Ontological Instability and Nonhuman Presence in Twenty-First-Century New York Fiction

Lieven Ameel
Tampere University

ABSTRACT: This article explores the appearance, in Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* and Ben Lerner's *10:04*, of ontological instability and disturbing nonhuman presences in urban space. Developing the work of Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction*, ontological instability is understood here as shifts in what is deemed as real or unreal in the storyworld, and the resulting uncertainty (for characters as well as for readers) as to the stable ontological attributes of the narrated world. Such shifts feed into broader apocalyptic undercurrents in Lethem's and Lerner's novels. They are also important for an understanding of how early twenty-first-century fictional texts come to grips with complex environmental threats, and have relevance for the relationship between human vision, consciousness, and the environment. In *Chronic City* and *10:04*, I will argue, a sense of unsettling nonhuman presence is realized in continuous references to menacing weather conditions and occurrences that threaten the ontological stability of the narrated storyworld.

> *"closing in dream the somnolent city. . ."*
>
> (*Chronic City*)

This article explores the appearance, in two contemporary New York novels, of ontological instability. Ontological instability is understood here as shifts in what is deemed as real or unreal in the storyworld, and the resulting uncertainty (for characters as well as for readers) as to the stable ontological attributes of the narrated world. Such shifts are also important for an understanding of how fictional texts come to grips with complex environmental threats, and have relevance for the relationship between human vision, consciousness, and the environment. And they feed into broader apocalyptic undercurrents in the novels discussed here, Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* (2009) and Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014), novels that thematize palimpsestic layers of meaning in urban space, and that are informed by an interest in the impact of imagined futures on the present. In these fictional texts, I argue, ontological instability is realized in relation to unsettling nonhuman presences: natural patterns, unseasonal weather conditions, and strange occurrences in the urban environment that threaten the stability of the narrated storyworld. The uncertainty, in these novels, as to what can be considered real and what unreal, and the interaction between human character and nonhuman presences cannot be meaningfully unpacked with the help of dualistic approaches (pitting culture against nature, inner against outer, mind against material, or fantastic against hallucinatory), but rather, by approaches that allow for an integration of inner and outer. Such an approach is attempted here by drawing on Gilles Deleuze's concept of the *fold*.

In terms of methodological framework and theoretical approaches, my work explores the appearance of ontological instability in narration from the perspective of possible world theory (Ryan, "Impossible Worlds") and Gilles Deleuze's concept (in his work on Leibniz) of the *fold* (Deleuze). A key question is how nonhuman presences in the urban environment, and the (visionary) perception of such occurrences, are bound up with ontological instability of the described storyworlds. I argue that these menacing appearances are not only (or not primarily) bound up with spatial coordinates, but that they also tend to point to possible futures. One of the challenges of literary fiction in the current century is to render the

impact of uncertain futures within the formal confines of the novel, especially in view of the planetary scale and geological temporalities of anthropogenic climate change (see Heise). The description of disturbing nonhuman presences in the novels under discussion can be seen as one particular narrative strategy to render the position of human experience in a time of radical environmental upheaval. While there is a sense that disturbing occurrences in the storyworlds of both texts function on radically different scales than the human protagonists whose sense of ontological certainty is threatened by them, the way in which instability is narratively rendered in these novels ultimately gestures toward a profound sense of entanglement between language and planetary materialities, between storyworlds and the referential world.

The novels discussed here were chosen because they reflect in complementary ways on several important aspects of contemporary uncertain ontologies: the importance of visual perspectives; the impact of uncertain futures; and the possibilities of literary fiction to productively undermine ontological determinacy by narrative strategies such as literalization of metaphor, metalepsis, and typographical or multimedia experimentation.

Ontological Instability and the Fold

My examination of ontological instability is profoundly informed by Brian McHale's (1987) *Postmodern Fiction*, which sees postmodern literary fiction as primarily concerned with ontological questions (as opposed to epistemological questions in modernist literature), with ontological instability being one of the key issues at stake in postmodern literature. What is this world we find ourselves in? For readers of postmodern fiction, this constitutes a key question—often with playful undertones. In grappling with this question, and in examining the relationship between a fictional storyworld and the actual world, literary scholars have tended to utilize a range of metaphors: storyworld itself is such a metaphor, meant to describe what takes place when a reader conceptualizes the ontological construct evoked by a literary text. Other such metaphors are the "mirror" of mimesis that literature is supposed to hold up to the real world; the concept of a fictional world as a separate "heterocosm" (McHale), and, more generally, possible worlds theory (Ryan, *Possible Worlds*). In Ryan's possible worlds-based model of narrative, such metaphors are used not only to describe the relationship between the "real" world and an "imagined," textual actual world, but also that between different worlds (textual actual worlds, dream worlds, fear worlds) within the diegesis.

I propose here a different metaphorical approach to the relationships between different possible worlds (or "subworlds," see Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 4) within contemporary literary fiction, and their relationship to the actual world: that of the *fold*, drawing on Gilles Deleuze's reading of Leibniz (Deleuze 1988; 1993). The possibilities for applying the concept of the fold to narrative storyworlds in postmodern literature are noted by Bertrand Westphal in *Geocriticism* (2011). Considering multiple worlds in postmodern literature, Westphal argues that "the representation of the referential world . . . in fiction engages in a process of interactivity between instances of heterogeneous nature brought together in the same world through an interface . . . [which] is also the means of connection between the elements of this world" (Westphal 99). He adds in passing that "this approach is something like the concept of the *fold*, developed by Leibniz in his theory of monads, and taken up by Deleuze in his book on Leibniz" (99). I argue that the concept of the fold presents a particularly helpful metaphorization to account for ontologically problematic forms of interactions, overlaps, or distortions between different possible or actualized worlds in the texts discussed here. Not only does the fold appear as a useful concept for describing ontologically unstable worlds, it may also shed light on the way in which many of these texts are fundamentally involved in problematizing the status of the world(s) in which they take place, and a concept useful also for questioning the chiasmus between inner and outer layers, between what is represented and what represents (cf. McHale 26–27;

Westphal 88). Moreover, the fold also enables a way of approaching the interaction between the human protagonist and the nonhuman environment in the storyworld, an interaction, in the novels under discussion, which defies ready hierarchical relationships.

In Deleuze's book *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, the fold is a way of describing worlds that are not merely interconnected but fundamentally acting on the same plane. Conceptualizing the world in terms of the fold is to think of a fabric that, by way of the infinitely complex manners in which it is folded, connects everything material and immaterial. For Deleuze, the fold is something that examines spatial attributes—Deleuze repeatedly returns to structural elements of baroque architecture and sculpture—in a way that shows that what is thought to be outward is part of the inner, and vice versa. The whole project is, for Deleuze, as it was for Leibniz, an examination of the soul and its relation to the body, which is described in the metaphor of the spatial interior and exterior:

> The infinite fold separates, or passes between matter and the soul, the facade and the sealed room, the interior and the exterior. For the line of inflection is a virtuality ceaselessly differentiating itself: actualized in the soul it is realized in its own way in matter. (Deleuze 242)

The concept of the fold, as a vital connection between inner and outer, "between matter and the soul," provides a fruitful supplement to the conceptual framework used for describing narrative worlds and the way such worlds interrelate with each other and with the actual world. Such relationships have long tended to be examined in terms of separations. Drawing on Benjamin Hrushovski, Brian McHale points out that "all literary texts involve a 'double-decker' structure of reference. Literary texts project at least one internal field of reference, a universe or semantic continuum . . . constructed *in* and *by* the text itself. In addition, they inevitably refer *outside* their internal field to an external field of reference: the objective world, the body of historical fact or scientific theory" (McHale 28–29). McHale draws attention to the instances in which such separations are disturbed, positing approaches such as Roman Ingarden's metaphors "iridescence" or "opalescence," and the "flickering effect" (Ingarden; McHale 32). Such metaphors, with their frame of reference of light effects and reflections, I believe, do not go far enough in problematizing more traditional notions of separation between actual and textual actual world, or between textual actual and textual possible worlds. The fold enables a metaphorization that affords a view of simultaneously existing storyworlds that blend with each other almost imperceptibly. The fold may also be helpful in conceptualizing relationships between diegetic worlds and the actual world, and in describing how a literary world unfolds in the process of reading—a process that, before the age of the codex, was literally a process of unfolding (see also Caracciolo). The concept of the fold may be applied, of course, to earlier texts, but in the context of twenty-first-century literary fiction, it has a particular significance, teasing out contemporary fiction's renewed concerns with the actual world and its urgent challenges, and what Huber has called contemporary fiction's "reconstructive" tendency; the way in which it "attempts to reconstruct, (re-)connect, communicate and engage" (Huber 24; see Polvinen in this issue).

Two Temporalities Collapsed into a Single Image

In Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014), the reader encounters strange omens, unseasonable weather, and the visionary capacities of an aestheticizing narrator walking New York—a city that appears as both a recognizable and yet a defamiliarized version of its referential self. "[U]nseasonable warmth" is noted in the first sentence (3), and mentions of the warming planet (7–8) and the weather's unseasonability are repeated throughout the novel (32, 107). To the narrator, a keen walker and aestheticizing figure, the appearance of an out-of-place heat (in the following passage rewritten in a third-person novel-within-the-novel), is reminiscent of a photographic visual effect:

> The unusual heat felt summery, but the light was distinctly autumnal, and the confusion of seasons was reflected in the clothing around them . . . It reminded him of a doubly exposed photograph or a matting effect in film: two temporalities collapsed into a single image. (Lerner 63)

In *10:04*, unusual climatological circumstances take center stage. But the extraordinary experience is not described as new conditions superseding earlier ones, but, with an image from photography, as the coexistence of two different temporalities—"two temporalities collapsed into a single image."[1]

Centered on the experience of Hurricanes Sandy and Irene, the plot of *10:04* deals with how the city and its inhabitants cope with the threat and then impact of life-threatening storms. But the issue of changing, threatening weather conditions, and the intimation of out-of-place presences in the urban space also points to the overlapping folds of simultaneously present storyworlds; the blurring or fading of a world as we know it. The tangible presence of possible futures and different pasts is described as encroaching on the ontological stability of the present. *10:04* takes a cue from the 1985 movie *Back to the Future*, in which the protagonist Marty, traveling in time, disturbs the meeting between his own father and mother, thus potentially erasing his present self (9–10, 52). The title *10:04* is a reference to the moment when lightning strikes the clock tower in the movie, enabling Marty to return to his own time. The playful reference is reenacted on the mundane level of the protagonist's personal life: while waiting with his close friend Alex for a once-in-a-generation storm to strike New York, the two have a moment of intimacy in Alex's apartment. But when the storm, whose anticipation triggered their intimacy, does not materialize, their experience feels to have passed into the unreal:

> . . . it was as though the physical intimacy with Alex, just like the sociability with strangers or the aura around objects, wasn't just over, but retrospectively erased. Because those moments had been enabled by a future that had never arrived, they could not be remembered from this future that, at and as the present, had obtained; they'd faded from the photograph. (24)

While the experience is personal and mundane, the consequences of the unrealized natural occurrence are felt within the storyworld beyond the personal sphere, affecting also the memory of the communal experience ("the sociability with strangers") in expectation of the storm, as well as the "aura around objects." The ontological status of the world is impacted by the way the future is imagined, and when such imagined futures are transformed, so are the characteristics of the present. *10:04* constantly plays on the effect, not only of natural occurrences and presences, but also on the effect of absences. The present is determined by how past and future layers of meaning—or their absence—are narratively folded into the present. The result is the experience, in the novel, of a lived present with distinctly unstable and unreal characteristics.

The unseasonable weather strongly feeds into broader world-threatening strands of the novel. The protagonist lives in anticipation of apocalypse, and the sense of impending doom in the novel is continuously reinforced by the protagonist's reading of incongruous presences, such as the "ominous medium" of "tropical humidity that wasn't native to New York" (18). He is described as someone who imagines "the global apocalyptically" (14); as taking mundane decisions in his life "because . . . the city would soon be underwater" (153), and imagining a "not-so-distant future where New York was largely submerged" (132). This imagined disastrous future strongly informs his readings of the present, as when he imagines that the water damage to paintings is the result of the coming catastrophic flood (132).

All this is bound up with the protagonist's distorted or hypersensitive senses, especially his vision. Early in the novel, with the city bracing for the coming storm, the protagonist is struck by how things have taken on a new "radiance," only to realize "the alteration was most likely in my vision" (18). The foregrounding

of vision is a reminder that the instability of the storyworld is located in the narrator, whose senses and cognitive capacities are presented as idiosyncratic and untrustworthy. In the opening pages, he intuits within himself "an alien intelligence . . . and affects that did not, properly speaking, belong to me" (3)—a possible reference to the residue of the baby octopus he eats alive just moments before (see also De Bruyn 963). The reader learns to further distrust the narrator when it becomes clear that he has a heart condition that affects his cognitive capacities. Fearing an upcoming medical test, he notices he is affected by psychosomatic "[h]eadaches, disordered speech, weakness, visual disturbances, nausea, numbness, paralysis . . . The momentary sense of having traveled back in time" (74). The awareness of unseasonable weather, too, could be attributed to a confusion of the senses, as when the narrator realizes the sensation of a "false spring . . . might have been a mild olfactory hallucination triggered by memory—or, I found myself thinking, a brain tumor . . ." (108). The simultaneous coexistence of remainders of earlier times, or forebodings of future times in the present, is thus suggested to emanate from the narrator's disturbed consciousness and senses. The "doubly exposed photograph," in which "two temporalities [are] collapsed into a single image" (63) may possibly not exist other than in the imagination (or the delusion) of the onlooker.

But within the storyworld, this collapse of different images and realities is real enough, and the effect is a sense of continuation of consiousness between the protagonist and the surrounding environment, all constituted on the same plane in the manner of Deleuze's fold. In describing the relationship between consciousness and the threatening urban environment as an intertwinement, not a causal linkage, Ben Lerner inscribes himself in a recent literary paradigm that Heather Houser has described as "ecosickness." Ecosickness manifests itself in literature in which "humans and the more-than-human world do not only interact but, more importantly, are coconstitutive. This literature shows the conceptual and material dissolutions of the body-environment boundary through sickness and thus alters environmental perception and politics" (3). In *10:04*, the nausea and sensory disturbances of the protagonist are coeval (a word with special resonance for Lerner and *10:04* in particular; Lerner 66–67, 71) with environmental disturbances in a way that resonates with past and future events and defies clear linear or causal relationships. While this impression of resonating with the environment is clearly informed by somatic and psychosomatic disturbances in the protagonist, there is also a sense of the narrator as a privileged visionary; the idea that it is exactly his condition and the "visual disturbance" he experiences that help him to feel with his environment. And while a reading of the narrator of *10:04* as suffering from ecosickness can be understood metaphorically, there is also the possibility of a more literal reading, with the explicit suggestion in the novel that the narrator is infected by the natural consciousness of the baby octopus he swallows in the opening page of the novel, and this giving rise to his expanded consciousness and awareness of his environment.

In the notion of the groundbreaking sociologist Robert Park, the city is a "mosaic of little worlds that touch but do not interpenetrate" (608). Similarly, Timothy Morton, when reflecting on the fragile and contingent nature of cities in *Dark Ecology*, states that "[p]laces contain multitudes" (12). It is in the visionary, aestheticizing consciousness of a narrator such as Lerner's that these worlds can for a moment coexist, together with a variety of past and future presences—including that of the reader. Walking in the shadow of the "felt absence of the twin towers" (237) and in the shadow of another "historic storm that had failed to arrive" (231), Lerner's narrator enables a range of worlds to coexist for a brief moment, and draws a comparison with the New York City cabs which, for this short crisis moment, accept multiple fares, "fares from multiple worlds" (237).

The presence of temporally uncoupled layers of meaning also draws on an aestheticizing and intertextual play on other literary cities. This becomes explicitly spelled out in one of the culminating scenes of the novel, when Ben and Alex walk through Lower Manhattan and across Brooklyn Bridge, with the narrator

imagining "all of us were dead, flowing over London Bridge" (239). The reference to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, with its reverberations of Dante's *Divina Commedia* (in a passage already heavily, and explicitly, indebted to Walt Whitman's poetry), opens up the text to a complex interplay of meanings, driven by intertextual references activated in the reader, and folding into the narrator's collapse of past and futures presences in the singular moment. *10:04* has also been read in terms of its continuation of a realist mode (De Bruyn), but references such as these gestures, rather, to a continuation of the aestheticizing and associative mode of high modernism, in which the narrator saw in the everyday, transitory city the signs of rich symbolic meanings. The result is an "unreal city"—but with repercussion that are different from Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* (the original reference of "unreal city") or Eliot's *The Waste Land*. In *10:04*, the narrator is not merely invoking a literary trope when he describes how he feels his "senses and the city vibrating at one frequency" (28), but he is also hinting at the planetary dimension of such correspondence, in the references to the affinity between narrator and octopus (3); in his hypersensitive awareness "that water surrounded the city, and that the water moved" (28), and the intuition of planetary warming (7).

More radically, it is not only potential futures and past readings of other cities that are folded within the present storyworld, but also the physical world of the reader. Following the reference to London Bridge, the narrator continues the description of the communal spectacle of people gathered on Brooklyn Bridge in the dark, describing how "[t]he fireworks celebrating the completion of the bridge exploded above us in 1883, spidering out across the page" (239). The image of a page with fireworks spidering out across it can be considered as a metaphor for the empty sky, but (given autofictional and metaleptic instances elsewhere throughout the novel), a more convincing reading would be to interpret "the page" as a reference to the material page within the actual book, the materiality of which the reader is invited to briefly contemplate. For a passing moment, the canvas of the night sky and the page of the book held by the reader coexist, in a metaleptic operation that is also at work in use of photographs on the page and in the repeated address to the reader with a compelling *you* (193, 240; see also Gibbons). The way the novel employs photographs also suggest the possibility of coeval coexistence of the visual perspectives of reader and narrator: as Lerner points out in an interview, the photographs "are ways of trying to think about looking together, where the looking in the narrative, and the looking of the reader, can become briefly coeval or correspond" (Langley). Here the novel attains, by folding multiple planes simultaneously, what the baroque *fold* had endeavored: to break down the boundaries between the worlds of spectator and artwork, while simultaneously giving the onlooker a glimpse of how the artwork relates to a cosmic (or, in Lerner's case, planetary) scale.[2]

Ellipses, Hiccups, and Pocket Universes

The New York City of Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* (2009) is clearly *not* to be mistaken for the referential New York in the early twenty-first century. To begin with, the basic information the reader receives does not match with the real-world city on the East Coast of the United States: the mayor is called Jules Arnheim; the twin towers are still standing, and Russia and the United States are allied in a space war conflict with China. Moreover, there are a range of nonhuman presences, bordering on the fantastic, that demand the reader's attention: a mysterious "fog" that has settled on Lower Manhattan (13); a giant tiger (itself with unclear ontological status, since it is rumored to be a tunnel digging device on the loose [163]) is slowly destroying the underground (35–36); gigantic chasms are opening up in the city as part of radical conceptual art work. While *10:04* draws heavily on the aestheticizing tendencies of modernist city writing, in which an oversensitive consciousness reads mythical meanings into the everyday and in which ontological uncertainties can occasionally still be attributed to an aestheticizing (and unreliable) narrator, *Chronic City* moves closer to the ontological instability described in Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). If *Chronic City* differs from *10:04* in how it locates ontological

instability more firmly outside of the narrator's consciousness, this is also in part because the reader comes to know New York City through multiple perspectives, and by way of the protagonist's—Chase Insteadman's—friend Perkus Tooth, who acts as Chase's guide to the many hidden and often contradictory layers of the city. The novel begins when Chase meets Perkus, a socially awkward cast-out with a tendency for drawn-out conspiracy theories. In lieu of a plot, the novel presents a series of events that see Chase navigate the labyrinthine city in a journey that increasingly resembles a quest to distinguish the real from the illusory. Perkus's point of view gradually becomes the protagonist's—and thus the reader's "door to my life in the city as I knew it now" (404). The dependence on the perspective of Perkus foregrounds the importance of (erratic) vision for constructing knowledge of the world. He has a lazy, "deviant" eye (16), and a "double and wandering vision" (262). Chase is described as gradually becoming initiated into this mode of seeing, and describes himself as having become "an acolyte to his brand of . . . vision" (262).

Perkus is also beset by conditions described as "ellipsistic," in which time and space appear as ellipses, expanding uncontrollably (26; 45); a "species of blank interval, a nod or fugue in which he was . . . [m]erely between" (3). Throughout the novel, there is a strong suggestion that this disturbing vision enables access to crucial and otherwise inaccessible information: Perkus notes that "[e]llipsis is like a window opening" (27). Intriguingly, Perkus speaks of such visionary information in terms of seeing an animal: the "blot" on his vision during one "ellipsistic" seizure was like "an elephant in my apartment . . . crowding to the edges of the room" (83). Of course, the "elephant in the room" is a figure of speech. But the elephant is here, for Perkus, to be taken almost literally: "I felt like I could stroke its pebbly hide" (83). In this elliptic mode, it is suggested, metaphorical utterances may be taken literally, and the figural becomes accessible as a tangible material reality. Throughout the novel it is asserted—similarly to *10:04*—that a disturbed or impaired vision may enable one to gain access to privileged knowledge. Perkus notes that "[m]ost of his proudest writing . . . was born of some glimpse of ellipsistic knowledge" (26). Crucial features of the environment in *Chronic City* tend to appear at the edges of vision—Mayor Arnheim, the center of power in the city, is described by Chase as "almost impossible to regard directly, like a black hole or a blot on my vision" (280).

The focus on vision and on the importance of glimpses of other worlds lurking at the edge of vision takes on two important aspects. The first one is that of the frame. Perkus Tooth insists that "[t]hat glimpse is intolerable. When your gaze slips beyond the edge of a book or magazine, you notice the ostensible texture of everyday reality" (79).[3] There is the suggestion that the "texture of everyday reality" is hidden just out of sight, or at the edge of sight—a world to be discovered if only we could look more clearly from the corner of the eye. Like the reference to the page in *10:04*, the mentioning of "everyday reality" starting at the edge of a book relates the words on the page to the material texture of the book and its connection with the reader's actual world. But what is seen from the corner of the eye in *Chronic City*'s Manhattan is not a single, coherent world, but multiple spaces folded into spaces, "worlds squirreled inside one another, the chaotic intricacy with which realms interleave, like those lines of television cable and fresh water and steam heat and outgoing sewage and telephone wire and whatever else which cohabit in the same intestinal holes that pavement-demolishing workmen periodically wrench open to the daylight and to our passing, disturbed glances" (8). This observation of spaces enfolded in spaces, "worlds squirreled inside one another" is repeated throughout the novel. Perkus has the capacity to glimpse "bonus dimensions, worlds inside the world" (27). And the super-rich Woodrows' concealed home, a "house within-a-building," has an elaborate entrance that (to the narrator) seems to tell the neighbors that "*your indoors is our outdoors*" (28; italics in the original)—thus announcing, like the baroque fold, "that the inside is nothing more than a fold of the outside" (O'Sullivan 107).

What is hovering at the limits of eyesight is thus not a singular, stable reality, but the existence of numerous worlds. As Oona, Chase's love interest in the novel, imagines: ". . . we're just one of innumerable universes living in parallel" (197), reminding one of Leibniz's theory of monadology, with its multiple worlds, from which the concept of the fold developed in Leibniz's work. The image of "innumerable universes" is no mere metaphor from Oona, but an endeavor to access accurately the ontological status of the world they live in, because Oona and Perkus are considering the odds that they are living in a computer simulation. Perkus's and Oona's considerations of multiple computer simulations are variations on a more mundane theme: that of individual humans as single, self-centered worlds (the novel uses for this the term "demimonde," literally half-world), with limited access to other worlds. Perkus insists that "*no body* . . . really believes in the news from beyond the boundaries of their neighborhood or pocket universe. Manhattan is one of those, you know, a pocket universe" (328; original emphasis). It is a position that enables people to be blind to others' realities, or amnesiac—a position Perkus criticizes Chase for, and which he deems typically American (in a statement that could easily be read as both a reference to the memory of 9/11 and the international repercussions of the subsequent war of terror): "You're like the ultimate amnesiac American, Chase. You never can imagine anything actually happened before you wandered along" (207).

If the emphasis on glimpses of alternative realities, and problems caused by visionary blots, accentuate the inaccessibility of reality, there is also a pull in another direction: if vision is so central to our relation with reality, the reality of the world is perhaps determined by how one sees, rather than the other way round. Did the world exist before some cognitive being "wandered along" and confirmed its existence by perceiving it? This position comes close to *idealism*, a philosophical movement associated among others with Bishop Berkeley, whose thinking in this respect is often summed up in the argument "esse est percipi (aut percipere)"—to be is to be perceived (or perceive) (Downing). It is a position repeatedly hinted at in *Chronic City*. Perkus argues that such an idealist view, in which matter is conceived as not existing unless observed, may be an ontological prerequisite for the world in which he and the other characters live (if it is, indeed, as he and Oona consider, a computer simulation world), because it would, within multiple computer simulations, take too much energy "to make everything exist *whether we look at it or not*" (229; original italics).

Not only are the ontological bearings of the world determined by how one sees, but there are also suggestions that the world functions according to the words coined to describe it. It is a narrative strategy common in postmodern literature, and used to great effect in the work of Thomas Pynchon—"the literalization of a situation initially implied as metaphorical" (Simonetti 57). One example of such literalization is the description in *Chronic City* of "money men . . . slumping through the gray fog" (30), and lower Manhattan under a "cloud bank" (201)—a condition that turns out to be not figurative but literal (and open, of course, to interpretation as allegory for 9/11). Words seem to have power over the world, and this goes most obviously for Chase himself, who turns out to be living a script written by Oona and produced for the entertainment of the city. There's also the suggestion, for example, that the *New York Times* "is getting its material" from a drug dealer's invented marihuana brand names, rather than the more obvious reverse interpretation (187). Such complications between the world and words also invite the reader to reconsider her own world and the extent to which it is constructed according to narrative frames.

The relationship between human observer/narrator and the nonhuman environment (including strange weather, disturbing natural occurrences, animal patterns such as that of eagles) oscillates in *Chronic City* between two positions on how human language and vision interact with the nonhuman world: on the one hand, the idealist conceptualization that the world (in its very ontological existence) is dependent on conscious vision; on the other hand, a much more skeptical idea of reality as a collection of (potentially

infinite) worlds that can be accessed only with difficulty and through compromised senses. It's an oscillation that has antecedents also in nineteenth-century literature's preoccupation with modes of seeing as knowledge and deception (Goulet), in Baudelaire's correspondences, and before that the romantic mode's searching relationship with the environment, which incorporated monist tendencies (see De Man 187–228). *Chronic City* presents a conglomerate of worlds in which nonhuman occurrences (such as the fog in southern Manhattan) affect the senses (vision, smell), and animal patterns force inhabitants out of their homes (a pair of eagles, the tiger). On the other hand, the novel also presents an environment where words used to denote that very world may affect its ontological attributes. When Perkus claims that

> [s]omething happened, Chase, there was   rupture in this city. Since then, time's   been fragmented" (389)

the hiccups in the soliloquy can be seen to correspond to the holes being torn in New York, but raise the question whether there is a causal relationship between the gaps in speech and gaps in space—and in what direction does that relationship move? It is noteworthy that the hiccups are presented as a natural force, since Perkus contracted them from his dog. This much is certain: that the hiccups appear as *real* gaps in the textual matter on the page.

What in both interpretations remains is a sense of radical interconnectedness between the various pocket universes of Manhattan. And similar to Ben in *10:04*, it is the protagonist's privilege to move through these multifarious worlds, to provide a point of connection. In what he calls "another wave of my straddling-universes feeling," Chase feels he is the link between otherwise unconnected worlds (in this specific case, those of Perkus and the conceptual artist Noteless): "Only I had the freedom to dabble in each of their realities and feel the native absurdity of their simultaneous distance and proximity" (229–230). Chase himself is, in his quest for reality, enacting the operations of the fold—moving between "the façade and the closed room, the outside and the inside" (Deleuze 39). Making sense of the numerous worlds to which he is introduced by Perkus is described literally as a folding operation, Chase's "attempt to collate and refold his many crumpled maps of the universe" (404), the result of which is the narration presented in *Chronic City*.

Conclusion

In *10:04* and *Chronic City*, natural patterns, unseasonal weather conditions, and strange occurrences in the urban environment are bound up within a larger frame of reference that emphasizes as well as questions human vision and memory, and that carry intimations of possible world-threatening scenarios. In both novels, apocalyptic strains can be read through the lens of 9/11, as mediations on remembrance, trauma, and endeavors to give past traumatic experiences a meaningful place in the present (see, e.g., O'Gorman and Severs). But there are other things at stake—the emphasis in both novels on strange weather patterns, on experiences of visionary correspondences with the environment, and on the shadow cast by uncertain futures also feeds into narratives of climate change, and into contemporary fiction's renewed interest in establishing urgent material relations with the actual world across materialities of the book and the body.

In *10:04*, the way in which nonhuman presences, as well as past and future temporal layers, are imbued with meaning, can arguably be located in the aestheticizing tendencies of the narrator. But there is also a sense that the visionary narrator is able to feel with the environment, rather than being a sovereign attributor of meaning. The novel can be approached as form of "Ecosickness," a literature in which the human and the nonhuman appear as coconstitutive (Houser). In *Chronic City*, ontological instability is further multiplied, and the world is represented as open to a range of different explanations—moving

from extreme forms of idealism to skepticism concerning the possibility of experiencing anything beyond one's immediate "demimonde" or "pocket universe."

The overlap between various (possible mutually exclusive) storyworlds and temporal layers in these novels—although realized in different degrees and by using different narrative strategies—cannot be meaningfully unpacked by looking at the narrated ontological instability in terms of worlds "flickering" (Ingard), or as "Swiss Cheese," in which the "irrational is contained in delimited areas that pierce the texture of the fictional world" (Ryan, "Impossible Worlds" 377), or by positing heterotopian zones (McHale 43 ff.)[4]. Rather, it proceeds by way of folds, similar to paper or cloth folding and unfolding: temporal layers superimposed like "a doubly exposed photograph" in *10:04*; worlds "squirreled inside one another" in *Chronic City*, with the narrator left to "collate and refold" the various maps.

Human consciousness, and its ability to connect with the world, is at once "blind" and, paradoxically, capable of visionary "insight" (see de Man). The visionary experiences of Ben, in *10:04*, driven by something close to hallucination, and the insights provided by "blots on vision" and by looking out of the corner of one's eye in *Chronic City*, point to a similar flawed yet insightful sensitivity, in a way that defies binary oppositions or causal hierarchies. The real, the possible, and the imaginary appear to such a sensitivity as continuations of the same plane. In both novels, there are endeavors to extend that folding of inner and outer into the world of the reader, such as the hiccups of Perkus in *Chronic City*, visualized on the page in blank spaces, and the fireworks above Brooklyn Bridge, in *10:04*, which are imagined on the physical page in the hands of the reader, thus extending tangibly into the reader's physical world.

Approaching the ontological instability and the interaction between human perception and nonhuman environment through the concept of the fold helps zoom in on those elements that spill out from the fictional representation into the actual world. Such spillover effects reenact the Baroque breaking of spatial boundaries; Deleuze was intrigued in how Baroque form was "always put in motion" ending "in the manner of a horse's mane or the foam of a wave," and how "matter tends to spill over in space" (4). The endeavors to reach out into the reader's referential world, evident in *Chronic City* and *10:04*, are one particularly tangible example of such overspill. In language, a tentative overlap between the consciousness of reader and narrator is attempted, a moment of "coeval readership" (Lerner 93). Just as Perkus's view of New York City becomes for Chase an "ellipsistic" experience that starts to affect his own perception of the surrounding world, some of the visionary insights may color the reader's view of the real world, enabling a sense of interconnection, which in the way of a fold connects inner and outer, and a feeling-with the nonhuman environment.

[BIO]
LIEVEN AMEEL is university lecturer in comparative literature at Tampere University, Finland. He holds a PhD in Finnish literature and comparative literature from the University of Helsinki and the JLU Giessen. He has published widely on literary experiences of the city, narrative planning, and urban futures. His books include *Helsinki in Early Twentieth-Century Literature* (2014) and *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning* (2020) and the co-edited volumes *Literature and the Peripheral City* (2015); *Literary Second Cities* (2017), and *The Materiality of Literary Narratives in Urban History* (2019). (Lieven.ameel@tuni.fi)

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[1] Brian McHale mentions "double vision" in his treatment of postmodernist fiction and the zone, but rather than retaining this idea of the simultaneity of two different temporal levels, when discussing Elkin's *George Mills* and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, he returns to metaphorizations that suggests the separation of different levels, moving from "double vision" to "split-screen effect" to different temporalities that "flicker back and forth" (93).

[2] In a more concrete operation of blurring boundaries, *10:04* uses a range of autofictional elements to suggest complex overlap between real-world Ben Lerner and Ben, the protagonist of *10:04* (see also Gibbons). One particular aspect of this autofictionality is that certain parts of *10:04* and attributed to storyworld Ben double as texts that are published by Ben Lerner in the actual world. For more on this kind of ontological blurring, see Gibbons in this issue.

[3] For more on the importance of the concept of "frame" in the work of Lethem, and its link to Heidegger's philosophy, see O'Gorman 45–47.

[4] It could be argued that Lethem's *Chronic City* does refer to McHale's concept of the zone explicitly and repeatedly (e.g., 107, 174, and 382)—and yet these zones (sometimes between quotation marks; 243) never appear as radically set apart from the rest of the narrated world, but rather as moving into this, overlapping, or folding in, with other, less defamiliarized spatial environments.