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## **Rhizomatic Maps and Arboreal Tracings: *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *Tripticks* and the Mass Media**

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This paper will examine the manner in which two novels published in the early seventies – J.G Ballard’s *The Atrocity Exhibition*, originally published in 1970, and Ann Quin’s *Tripticks*, originally published in 1972 – utilise fragmentary narrative forms in an attempt to grapple with the implications, both social and psychological, engendered by the emergence of the modern mass media in the preceding decade. In doing so, I will suggest that some of the rhizomatic qualities that Deleuze and Guattari outline in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980) – in particular the concept of the rhizomatic map and its opposition to the arboreal tracing – prove to be highly productive for examining the way in which Ballard’s and Quin’s respective novels attempt to negotiate an increasingly mediated ‘reality’.

In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1992), Frederic Jameson argues that the sixties were the decade in which the modern mass media first emerged, in what he calls a ‘communicational explosion’.<sup>1</sup> According to Jameson, the pivotal moment in the mass media’s rise to prominence was the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. The assassination and the subsequent coverage of it was, Jameson contends, the inaugural event in what was ‘something like the coming of age of the whole media culture that had been set in place in the late 1940s and the 1950s’ and served as the first demonstration (for the publics of the ‘West’ at least) of ‘a new collective experience of

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1992. p. 355.

reception' based on 'a prodigious new display of synchronicity and a communicational situation that amounted to a dialectical leap over anything hitherto suspected'.<sup>2</sup> Like Jameson, J.G. Ballard also argues that the assassination of Kennedy was a hugely important moment in the rise of the modern mass media – particularly television – noting that: 'Kennedy's murder [...] freed the medium [television] from the airless, studio-bound realm of stilted news announcers and staid game shows, transforming the screen into a global media landscape that soon became a direct competitor with reality itself'.<sup>3</sup> For both Jameson and Ballard, the assassination is thus seen as the catalyst for an epochal shift in the way in which people understood the world and in which the narratives and spectacle of the mass media were central.

Unsurprisingly then, being composed in the aftermath of this new mediatisation, both *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Tripticks* are intimately concerned with questions regarding the ascent of the mass media and the implications of such a paradigmatic shift. These thematic concerns carry through to the structure of the novels, which both employ techniques of collage and cut-up in an attempt to depict the manner in which increasing mediatisation might render the individuals experience of 'reality' as disjointed and fractured. Indeed, perhaps even more than their engagement with the mass media, what unites both texts is their deployment of unusual and fragmentary narrative structures. Consequently, in order to more fully explore the disjointed narratives of both novels, and the way in which such structures relate to the texts' thematic engagement with the emergence of the mass media, I would suggest that Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome will prove instructive.

The concept of the rhizome was first outlined by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980). Therein, Deleuze and Guattari argue that,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 355.

<sup>3</sup> J.G. Ballard. 'The Overlit Carousel'. *A Users Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews*. London: Flamingo, 1997. p. 242.

historically, the systems of knowledge which shape human societies have been thought of as functioning in a hierarchical fashion organised in an idealised dichotomising tree-like structure, a way of looking at the world that they describe as ‘arborescent’.<sup>4</sup> Such a mode of thinking is, Deleuze and Guattari claim, completely wrong. Instead, they argue that the various different facets of human knowledge and understanding are actually all interconnected and knotted together in a highly complex manner. Consequently, rather than understanding the world in Cartesian and taxonomic (or indeed arborescent) terms, it should instead be viewed as a chaotically organised rhizome in which ‘connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles’ are ceaselessly being established.<sup>5</sup> The rhizome is thus a model for thinking about the world, and the signifying systems of knowledge within it (including the textual) in a radically de-centred fashion.

Although Deleuze and Guattari outline six facets of the rhizome it is the fifth and sixth principles, those of decalcomania and cartography, respectively, that I would contend are key to understanding *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Tripticks* engagement with the mass media landscape that emerged in the nineteen sixties. In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari illustrate the principles of decalcomania and cartography through a discussion of the differences between the tracing and the map. The tracing, they argue, is a reproduction of an earlier pre-existing form of discourse or knowledge and that it is arborescent in nature: ‘All of tree logic is a logic of tracing and reproduction’.<sup>6</sup> The tracing works ‘on the basis of an Overcoding structure or supporting axis’, and functions by superimposing new information onto an already existing model.<sup>7</sup> The tracing can therefore be thought of as an attempt,

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<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. ‘Rhizomes’. *Postmodern Literary Theory*. Ed. Niall Lucy. London: Blackwell Publishers, 2000. p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

through the deployment of methodical and systematic processes, to code ‘reality’ with a fixed and definitive ‘meaning’. In contrast, the map functions in the original cartographic sense of the term and is not a mere representation, but is instead active and productive, opening up new vistas that emerge experientially in the moment. Indeed, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, the map differs from the tracing in that ‘it is oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real’.<sup>8</sup> As a result of this orientation the map creates new articulations of spatiality and knowledge. It is not dependent on pre-existing forms and can instead be manipulated and reconfigured: ‘The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, and susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted, to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation’.<sup>9</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, the map thus functions as a site for constant experimentation, (re)negotiation and the endless generation of meaning.

As I will now suggest, these rhizomatic principles of cartography, as well as more tracing-like elements, are clearly evident in both *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Tripsticks*. Furthermore, by explicating the tensions between the arborescent tracing and the rhizomatic map I will argue that both novels seek to raise questions about the manner in which it might be possible for the individual to effectively negotiate an increasingly mediated ‘reality’.

In the case of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, the fragmentary and collagist nature of the text is immediately apparent with only the most cursory glance. The titles of the novel’s chapters, which include ‘You: Coma: Marilyn Monroe’ and ‘Tolerances of the Human Face’ are each broken down into smaller, paragraph long, highly-condensed mini-narratives with their own

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

gnomic titles, such as ‘Zapruder Frame 235’ and ‘The Optimum wound profile’.<sup>10, 11, 12, 13</sup>

The effect of all this subdivision results in a work that is, in the words of Andrzej Gasiorek: ‘a fragmented text divided up into sections that resonate with each other thematically but eschew all traditional props of realist narrative: linearity, psychological consistency, social context, authorial omniscience’.<sup>14</sup>

Aside from the manner in which this formal sub-division induces a sense of fragmentation, it also suggests an elastic inter-connectivity between the scenes with which the reader is presented. *The Atrocity Exhibition* thus gives the impression that, if need be, it could be read in a completely random manner without detracting from the power of its narrative. This disruption of linearity is perhaps best represented by the reappearance within many of the sections of the same characters, seemingly in contradiction of causality and affect. For example, the text’s first chapter, ‘The Atrocity Exhibition’, ends with death of a number of characters: ‘the corpses of Dr Nathan, Webster and Catherine Austin formed a small tableau by the bunkers’.<sup>15</sup> However, having seemingly died in the first chapter of the book, these characters appear constantly throughout *The Atrocity Exhibition*, in much the same way that many of the thematic concerns – ‘the celebrity culture of the 1960s; the power of the telecommunications industries to mediate reality; the assassinations of iconic figures’ – also reappear in each chapter.<sup>16</sup> Such successive reappearances of the same characters, themes and imagery in many ways parallels the way in which the mass media functions, with its constant repetition of the same footage and imagery which is then slowly (re)configured

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<sup>10</sup> J.G. Ballard. *The Atrocity Exhibition*. London: Harper Perennial, 2006. p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Andrzej Gasiorek. *JG Ballard*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005. pp. 16-17.

<sup>15</sup> Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*. p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Gasiorek, p.17.

into different narratives depending on the dominant ‘facts’, evidence and conjecture available at any given time.

The constant reappearance of the same elements and characters, coupled with a narrative structure which eschews causality, quite clearly positions *The Atrocity Exhibition* as a text that is fundamentally aligned with the chaotic qualities of the rhizome. Indeed, given the aforementioned qualities, Ballard’s novel is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari’s claims that, ‘A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines’.<sup>17</sup> In addition to this; however, such rhizomatic qualities are also apparent in the narrative perspective of the individual I shall henceforth refer to as the ‘T’ character. The ‘T’ character appears throughout Ballard’s novel and is variously known, from section to section, as ‘Travis’, ‘Talbot’, ‘Traven’, ‘Tallis’, ‘Trabert’, ‘Talbert’ and ‘Travers’, his name always pivoting around the letters ‘T’ and ‘a’.<sup>18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24</sup> It is the ‘T’ character who is the central figure in *The Atrocity Exhibition* for, as Gasiorek notes, ‘This protagonist’s passage through the text in some ways holds its multiple themes together’.<sup>25</sup> However, despite this central role, the ‘T’ character is anything but stable. Not only is it impossible to confer a stable signifying identity on this character (as seen by his constantly changing name), but it is also impossible to decide which events described in the text take place within the interiority of his psyche, or in the external ‘real’ world.

Using bizarre geometric equations, and by attempting to re-enact traumatic spectacles from the mass media, as well as by re-interpreting the ‘totally altered meanings’ of the

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<sup>17</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p. 99.

<sup>18</sup> Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*. p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>25</sup> Gasiorek, p. 59.

smallest of gestures, the 'T' character is desperately in search of some sort of meaning, no matter how dis-united and multiplicitous this may be, to explain the sprawling mess of mass media narratives with which he is confronted.<sup>26</sup> This is signalled numerous times in the course of the text. For example, in 'You, Coma: Marilyn Monroe' we read that the 'T' character: 'had come to this apartment in order to solve her [Marilyn Monroe's] suicide', while the explosion that takes place in 'The Atrocity Exhibition' chapter apparently constitutes an attempt by the 'T' character to celebrate: 'his own search through the suburbs of Hell'.<sup>27, 28</sup>

It could be argued that such a 'search' indicates that 'T' is trying to uncover what Deleuze and Guattari would refer to as a 'deep structure' within the rhizomatic mass media landscape, and to thus produce an arborescent tracing atop this reality which would 'explain' these disparate events.<sup>29</sup> However, I would argue that the search in which the 'T' character is engaged is one that transcends any arboreal methodology or explanation and instead follows a logic that is as rhizomatic and disjointed as the reality that it attempts to navigate. This becomes clear when one considers the manner in which the 'T' character's account of the world in which he finds himself, his interactions with it, and the significance he places on particular events is not explicated in a logical, dichotomising fashion, but rather unfolds in a manner more akin to the rhizomatic processes of short-term memory described by Deleuze and Guattari.

As Deleuze and Guattari argue, short-term memory is fundamentally rhizomatic in nature and is 'in no way subject to a law of contiguity or immediacy to its object; it can act at a distance, come or return a long time after, but always under conditions of discontinuity,

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<sup>26</sup> Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*. p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p. 101.



rupture, and multiplicity'.<sup>30</sup> In other words, short-term memory is chaotic and random, producing connections between disparate topics, ideas and events. Such a notion, I would argue, seems to perfectly describe the 'T' character's non-contiguous approach to the world throughout *The Atrocity Exhibition*. For example, at one juncture the novel details how:

Entering the exhibition, Travis sees the atrocities of Vietnam and the Congo mimetized in the alternate death of Elizabeth Taylor; he tends the dying film star, eroticizing her punctured bronchus in the over-ventilated verandas of the London Hilton; he dreams of Max Ernst, superior of the birds; 'Europe after the Rain'; the human race – Caliban asleep across a mirror smeared with vomit.<sup>31</sup>

In this section, the 'T' character's disorientating and rhizomatic understanding of reality is placed in sharp relief. Death and celebrity, culture, war, sexual fantasy and the fleshy reality of the body all co-mingle in this short paragraph, with individual sentences and sub-clauses cutting from one subject to the other. Moreover, the reality-status of all the topics the 'T' character touches upon is conflated. As such, the very real atrocities of Vietnam and Congo become equivalent to the death the 'T' character imagines for Elizabeth Taylor. These lines thus demonstrate not only the 'T' character's rhizomatic negotiation of his environment – and the manner in which the meaning he ascribes to particular events and images with which he is confronted are highly complex and impenetrable – but also how such an understanding and approach to reality has been profoundly shaped by the mass media landscape in which he is immersed, with its constant blurring of the distinction between real events, spectacle and fantasy.

The rhizomatic experience of reality that typifies the 'T' character's perspective sits in marked contrast to the rational logic that characterises the perspective of Dr Nathan. Indeed, as Gasiorek notes, throughout *The Atrocity Exhibition*: 'The commentaries of the ultra-rational Dr Nathan are juxtaposed against Traven's (one of the 'T' character's many

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>31</sup> Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*. p. 12.

personas) obsessions, and an internally fissured, double-narrative is the outcome'.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout the course of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Dr Nathan attempts to use scientific logic to trace arborescent explanations onto all of the 'T' character's acts. For example, at one point Dr Nathan suggests that: 'These images of angles and postures constitute not so much a private gallery as a conceptual equation, a fusing device by which Talbot hopes to bring his scenario to a climax', a reading which, couched in the rationalist language of science or psychology, attempts to provide a closed-off explanation of the 'T' character's behaviour.<sup>33</sup>

As the mouth piece for structured and rational logic, Dr Nathan's explanations of the 'T' character's actions thus need to be understood as attempts to over-code and 'structuralize [...] the rhizome' and return to a safe world of unity and arborescence.<sup>34</sup> This is perhaps most apparent in Dr Nathan's explanation of the 'T' character's actions being predicated on a quest to uncover 'the lost symmetry of the blastosphere'.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the model of the blastosphere that Dr Nathan describes is predicated on values even more arborescent than those found in classical conceptions of human thought, suggesting as it does a radial, not merely a bilateral, symmetry: 'the primitive precursor of the embryo that is the last structure to preserve perfect symmetry in all planes. It occurred to Travis that our own bodies may conceal the rudiments of a symmetry not only about the vertical axis but also the horizontal'.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, such a motivation – to provide such a deeply ordered and structured account of events – is wholly lacking in any part of the text focalised through the perspective of the 'T' character, who makes no mention at all of the blastosphere or radial symmetry. Indeed, when the actual end of the 'T' character's quest comes into sight at the close of the 'You and Me and the Continuum', it is couched in language completely at odds with the

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<sup>32</sup> Gasiorek, p. 60.

<sup>33</sup> Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*. p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p. 103.

<sup>35</sup> Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*. p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

arboreal logic of Dr Nathan and emphasises the dissolution of any sort of stable identity or biological structure, rather than a return to one: ‘As his own identity faded, its last fragments glimmered across the darkening landscape, lost integers in a hundred computer codes, sand-grains on a thousand beaches, fillings in a million mouths’.<sup>37</sup> Dr Nathan’s account of the ‘T’ character’s actions thus seem entirely spurious, coming across as an attempt to *trace* a logical, or arborescent, explanation atop actions that are largely incomprehensible. Consequently, as the final lines of ‘You and Me and the Continuum’ quoted above appear to signal, if there is any system or model that can explain the ‘T’ character’s actions, it lies with rhizomatic notions of interconnection, interpenetration and multiplicity, rather than the recovery of any underlying deep structures of ‘rational’ logic.

There is, however, perhaps a more fundamental tension between the principals of the rhizomatic map and the arborescent tracing to be found within the pages of Ballard’s text. For, aside from the fifteen chapters and two appendices that round out *The Atrocity Exhibition*, the book also includes a further commentary added by Ballard in 1990, roughly twenty years after the novel’s first publication. In many ways, Ballard’s commentary could be said to constitute an explanatory tracing on the complex map that makes up the main body of the text. This is an argument made by a number of critics, including Philip Tew, who argues that Ballard’s annotations imply that: ‘at least unconsciously he came to regard the text as requiring further explanation, certainly for new generations of readers’.<sup>38</sup> Understood in this way, Ballard’s commentary becomes a capitulation to those who might find the narrative of *The Atrocity Exhibition* too confusing and fragmentary. However, I would argue that, actually, Ballard’s annotations do not stabilise the ‘meaning’ of the text but actually work to complicate it. Indeed, as Jeanette Baxter argues, Ballard’s annotations are less an

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>38</sup> Philip Tew. ‘Acts of Reconsideration: J.G. Ballard (1930-2009) annotating and Revising Editions of *The Atrocity Exhibition*’. *Textual Practice* 26.3 (2012). p. 401.

attempt at fixing meaning, than a kind of ‘mimetic performance’ highlighting the difficulties inherent in trying to pin-down a definitive interpretation of events in a fractious and confused mass media age.<sup>39</sup>

The way in which the commentary works to complicate the text, is highlighted by Ballard’s own repeated professed ignorance regarding the nature of the imagery found in *The Atrocity Exhibition*. A particularly glaring example of this occurs in ‘The University of Death’ chapter where reference is made to: ‘(1) the left orbit and zygomatic arch of President Kennedy magnified from Zapruder Frame 230’.<sup>40</sup> Ballard refers to this image in his commentary, but then admits that he is unable to fully gloss the information provided in these lines, stating that ‘The Warren Commission concluded that frame 210 recorded the first rifle shot, which wounded Kennedy in the neck, and that frame 313 recorded the fatal head wound. I forget the significance of frame 230’.<sup>41</sup> For Baxter, such gaps are evidence that ‘Ballard’s annotated text parodies the didactic edifice of the Warren Report’ and its attempt to get to the ‘truth’ of the events that surrounded the assassination.<sup>42</sup> In this regard, the way in which the annotated version of the text juxtaposes a fragmentary narrative with a rational commentary which, in the final analysis, does not provide the clarification one would expect of it, is reminiscent of the complex tensions that Deleuze and Guattari suggest may be manifested between rhizomatic map and arboreal tracing and where: ‘A new rhizome may form in the heart of a tree, the hollow of a root, the crook of a branch’.<sup>43</sup> Seen in this light, Ballard’s annotations do not fix the multiplicitous meanings found in the text around deep thematic structures as a tracing might do, but actually further obfuscate any stable reading we might make of the text. As Tew also ultimately concludes, the effect of Ballard’s annotations

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<sup>39</sup> Jeanette Baxter. *J.G. Ballard’s Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009. p. 97.

<sup>40</sup> Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*. p. 32.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>42</sup> Baxter, p. 97.

<sup>43</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p. 15.

actually result in the novel being ‘quite radically transformed, becoming a cartographically far more complex and demanding series of aesthetic acts, the act of its comprehension entirely reconfigured’.<sup>44</sup>

*The Atrocity Exhibition* thus seems to function by playing upon the underlying tensions which can be observed between the rhizomatic map and the arborescent tracing. Such a tension is manifested on two levels. On a purely thematic level, the text juxtaposes the random and chaotic experience of ‘reality’ of the ‘T’ character with the arborescent and rational explanations proffered by Dr Nathan. On a more structural level, the annotated version of the novel introduces a commentary that, at first glance, attempts to clarify the events being described in the narrative. In this regard, Ballard’s text thus presents itself as a map for negotiating the mass media age to which tracings *appear* to have been added. However, when examined more closely these tracings cannot fix and over-code the events described in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and actually serve to obfuscate and occlude easy interpretation. Consequently, the tracings that constitute Ballard’s commentary add layers of additional complexity and multiple extra resonances to the main, fragmentary narrative and demonstrate the complex interactions and tensions evident in Deleuze and Guattari’s account of the rhizomatic map and the arborescent tracing.

Like *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *Tripticks* also plays upon the tensions between the rhizomatic map and the arborescent tracing in its attempt to get to depict the manner in which the individual might navigate the emergent mass media landscape. Indeed, the novel’s engagement with such themes is unsurprising given Kathleen Wheeler’s claim that much of Quin’s work ‘represents a search for literary and linguistic techniques for depicting and expressing inner consciousness which avoid the conventional assumptions of order and

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<sup>44</sup> Tew, p. 401.

wholeness that cut us off from other possible experiences and perceptions'.<sup>45</sup> In the case of *Tripticks*, this negotiation can most clearly be discerned in the novel's use of techniques of collage and cut-up to elucidate how the mass media interpellates and subsumes the individual into its discourses.

The slow dissolution of the individual within the mass media landscape of sixties America is apparent from the very start of *Tripticks*. After a brief account of his identity (which, with the words 'I have many names. Many faces', already perhaps hints at the manner in which he is his subsumed into the various discourses of the mass media), the narrator begins to explain his surroundings as he lies in wait for his No.1 X-Wife and her lover.<sup>46</sup> Ironically, despite the apparent specificity of the information provided, it is at first difficult to ascertain exactly where the scene is supposed to be set: 'Time checked 14.04 hours Central Standard Time. 73 degrees outside. Area 158,693 square miles, of which 1,890 square miles are water'.<sup>47</sup> It is only when the narrator continues, listing a series of facilities that are presumably available at this location, that the reader is perhaps able to ascertain that this is some kind of campsite or national park:

Natural endowments are included in 20 million acres of public reservations. Open during daylight hours an unusual arrangement of garden pools. Hours subject to change in summer. No dogs, with the exception of seeing-eye dogs, are allowed. Cats are permitted to stay overnight provided they are on a leash. A naturalist is on duty.<sup>48</sup>

It is also at this point in the text – as the detached and impersonal detailing of the facilities on offer pile-up – that it becomes clear that the narrator is not actually providing the reader with his own account of this location, but instead regurgitating the words from some sort of tourist information brochure or billboard.

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<sup>45</sup> Kathleen Wheeler. *A Critical Guide to Twentieth-Century Women Novelists*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. p. 207.

<sup>46</sup> Ann Quin. *Tripticks*. London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2009. p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

However, following this account of the facilities offered at the park, the next lines of narration then take the reader off on a tangent: ‘As members of the 89-person party died, those remaining resorted to cannibalism. Only 47 were rescued’.<sup>49</sup> Instead of imparting words taken from tourist information, the narration now appears to be based upon a story heard on the radio or drawn from the pages of a periodical and completely unrelated to the narrator’s current situation. Then, no sooner has the information about cannibalism been imparted, the narrator returns to the tourist information with the words: ‘Picnicking. Campsites near the original area’, before finally inserting himself back into the action with the declarative words: ‘Where I waited’.<sup>50,51</sup> The narration continues in this manner throughout *Tripticks*, with the narrator’s words moving tangentially between a range of different mass media discourses and his own, occasional, interjections. Indeed, as Evenson and Howard note, in ‘any given paragraph can contain all sorts of narration, some of it appropriated from magazines or television and nestling uncomfortably against the narrator’s own words’.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, when reading the text, it is often impossible to pull apart which portions of the narration are the narrator’s directly lived experience, and which constitute the background hum of mass media discourse.

At first, these changes in subject matter and discourse appear to be almost random; however, on closer examination the associative connections between the different kinds of narration become apparent. In the example above, it appears that the implicit evocation of nature in the words: ‘A naturalist is on duty’, serves as an associative link that connects the curated nature of the national park to the un-manicured nature of the wilderness, where a

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.9.

<sup>52</sup> Brian Evenson and Joanna Howard. ‘Ann Quin’. *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 23:2 (Summer 2003). p. 52.

group of people are forced into ‘cannibalism’.<sup>53, 54</sup> The notion of cannibalism, and the suggestion of eating human flesh for sustenance, then serves as a link back to the tourist information (in a grimly ironic fashion), and the far more convivial outdoor eating pursuit of ‘picnicking’.<sup>55</sup> In this regard, the way in which Quin’s text plays upon the tension between the rhizomatic map and the arboreal tracing becomes apparent. While on the one hand the narrator’s ability to associatively move between completely different kinds of imagery and discourse is suggestive of the way in which the rhizomatic map ‘fosters connections between fields’, on the other, the narrator’s reliance on pre-existing forms of knowledge, propagated by the mass media, points to the arboreal tracing ‘that comes ready-made’.<sup>56, 57</sup>

This shifting between personal pronouns and lived reality that is apparent throughout the opening pages of *Tripticks*, serves as an early indication of the novel’s engagement with the way in which mass media narratives colonise individual consciousness. Indeed, as Philip Stevick notes: “in *Tripticks* the outer limits of the self give way to the American world of billboards and self-help, tabloids and soaps, mom, pop and the kids”.<sup>58</sup> Such a thematic is further emphasised by the way in which the narrator ends the opening pages of the novel – which have mainly served to set the scene – with an image that likens this scene-setting to an image on a TV set: “Hovering, pale and jittery, like an image that persists for a second after the set has been turned off”.<sup>59</sup> In invoking such an image, the text further builds on the sense of confusion between exterior spectacle and interiority that has already been established, but

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<sup>53</sup> Quin, p. 9.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p. 102.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>58</sup> Philip Stevick. “Voices in the Head: Style and Consciousness in the Fiction of Ann Quin”. *Breaking the Sequence: Women’s Experimental Fiction*. Eds. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. p. 236.

<sup>59</sup> Quin, p 10.



goes further to implicitly suggest that the mass media produces its own form of ‘screen burn’ on the consciousness of the individual.

Consequently, while the narrator does move associatively and, indeed, rhizomatically between different kinds of mass media discourse such a movement seems far from liberating. Indeed, in a number of ways the associations practiced by the narrator seem illustrative of the critiques of modernity laid-out by Herbert Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man*, originally published in 1964 and, I would contend, one of *Tripticks* major intertexts. In *One Dimensional Man* Marcuse claims that ‘In speaking their own language people also speak the language of their masters, benefactors, advertisers’, and in this regard, with its narrator who constantly makes associative links between ready-made mass media formats to express himself,<sup>60</sup> *Tripticks* is clearly concerned with increasing mediatisation and the narrowing of human experience that it seems to engender. A particularly prominent example of this can be seen in the narrator’s account of his relationship with the family of No.1 X-wife following their divorce:

The whole episode fragmented into a honeycomb of separate actions. Mock histrionics where her father prostrated himself before me, dug his nose in the rug, and moaned ‘look please do what I say give my daughter up and you’ll have an income of...’ Plot diminishes in a forest of effects and accidents. Motivations done away with, loose ends ignored, as the son-in-law is invited to become the father’s collaborator filling in the gaps he left out.<sup>61</sup>

Rather than constructing his own account of events, here the narrator turns to the mass media form of the soap opera in order to describe the situation. While this information is relayed in a manner that emphasises the narrator’s self-awareness of this act of pastiche (something apparent in his clear understanding of the manner in which soap operas function as narrative constructs, as seen in the words ‘Motivations done away with, loose ends ignored’), I would

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<sup>60</sup> Herbert Marcuse. *One-Dimensional Man*. With an Introduction by Douglas Kellner. Abingdon: Routledge, 2002. p. 198.

<sup>61</sup> Quin, p. 31.

argue that there is more to this than simple postmodern self-reflexivity.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, given that a few lines prior to this account the narrator has remarked that ‘Independence of expression has now become almost unthinkable’, this description of family life as, quite literally, a soap opera instead highlights how such a representation of reality has supplanted any possibility of the narrator attempting to describe events in his own subjective manner, using his own language.<sup>63</sup> In other words, described in Deleuzian terms, the modality of the soap opera has worked as tracing to structuralise and fix the underlying and rhizomatic reality of lived experience.

Despite his reliance on these kinds of ‘ready-mades’, as *Tripticks* progresses the narrator’s dissatisfaction with the tracings of the mass media becomes increasingly apparent and, at numerous points in the narrative, he begins to repudiate these limited possibilities. A clear example of this can be seen in the narrator’s critique of the mass media’s depiction of the Moon landings, which has occluded a whole host of subjectivities and universalised a white, American, heterosexual, masculinity as the de facto human state: ‘Two of our kind stand with their own feet on the moon. Two earthlings representing both sexes (though they are all men) all races (though they are pinkish-white beneath their white space suits) and all nations (though they are from the United States, as you might infer from the patches on their sleeves)’.<sup>64</sup> Such a critique is interesting because it demonstrates, in a highly visual manner, the tension between the tracing and the rhizomatic. The un-bracketed text is obviously indicative of the dominant account of the Moon landing and the one that would have constituted the mass media’s take on events. The interjections in brackets, however, function as something akin to rhizomatic nodes, re-inserting some of the excluded identities back into the dominant discourse and, in the process, forcing the reader to think about and acknowledge

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>64</sup> Quin, p. 127.

the illusory inclusiveness of the rhetoric surrounding the event. Indeed, the reinsertion of these excluded identities provides a clear example of the way in which Deleuze and Guattari argue that one must ‘Plug the tracings back into the map, connect the roots or trees back up with a rhizome’ in order to subvert and challenge the arboreal logic of dominant, ‘rational’ narratives.<sup>65</sup>

Unfortunately, however, despite the narrator’s increasing attempts to challenge and escape the narratives and logic of the mass media, *Tripticks* denouement suggests that any success in this regard may ultimately be impossible. In the final image of the text the reader thus finds the narrator cowering in a church with a ‘desperate need to break out into a stream of verbal images’.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, despite this desperate need, when the narrator does attempt such a course of action – attempting to repudiate the discourses of the mass media and actively attempting to recover his own voice – he instead finds that he is simply unable to express himself in his own terms: ‘I opened my mouth, but no words. Only the words of others I saw, like ads, texts, psalms, from those who had attempted to persuade me into their systems. A power I did not want to possess. The inquisition’.<sup>67</sup> *Tripticks*’s narrator thus finds that he is unable to extricate himself from the colonising discourses of the mass media and the allied discourses of consumer capitalism. Consequently, *Tripticks* seems ultimately pessimistic about the individuals ability to operate rhizomatically in a world suffused with mass media tracings; indeed, as Morley argues: ‘Against its consumer culture mediascape, Quin’s last novel evokes the spectre of a terrifying new order of discourse in which the speaking/writing-subject is enmeshed and silenced without hope of escape. A grim edict on the future of ‘self-expression’ in contemporary culture’. In *Tripticks* the mass media thus practices a form of colonisation, over-coding individual experience with its pre-constructed

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<sup>65</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p.104.

<sup>66</sup> Quin, pp. 191-192.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

discourses and simply permitting the individual to choose between them. Indeed, as Quin's narrator himself remarks in a moment of lucidity, the world of modern mass media communications is one in which he is confronted with 'An unprecedented freedom, but a freedom to only switch TV channels: AC/DC'.<sup>68</sup> As far as the manner in which the text related to the tension between the rhizomatic map and the arboreal tracing, the conclusion of *Tripticks* narrative thus seems to illustrate Deleuze and Guattari's claims that once the map has been transformed into the tracing, real communicational possibilities are totally curtailed, resulting in a world where: 'You will be allowed to live and speak, but only after every outlet has been obstructed'.<sup>69</sup>

While *Tripticks* narrator is ultimately overwhelmed by the tracing like discourses of the mass media – which seem at every point to overthrow a more cartographic and essentially experiential approach – this pessimism is counter-balanced by the rhizomatic formal structure of the text. As Evenson and Howard note, it is in Quin's manipulation and juxtaposition of a variety of different forms, tropes and modes of discourse that gives *Tripticks* much of its power:

there's something exhilarating about Quin's use and manipulation of the barrage – she does manage to make it do something, to comment ironically back on the capitalist world, and she herself invites the reader to step into the flux himself, to get lost in it.<sup>70</sup>

In this sense, by manipulating the many discourses of consumer culture and the mass media and by highlighting the totalising element of these discourses, *Tripticks* does manage to subvert the power of the tracings stranglehold on the terms and parameters of language and expression.

Similarly, at numerous points in *Tripticks*, particularly those passages that focus on physical sensation, the rhizomatic formal qualities of the text seem to dovetail with the

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>69</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p. 104.

<sup>70</sup> Evenson and Howard, p. 71.

narrator's experience of the world. In such situations, the tracings of mass media discourse seem to evaporate and the narrator's own experiential engagement with 'reality' comes to the fore. A particularly striking example of this is apparent in the narrator's description of (and active participation in) an episode of group sex:

A fluid dance, and all our limbs flowing into, out, through, until I had no idea whose hands breast, leg I touched, or was touched by. Time seemed no longer time of real life, but a hugely amplified present. When fantasy has the weight of fact; and fact has the potential of fantasy. The experience existed in its own context, on its own terms. A certain rhythm, a nervous montage. Trips not on established trails.<sup>71</sup>

In this description, it seems all the aspects of the rhizome laid out by Deleuze and Guattari are expressed. The demarcation between interiority and exteriority disappears as the participants blend into each other. Fantasy and fact become inverted and indistinguishable, while heterogeneous bodies are constantly reconnected and reconfigured according to principles of asignifying rupture. Furthermore, in the narrator's description of a trip that deviates from 'established trails', the image of the map is evoked and the opening-up of experiential visits that transcend the limited possibilities afforded by the dominant narratives of mass media discourses.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, if as Deleuze and Guattari suggest that: 'What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real', this scene invokes the notion of the rhizomatic map because no tracing or colonising discourse from the mass media can be seen to have interceded, or over-coded, the narrator's experience of the event.<sup>73</sup> It thus seems that in *Tripticks* it is the experiential aspects of the physical body, removed from scenes and situations that have been fixed and commodified by consumerism and mass media, through which any true freedom for the self might lie.

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<sup>71</sup> Quin, p. 64.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>73</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p. 102.

In this essay I have attempted to explicate the manner in which J.G Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* and Ann Quin's *Tripticks* engage with the communicational mass media explosion that took place in the sixties. As I have argued, *The Atrocity Exhibition* ironizes attempts to over-code and explain the inter-relationship between the human psyche, the greater social unconscious and the mass media by juxtaposing rhizomatic and tracing-like accounts of reality. The text thus presents the reader with a fragmentary narrative featuring a central character (the 'T' character) whose experience of reality is fundamentally rhizomatic, and then contrasts this with the voice of character embodying arborescent scientific discourse (Dr Nathan) who attempts to provide rational explanations for the central 'T' character's actions. In addition to this, the annotated version of the novel then adds a commentary from the author which, while at face appears to function as a tracing that will help 'explain' the text, ultimately subverts its stated aim in order to further throw into question any stable or singular explanation of the imagery and events which are presented to the reader.

In contrast to Ballard's text, *Tripticks* appears to be more explicitly pessimistic about the individual's ability to navigate the mass media landscape. In *Quin's* novel, the central character is constantly being torn between the discourse of mass media tracings and his own desire for a more rhizomatic and experiential relationship with 'reality'. *Tripticks* juxtaposes these tensions between the rhizomatic and the arboreal throughout its entire length before ultimately seeming to indicate that the narrator will be subsumed in the discourse of the mass media. In this sense, Quin's text depicts the barrage of mass media discourses as arboreal tracings which fix and unify the individual's experience of the world and, in the process, close down more rhizomatic and free-flowing possibilities.

In the final analysis then, both *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Tripticks* need to be understood as deploying fragmentary and experimental forms in order to try to explore the potentialities for existence available following the mediatization of 'reality' in the sixties. In

the process both texts echo numerous qualities that Deleuze and Guattari locate in their notion of the rhizomatic map and juxtapose these with the dominant and over-bearing, tracing-like narratives of the mass media. In doing so, both novels present the reader with characters who are desperately attempting to forge their own experiential maps and, in the process, raise important questions regarding the manner in which it is possible for the individual to freely function in an ever-increasingly mediated 'reality'.

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