

**The Relation between Words and Worlds
in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay***

Frederik De Vadder
KU Leuven, Belgium

Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. In the first part, Chabon's novel will be read as an example of what Linda Hutcheon has coined "historiographic metafiction". In the second part, I will show that *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is an excellent illustration of Brian McHale's definition of postmodern literature and that this postmodern identity plays an important role in expressing the novel's main theme, escapism.

Keywords: Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, postmodernism, historiographic metafiction, possible worlds, 'ontological' layers, (de)mythification, escapism

Introduction

Even though the heyday of postmodern literature has passed, and the theoretical and critical concepts that were developed to discuss postmodern literature no longer draw the attention they used to, the postmodern legacy still offers interesting insights into complex works of literature such as Michael Chabon's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*¹ (2000). My analysis of Chabon's magnum opus is deeply rooted in and indebted to the postmodern writings of Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale.

Considering the complexity and the scale of *Kavalier & Clay*, the first part of this paper will introduce the plot before delving more deeply into *Kavalier & Clay*'s intertextual interaction with various genres. *Kavalier & Clay* shares characteristics with multiple genres, yet it is hard to pigeonhole. The label that is most readily applicable to *Kavalier & Clay* is that of historiographic metafiction, a term coined by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) to describe literature that bridges the gap between (postmodern) fiction and historiography. *Kavalier & Clay* is at home in this grey area, this 'twilight zone' between genres, and a discussion of the novel as a piece of historiographic metafiction unveils both the poetical and the political concerns at stake when representing the past.

In the second part, which is the focus of this paper, I will analyse *Kavalier & Clay* in the light of the definition of postmodern literature Brian McHale put forward in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). Reading *Kavalier & Clay* in this light offers a better understanding of the novel's main theme, escapism. As I will show, Chabon's novel is elusive in more ways than one, to such an extent even that it thematises its elusiveness. Ultimately *Kavalier and Clay*'s tales of escapism are also tales *about* escapism.

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay and Historiographic Metafiction

Michael Chabon's novel tells the story of Josef Kavalier, the eldest son in a Jewish family. He grows up in Prague, where, along with his schooling as an artist at the Academy, where he quickly develops a gift for drawing, he is trained as an escape artist by the renowned *Ausbrecher* Bernard Kornblum. Josef reaches adolescence as World War II breaks out and Prague is occupied by Nazi Germany. Jews are relocated to ghettos, and before long their situation deteriorates drastically. It is impossible for the whole family to escape the atrocities that await them; all their hope resides in getting Josef to a safe place, somewhere far away. Although his family's attempt to bribe officials fails, Josef succeeds in escaping with the help of his teacher Kornblum, who involves his student in an escape trick he was commissioned to develop by the Jewish community of Prague to get the city's Golem to a safe location. Hidden in a coffin underneath the Golem of Prague, which is disguised as a giant's corpse, Josef escapes the city. Having travelled the world he finally reaches New York, where, together with his cousin Sammy Clay, he becomes the creative force behind *The Escapist* and other successful comic-book titles, and starts a turbulent relationship with his muse Rosa Saks, an artist in her own right who is at home in New York's avant-garde art scene. After his arrival in New York, Josef works day and night trying to help his family escape Europe, but he ultimately fails as the ship transporting his brother across the Atlantic is struck by a German torpedo. Overcome by grief, Josef enlists in the army and disappears from the face of the earth, not knowing that his partner Rosa is expecting their child. He is detailed to an Antarctic outpost, where he fights his little war. When the war is over he returns to New York, where he finds his best friend Sam has taken on Josef's role and married Rosa in order to cover up his own suppressed homosexuality. The story ends with Josef assuming his rightful place as a father to

¹ Hereafter referred to as *Kavalier & Clay*.

his child and a husband to Rosa, as Sam leaves New York looking for love and a future in California.

Kavalier & Clay's epic scope spans three decades and two continents, offering a peculiar view of the second half of the twentieth century: from pre-World-War-II Prague, through the bustling, creative comic-book scene in New York and an American outpost in Antarctica during the war, to the suburban American Dream of the fifties and sixties. The novel supports an extremely varied cast, similar to E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, including mythical, historical and fictional characters. But what to call it?

Although it certainly is no straightforward traditional novel, it does self-consciously label itself as "a novel" on its title page. Yet already on that very same page it contradicts itself, for the title page is not typical of a novel; the stylistic typography and layout are reminiscent of 1950s comic books. Every chapter is preceded by an identically styled title page carrying that chapter's title. It is clear that, although *Kavalier & Clay* differs too much from the comic-book medium to warrant this label, it does share some themes, motifs and narrative patterns with the genre. As in the majority of adventure comic books, the plot of *Kavalier & Clay* revolves around two main characters, the hero and his sidekick, who are involved in an epic battle against evil. Both, too, have a preference for the fantastic. As a result, the hero and his sidekick are endowed with powers—supernatural powers in the case of the comic-book heroes, less so in the case of the novel's heroes. Despite their many similarities, it is clear that *Kavalier & Clay* is a novel, not a comic book or graphic novel.

Yet if we are to call it a novel, what kind of novel is it? A number of generic labels suit *Kavalier & Clay*. It is—as I will show in the second part—a fantastic novel, but it is also to some extent a historical novel as it offers a narrative that includes real events, places and people of the second half of the twentieth century. The novel does, however, take considerable liberties in its treatment of these historical facts. The question then is where to draw the line between fiction and historiography.

From a postmodern point of view it remains to be seen whether there is a line to be drawn. Linda Hutcheon, although still using the terms historiography and fiction, also—and more frequently—relies on the concept of historiographic metafiction. Historiography, or the writing of history, is always the linguistic result of a subjective narrativisation or totalisation (Hutcheon 1989: 62), yet unlike fiction it pretends not to be one. Once you acknowledge that both historiography and literature are essentially textual, it becomes difficult to distinguish between a novel that represents a piece of history and a historiographic text. Therefore Hutcheon uses historiographic metafiction as a common denominator for texts that are defined by the self-conscious fashion in which they portray history: texts, be they historiographic or fictional, that expose the totalising process that is present in any and every narrativisation of the past.

Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction offers an interesting perspective on *Kavalier & Clay*, which represents a substantial slice of twentieth-century history, whilst forcing the reader to consider the metafictional complications of representations of the past. One strategy to cajole the reader into a metafictional aporia is to deliberately cancel the suspension of disbelief by manipulating paratextual traits. The footnotes throughout the novel, for example, force the reader to leave his or her linear reading of the text, creating a distance between the storyline and the commentary in the footnote. Another strategy is to create what Fredric Jameson has called "incommensurable characters" (1991: 22). Consider, for example, the scene in which Joe and Sammy attend a party in New York, a party thrown by Longman

Harkoo, né Siegfried Saks,² father to Rosa Luxembourg Saks.³ Other notable guests include Raymond Scott, Loren MacIver, Peter Blume, Edwin Dickinson, José Ferrer and Uta Hagen, and Salvador Dalí. At the party Joe saves Dalí, who has chosen to wear a diving suit to a dinner party, from suffocating. Dalí was in New York at the time of the World Fair in 1939,⁴ but it is unknown whether he attended the party in question, though surely not inconceivable. A notable Dalí diving-helmet incident did actually happen in London at the International Surrealist Exhibition in 1936,⁵ but it is unlikely—though not impossible—that something similar occurred in New York. This single scene combines real historical figures—or at least their fictional representations—with fictional characters and puts them on the same level. These are just two of many strategies⁶ that effectively undermine readers' immersion in the story. Readers are destabilised as they are made aware that they are reading a totalising linguistic construction.

The representation of history is a major topic in *Kavalier & Clay*. It is, however, not merely a matter of poetics, but also of politics. Denying traditional historiography implies the rejection of the traditional historiographic perspective. Postmodern historiography has to adopt *other* perspectives, and it is exactly this otherness that defines these new perspectives; they are defined through their contrastive position in relation to the dominant point of view.

In the case of *Kavalier & Clay* the otherness can be brought back to two dimensions: *Yiddishkayt*, or Jewishness, and comic-book literature. The former constitutes the text's culturo-religious identity, whereas the latter defines the poetical stance taken by the text. These two dimensions are more intertwined than the dichotomy I have just proposed suggests, as there is a strong bond between Jewishness and the birth of the comic-book genre. As Sammy puts it:

They're all Jewish, superheroes. Superman, you don't think he's Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing this name like that. Clark Kent, only a Jew would pick a name like that for himself. (Chabon 2000: 585)

The creators of some of the first and most important comic-book series are Jews, whose Jewish identity is reflected in their creations. *Superman*, for example, was created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster.⁷ It tells the story and adventures of Kal-El, an alien with superhuman powers from the planet Krypton, who was sent to earth by his father just before his home planet was destroyed. Kal-El is named Clark Kent by his foster parents. As such, Kal-El possesses a double identity. On the one hand, he is a costumed superhero—arguably the first one of his kind. On

² I cannot find any record of a well-known art dealer named Siegfried Saks living in New York at that time. There was and still is a wealthy Jewish enclave in New York that included a number of Saks or Sachs families. Think for example of the founders of the eponymous department store on Fifth Avenue or the bank Goldman Sachs. The character of Longman Harkoo may also be inspired by the actor Andrew Siegfried Sachs.

³ I cannot find any record of Rosa Luxembourg Saks, but there is an obvious association to the feminist and revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg.

⁴ Dalí created the 'Dream of Venus' pavilion for the 1939 World Fair in Queens.

⁵ Dalí gave a lecture at the International Surrealist Exhibition in a diving helmet to reinforce the idea that he set out to dive into the human subconscious. However, while he was delivering his lecture, he got stuck and nearly suffocated.

⁶ These strategies are, of course, not new. They can also be found in postmodern texts by authors like Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges.

⁷ The plot of *Kavalier & Clay* borrowed elements of the real biographies of Siegel and Shuster. For example, like Siegel and Shuster, Kavalier and Clay were conned and did not get the recognition and earnings they deserved.

the other hand, he is a journalist with a spectacularly normal life. It is not difficult to relate the character of Superman to the image of the wandering Jew and the theme of perpetual alienation. Banished from his mother country, the wandering Jew keeps searching for a place to call home. He is a member of the chosen people, who have been greatly tested so that they may prove their worthiness. Similarly, Kal-El's home planet Krypton has been destroyed and he is shipped off to an unknown world. Whereas Kal-El's Superman identity reflects Jewish images and themes of mythical proportion, Clark Kent leads the life of the average American.

Brian McHale's Postmodernism and Tzvetan Todorov's Fantastic

The questions we have addressed up until now are largely concerned with genre, and *Kavalier & Clay* as a representative of historiographic metafiction. I believe there are other postmodern theories that shed an interesting light on *Kavalier & Clay*. For this second part of my analysis, I will mostly rely on the definition of postmodern literature put forward by Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). McHale links modernist fiction with epistemological questions and genres, such as the detective, and postmodernist fiction with ontological questions and genres, such as science-fiction. In order to clarify this connection, allow me to elaborate on McHale's theory.

I will follow Brian McHale, who borrows Thomas Pavel's words when defining ontology as "a theoretical description of a universe" (McHale 1987: 27). This is obviously the core business of fiction, as fiction implicitly offers theoretical descriptions of one or more universes, and, as can be deduced from Pavel's formulation, this universe does not have to be our universe, but merely *a* universe. Fiction is concerned with possible worlds, and each has its own ontology. Moreover, fictional characters can themselves conceive of ontologies, creating a hierarchy: a fictional world within a fictional world. Umberto Eco (1984) refers to these lower-order ontologies as subworlds, whereas Pavel (1980) prefers the term narrative domains. To complicate things even further, it could be argued that our reality is composed of a complex network of ontologies much like the ontological web found in works of fiction, forming, in Pavel's terminology, a complex ontological landscape. The borders between these ontologies—both real and fictional—are not written in stone. This lack of sharp distinctions between worlds leads McHale to conclude that the ontological boundaries are "semipermeable membranes". Subjects and objects can pass from one ontology to another, or change their ontological status. There are, for example, the processes of mythification and demythification, respectively the acquisition and the loss of a mythical status vis-à-vis a profane status.

Additional to the transfer of entities through the semipermeable ontological membrane, it is possible that entities exist in more than one world. According to Eco (1984) there is almost always a degree of overlap between two or more fictional ontologies or between real and fictional ontologies, because it is impossible to describe a world exhaustively. The most efficient textual strategy, therefore, is to rely on what is readily available to both author and reader. Thus, McHale concludes, it is possible that an entity exists in more than one world at the same time. McHale uses Eco's concept of 'transworld identities' to refer to these 'borrowed' entities.

If an entity in one world differs from its 'prototype' in another world only in accidental properties, not in essentials, and if there is a one-to-one correspondence between the prototype and its other-world variant, then the two entities can be considered identical even though they exist in distinct worlds. (McHale 1987: 35)

If, however, these entities look similar but in fact differ in essentials they are called homonyms. It is not difficult to imagine that this theoretical distinction cannot so easily be put into praxis. Moreover, in the light of Baudrillard's concept of simulacra (1994), it might be difficult—or

even impossible—to tell replica from prototype. Taking the theory of simulacra to its logical conclusion, the question is not to what extent the replica differs from the prototype, but to what extent the prototype differs from the replica.

McHale points out that postmodernist fiction shares a preference for dual ontologies with science-fiction: “on one side our world of the normal and everyday, on the other side the next-door world of the paranormal or supernatural, running between them the contested boundary separating the two worlds” (1987: 73).

Moreover, MCHale makes a compelling case for an ontological revision of Todorov’s classic definition of fantastic fiction, to which postmodernist fiction is also indebted (McHale 1987: 74). Todorov defined the fantastic as an ambiguous state between the uncanny, in which the supernatural could eventually be explained by relying on the laws of nature, and the marvellous, in which the supernatural could not be explained and was accepted as being precisely that, supernatural. Todorov’s definition of the fantastic can be paraphrased in terms of ‘epistemological uncertainty’; for the reader it is impossible to *know* whether or not the supernatural can be explained, and it is this ambiguity or uncertainty that is decisive. MCHale does not accept this epistemologically based definition as it excludes a lot of core postmodernist texts which do bear resemblance to the fantastic. Therefore, MCHale tries to revise or update Todorov’s definition. For a period of time the uncertainty that governed fantastic texts was epistemological in nature. However, in contemporary literature and literary criticism the representational capacities of language and literature have been under attack to such an extent that it has become questionable whether language and literature can represent reality. If these representational tools are broken then it becomes impossible to uphold epistemological uncertainty as the decisive criterion. The fantastic thus has to be redefined in terms of ontological uncertainty. “The fantastic, by this analysis, can still be seen as a zone of hesitation, a frontier—not, however, a frontier between the uncanny and the marvellous, but between this world and the world next door” (McHale 1987: 75).

Postmodernist fiction seeks to highlight the seams, where one world ends and another begins. There are various techniques that postmodern texts use to achieve this effect, but they all evoke resistance to the crossing of ontological boundaries. This resistance can be situated in the characters or in the readers. For if the characters fail to notice the ontological conflict, the reader’s awareness cannot but be heightened even more (McHale 1987: 76–79).

The Ontological Layers of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

In what follows I will deal with *Kavalier & Clay* as an example of the fantastic. I will take MCHale’s revision of Todorov’s definition of the concept as a starting point, but it will become clear that the definition of the fantastic has to be revised and expanded. MCHale turned Todorov’s epistemological ambiguity into an ontological ambiguity; the reader is not left wondering which representation, but which universe to choose. In *Kavalier & Clay* there are at least four ontologies that have to be taken into account: the reader’s, the fictional ‘real’, the Jewish/religious and the comic-book.

The fictional-real ontology mimics the reader’s ontology, making it resemble our ‘normal’ universe. This ontology has to play by the rules of historical fiction: that is, it aspires to verisimilitude. Therefore, this ontology can only contain ‘realemes’—semioticised persons, events, objects etc.—that could occur in historical fiction. MCHale lists three constraints that “govern the insertion of historical realemes”, but two of them can be combined (1987: 86–88). First, realemes and *Weltanschauungen* in historical fiction cannot contradict the ‘official’ historical record.

Another way of formulating this constraint would be to say that freedom to improvise actions and properties of historical figures is limited to the ‘dark areas’ of history, that is, to those aspects about which the ‘official’ record has nothing to report. (McHale 1987: 87)

Although McHale recognizes that calling upon the ‘official’ record of history is a ‘question-begging formulation’, he ultimately still relies on the reader’s intuition about what is accepted as a historical fact. This does not resolve any questions; it merely shifts them. The question is no longer *what* the historical facts are, but *whose* facts they are. In the light of Foucault’s critique of a unified history, it is undesirable to base a theoretical concept on a unified, even ‘official’, record of history. Therefore, the ‘official’ record in the formulation of the first constraint should be substituted by ‘any historical record or recollection’. Otherwise, all minority themes are banned to the ‘dark’ areas of history. The second constraint states that “the logic and physics of the fictional world must be compatible with those of reality” (McHale 1987: 88).

The fictional-real ontology of *Kavalier & Clay* sticks to these constraints; it does not contradict the reader’s reality, but it does fill in the blanks *ad libitum*. Moreover, seeing as the fictional real is only separated from the other ontologies by a semipermeable membrane, the fictional-real ontology is a target for mythification. Characters and objects with a transworld identity can be subject to mythification as long as the text either carefully selects information from the ‘official’ record of history—highlighting extraordinary, yet real, events, characteristics, accomplishments etc.—or resorts to the ‘dark’ areas of history. Respective examples are Houdini’s escape tricks, which were really performed, and Dalí’s appearance at the New York party, which might have happened. These real or possible people, places or events are thus mythified. Through these strategies of selection and exploitation of ‘dark’ areas, the verisimilitude of the fictional-real ontology is undermined.

This fictional-real ontology is the ontology of Sam Klayman, Rosa Luxembourg Saks and many others. It comprises the world ‘normal’ characters believe in. It is the basic, realistic ontology that seems plausible to the reader as it mimics his or her ontology. The fictional-real ontology is, however, penetrated by at least two other ontologies, namely the Jewish and the comic-book, and the point of intersection of these three ontologies is the character of Josef Kavalier. Josef, or Joe, is the only character that has a part in all three ontologies. He is part of the fictional real as he fights the Nazis and marries Rosa; he is part of the Jewish ontology as he gets involved in the mission to transport the Golem to a secure location; and he is the creator of the comic-book ontologies surrounding the characters the Escapist and Luna Moth.

The Jewish ontology describes a world that differs from ours in that it contains magical elements, the most prominent example in *Kavalier & Clay* being the Golem of Prague. The Golem is a mythical creature made of mud that is brought to life by a rabbi, much like the monster that was created by Doctor Frankenstein. Indeed it seems that the Golem is the Jewish equivalent of a theme that is key to any religion and as old as mankind itself, namely the creation of life and the manipulation of death. In Jewish religion it is believed that a number of powerful rabbis were capable of creating a Golem through enchantments and prayer. This theme conflicts with the atheistic and amychical character of our contemporary, and the fictional-real, ontology. In Lyotard’s words, the status of discursive and narrative knowledge—although the primary mode of capturing and conveying knowledge—is in decline in favour of objective, scientific knowledge, which is ranked higher in the social epistemological hierarchy. Within the Jewish ontology of *Kavalier & Clay*, however, a different epistemology applies.

Every universe, our own included, begins in conversation. Every golem in the history of the world, from Rabbi Hanina’s delectable goat to the river-clay Frankenstein of Rabbi Juddah Loew ben Bezalel, was summoned into existence through language [...]. (Chabon 2000: 119)

It is clear that the power of narrative and discourse is an important theme in *Kavalier & Clay*. The Golem is not merely a metaphor for creation, the act of breathing life into something, be it a pile of clay or a string of words, but it also is an actual character. As such, the Golem itself has been brought to life through the power of the word and enters the fictional real.⁸

In *Kavalier & Clay* the Golem, though no longer alive, is transported from Prague to an American suburb, and its security is a matter of life and death. Initially, the Golem is only present through the story of Josef's childhood.⁹ At the end of the novel, however, Rosa and Sam are baffled when a box filled with mud ends up on their doorstep. This ontological breach is problematic as up to that point Golems had no part in their ontology. Seeing as the fictional real resembles the reader's ontology, this transgression is difficult to process for the reader. To problematise this event even further it is not the anthropomorphic Golem that turns up on Rosa and Sam's doorstep, but rather a box of mud, with stickers from all over the world. In McHale's terminology an ontological flicker is created as every attempt at interpretation hesitates between two or more ontologies. Moreover, by entering the fictional-real ontology, the Golem is demythified; it loses its mythical status, blurring the boundary between the fictional real and the Jewish ontology even further.

It is also remarkable that Josef's life story is modelled after the motif of the wandering Jew. Forced to leave his family behind, Josef leaves his home and travels the world, all the while trying to reunite his family and to find a new place to call home. It seems almost as if Josef Kavalier has been torn from his world and placed in another, which leads me to propose that the different ontologies can be linked to specific chronotopes. In an almost neo-structuralist analysis the ontological boundaries of the novel are reflected in a dichotomy between old Europe and modern America. Old Europe is a chronotope in which the religious, the magical and the mythical are valued more than the scientific; in which ethical, aesthetic and narrative knowledge are epistemologically superior. It is the other-world. Modern America on the other hand is a chronotope that is characterised by its similarity with the contemporary reader's mode of thought. It is a selection of the fictional-real universe. Josef Kavalier has travelled from old Europe to modern America, where he became Joe Kavalier, almost as if adopting an alter ego. Next to this dichotomy there are other 'ex-centric' places, which are imbued with magical qualities, such as the Empire State Building, the Rathole and Tannen's magic shop. These re-interpretations of the *locus amoenus* can be found in every universe of *Kavalier & Clay*.

Besides being breached by the Jewish ontology, the fictional real is also penetrated by the comic-book ontology.¹⁰ Sam Clay and Joe Kavalier work together to create a comic-book universe. The status of this universe is ambiguous. On the one hand, it could be argued that this universe is subordinate to the fictional real, as it is created by a character of the fictional real universe. In Eco's terminology this would mean that the Escapist's universe is a subworld. On the other hand, the story of the Escapist is presented in separate chapters that are not directly linked to the fictional real, making it possible that the Escapist's universe is juxtaposed to the fictional real. Disregarding the hierarchical position of the comic-book ontology, it is clear that—similar to the Jewish ontology—it is characterised by an other-worldly attitude towards

⁸ Although the myths surrounding the golem contradict each other, a lot of them agree on the fact that the Golem is ultimately brought to life through the power of the word, either by inscribing words on his forehead or by chanting prayers.

⁹ There is another link between Josef Kavalier and the Golem. The Golem that was brought to life by rabbi Juddah Loew ben Bezalel in order to protect the city was also called Josef.

¹⁰ I am referring to the comic-book ontology as if it is a monolithic ontology. In reality, however, the comic-book universe is made up out of a myriad of universes that overlap and intersect but are ultimately independent. In order to simplify things, and because our discussion is mainly centered on one universe of the comic-book ontology, namely that of the Escapist, I sometimes may refer to the Escapist's universe as the comic-book universe.

the magical. Unlike the Jewish ontology, however, the comic-book universe is created by characters. This does not have to mean that they have created it from scratch; they had all kinds of sources to borrow from. Note that, as I have mentioned above, Eco thought that there is always a degree of overlap. By copying, transforming and manipulating other ontologies Kavalier and Clay create their own ontology. In a way they fit Lévi-Strauss's description of the 'bricoleur' (1966).

One of the most important characters to populate the comic-book universe is Tom Mayflower. He and his alter ego, the Escapist, a champion of the free world who comes "to the aid of those who languish in tyranny's chains" (Chabon 2000: 12), is based on Josef's teacher Bernard Kornblum, who exists in the fictional real; the real-life escape artist Harry Houdini, who has a transworld identity; and to some extent Josef Kavalier himself. In a way Joe Kavalier is the Escapist, as the Escapist's persona is made up of what Sam refers to as "wishful figments. [...] [W]hat some little kid *wishes* he could do" (ibid: 145, original emphasis). The Escapist is a projection of Josef's desire to free the oppressed, and more specifically his family. He wishes to realise his objective so badly that he risks losing track of the ontological boundary.

Over the course of the last week, in the guise of the Escapist, Master of Elusion, Joe had flown to Europe [...] [I]n a transcendent moment in the history of wishful figments, the Escapist had captured Adolf Hitler and dragged him before a world tribunal. [...] The war was over; a universal era of peace was declared, the imprisoned and persecuted peoples of Europe—among them, implicitly and passionately, the Kavalier family of Prague—were free. (ibid: 165-166)

When he looks up from his desk he feels "contented and hopeful" (ibid: 166), and the odour he smells is "the smell of victory" (ibid: 165). At that point Joe is mixing the fictional real with his own creation. Joe battles the Nazis by creating a parallel universe in which a war is being waged between representatives of the League of the Golden Key and the Iron Chain, two ancient secret organisations that have been battling each other throughout history. The war between the Allies and the Axis that is being fought in the fictional real is borrowed, transformed and incorporated into the comic-book universe. Such a strategy is by no means restricted to this novel or this author.¹¹ It can also be detected in the works of other postmodern authors, most notably Thomas Pynchon. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example, history is reinterpreted in terms of a conflict between two rival mail-distribution companies, 'Thurn und Taxis' and 'Tristero'. What this strategy achieves is the creation of both epistemological and ontological doubt: epistemological because it makes the reader reconsider the notion of history and historiography, ontological because readers have to choose between what they thought was true and what is now presented to them as true. There is an ontological flicker between two contrasting ontologies.

At first, the parallels between the fictional real and the Escapist's reality are thinly veiled—for example, the Escapist is fighting the *Razis* in Europe—but this veil is quickly dropped, an act which is met only lukewarmly by Anapol, Joe and Sammy's publisher: "We're calling them *Germans* now?" (Chabon 2000: 170, original emphasis). Joe pushes political aspiration so far as to create a comic-book cover portraying the Escapist hitting Hitler in the face.

This dropping of the veil is symbolic because it shows the motivation of everybody involved in the act of creation. For Anapol, the Escapist's world has to appeal to a broad audience and thus eschew controversy. For Sam and especially Joe, the politics outweighs the economics. It is their way to contribute to the war. They have created characters that possess the power to defeat evil, a power they do not have themselves. Or do they? The episodes of the Escapist that are created by Joe and Sam function as propaganda. In other words, the Escapist

¹¹ McHale refers to this postmodern phenomenon as the creation of a "secret history" (1987: 91).

enables them to influence two universes in one go. The idea of comics as propaganda is, however, not an invention of the fictional real, existing as it has, and does, in the reader's reality. The publication of the cover of the *Escapist* hitting Hitler is an event that has been borrowed and transformed from the reader's reality,¹² for the very first cover of *Captain America*, who was created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, two Jewish cartoonists, depicted their hero beating up Hitler (Strömberg 2010: 42–43). Again, this is an example of the crossing of ontological boundaries by using events that took place in the reader's universe and creating a copy in the fictional real.

Kavalier and Clay are, however, quickly forced to choose: either they have to abandon their commitment to a political comic-book universe, an act for which they would be handsomely rewarded, or they lose their jobs and thus the opportunity to create *The Escapist's* universe altogether. The money that Joe would earn would finance his brother's escape attempt. Together with their editor, George Deasey, they find a way out of their conundrum, but if they had not, they would have been fired, because Joe is unable to 'lay off' the Germans.

And that was the problem, Joe thought. Giving in to Anapol and Ashkenazy would mean admitting that everything he had done until now had been, in Deasey's phrase, powerless and useless. [...] No, he thought. Regardless of what Deasey says, I believe in the power of my imagination. [...] "Yes, god damn it, I want the money," Joe said. "But I can't stop fighting now." (Chabon 2000: 286)

If Deasey had not helped them, Joe would sooner have quit his job than succumbed to Anapol and Ashkenazy, even if it would provide the money he needed to get his brother out of Prague. Joe does not want to give in, because the universe he has created has grown to such an extent that it rivals the fictional real. The ontological flicker has become so strong that it determines the actions undertaken by characters in the fictional real. It does not take long, however, for Joe himself to start questioning the political use of his comic-book war.

[T]he sad futility of the struggle [...] seemed to have begun to overtake the ingenuity of his pen. Month after month, the *Escapist* ground the armies of evil into paste, and yet here they were in the spring of 1941 and Adolf Hitler's empire was more extensive than Bonaparte's. [...] Though Joe kept fighting, Rosa could see that his heart had gone out of mayhem. (ibid: 318)

The *Escapist's* power does not influence the fictional real to such an extent that it enables Joe to end the fictional-real war at once. So Joe directs his attention to the poetics of the comic-book universe, rather than the politics. He becomes concerned with the representational nature of the subworlds he has created. Joe Kavalier's poetics can be divided into at least three stadia: conventional linear poetics, surrealist poetics and modernist poetics.

Josef Kavalier relied on conventional linear poetics for his politically orientated *Escapist* comics, but gradually turned to the surrealist poetics à la Winsor McKay, to which he was introduced by Rosa's father, as his political aspirations faded.

Suddenly the standard three tiers of quadrangular panels became a prison from which he had to escape. They hampered his efforts to convey the dislocated and non-Euclidian dream spaces in which Luna Moth fought. He sliced up his panels, stretched and distorted them, cut them into wedges and strips. He experimented with benday dots, cross-hatching, woodcut effects, and even crude collage. (ibid: 319)

¹² A myriad of examples could be given of real events that were borrowed from the reader's universe and incorporated in *Kavalier & Clay*. One other notable example is the publication of Fredric Wertham's *The Seduction of the Innocent* and the subsequent Senate hearing (see Strömberg 2010: 90–91). Both events occurred both in the reader's and the fictional-real universe. In the fictional real, however, this real event is mixed with fictional elements as Sam Clay's testimony never took place in the reader's universe (Chabon 2000: 613–616). Moreover, it is ironic that Sam Clay does not have to account for his real homosexuality, but has to motivate the alleged homosexual relationship between the comic-book characters he created.

Joe's turn to surrealism is partially fuelled by the critique that realism cannot capture reality. The conventions have to be broken and a new language has to be created, a language that has the power of expression. In his depiction of Luna Moth's universe—centred on Luna Moth, a comic-book heroine based on Rosa—Joe develops a surrealist style. It is not until he watches Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, though, that Joe realises that he had not yet fully laid bare the genre's potential.

It was not just a matter, he told Sammy, of somehow adapting the bag of cinematic tricks so boldly displayed in the movie—extreme close-ups, odd angles, quirky arrangements of foreground and background; Joe and a few others had been dabbling with this sort of thing for some time. It was that *Citizen Kane* represented, more than any other movie Joe had ever seen, the total blending of narration and image that was—didn't Sammy see it?—the fundamental principle of comic book storytelling, and the irreducible nut of their partnership. (ibid: 362)

Joe wants to create a 'total blend of narration and image'. And when he finally has a shot at achieving this through a project Sam and Joe have titled *Kane Street*, he completely abandons the political aspects of the Escapist (ibid: 366). Joe had already let go of the conventional comic-book poetics with the creation of Luna Moth, but he only creates a complete blend of narration and image, of content and form, in *Kane Street*. The purest form of this kind of blend, however, is probably Joe's *The Golem!*. This graphic novel tells the "long and hallucinatory tale of a wayward, unnatural child, Josef Golem, that sacrificed itself to save and redeem the little lamplit world whose safety had been entrusted to it" (ibid: 577). Through *The Golem!* Joe grants himself a transworld identity; he creates yet another fictional universe, but this time he is at the centre of it, he himself the unfortunate hero. Equally noteworthy is the form of Joe's *The Golem!*:

There were no balloons in any of the panels, no words at all except for those that appeared as part of the artwork itself [...] and the two words *The Golem!* (ibid: 578)

The Golem! is not narrated through language, but through the sole use of images. Besides the absence of words, little information is shared about the pictorial language that Joe develops. We do know, however, that the end product is startling. Joe has crafted a tool that is so apt at telling a story that he is afraid to share his own, painful life story.

[T]he more convincingly he demonstrated the power of the comic book as a vehicle of personal expression—the less willingness he felt to show it to other people, to expose what had become the secret record of his mourning, of his guilt and retribution. (ibid: 579)

The project that Josef Kavalier undertakes with *The Golem!* is similar to Michael Chabon's *Kavalier & Clay* in that Chabon's novel also is a complete blend of content and form, and in that both texts show an understanding and exploration of the limits of their material. In contrast to the essentially modernist project of Josef Kavalier, however, stands the elaborate metalevel of Chabon's text. Whereas *The Golem!* is Josef's autobiographical graphic novel, *Kavalier & Clay* is as much a novel about the business of creating worlds, both real and fictional, and about language and its limits, as it is the story of Joe, Sam and so many others.

The different ontological levels of *Kavalier & Clay* are so intricately intertwined that form and content are indistinguishable; politics and poetics form a coherent unity. To get an idea of the dazzling complexity and obfuscation of the ontological landscape one only needs to consider the entity of the Golem. The Golem—metaphor, creation and character at the same time—occurs in every universe. He is transported from old Prague to modern America, from the religious to the fictional real (and is thus demythified), from where he is yet again transformed to fit into another subworld, that of Joe's graphic novel. In this last universe, however, the Golem appears in the person of a little boy, who is a (re)mythified copy of the

young Josef Kavalier. This dizzying complexity illustrates one last difference between *The Golem!* and *Kavalier & Clay*; whereas *The Golem!* ultimately succeeds in mustering a suitable language to narrate experiences and events, *Kavalier & Clay* has to work with the imperfect tools at hand.

Conclusion

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay is a novel that sets out to explore the boundaries of language and of the novel. What can a novel portray or express? Is it capable of representing history? And what are the possibilities of the fantastic novel? Chabon's novel does—as postmodern texts often do—ask more questions than it answers. *Kavalier & Clay* succeeds in showing that all novels are essentially totalisations. It reveals that all narratives employ totalising techniques. Therefore, the term historiographic metafiction suits the novel well. It casts the past in a compelling narrative that never aspires to 'Truth'. On the contrary, *Kavalier & Clay* incorporates an extensive metalevel that destabilises every attempt on behalf of the reader to interpret it as a totalising narrative.

Kavalier & Clay not only questions the boundaries of language and literature, but also those of our universe and our view or description of that universe, thereby disrupting the suspension of disbelief even more. I have shown that the ontologies that constitute the ontological landscape of *Kavalier & Clay* cannot easily be distinguished from each other as they interact and create ontological ambiguities. Therefore, *Kavalier & Clay* can be read as a fantastic novel that resists interpretation.

Especially the combination of mythification and demythification causes ontological doubt as 'the world as we know it' is negated. The laws governing one universe are applied in another and the existence of people and the occurrence of events are manipulated. Yet it is impossible to put one's finger on the exact transgression, as these destabilising techniques operate in the 'dark' areas of the collective consciousness of the past. This ontological ambiguity is cleverly exploited to express what is perhaps the main theme of the novel, namely escapism. To suspend, even if it is only for a short period of time, your belief and disbelief; to let go of what you believe and to believe what you did not deem possible.

Kavalier & Clay 'escapes' the boundaries of language, literature and our universe. Through the narrative of the Escapist's origin, the true nature of the book is revealed. The core of the novel is shaped by an essential metafictional theme, namely escapism, which is at the same time the 'real' theme in Josef's 'real' life within the 'reality' of the text's 'real' ontology. This sense of escapism is further strengthened by the incorporation of a Jewish and a comic-book ontology. By mixing these ontologies the novel takes a stand in the ongoing epistemological struggle. It 'promotes' ontologies that prefer narrative over scientific knowledge by creating fundamental ontological doubt. Ontological doubt is directly opposed to the reader's empiricist, objective and scientifically orientated world, which values truth more than beauty and moral good.

References

- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Chabon, Michael. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. London: Fourth Estate, 2000.
- Citizen Kane*. Director Orson Welles, 1941.
- Derrida, Jacques. 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.' In *A Postmodern Reader*, edited by Linda Hutcheon and Joseph P. Natoli. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993. 232–242.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of the Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. London & New York: Routledge, 1988.
- . *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London & New York: Routledge, 1989.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203358856>
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. University of Chicago Press, 1966.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen, 1987.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203393321>
- Pavel, Thomas. 'Narrative Domains.' *Poetics Today* (1980): 108.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1771889>
- Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. London: Vintage, 2007.
- Strömberg, Fredrik. *Comic Art Propaganda*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973.

Author contact email: frederik.devadder@kuleuven.be