



Beware the Ides of Coupland: Douglas Coupland's (Oh, So Very Canadian) Perspective on the Future and What it Means to Us

By Marilyn Boyle-Taylor

Douglas Coupland, a prolific author/artist/lecturer and now prognosticator, is in the forefront of the arts movement in both Canada and the US. His works, starting with his breakout novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, have consistently worked as a bellwether of current perspectives and values, both noting our cultural milestones and influencing future trends. In books, such as *Microserfs* and *JPod*, he sensitively involves the reader in the world of the technologically wired, showing the paradox of the resultant isolation and alternative community that evolves within the computer industry. Other works, such as *A Souvenir of Canada*, complete as an installation, documentary, and book, and his further installation of Terry Fox, display the keenness with which he filters his North American experience, and in particular, his roots as a Canadian with specific values and artifacts.

Each novel, artwork, or article shows a different side of Coupland, explores new topics, yet reiterates his belief in the randomness of behaviour, or at least humanity's inability to control our excesses. Nonetheless, he consistently leaves the reader with a paradoxical sense of hope that there is a future, perhaps even one that is superior to what we dream.

Beware the Ides of Coupland is a look at his current work and his 2010 CBC Massey Lecture series, which he presents as a "novel in five hours" about the future. Linking this to his previous apocalyptic theme, presented by Coupland in *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *JPod*, he gives us cultural clues that inform our present day sociological perspective.

I must start this discussion with an apologia. Aside from the fact that the title literally makes no sense, it was spawned simply by an article in the *Globe & Mail*, accompanied by an illustration by David Woodside, extolling us to "Beware", showing Coupland's eye upon us. In fact, as Douglas Coupland recently said in an interview with George Stroumboulopoulos on CBC, he is trying to be an optimist, not a pessimist; as he says, "[t]he world's such an interesting place. How could you not say, 'wow, what's next?'"- and by my saying, "Beware the Ides of Coupland", I am casting his predictions in a negative light, albeit, a rather playful light. This playfulness, I hope, is what will save me in his eyes, for, as my reader is well aware, playfulness is the very key to Coupland and his vision of the world. His recent prognostications, some of which have already begun to unfold in our world, spring out of that vision, and even though they might sound like "doom and gloom" on the surface, if taken in the spirit with which they are given, project that Canadian cultural perspective of skeptical observation and the very bounce of joyful life.

Coupland is a fascinating figure to study, as he is multidimensional in his outlook and open to new media. Whether he is writing new works, or

sculpting theme parks and installations, or designing a new line of clothing for Roots, he brings a child-like sense of curiosity to the project, an attempt to envision it in new ways and to reflect the culture of our times.

So it was with his latest project, as he was approached to present the Massey Lecture Series for 2010. Instead of telling us what he thought, he showed us by writing and then reading a novel in five hours called *Player One: What Is to Become of Us*. The constraint was five hours. The ideas were immense. He was to pull together the “new ways of interpreting the self,” distilling our interpretations of self as reconfigured through patterns of electronic communications. He claimed “[he’d] been writing about it and thinking about it unwittingly for two decades and now it’s time to name the beast” (Barber, 2009). This naming he sees as intrinsically Canadian; he looks to our recent past and cites that “the ways of looking at the new world [created by the media] and making it intelligible were coming out of Toronto” (Barber, 2009). He references Marshall McLuhan, Harold Innis, Northrop Frye, and Glenn Gould (yes, more than just a piano player) as major intellectual figures coming out of the freedom Canada provides, as he puts it, “to steer the boat wherever we want” with “a clarity and an unobstructedness of the present and near future” that he doesn’t see in the States. Not encumbered by the alienation, “loneliness and craziness and horror” he sees in the US psyche, he feels Canadians are still able to find patterns within the “bombardment of information” presented to them. Coupland says, our thinkers are “connecting the dots or whatever -by refusing to be overwhelmed by it” (Barber, 2009).

What Coupland has done in the novel *Player One* is exactly that - named the beast, the cause of what he sees as our increasingly fragmented, speeded up lives. He has taken his thesis, originally presented in *Girlfriend in a Coma* and rejigged it twelve years later for our contemporary times.

A brief recap of *Girlfriend* finds two teens in 1976, having idyllic sex on the top of a ski hill; the girl, Karen, then falls into a coma for 17 years. During this time, her boyfriend, Richard, has kept vigil by her side, as she’s borne his child while “asleep”. She finally wakes and then the apocalyptic happens. As she regains the use of her atrophied limbs and learns the ways of the end of the century, everyone in the whole world falls asleep, except for her five friends and daughter. In the end, Karen sacrifices herself by returning to the coma with her baby granddaughter. TaDa! Everyone wakes up. Catastrophe over. Richard’s job now is to become the testifier, the bell ringer, the spreader of the word for the rest of his life. He says, “We’ll be begging passersby to see the need to question and question and question and never stop questioning until the world stops spinning. We’ll be adults who smash the tired, exhausted system. We’ll crawl and chew and dig our way into a radical new world. We will change minds and souls from stone and plastic into linen and gold...” (*Girlfriend* 284) For Richard, we can read Coupland. He is naming the beast and in that naming is, not exactly hope, but at least a curiosity and acceptance of “What’s next?”

In *Player One*, Coupland repeats this theme, although varying the form. *Girlfriend* is constructed like a B-sci-fi movie script, whereas *Player One* reads more as a TV dramedy in five parts. Some character names

reoccur - Karen has morphed from a cheerleader into a soccer mom, and Rick, who is a reformed drinker like Richard, is a bartender in the lounge. Karen begins the action, having travelled to Toronto to meet her online suitor in hope of a relationship, but slowly loses her place as focal point to the main character of Rachel, an autistic young woman who is trying to be "normal". There are other characters rounding out the players to five as there are in *Girlfriend*. The apocalyptic happens - with violence this time. The price of oil skyrockets, explosions give off chemical dust, and the world is dying. The characters barricade themselves in the lounge to keep out chemicals and looters. There is a sniper on the roof, calmly killing anyone he can. Rick and Rachel have sex, and she knows she's pregnant. Rick claims, "Right now is the end of some aspect of my life, but it's also a beginning - the beginning of some unknown secret that will reveal itself to me soon" (103). Rick and Rachel fall in love; Luke and Karen fall in love. They capture the sniper. The sniper shoots Rachel. She dies. He dies of a peanut allergy (don't ask!), then Rachel comes back to life. As she returns to life, she says with the newfound clarity of the dead, and echoing Richard in *Girlfriend*, "Here's to all of us reaching out our hands to other people everywhere, reaching out to pull them from the icebergs on which they stand frozen, to pull them through the burning hoops of fire that frighten them, to help them climb over the brick walls that block their paths. Let us reach out to shock and captivate people into new ways of thinking" (214).

Now more than ever, we have to look at the cultural ramifications of our literary figures, our authors, and their expression of our social standards and transgressions. They are also an influence on the formation of aesthetic and ethical choices that we as a society make. They are both a reflection and an inflection, a complex interweaving, not a binary, of our social needs and desires. In this major area, we see Coupland in his apocalyptic visions claiming a role as prophet, expressing cultural anxiety and the fractured sensibility of our postmodern age. Veronica Hollinger claims that *Girlfriend in a Coma* "self-consciously recalls science fiction's Golden Age apocalypticism" (160) Coupland situates his apocalypse in the present time, refusing to project a futuristic scenario on the reader, forcing a confrontation of earthly devastation within the present day limitations and options for solutions, rather than projections of plateaus, matrixes, or innovations that either can save the day or further reduce the world to rubble. He sees the environmental aspects of the apocalypse as a reduction to ash, to a powerless landscape. There is grayness to this new world, the aftermath of the end. The removal of manmade light sets the world back in greater dependence upon natural cycles of moon, sun, and seasons. This natural cycle is itself upset, and we see characters in both tales struggling to function in a "normal" fashion with not only the manmade parameters extinguished, but also the physical aspects of the weather and time mutated and left as twisted indicators of new apocalyptic instability.

As Marlene Goldman says in *Rewriting Apocalypse in Canadian Fiction*, "The basic elements of the apocalyptic narrative include a transformative catastrophe and a subsequent revelation of ultimate truth. But the apocalypse frequently blurs the boundary between art and life, a tendency that provokes a consideration of the broader social and historical context" (4). Seen in this light, we must examine Coupland for the milieu both in which he works and the milieu that he represents. The apocalypse can be seen to have been born out of the present day life style -- a time

where as Coupland says “we have crossed the line” (*Girlfriend* 268). Habits of contemporary life created the devastation of today.

Frederick J. Hoffman, when referring to the poetry of the Apocalypse (a movement in post-war 1940's) states that “one discovers a mood of personal resignation to the brutality of modern life, combined with a skepticism regarding any confident prophets of world order”(159). We can see this in writings of Coupland who does not expect world order but needs his protagonists to call attention or to witness the fact that there is none. Marlene Goldman would proscribe this to “the equally despairing images of failed apocalypses” in Canadian fiction, in which she sees “the absence of an earthly paradise, and the violence unleashed on the non-elect” (9). She claims that “Canadian authors introduce particular twists to the familiar myth of the end by challenging rather than embracing apocalypse's key features, specifically, the purgation of the non-elect and the violent destruction of the earthly world in preparation for the creation of a divine one” (6), and Frank Kermode in “Waiting For the End” says that it is “potentially dangerous to dismiss consideration of the degree to which the ideas and the literature we value and some of the assumptions we ordinarily do not question are impregnated by an apocalypticism...”(255).

In compliance with prevailing Canadian views of apocalypse, Coupland's apocalypse, though still violent, is a gentle purge that can be reversed through the assimilation of a victim (Karen) or a reentry into the New Normal. After this realignment or rather reassessment of reality, Coupland's characters can go forth into the chaos of the new world and function. For Coupland, one continues to testify to the fact that there should be a “core”, a “diamond”, a “soul”; for him, this is a “peephole” into the “profound,” that message being how “strange it is to be alive” (Solomon F8). He claims, this idea “makes him do things,” such as create novels and works of art.

Though firmly placed in an post-cataclysmic present , Coupland uses nostalgia that is steeped in signifiers from his formative era. Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* says “we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach” (1960) We see this played out in both works, as Coupland situates the beginning of *Girlfriend* in the 1970's, where it all begins “to go wrong”. He looks with nostalgia at this time of his childhood as a past of hope, a construct of idealized ease. He sees Karen as possessing the supposed innocence of that time.

[Karen] provided a platform on which people could hope. She provided the idea that some frail essence from a not long-vanished era still existed, that the brutality and extremes of the modern world were not the way the world ought to be - a world of gentle Pacific rains, down-filled jackets, bitter red wine in goatskins, and naïve charms.(*Girlfriend* 76)

These innovations, artifacts of progress, foreground the extent of the apocalypse. Coupland uses these artifacts to idealize a time that was pivotal in cultural evolution. This culture did not live in a vacuum and the

subsequent evolution led to the apocalypse coming true, the “death of time” as Coupland expresses it. He has recently referred to 9/11 as a turning point, where we “entered a magical time, crossed a magical line” and renders this new order in *Player One*, by the anarchy of the characters, in a time where “there are no rules” and “everyone’s everyone” (Stroumbo). Catherine Bush says, through her novels herself an articulate spokesperson for our current milieu, that in this text, Coupland “wants to have his cake and eat it”, by breaking down the narrative into “something new and non-linear, while warning us of the inherent dangers.” She claims, “There is a plea here, even as Coupland, that poignant provocateur, looks forward, for all that’s on the verge of being lost” (Bush, 2010). This plea contains echoes of the romance, one endorsed by Northrop Frye in *The Secular Scripture* (35) as the shaping spirit of our literature, and by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* as the means by which “the popular or mass culture of our time are all syllables and fragments of some single immense story” (105).

Shortly before Coupland was to present *Player One*, he published a compendium of prognostications and an accompanying glossary of newly coined words in the *Globe & Mail*. These are supposed to serve as a guide to the future, a help for us to accept what is and move on, starting with the first rule. “It’s going to get worse. No silver linings and no lemonade. The elevator only goes down. The bright note is that the elevator will, at some point, stop,” and “The future is going to happen no matter what we do. The future will feel even faster than it does now.” These cheerful sayings get us in the mood for a few more specific points, such as “Ikea will become an ever-more-spiritual sanctuary” and “Your dream life will increasingly look like a Google Street View.”(Coupland *Globe*) I do want to focus on one specific saying, however, which relates both to Coupland’s world view as posited in *Girlfriend* and *Player One* and to us as educators. One important prognostication we should think about as educators is the idea of narration as a form of self. Guideline #28 reads “It will become harder to view your life as “a story”. This notion of a storyless self is presented in both novels and is seen as a consequence of the New Normal, a world in which fragmentation and network socializing reign. As Coupland says, “Your life becomes however many friends you have online.”(*Globe* F7) This is contrary to our current notion of linear time and our “self” as the centre of our world. As we know from the writing of Hayden White (*The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*), in our postmodern world, we are aware that narrative, the shaping of information into a beginning, middle, and end is a basic instinct, one that surfaces in all cultures and seems to be one of the things that makes us intrinsically human. We have a drive to create narrative with all we experience - to place event in history - a story - in order to better share or understand it. In reality, this narrative is constantly in revision, changing as new correlations and relationships emerge resulting from the barrage of information in the form of artifacts. This accelerated flux no longer fits into the narrative format. Now the buck must stop here. To explain these concepts, Coupland has coined the phrase “Narrative Drive: The belief that a life without a story is a life not worth living - quite common, and ironically accompanied by the fact that most people cannot ascribe a story to their lives,” and “Denarration: The process whereby one’s life stops feeling like a story.”(*Globe* F7) To understand our students then, we must understand the social network, and see reality as intermeshed points rather than a

linear demarcation. This is how our students view the world; it's not bad, nor good, just different. Douglas Coupland, by pointing out some of these new "truths", is helping us "name the beast" and carry on asking "wow, what's next?" (Stroumbo)

To conclude, in the words of Rachel, our Player One, "I have this funny feeling that I wouldn't have missed earth for anything, so I must be getting something out of the experience. I hope you do, too." (*Player* 214.)

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