin by a radically based acceleration chamber, which creates a centripetal tendency to them so that they cohere rather than dissipate. A negative ion field diminishes the velocity of anti-protophasons normally present in the atmosphere; as soon as their velocity falls they cease to be anti-protophasons [...] – and so on for as long again.'³²

In this respect Dick's work can be said to problematise the clear distinction between reason and unreason, science fiction and fantasy, that underpins Suvin's long-standing schema. Dick's work is hardly alone in this: rather it stands as a major example of a tendency identified by Adam Roberts, in which SF works at the border of the rational and nonrational, science and religion, rather than being limited to the former term.³³ *Apes in the Plan* is not a major contribution to this tradition as Dick's oeuvre is, but the ambiguity in question can also be seen at work here. The beings possessing Perkus Tooth, Agatha Highseed and Jim Nothing are described as 'ancient deities from another star system', 'God-like beings'. Perkus's terms are ambiguous and shifting. He states that 'They used to be people [...] organic creatures', but then that these beings have long ago become disembodied: 'just spirits'. On reflection, he goes on, 'deity is much more like it', because they 'had something to do with creating, uh, life on earth' (183). These entities are thus uncertainly categorised between 'organic beings' and 'deities'. They seem to belong to space ('another star system') but also to be beyond spatial existence ('just spirits'). Characters grope for appropriate terms. President Florian calls them 'space creatures' (180) and states that 'We're dealing with a representative of an alien civilization' (190). Agatha Highseed describes her own experience in more Gothic terms, saying that she is engaging 'the fiend' in 'psychic combat' (180). In line with this, the language of possession, which Perkus uses at one point, suggests demons or malign spirits. Yet the beings are from 'space', a continuation of the physically known realm. Their billion-year existence – Perkus even calls it 'Eternity' (194–95) – in one sense sounds like another modality of being entirely, belonging to a different dimension. But it is described in matter-of-fact terms, as though it were an extension of terrestrial science rather than a theological realm that may not be spoken of.

³² Dick, *Ubik*, pp.220–1.

³³ See Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, pp.ix–xv, for a summary of this case, which recurs through the rest of the book. Roberts naturally emphasises Dick's theological or messianic dimension: pp.240–243.

Lethem in *Apes* splits the difference between ‘aliens’ and ‘gods’, or resolves the latter into an ancient instance of the former. The blend of mystic visitation and extra-terrestrial life – which seem, effectively, to be the same thing – is broadly consonant with the attitudes that we have traced in Dick. Lethem may well also have had another source: the writing of Olaf Stapledon (1886–1950). Lethem’s description of *Apes* does not mention Stapledon’s work, but he has confirmed that he read this author as a teen.³⁴ Stapledon’s books *Last and First Men* (1930) and *Star Maker* (1937) paint on an unfathomably large canvas, purporting to place humanity and its life on earth in a cosmic perspective reaching thousands of millions of years into the future and back to the origins of the universe. At the start of Stapledon’s first book, for instance, a narrator purports to be giving the story to its 20th-century author from many millennia hence:

I, the true inspirer of this book, I who have begotten it upon that brain, I who influence that primitive being’s conception, inhabit an age which, for Einstein, lies in the very remote future. [...] A being whom you would call a future man has seized the docile but scarcely adequate brain of your contemporary, and is trying to direct its familiar processes for an alien purpose. Thus a future epoch makes contact with your age.³⁵

The structure indicated here is close to that driving the plot of *Apes*: a being of vastly superior mental capacity, from an immensely distant time, has ‘seized the docile but scarcely adequate brain’ of a human in the present in order to intervene in reality. The most evident difference is that Stapledon’s influencer comes from the distant future, while Lethem’s is a survivor from the distant past. Stapledon’s future being describes human history at vast scale and in intergalactic context:

[It] is well to contemplate for a few moments the mere magnitudes of cosmical events. [...] The receding depths of time and space, though they can indeed be haltingly conceived even by primitive minds, cannot be imaged save by beings of a more ample nature. [...] While the near past and the new future display within them depth beyond depth, time’s remote immensities are foreshortened into flatness. It is almost inconceivable to simple minds that man’s whole history should be but a moment in the life of the stars, and that remote events should embrace within themselves aeon upon aeon.³⁶

The cosmic perspective might be recognised by Lethem’s ‘God-like beings’ from distant space, which can perceive events on a similarly distended scale. However, where

³⁴ See Clarke (ed), *Conversations*, p.35; and see Lethem’s reference to Stapledon in ‘My Year of Reading Lemmishly’, p.27.

³⁵ Olaf Stapledon, *Last and First Men* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966 [1930]), p.15.

³⁶ Stapledon, *Last and First Men*, p.16.

Stapledon works out his future history of humanity at systematic length, Lethem's alien intervention amounts to a brief, bewildering episode. And while Stapledon's figure speaks with the sonorous tones of the 'last men', Lethem's ancient figures have incongruous names – notably 'The Iron Doggie' – which tend to undermine such solemnity even as their story posits it. *Apes* applies the cosmic immensity of Stapledon as a driver of plot in the disenchanting, authoritarian, hi-tech yet humdrum future world of Dick. As in Dick, this world is seen laconically, through the eyes of authority figures unsure of their authority and mundane citizens more used to urban boredom than to adventure. In addition, Dick's more zany and irreverent attitude influences the naming of the aliens, in a way that installs a certain incongruity at the heart of the novel.

Ape Origins

The single most vivid and surprising element of *Apes in the Plan* is signalled in its title: the transformation of humans into apes. When Perkus first becomes the ape City Born, his body is described:

the broad, leathery nose, the black, oily hair. Perkus turned his hands over in the light, examining them. The backs were covered [with] coarse, thickly matted hair, his nails were chipped and yellow. An exotic stench floated up from his ape-body, particularly his ape-genitals, but this didn't really offend his ape-nose. (54)

This description of Perkus the ape is more extensive than any description the novel gives of Perkus as a human. Lethem describes the ape's physical being to enhance the sense of estrangement that this metamorphosis naturally provokes. It is noteworthy that prior to this metamorphosis, the novel also uses the word 'ape' as though to prefigure what is ahead. Thus when echoing Jim Nothing's speech, Perkus 'aped the rhyme' (34), and Nothing himself is seen 'crouching, apelike, against the floor' (35). This is congruent with the text's developing tendency to blur human into ape. Nonetheless, in a novel that depicts a high-technology world, the apes present a considerable shift, though their world does also contain advanced technology in the miniature houses or 'nests' that accompany them. The question arises: why apes?

The first answer is made plain in the text's epigraph. In Lethem's typewritten rendition, Devo's 1978 song 'Jocko Homo' states:

God made man, but he used the monkey to do it;
apes in the plan, and we're all here to prove it:
I can walk like an ape, talk like an ape, do like the monkey do --
God made man but the monkey supplied the glue. (1)

Given Lethem's passionate investment in pop music, it was natural enough for him to draw inspiration from a pop song. Devo do not resound, across his writings, as his greatest favourite, compared to Bob Dylan or Talking Heads, but as a band of the New Wave era that coincided with Lethem's impressionable teens, and produced by Brian Eno, they make a relatively characteristic choice.³⁷ This particular lyric invokes Darwinian concepts of evolution. Earlier, the song states that 'We lost our tails / Evolving up / From little snails'; it also refers to 'Monkey men all / In business suits', pointing to the evolutionary continuity between humans and earlier anthropoids. In this sense the ape is a crucial image in modern scientific understanding. The lyric also repeats the phrase 'Are we not men? / We are Devo'. The question here is drawn from H.G. Wells' 1896 novel *The Island of Dr Moreau*, in which a tribe of genetically manipulated beast-men ritually recite the phrase to emphasise the prohibition on bestial activity:

Not to go on all-fours; that is the Law. Are we not men?
 Not to suck up Drink; that is the Law. Are we not men?
 Not to eat Fish or Flesh; that is the Law. Are we not men?
 Not to claw the Bark of Trees; *that* is the Law. Are we not men?
 Not to chase other Men; *that* is the Law. Are we not men?³⁸

In its original context, then, 'Are we not men?' is an anxious assertion of humanity by a race of beings whose humanity is very much in doubt, and which represents the troublingly fragile border between the human and the rest of the animal world. Devo's song, requisitioning the phrase, does not produce such clear meaning, but rather conveys a sense that human status is of only relative value. The repeated reply 'We are Devo' implies 'devolution' or reverse evolution: a process that might be feared by Wells's Ape-Men and that might also be dramatised by Perkus Tooth's metamorphosis.

Other sources also existed for the image of the ape. A prominent one was *Planet of the Apes*, a 1968 film (based on a French novel) in which a crew of human astronauts land on a future Earth where talking apes have become dominant and humans, bereft of language, are reduced to wearing crude animal skins. The film thus proposes an inversion of the relation between these large primates. The use of apes in SF, and the

³⁷ 'Jocko Homo' is the last track on the first side of the original vinyl release of Devo's first LP, Q: *Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!* (Warner Bros. / Virgin Records, 1978). The single fullest account of Lethem's relation to music in this New Wave era is his book *Fear of Music* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); Devo are paired with Talking Heads as a science fiction band on p.84. Devo become a reference point for teenage characters in Lethem's novel *The Fortress of Solitude* (London: Faber, 2003): 'The band Devo might have something to do with the new something in the air, lyrics about *mongoloids* and *swelling itching brains* offering some ironic back door into animal nature, a way to evade the appalling, head-on Jim Morrison route' (p.221).

³⁸ H.G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (New York: Stone & Kimball, 1896), p.107.

notion of an evolutionary inversion, makes *Planet of the Apes* broadly relevant as an intertext for Lethem's novel. One of the film's authors was Rod Serling, creator of *The Twilight Zone* and much appreciated by Lethem.³⁹ The film is also referred to in Lethem's later post-apocalyptic novel *The Arrest*.⁴⁰ Its title plainly finds assonance with Lethem's (planet, plan), perhaps having influenced Devo's original lyric. The image of humans as an inferior species enslaved by apes could be a source for Lethem's narrative, in which it is asserted that the cosmic deities developed Earth as an 'ape-farm' (194). However, the sophisticated talking apes of the film do not closely resemble the mute, unclothed primates of Lethem's typescript.

In this regard, a stronger resemblance might be found with the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), developed by Stanley Kubrick from ideas by Arthur C. Clarke, an author whose SF had been important to the teenage Lethem and who has an anonymous cameo in Lethem's later novel *Dissident Gardens* (2013).⁴¹ Lethem has explicitly praised *2001* as among the favourite films of his youth. Having watched the first *Star Wars* twenty-one times in a row, he followed up by doing the same for *2001*, so his familiarity with the film by the 1980s will have been profound.⁴² In a celebrated early scene, *2001* shows apes clustered around a dark monolith in a wilderness environment. The coexistence here of primitive apes and what appears to be sophisticated alien technology is in fact close to the scenario into which Perkus Tooth's fugue state takes him. In both *2001* and *Apes in the Plan*, the sense is that apes are the servants, or at least the observers, of a higher intergalactic intelligence. The theme of evolution is also indicated in *2001* as an ape's hurling of a bone finds a visual echo in docking spacecraft in humanity's future. All told, *2001* is a plausible source for this aspect of Lethem's typescript.

One other ape narrative can be mentioned as a possibly relevant precursor. This is Franz Kafka's 'Report for an Academy' (1917), a fictional lecture by the ape Red Peter explaining how, after capture by human hunters, he learned (we could indeed say 'aped') human behaviour as a means to avoid captivity and become a stage performer. The ape describes having two wounds from hunters' bullets: one in his cheek and one

³⁹ See Jonathan Lethem, 'Rod Serling' (1999), in *More Alive and Less Lonely*, pp.249–257. Serling was of fundamental importance to the development of Lethem's imagination, a fact that Lethem has often advertised but that critical work has yet fully to recognise.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Lethem, *The Arrest* (New York: Ecco, 2020), p.70.

⁴¹ See Jonathan Lethem, *Dissident Gardens* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), p.188. See Lethem's comments in his essay 'Lives of the Bohemians', in *The Disappointment Artist*, pp.85–106: 'As a teenager I revered Stanley Kubrick, and Arthur C. Clarke – at some point I'd have called them my favorite director and favorite writer (though Clarke was shed years sooner than Kubrick)' (p.86). In the same essay, about his painter father, Lethem writes: 'I find myself in relation to father and paintings as the apes in *2001: A Space Odyssey* stood before their monolith. Dumb, though making noise. Weren't those apes supposed to grab an implement and get to work?' (p.85).

⁴² Jonathan Lethem, '13, 1977, 21', in *The Disappointment Artist*, pp.33–41 (p.40).

below the waist. This may find an echo in *City Born*'s historic injury, 'the loss of his foot in a hunting accident' (55). More broadly, Kafka's tale refers to evolution: in a separate text about the character, Red Peter is said to have managed '[t]o cast off apehood in five years and gallop through the whole evolution of mankind'.⁴³ We have seen that a Darwinian theme is the source of Lethem's title, via Devo. The shift from Perkus Tooth to *City Born* is a form of devolution (Perkus's human foot, discarded by the ape body, is described as 'undeveloped' [55]), setting Darwin into reverse. However, this shift more closely recalls another potential source from Kafka: 'The Metamorphosis' (1915), which commences by announcing its protagonist's unexpected transformation into an insect. The suddenness of Perkus's barely explicable assumption of ape form is somewhat reminiscent of the effect of Kafka's text, as is his acceptance of this form while in it. Kafka has been one of Lethem's most vital literary sources. In 1999 he and co-author Carter Scholz published a whole slim volume of stories inspired by Kafka, and he has written of reading Kafka as a teen.⁴⁴ It is thus conceivable that Kafka's ape is another imaginative source for those in Lethem's unpublished typescript, and that 'The Metamorphosis' is an inspiration for the abrupt process of animal transformation.

Part II: *Apes in the Plan* and Lethem's work

Thus far, the present article has provided an account of the fictional world and story of *Apes in the Plan*, and indicated how it can be seen to derive from precursors known to Jonathan Lethem at the time: including multiple SF authors, but especially Philip K. Dick. The second part of this article situates *Apes in the Plan* in relation to the rest of Lethem's body of work. It deepens our sense of the trajectories and themes of Lethem's published oeuvre by connecting it with this previously unknown early material.

Apes in the Plan and Lethem's Science Fiction

A first continuity is simple. The early Lethem was primarily a science fiction writer. From the late 1980s, for around a decade, he published stories in SF magazines, such as *Interzone* and *Asimov's Science Fiction*.⁴⁵ Several of these stories would be collected in the volume *The Wall of the Sky, the Wall of the Eye* (1996), though others have remained uncollected and little-known. In full-length novels, too, Lethem was initially a writer

⁴³ Franz Kafka, 'A Report to an Academy', trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, and 'A Report to an Academy: Two Fragments', trans. Tania and James Stern, in *The Complete Stories* ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), pp.250–262 (p.261).

⁴⁴ See Jonathan Lethem and Carter Scholz, *Kafka Americana* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), and Jonathan Lethem, 'The Figure in the Castle' in *More Alive and Less Lonely*, pp.19–26.

⁴⁵ A full critical account of Lethem's early immersion in the SF field has not yet been produced, but a key text is his essay 'What I Learned at the Science-Fiction Convention' in *The Ecstasy of Influence*, pp.68–73.

of SF. His first published novel *Gun, with Occasional Music* (1994) depicts San Francisco in the early 21st century, distinguished from the time of writing by numerous technical advances and social changes. His second novel *Amnesia Moon* (1995) ranges across the southern US states in what characters believe is the aftermath of a nuclear war; here too the future has seen both radical social alteration and technical innovation. Lethem's fourth novel *Girl in Landscape* (1998) also takes place in the future, this time blighted by climate breakdown: humans leave Earth by spaceship to build a community on a distant planet. As a science fiction novel, *Apes in the Plan* is broadly continuous with all this important early work. Like *Apes*, each of these novels features both unfamiliar technology and a reconfigured social world.

A non-exhaustive list of such features in the early published fiction would include the following. In *Gun*, the use of cryogenic cold storage for criminal incarceration (a feature that may derive from the prominence of cryogenics in Dick's *Ubik*); the attachment of a 'slavebox' of neural implants to render a person compliant; or everyday objects (such as a cash register or gun) that play music upon use.⁴⁶ In the damaged landscape of *Amnesia Moon* levels of technological development are variable, but the novel features such science-fictional motifs as robot televangelists. Amid seemingly familiar cars and motorcycles, traffic in San Francisco also features 'a gigantic two-wheeled RV cycle, its bloated kitchenette body aloft with antigrav'.⁴⁷ In the 1992 story 'Vanilla Dunk', future basketball players perform with exoskeletons that replicate the skills of specific past players. In *Girl in Landscape*, transport under the future Brooklyn takes place in private cars that hook on to a collective transit network underground, somewhat reminiscent of Perkus Tooth's underground piloting of a 'carriage and driver-pod' in *Apes*.⁴⁸ By no means are all of *Apes*' technical innovations replicated in the published fiction. But the general point stands: *Apes* is an early venture into a specifically science-fictional practice of world-building that persists through Lethem's first decade of publication.

In certain cases a more specific echo is telling. Thus in *Gun*, human memory is eventually outsourced to an external device called a memory, which speaks for the individual and prevents them uttering any socially unacceptable statement (222–23). In *Apes*, too, a 'memory' is the name for a mechanical device, though its working is quite different. Census Director Robert Smith uses his memory on arrival at his office: 'It fit in the palm of his hand. He tapped rewind and it drove with a whir to the beginning of the

⁴⁶ Jonathan Lethem, *Gun, With Occasional Music* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1994), pp.175, 219, 226. Subsequent parenthetical references in the text as *Gun*.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Lethem, *Amnesia Moon* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995), p.134. Subsequent parenthetical references in the text as *Moon*.

⁴⁸ See Jonathan Lethem, *Girl in Landscape* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), pp.5–7. Subsequent parenthetical references in the text as *Girl*.

day. He then tapped *skim*. The machine commenced playing back a succession of edits; the first five seconds of each of the day's entries' (71). The artificial memory device in *Apes*, therefore, is close to a telephone answering machine (an existing technology which became more widely used in everyday life from the mid-1980s), but also serves as a personal organizer. It perhaps shares what would later be some of the functions of a mobile telephone.

The prosthetic 'memory' in *Gun* is a more striking development than its precursor in *Apes*. It challenges the reader, and indeed the protagonist, with the notion that human memory itself could be replaced by an external mechanism, programmed to serve powerful interests by carefully editing information. In a fine twist, when *Gun*'s protagonist Conrad Metcalf is asked why he does not use a memory machine, he claims to have 'the new kind of memory': 'It's a cranial implant. You don't have to speak out loud. You just think, and it talks to you in a quiet little voice in your head' (225). In Metcalf's conceit, the most advanced form of mnemonic technology would approximate the organic functioning of human memory itself. In this reversal, and in envisaging memory as a mechanical process that can be manipulated by power, *Gun*'s version of 'memory' strongly effects what Suvin would dub cognitive estrangement, to a degree that the device in *Apes* does not manage.

In considering technology in *Apes* and the early published works by Lethem, we have necessarily also broached these texts' visions of society. We shall thus now move to a fuller analysis of the social visions of these early works by Lethem, which, just as much as technological development, are part of their speculative character.

We have seen that *Apes*' future society strongly focuses on random selection in a lottery, which serves both to determine social outcomes and as televised public entertainment. This theme finds a significant echo in Lethem's first two published novels. In *Gun*, each citizen has an official number of karma points, recorded on a digital card. Karma, along with crime and punishment, is monitored by the Inquisition: an immense, seemingly totalitarian police force which strongly recalls the Census of *Apes in the Plan*, but in a more consistently sinister manner. In both *Gun* and *Apes*, Lethem reimagines the police service, or coercive state apparatus, by making them into vast, homogeneous bureaucracies beyond civilian accountability, and gives each formation a succinct, suggestive name. The effect maintains continuity with policing as we know it, but also enlarges and estranges it.

The maintenance of personal karma levels by the Inquisition is an exercise of arbitrary power; individual Inquisition officers deplete the protagonist's karma at their discretion. This plot device does not have a direct precursor in *Apes*, but it connects strongly with an innovation in *Amnesia Moon*, when the protagonist Chaos arrives at the town of Vacaville. In Vacaville citizens are judged to have not 'karma' but 'Luck'. A

citizen is tested and assigned an amount of Luck, which then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: a citizen judged to be 'unlucky' struggles with social matters like employment and housing. The state in Vacaville is most consistently represented by Luck Investigator Ian Cooley, from the town's Luck Institute (*Moon* 77). Cooley pursues his romantic target Edie by insisting that she has bad Luck and thus needs his protection as a governmental employee, on pain of being sent to a 'bad luck camp' (*Moon* 109). The protagonist Chaos, a newcomer to town, rejects the notion of Luck as a local superstition.

What the two novels share, here, is a model of social hierarchy and advancement as related to an arbitrary score. Karma and Luck seem like absolutes to those whose lives are dominated by them, but are actually constructs formed by those in power. This consistent motif can be seen to follow directly from the notion of the Lottery in *Apes in the Plan*. The latter is not a matter of state coercion or policing, and thus differs from the use of arbitrariness in *Gun* and *Amnesia Moon*. It does, though, apparently install arbitrariness in social process, making matters of employment, salary and class a matter of chance. It is possible to read all these features as satirical upon actual social realities. That wealth and class are decided by a lottery, in *Apes*, accentuates the idea that this is, in a sense, true in reality, where social status may be an accident of birth (including such factors as ethnicity) rather than reflecting personal qualities or effort.

The self-fulfilling prophecies of karma and Luck in the first two published novels then also highlight the way that social inequality tends to be self-perpetuating (with poverty tending to produce marginalisation and misfortune in a negative spiral), with an additional role played by state authorities (the Inquisition and the government's Luck Institute) that compound these pre-existing disadvantages and inequities. In this aspect, despite being a fractured and uneven novel, *Amnesia Moon* contains radical social critique. *Apes in the Plan*'s vision of society moves some way in this direction, but does not connect its motif of the lottery with social control and power in the thoroughgoing way that Lethem's early published fiction does. This is another example of the fact that *Apes* is a suggestive text, which clearly contains impulses that will later be productive, but also an apprentice work, not as wholly fulfilled as the work that follows.

We have noted that in *Apes*, mundane working life and an effective surveillance state are shown to coexist with a regime of distraction, through which citizens like Perkus Tooth relieve their alienation. It is worth noting the role of drugs here. Taking a depressant pill in his office, Perkus reflects: 'Pass yourself the old peace pipe' (4). As the drug takes effect, '[e]verything, he suddenly realized, was going to be all right' (5). *Apes*, though, does not strongly emphasise the role of drugs as a social escape valve, whereas they are crucial in *Gun* – where a range of drug blends are socially distributed to adjust citizens' moods and enable them to forget inconvenient facts – and, differently,

in *Amnesia Moon* where they provide access to other realms of existence. In *Apes*, such access is primarily found through the virtual reality of kinesthetic games. Such games are not prominent in *Gun* or *Amnesia Moon* specifically, but related technologies appear in other texts by Lethem.

In the very early story 'The Happy Man' (1991), the protagonist spends part of his time in a Hell which functions like a computer game. Another story, 'How We Got In Town and Out Again' (1996), set in a bleak future society, centres on indigent travellers who enter a competition involving virtual reality performance for an audience. As in *Apes*, the performers are plugged in to virtual reality (here colloquially called 'cyberspace') via headsets and wires: Lethem is keen to show the flawed, stained materiality of the mechanisms that enable what is presented as a gleaming new online universe. As in *Apes*, too, the VR environment comes with options: where Perkus and Elko select *Ten* from a range of Great 75 choices, the protagonists of 'How We Got In Town' entertain spectators by exploring a range of digitally constructed sites, such as an aeroplane flight, a Martian landscape and a dating site. Indeed the two fictional scenarios share a perception of the link between technology and sexuality: Perkus and Elko are drawn into *Ten* by the hope of catching the beauty on the beach, while the spectators of 'How We Got In Town' are at one point treated to a 'Sexathon' in which each contestant encounters a virtual sexual partner.⁴⁹

The comparison demonstrates an abiding concern for Lethem: the construction and inhabitation of alternative worlds.⁵⁰ In *Amnesia Moon* a multiplicity of worlds is at stake, but here this plurality is a matter of radical ontological instability, as characters are pulled between zones of existence. Often, as in *Apes* and 'How We Got In Town', such multiple worlds are deliberately constructed for entertainment or distraction. This is also somewhat true of the alternative world that becomes a major plot point in Lethem's much later novel *Chronic City* (2009). Here, Yet Another World is the name of a complete virtual reality in which characters develop alternative lives, using resources acquired in the real world and especially making use of the mysterious holographic 'chaldrons'. The title is taken up yet again in Lethem's later novel *The Arrest* (2020), in which 'Yet Another World' is the name of a film or TV series under development by the protagonist prior to the sudden technological collapse of civilization. This project is a 'tale of alternate near-future Earths', which focuses 'on harbingers of eco-catastrophe,

⁴⁹ See Jonathan Lethem, 'How We Got In Town and Out Again' in *How We Got Insipid* (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2006), pp.7-44. Lethem's Afterword to this volume (pp.103-107) makes clear his intention to undermine the virtuality of virtual reality with the insistence of physical life: a theme also announced in 'What I Learned at the Science-Fiction Convention', pp.70-71.

⁵⁰ See Joseph Brooker, *Jonathan Lethem and the Galaxy of Writing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), chapter 3.

and collapsing borders, and the dawning of AI, and of virtual reality'.⁵¹ The fictional project thus makes sidelong reference to *The Arrest* itself and to Lethem's earlier work. In this sense a line can be traced from the very earliest to the very latest of Lethem's work, across almost four decades.

Blather: *Apes in the Plan* and Lethem's Language

A further area of strong continuity between *Apes in the Plan* and Lethem's published work is a certain focus on language. Language often has a particular role in SF.⁵² Future worlds or alien species bring their own lexicons and abbreviations, to which the real-world reader must adjust. Language is thus a direct way to confront readers with strangeness. This principle applies in *Apes*, as numerous examples have already indicated: 'Repub' or 'Dem' endorsements, 'center', 'Census'. Further instances not yet cited extend the principle: thus characters prize their 'evercool', a noun seeming to refer to poise and self-control (2). The practice of coining new terms, or repurposing existing ones, to describe other worlds and societies continues through Lethem's later work: indeed 'karma' and 'Luck' are examples.

But a more specific form of linguistic innovation is also perceptible in *Apes*, through the character of Jim Nothing. He belongs to a youth subculture called Blatherers, 'the teenage cult of spontaneous talkers' (14). At the entertainment centre two Blatherers are seen 'talking in a high-pitched monotone, providing a continuous running nonsense commentary' (21). Perkus's thoughts inform us that Blatherers are 'existentially dedicated to their task of filling the air with stream-of-consciousness babble. They believed, or professed to believe [...] that the truth could be sought through endless gab, that by talking incessantly they were tapping into some unseen network of communal information' (21–22). Jim Nothing's speeches in the novel, in conversation with Perkus and others, give us a direct idea of Blatherer discourse. At the bar with Perkus, he offers: 'Let's just have a drip or two together. We can talk about the weather. [...] The weather's been fine, like a rake in the grass. Like the ladder that swallowed the clasp. How crass' (32). Already in this first encounter we can perceive how Jim's discourse builds on linguistic and semantic resemblances: drip / drink, together / weather, rake / snake, grass / clasp / crass, but also snake / ladder, a connection that is conceptual rather than auditory.

⁵¹ Lethem, *The Arrest*, p.50.

⁵² A useful initial overview of this issue can be found in Peter Nicholls and David Langford, 'Linguistics', *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, <https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/linguistics>. One of the most influential commentators on the role of language in SF has been the novelist Samuel R. Delany: see his book *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, revised edition (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009). Lethem cites Delany as a key SF influence: for instance *Conversations* 35.

Jim Nothing's mode of Blather emerges again extensively during the climactic interview with government officials. When Robert Smith utters the word 'Understand?' (180), Jim reacts by seizing and distorting Smith's words: 'Understood! [...] I understand. I stood up. I stand under you. You overstand me. [...] But I know somebody who stands over you' (180–81). The Blatherer echoes an interlocutor's words but then replaces them with other cognate terms, which may be neologisms (thus 'understand' leads to 'overstand') or may involve excessive literalisation (thus 'understand' leads to 'I stand under you'). When the detainees express a wish to leave, Jim exclaims: 'Well then, it's a consensus, Census. [...] Call us a cab. Put it on the tab' (181). When the President speaks, Jim adds: 'I'm going to complain to my senator. To my center. To a centaur. To my sister, Elaine. Explain this to a twister, if you can' (181–2). It is no wonder that a Census official complains 'You are disrupting the meeting, Mr Nothing' (182). Perkus reflects that Jim's discourse is 'like a filibuster' (182): an outpouring of verbiage aimed at delay and disruption.

The Blatherer's speech is associative, formed by responding to the words of others and itself. Its phrases are in this sense parasitic. Its associations can be conceptual, but most often they are generated at an auditory level: consensus, Census; tab, cab; senator, center, centaur. As such, it tends to lack meaning that is relevant to the conversation at hand, and to lack referential content. Much of the Blatherer's speech, therefore, is strictly redundant. It interrupts more serious and consequential discourse; it takes up excess space in a dialogue or on the page; and in this climactic scene, as the reader struggles for comprehension of the real situation, it slows the process of exposition. With the Blatherer, Lethem deliberately inserts a principle of linguistic distraction and delay into his text.⁵³

This is diegetically explained, as the Blatherer belongs to a youth culture that fosters his speech. It also, to a degree, fits the pattern described above in which SF is hospitable to new uses of language. Otherwise, the Blatherer is a rather isolated textual function, which seems to retard narrative rather than serve it. Where does he fit in? We can understand this better not by situating him in *Apes in the Plan* itself, but by looking further ahead into Lethem's career. In 1999 Lethem was interviewed by Michael Silverblatt, who posited what he saw as a recurring feature of Lethem's work: an 'impulse to deform and restructure language' (*Conversations* 26). Silverblatt saw this, firstly, in *Girl in Landscape*,

⁵³ Coincidentally, *Blather* was also the name of an anarchically satirical magazine published in Dublin in 1934–35, by the writer Brian O'Nolan (better known as Flann O'Brien) and friends. See Flann O'Brien, *Myles before Myles* ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Grafton, 1988), pp.96–162. Lethem would not have known of this while writing *Apes in the Plan*, but he did discover Flann O'Brien's work soon after: see *The Ecstasy of Influence* pp.47–49. Insofar as conceptual affinity exists between the 1930s *Blather* and Lethem's, it would centre on interference, the introduction of comic randomness that scrambles cultural communication. In this context, Tobias Harris has written of the 1930s *Blather* as an avant-garde publication: see 'Blather, Razzle and Dada: Contextualizing Brian O'Nolan's Early Journalism', *Modernist Cultures* 14:2 (May 2019), 151–171.

where the alien Archbuilders use their own language, an ‘unintelligible bubbling noise’ (*Girl* 151) to human ears, but have also adapted to English. They are apt to produce unusual combinations of adjective and noun, either as assessments of a situation or as proper names: the latter include Hiding Kneel, Truth Renowned, Lonely Dumptruck and Gelatinous Stand. Charmed by the comparatively small vocabulary of English next to their own inscrutable tongue, the aliens tend to respond to human utterances with rhymes or puns. When a colonist talks of developing the planet, Hiding Kneel declares: ‘I’m in a state of anticipation, anticipating statehood’ (*Girl* 67). His interest kindled by the verbs used by a human character, he repeats two of them and adds a third that extends the first: ‘Baiting and planting, now *debating*’ (*Girl* 147).

The verbal play of the Archbuilders is partially reminiscent of the Blatherers. At least as strong a resemblance appears in the other text cited by Silverblatt: *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), whose protagonist Lionel Essrog’s speech is regularly interrupted by Tourette’s Syndrome. This version of Tourette’s is a literary conceit from Lethem, not medical reportage. Silverblatt notes that Lionel’s utterances ‘are not curses and obscenities. They’re wild improvisations, homologues, Finnegans [sic] Wake-like assemblages’ (*Conversations* 26). Lionel’s phrases, like Jim Nothing’s, are typically associative and reactive, formed by warping whatever words are already to hand. Almost any piece of language that appears in the novel can be tugged into this process, in which words are metamorphosed and repeated with a difference. A Japanese Zendo prompts the meditation: ‘*Don’t know from Zendo, Ken-like Zung Fu, Feng Shui master, Fungo bastard, Zen masturbation*’.⁵⁴ ‘Alfred Hitchcock’ becomes ‘Altered Houseclock’ and ‘Ilford Hotchkiss’ (the latter of which is also a character from *Amnesia Moon*: a fact unknown to Lionel and likely unnoticed by most readers). As with the Blatherer, the associative principle is primarily auditory but can become semantic, as a play upon sound also nudges us from one meaning to another. The sinister Fujisaki corporation is translated into *fool-me-softly*. A murdered financial advisor called Ullman becomes ‘*Dullbody, Allmoney, Alimony*’. When the novel’s *femme fatale* declares her departure for a Buddhist ‘place of peace’, the phrase prompts Lionel to the phrases ‘*Prays of peach? Plays of peas? Press-e-piece?*’ (itself on the edge of ‘precipice’) and ‘*pressure peas*’. The form of a phrase remains discernible, while within it vowels and consonants are shuffled and replaced. Lionel’s own name is ‘the original verbal taffy’: words stretch like a malleable, perhaps edible substance. Already reformulated as ‘*Liabie Guesscog. / Final Escrow. / Ironic pissclam*’, the name later becomes ‘*Viable Guessfrog*’, ‘*Lionel Deathclam*’, ‘*Criminal Fishrug*’, ‘*Lyrical Eggdog! Logical Assnog!*’, and several more alternate takes.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Jonathan Lethem, *Motherless Brooklyn* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p.4.

⁵⁵ Further quotations from *Motherless Brooklyn* in this paragraph are from pp.46, 184, 232, 293, 105, 7, 92–3, 97, 104.

In response to Silverblatt's description, Lethem responds with reference to his career thus far:

I'd created a series of excuses, essentially, for Joycean wordplay, and it was always a marginalized character or characters who were allowed to thrive as a subculture in my earlier novels. In *Motherless Brooklyn*, I challenged myself to take this marginalized impulse for wordplay and free association and let it drive the book. Let it stand front and center and not quarantine it the way I had in the past, and let that become structure. (*Conversations* 27)

Silverblatt's prompting helps Lethem to deliver a considerable insight into his own work, up to the time when *Motherless Brooklyn* has delivered crossover success. What we can now, for the first time, perceive is that the tendency they identify reaches back to Lethem's early unpublished typescript. The Blatherers in *Apes in the Plan* are so precisely described in his response – 'a marginalized character or characters who were allowed to thrive as a subculture in my earlier novels' – that it is possible that Lethem had them somewhere in mind, alongside the better-known examples cited, when responding to Silverblatt. The connection between *Apes in the Plan*'s Blatherer and *Motherless Brooklyn*'s Tourette's speaker can be summarised with one word that the two texts share. Perkus Tooth considers Jim Nothing to be undertaking a 'filibuster'. Lionel Essrog, in the first lines of his novel, turns to precisely the same comparison: his distorted, interruptive speech makes him akin to 'a senator drunk on filibuster'.⁵⁶ Once again, the evidence of *Apes in the Plan* confirms that key tendencies in Lethem's writing are strongly continuous with early material that has never entered the public domain.

One further aspect of the language of *Apes in the Plan* requires remark. A few of its characters' names are normal by the standards of the 1980s United States, such as Robert Smith. Some appear unusual, such as Elko Dunstable. ('Elko' may well refer to a city in Nevada that Lethem noticed while hitchhiking from Colorado to Berkeley in 1984.⁵⁷) Some are slightly flamboyant – President Florian Buckler – though still just plausible as names from the real time of writing. Some have a partial air of normality, but an additional element: the alliteration of Doreen Dropper, the nouns in the surnames of 'Break-in coordinator Brenda Family' (94), Jim Nothing, and indeed Perkus Tooth. Some are unrecognisable from the real world, like Mrs Juicygod, Perkus's secretary (7). Census operative John Walkman (130) appears to have the name of a personal stereo device released during Lethem's youth. This is not to mention the fanciful names of the aliens or apes.

⁵⁶ Lethem, *Motherless Brooklyn*, p.1.

⁵⁷ See Jonathan Lethem, 'Going Under in Wendover', in *The Ecstasy of Influence*, pp.15–21 (p.17).

The pattern is uneven, but mostly Lethem's names are not naturalistic. Taken together they suggest a different, in this case future, world, but in a way that conveys bathos (Dropper, Tooth, Walkman) rather than elegance. Though they are strange, a reader may be inclined to situate them in relation to precursors. Most immediately, some of the names could be compared with those in Philip K. Dick's fiction. In *Ubik* alone we meet Joe Chip, Stanton Mick, S. Dole Melipone, Zoe Wirt, Nina Freede, Fred Zafsky, Tippy Jackson and others. *A Maze of Death* features Betty Jo Berm, Milton Babble, Tony Dunkelwelt, Ben Tallchief and Ignatz Thugg. The names in *Apes* can also be compared to those of other writers familiar to Lethem. Kurt Vonnegut, another writer who had crossed between SF and the mainstream, is an example: his characters include Kilgore Trout, Paul Proteus, and, in the future dystopia of *Slapstick* (1976), Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain and Isadore Raspberry-19 Cohen. An equally relevant and prominent precursor is Thomas Pynchon. In *Apes*, the names Harris Raspburt or Mrs Juicygod might belong to the Pynchon universe that features Oedipa Maas, Dr Hilarius, Mafia Winsome, Benny Profane and so on.⁵⁸

All these lists could be extended for pages, and the issue of character names across this generation of US writers merits more integrated consideration in itself. The salient general point is that Lethem, by the time of writing *Apes in the Plan*, was habituated to a body of literature in which names are consistently unusual. Sometimes these names appear meaningful; sometimes they may have hidden meaning that devotees can decipher; often they are comic or grotesque; often they create a surface of strangeness. Taken as a whole, most of the names in *Apes* belong to this region.

In a 1997 interview Lethem comments on the role of unusual names. They are 'a way to point at the artificial nature of the fiction', which he associates with Pynchon and Barthelme. They can make 'an ironic point, although that's really dangerous if names are too meaningful'. They can be comic, or 'create the atmosphere of oddity'. The central point that emerges is that unrealistic names belong to, and signal, an unrealistic fictional world: 'Unrealistically strange character names are an easy way to make sure the reader feels, at the deepest level, they're entering a propositional space where they have to suspend some of their reading protocols and suspend disbelief and make leaps. It makes people ready for leaps' (*Conversations* 18). We can see that this principle applies to *Apes in the Plan*. The action of the novel, from virtual reality gaming to possession by ancient intergalactic beings, is beyond a reader's empirical reality, and is thus somewhat appropriately served by characters like Jim Nothing, Brenda Family and Perkus Tooth.

⁵⁸ See Patrick J. Hurley, *Pynchon Character Names: A Dictionary* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008). See also T.P. Caesar, 'A Note on Pynchon's Naming', *Pynchon Notes* 5 (1981), 5-10.

How far does Lethem's naming practice in *Apes* anticipate that in his later work? John Walkman is a notable instance. Insofar as the name refers to a technological innovation, it is akin to certain names in *Gun, with Occasional Music* – Catherine Teleprompter, Danny Phoneblum – which Lethem has suggested are appropriate for a technologised future (*Conversations* 18). The element of unfamiliarity in most names in *Apes* is retained through the majority of Lethem's fiction. Over subsequent decades he writes of Everett Moon, Efram Nugent, Lionel Essrog, Mingus Rude, Fancher Autumnbreast and many more. The name of the Blatherer Jim Nothing appears flagrantly symbolic rather than realistic, but it also anticipates a major trope in Lethem's third novel, in which another dimension, 'Lack', is created in a laboratory, existing as a force of negation or nothingness within reality. The most salient text here, though, is *Chronic City* (2009). The name of the novel's protagonist Chase Insteadman appears to invite paraphrase: 'Chase' for pursuit and also for the 'Chase Manhattan' bank, pertinent to the novel's setting; 'Insteadman' suggesting acting or substitution. The other most prominent character in the novel is Perkus Tooth, a rock critic and cultural obsessive. This Perkus Tooth bears little resemblance to his namesake in *Apes in the Plan*. The vividness of the character led Lethem to be asked about the figure's provenance in the wake of publication. In the brief article 'Who Is Perkus Tooth Anyway?' he explains that audiences have often asked him whether the character is based on a real person. The article eloquently explores a range of answers: for instance that Perkus Tooth is based more on Lethem himself than anyone, or that he has several real-world prototypes, not one.⁵⁹ The one thing that the article does not say is that Perkus Tooth's memorable name was well over twenty years old, and had once belonged to a very different figure.

A paradox appears. Lethem is profoundly open about the sources of his work. His writing is connected by an intricate web of cross-references, in which character names, motifs and phrases turn up in altered form in books published years or decades apart. The recurrence of the image of a kangaroo from *Gun* to *You Don't Love Me Yet* is an example. Asked about this, Lethem states that 'the connections between the books, the little jokes that knit them together, are in a way embracing the people who have followed me from one bizarre project to the next', and that 'I can [now] fool around with my own cache of images and jokes a little bit. It's like that way you begin to see your own material up for grabs, too' (*Conversations* 136–37). Dozens of such connections can be traced between Lethem's published works. The name 'Tooth' itself has a notably extended presence: *As She Climbed Across the Table* (1997) features the deconstructionist Georges De Tooth, and in *You Don't Love Me Yet*, a rock band considers calling itself Idiot Tooth

⁵⁹ See Jonathan Lethem, 'Who Is Perkus Tooth Anyway?', <https://jonathanlethem.com/so-who-is-perkus-tooth-anyway/>.

(‘The opposite of a wisdom tooth’) – not without confounding it with the alternatives Mystery Tooth and Spooky Tooth.⁶⁰ Even Perkus Tooth seems teasingly to reappear, as teenage music reviewer ‘P.K. Tooth’, in the historical fiction *Dissident Gardens*.⁶¹

Amid this web of reference, in which a text is repeatedly opened up to others, the unpublished *Apes in the Plan* remains a closed book. It is excluded from the circuit of association established by Lethem’s published works. Yet if Lethem wanted to suppress *Apes* and have no truck with this piece of unsuccessful juvenilia, he could have avoided it more fully than he has done. The present article shows that while several elements of *Apes* look forward in general terms to themes taken up in later work, some elements are more specifically and recognisably repurposed. This tendency is at its simplest with regard to ‘Perkus Tooth’. In using the name of *Apes*’ central character for the most vivid figure in a long novel, a quarter-century after writing *Apes*, Lethem makes direct, sustained, unmistakable reference back to this typescript, even while rarely, if ever, mentioning this connection in public. If the reappearance of ‘Perkus Tooth’ was an in-joke, it was one that could only be shared by the author and, perhaps, a small number of friends who might remember reading *Apes* in typescript over two decades earlier. The role of *Apes in the Plan* as a source text is at once blatant and secret.

In this respect Lethem seems poised between a desire to publicise and a desire to hide. Juvenilia is dismissed but its features recur, unannounced as such, in prominent published work. Lethem can make this double movement because his status, by the time of *Chronic City*, is assured. The specific gesture of rescuing ‘Perkus Tooth’ from obscurity may be read as a gift from the mature novelist to the struggling outsider whose typescript gains no traction with publishers: as if the successful author is able to grant, at no real cost, an achievement to his younger self. Lethem has emphasised the notion of the gift, as theorised by Lewis Hyde, as a vital part of the cultural economy.⁶² For once, here, such a bequest is made in the closed circuit of a single author’s career. The connection between juvenilia and published works, with which this article commenced, can thus be recast not merely as a contrast between early failure and later success, but as part of the network of echoes permeating an author’s oeuvre. Early and late writing can each give each other something worth having: textual material and ideas, and their legitimisation.

⁶⁰ Jonathan Lethem, *You Don’t Love Me Yet* (London: Faber, 2007), p.58.

⁶¹ Lethem, *Dissident Gardens*, p.187.

⁶² See Lethem’s 2007 signature essay ‘The Ecstasy of Influence’, reprinted in *The Ecstasy of Influence*: pp.93–120; on gifts, pp.106–108. Lethem here declares that ‘Above any other book I’ve here plagiarized, I commend [Lewis Hyde’s] *The Gift to your attention*’ (p.114).

Animals in Lethem's Plan

It was demonstrated earlier that Lethem's use of apes had probable sources in cultural history. In turn, *Apes in the Plan* would not be Lethem's last narrative of animal life. ('Animal' here is used in its conventional sense to mean animals other than humans – though Lethem's fiction, like other fantastic literature, sometimes troubles this very distinction.) While the typescript's simian aspect appears eccentric, the animal theme in fact finds extensive echoes through Lethem's published career. The most striking science-fictional innovation of *Gun, with Occasional Music* is the existence of 'evolved animals' which genetic development has enabled to assume a semblance of human life. Detective Conrad Metcalf (whose surname implies encounters with animals) variously reports meeting evolved sows, sheep, dogs, cats and kangaroos. To a degree, the distinction between humans and these animals replicates, and thus highlights through extrapolation, racial distinction and discrimination among humans in the real world.

Most notably for our purposes, Metcalf's key ally turns out to be a talking ape, a fellow private investigator named Walter Surface. Metcalf first detects Surface by his 'acrid' smell (*Gun* 157). The olfactory emphasis recalls Perkus Tooth's experience of gaining ape status. Not yet knowing that Surface is not human, Metcalf finds the injured detective in bed:

The body in the bed seemed awfully small. When he turned his dark face up from the pillow, I realized Walter Surface and I didn't have as much in common as I'd hoped, or feared. The animal in the house was Surface. He was an evolved ape. The surprise of it took my voice away for a second, but at the same time I didn't doubt for a minute that this was the guy I was looking for. His face was human enough to look weary with trouble, creased with the contemplation of things most humans, let alone most apes, never see. If he were a man, I'd have said he was a tired fifty years old. For an ape I couldn't or didn't want to figure it out. (*Gun* 158)

This is the most significant appearance of an ape in Lethem's published fiction. Metcalf has a degree of prejudice against the newly evolved animals, and does not expect the detective to be an ape. By extension, nor does the reader. We share his surprise at this moment of estrangement, as the human protagonist finds his professional colleague to be non-human. The passage moves back and forth between registering Surface's animal strangeness and reinterpreting him as an honorary human. He is 'the animal in the house', the source of the unusual smell, but also 'the guy I was looking for'. While Metcalf has started by thinking that he and Surface with his 'dark face' do not have much in common, he soon considers that '[h]is face was human enough' to have

emotions familiar to Metcalf, and estimates Surface's age as a human. In sum, the encounter with Surface is a subtle enactment of an encounter with alterity which is also partly familiar. The ape, who can fire a gun as well as talk, provides a significant foil for the first major protagonist of Lethem's published fiction. When crafting this character, Lethem may well have been mindful of the human-ape figures who had played such a key role in his unpublished novel. But the resemblance has been left tacit, unmentioned by Lethem or anyone else until now.

The animal theme commenced with *Apes* does not stop with *Gun*. Apes themselves do not figure prominently in the rest of Lethem's writing, though one of the epigraphs to *The Feral Detective*, from Jorge Luis Borges, borrows Swift's notion of the Yahoos and declares: 'I do not repent having fought in their ranks against the Ape-men'.⁶³ Numerous other animals do feature: so many that they would require an article in themselves, but a brief list here can demonstrate the persistence of this concern. In the 1996 story 'Light and the Sufferer' the protagonists encounter a species of alien that is variously described but apparently resembles a black panther. In *Motherless Brooklyn* a cat named Shelf facilitates a romantic encounter; in *The Feral Detective* a set of dogs do the same.⁶⁴ In *You Don't Love Me Yet* a kangaroo, again called Shelf, is stolen from a Los Angeles zoo: its physical being and, again 'acrid', scent are described with a keenness that recalls the apes we have observed in the early work.⁶⁵ In *Chronic City* Manhattan is menaced by a giant tiger, and a dog named Ava is lovingly depicted.

Perhaps still more telling in relation to *Apes in the Plan* are those figures that stand ambiguously between human and animal. In *Amnesia Moon*, Melinda Self is a girl 'covered with fine, silky hair from head to foot': 'furry, like a seal or otter' (*Moon* 10, 80). Lethem has more recently disclosed that he and his fellow author David Bowman playfully coined the notion of a 'furry-girl school of American fiction', based initially on this character.⁶⁶ In an essay praising Charles Dickens as 'The Greatest Animal Novelist of All Time', he has also proposed that we can gain from reading *Dombey and Son* 'as though it were a book about animals': 'Read it as though the characters are all covered in fur [...] read it as if it were *The Wind in the Willows*, or *Watership Down*, one of those droll stories about anthropomorphized creatures, clever eccentric badgers and rabbits and crows, as well as feral predators, foxes and cats, tucked into Victorian suits and dresses'.⁶⁷ The conceit does not ask to be taken wholly seriously, but it points to

⁶³ Jonathan Lethem, *The Feral Detective* (New York: Ecco, 2018), n.p.

⁶⁴ See Lethem, *Motherless Brooklyn*, pp.218-9; *The Feral Detective*, pp.63-65.

⁶⁵ Lethem, *You Don't Love Me Yet*, pp.60-61.

⁶⁶ Jonathan Lethem, 'David Bowman and the Furry-Girl School of American Fiction', *The New Yorker*, 2 January 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/david-bowman-and-the-furry-girl-school-of-american-fiction>.

⁶⁷ Jonathan Lethem, 'The Greatest Animal Novelist of All Time', in *More Alive and Less Lonely*, pp.27-40 (pp.27-28).

a strong continuity throughout Lethem's writing: looking closely at animal life, and seeing it as on a continuum with that of humanity. The start of this tendency is visible in *Apes in the Plan*.

Finally, in *Girl in Landscape*, the alien race of Archbuilders are also a kind of talking animal, composed of 'flesh and fur and shell and frond': 'In fact flesh was barely visible, just the black leather of its ears and eyelids. Whereas the fur was everywhere, under the papery clothes, and it was black too, smooth and tufted, perhaps faintly musky' (*Girl* 61). Even here, describing an entirely imaginary being, Lethem reiterates certain motifs that we have seen in *Apes*. The Archbuilder's 'black leather' features recall City Born's 'broad, leathery nose' and 'black, oily hair'. The black fur is reminiscent of the ape's 'coarse, thickly matted hair', and its musky scent, like Walter Surface's 'acrid' smell, may remind us of City Born's 'exotic stench'. In each case, in depicting animals, Lethem thinks of the sense of smell, rather than the more habitual sense of sight alone.

It is necessary to consider the Archbuilders in another light too. For the back-story given in *Apes in the Plan* anticipates that given in *Girl in Landscape*. Here again is Perkus Tooth's account of the cosmic past: 'A long time ago there was a race. I don't know what they looked like, but they were builders. They built houses. Really great houses, with all sorts of unusual features. [...] Then the race died [...] and the houses lay vacant' (193). This corroborates an earlier statement to us from *The Iron Doggie*:

Long before we didn't exist, and even somewhat before we existed, a race of builders inhabited the planet that was, briefly, our home. We know nothing of them. They melted off, faded away, extinct, leaving behind the nests. The wonder-houses, I should say, for that is what they were: automated homes, gifted with insight and benevolence. And, fortunately, patience. They sat empty for millenia, maintaining themselves, meditating, waiting for what they thought would be the return of their original inhabitants.

Those inhabitants would never return. Instead the insects arrived. In retrospect, however, loving the nests as we did meant loving their creators: in us that ancient race lived again, and lived forever.

Well, almost. (56–57)

This passage needs to be compared with the pre-history given at various points in *Girl in Landscape*. In that novel, the original Archbuilders were an ingenious race which constructed complex architecture (including the massive arches that provide their colloquial name) and altered the environmental state of their planet, before departing to conquer the stars. They left behind the inferior dregs of their race, who are the rather

whimsical and peaceful Archbuilders that we encounter in the novel. They also, it is suggested, invited human beings to take over the planet that they had abandoned.

Plainly, this narrative is rehearsed as the distant origin story of *Apes in the Plan*: one that, according to the passage just quoted, pre-dates even the ancient cosmic deities who drive the plot. The 'wonder-houses' recalled by the Iron Doggie would perhaps correspond to the Archbuilder house occupied in *Girl in Landscape* by the brooding human settler Efram Nugent. The heroine Pella Marsh thinks, on arriving here, that '[h]is house wasn't like the others. She'd arrived on the Planet of the Archbuilders at last' (*Girl* 175). Efram is bigoted against the harmless local Archbuilders, but he draws a distinction between these aliens who have stayed behind and the great ones who have departed: 'The Archbuilders I don't like aren't the ones that built these walls. [...] They're the ones that didn't bother to keep the walls from falling apart' (*Girl* 176). The story of the Archbuilders is not fully explained in *Girl in Landscape*, but is left as a series of contested rumours to be pieced together. What is certain is that this story, which lends a sense of profound but fruitful mystery to the background of Lethem's fourth novel, replays one that lies in the background of his unpublished typescript from over a decade earlier.

Conclusion

This article has introduced and described Lethem's unpublished typescript, while also articulating its significance in relation to larger themes and other works. We have observed the place of the typescript in Lethem's career, as a very early project that began at Bennington and went on to Berkeley, before at last being superseded by other fictional works. We have noted the science-fictional character of the work and situated this in relation to Lethem's reading of SF by the time of writing, and especially Philip K. Dick who remains the single largest influence on the text. We have then found in this typescript the clear signs of themes and ideas that would preoccupy Lethem across the published work that has made his name. These themes include high technology, its uses and effects; extrapolations of social tendencies and structures, making his fiction into a form of political critique; and the role of advanced media in forming alternative worlds, causing ontological multiplication and confusion. They further include an unusually keen, insistent focus on animal life, and a heightened awareness of language, often signalled through semantic distortion. We have also observed strong textual hints for what would become in 1998 Lethem's acclaimed fourth novel, in this text composed up to fifteen years earlier. These observations do not explain Lethem's later work or provide a key to it. But they do suggest its unity, by showing how pervasive certain concerns have been in this large body of writing.

Apes in the Plan is therefore a significant document in observing the early development of Jonathan Lethem's writing. It is not as strong as the work that Lethem went on to publish. The present article has acknowledged ways in which this very early work falls short of the author's later standards. But it contains the germs of much that is to come in Lethem's writing after its completion in around 1986. It may be best for literary history, and for Lethem's own reputation, that his career as a published novelist commenced with *Gun, with Occasional Music*: a superbly poised pastiche that reads as well as ever after almost three decades. *Apes* represented an earlier stage of evolution, which may have been necessary to the author's progress but did not need to be seen by the reading public. But from a scholarly perspective, *Apes* confirms the protracted gestation – going back to Lethem's freshman year at Bennington College, 1982–83 – of several of his central themes and motifs. Some of these would find expression through his science fiction in the 1990s; some would even continue to be explored thereafter. The reappearance of the name 'Perkus Tooth' in *Chronic City* is a sign of this: an authorial nod to the idea that old, long-discarded materials could still contain something worth quietly retrieving and reusing decades later.⁶⁸ *Apes* itself would stay in a folder and, when its author achieved sufficient fame, would be discreetly archived in a prestigious library. But certain of its themes would continue to evolve, beyond the text of *Apes in the Plan* itself, as part of one of the most extensive and inventive literary oeuvres of the era.

⁶⁸ Such reuse chimes strongly with the theme of 'Second Use' developed by Lethem in 'The Ecstasy of Influence', pp.103–105.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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