
5. Ewan Morrison: The Non-Place of Fiction

At the other end of the spectrum from James Robertson's emphasis on history's problematic but fertile connection with the present, and presenting yet another facet to the definition of the postnational constellation, an angle which takes into account the increased globalisation of our sense of the local itself, is the work of Ewan Morrison. Morrison came to fame as a writer with the publication of his 2005 collection of short stories *The Last Book You Read* which, as evidence of its popularity, is now available as an e-book. The collection was praised by Berthold Schoene (2007: 14) as 'embracing globalisation as the new human condition' in a vision that provided 'a strong sense of planetary commonality'. Indeed the stories, as well as Morrison's three subsequent novels, *Swung* (2007), *Distance* (2008) and *Ménage* (2009), and the generically hybrid *Tales from the Mall* (2012), show the author's overwhelming, constant concern with the place of the human in a globalised world. Morrison defines the globalised world as a world taken over by American-style consumerism, and its attendant rampant commodification of everything including the human, a state of 'inauthenticity' which he parallels with what he sees as the false construction of a (Scottish) sense of identity:

The construction of an authentic Scottishness is totally phony: the reality of daily life anywhere in the western world is that it is saturated with 'inauthentic' globalised media-generated images and experiences.¹

The globalised world described by Morrison is the world which sociologist Zygmunt Bauman characterises as the world of 'liquid modernity', a world which, like fluids, 'neither fix[es] space nor bind[s] time' and in which modernity has filtered down from the 'macro' level of society as an organised system to the 'micro' level of social cohabitation, resulting in an increased burden for individuals to make sense of themselves in an unstable and unstoppable – an 'underdetermined' – environment.² For Bauman (2000: 7–8), '[o]urs is, as a result, an individualised, privatised version of modernity,

THE SPACE OF FICTION

with the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual's shoulders.' In the world of liquid modernity, Bauman continues, it is only solids which 'are cast once and for all' (2000: 8). The result for Morrison is a fiction which, according to Garan Holcombe, takes the shape of 'compelling narrative essays on fear and emptiness' with characters 'desperate for identifiable meaning',³ while Schoene somewhat more optimistically describes the collection of short stories as showing the 'indispensable necessity of personal relationships' (2007: 14). In Morrison's own words, human relationships are the last retreat in a world that invests heavily in signs to be consumed, the author claiming that 'in the absence of all other values, relating to another person is perhaps all there is to go on'.⁴ And indeed, what his three novels have in common is the sense of a problematised intimacy, an exploration of sex, of 'orgasm as the most intimate physical expression of love [that] has become part of a transaction that might drain rather than fulfil the self'.⁵ Like many objects and symbols of consumption, the human in Morrison's fiction is placed at the centre of a nexus of separate, sometimes contradictory drives, which raises issues not only related to the creative process, or the process of writing fiction, but also to anthropology and sociology. It is therefore a reflection on space in many senses which is conducted in the three novels this chapter focuses on, on the meaning and values of space and place, the space of the human, as well as the space of fiction. In order to tackle these issues, this chapter will be based on the critical and theoretical thinking of Zygmunt Bauman, Marc Augé, Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord.

Virtual space, non-place, no-place

Distance, as its title indicates, is very much about space, as well as about the intricate connections that can be woven between space and time. The two lovers, with a continent between them, try to make sense of an impossible spatial equation, while the organisation of the novel as a countdown to their eagerly-awaited reunion translates the spatial dimension into a temporal one. Tom and Meg live very much in time, and the space that they create to bridge the physical gap between them is made up of transcribed phone conversations, text messages and occasionally a few emails, all of which gradually build up an electronically based virtual world, ultimately a world that is made mostly of words. The part of the narrative devoted to Meg

consists in various journal entries and a series of computer files all related to her love story with Tom, and created with a view to making sense of and ordering the narrative of their lives into a coherent pattern. In this transcript world, there is no place for secondary characters, who are all turned into types, and who play very little part in the narrative – Josh the American agent, McGregor the caricature entrepreneur, Morna the silent girlfriend, the predictably antagonistic ex-wife. The only character truly to have an impact on the narrative, to be given more than a walk-in part, is Sean, Tom's ten-year-old son. Significantly, Sean is afflicted with a severe stutter which prevents him from communicating with his father in the real world, a handicap for which he compensates by existing on the online computer game *Second Life*, in practice transferring his relationships into cyberspace – the new space of modernity, according to Paul Virilio – in a way that parallels his father's need for a virtual space of existence. For Sean, virtual space is also a world of words, although in a different way. It is a place where he, a child without an adequate voice, can exist by doing the only thing that is not available to him in the real world: using words. But this cyberworld is volatile, intermittent: as characters log on and off, they exist only in snatches of time, pointing to the fundamental shortcoming of this new space of modernity – that it can make people disappear.

Tom and Meg's story, which mostly takes place in their own private virtual space of words, is a place of transit, a fact mirrored by the way Sean and then Tom himself walk their avatars on the near-empty screen of *Second Life*. Additionally, the affair starts in a New York hotel, and the narrative first introduces the couple as they are waiting for a flight at Newark Airport, therefore placing the relationship firmly in the only space that they can pragmatically inhabit – two places which anthropologist Marc Augé describes as non-places. Augé chose this term in opposition to the notion of 'place', or 'ethnological place', associated by the ethnological tradition with the idea of a culture localised in time and space. For Augé:

If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place. The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places

THE SPACE OF FICTION

and which [...] do not integrate the earlier places: instead they are listed, classified, promoted to the status of 'places of memory', and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position. A world where people are born in the clinic and die in hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps [...]); where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces is developing; where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce; a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral, offers the anthropologist (and others) a new object.⁶

As Tom at the beginning of the novel wishes '[t]o live with Meg, forever in departures' (*D*, 19), he prophetically glimpses, even yearns for, the only space available for this relationship to endure in, which is an impossible combination: technically a non-place, but literally either a no-place, in the usual sense of a utopian space – '[w]hen they kissed they were nowhere' (*D*, 19) – or a place disconnected from geographical constraints, i.e. a virtual place. It is an impossible combination because, as Augé indicates, the non-place cannot be a no-place as it is not a valid place of communication, but rather a space of separation, isolation and loneliness; in Augé's own words (1992: 90), 'the non-place is the opposite of Utopia: it exists, and it does not contain any organic society.'

In a structure that seems to point in the direction of a never-ending, vicious circle for the story, Meg and Tom's affair ends in another non-place, Edinburgh Airport. The outcome, a brutal end put to the relationship, can be read as inevitable, as the words that are used by both characters to bridge the spatial gap and therefore invent an alternative to the ethnological place (unavailable) versus non-place (place of non-communication) dilemma gradually appear to the reader as increasingly scripted, as their love story is turned by Meg into a film script that exposes their most intimate thoughts and experiences. In the chapter entitled 'Film', which takes over the narrative to the extent that the portrayal of the break up is handed over to it, Meg, the script doctor unable to doctor her relationship, has, however, produced its virtual counterpart, its fictionalisation, its removal from the realm of the

real in a manner so successful that it ironically enables her to relive the beginning of it with various Tom stand-ins whom she picks up at parties. The very last line of the novel, the words, 'It's You', spoken by Tom over the phone in an attempt to start the relationship over, is territorially ambiguous.⁷ It can signal the entry of the story into the cheesy realm of romance, in a bid from the character to escape the non-place and to secure the anchoring of the relationship into the no-place of romance. This outcome is suggested by the last part of the book, 'Return', where Tom reflects upon how different the story of their relationship might have been, had it taken place several years later. But the words also signal the circularity of the process: the virtual relationship, or rather the relationship carried out in a virtual space that hovers between non-place and no-place, cannot escape the pattern it has set for himself, as is indicated by the fact that the ambivalent words ('It's You') are spoken over the phone, the space where most of the relationship has been conducted.

Morrison's first novel, *Swung*, follows another pair of lovers, David and Alice, both of whom work for Scotia TV, a local TV station which is being taken over by a large conglomerate. The merger makes David redundant, ironically so, as he is the one supposedly firing people owing to his job in human resources. He starts visiting swinging websites instead of looking for work, measuring up his own sense of isolation against the general loneliness he finds on those sites. The novel, like David, focuses on the gap separating individuals who, throughout the book, strive to achieve intimacy. In this case, the obstacle is not geographical but physiological as the main character suffers from sexual impotence, a condition which he generalises to the whole of his existence, declaring himself 'impotent. In so many ways' (S, 63). In order to stimulate him, Alice tells him 'bedtime stories' about watching people having sex in a variety of non-places such as car parks, hotels, changing-rooms in chain stores, beaches or parties. In this novel, the private, the intimate is therefore associated with non-places, the spaces of isolation and non-communication which seep into anthropological places such as homes when David watches his neighbours having sex with Alice through their window, a scene which introduces an unobtrusive but very real screen between the lovers.

If the most intimate is transferred onto a non-place, the swinging website provides the updated, electronic or virtual, therefore ubiquitous version of

THE SPACE OF FICTION

it, as couples log on to it to post their most intimate memories in the shape of wedding photos with the faces blanked-out.⁸ In this world where relationships are 'virtualised', removed to a space that is also a non-place disguised as a no-place,⁹ in spite of the frantic efforts made by all the characters who people the novel to create connections through sex, humans, like objects, are transferred onto a plane where the utopian impulse (the no-place, with its sense of community) is combined with the consumerist drive. David and Alice, an affluent couple living in Glasgow's West End, describe their living environment in words that are directly lifted from the commercial communication of such iconic retail stores as Ikea, Habitat or Homeworld, claiming that they 'need a thirty-eight-inch flat-screen digital surround-sound television' (S, 4), or referring to 'the big white kitchen slash dining room' (S, 5), or '[b]ath slash Jacuzzi unit' (S, 7). In a phenomenon that Morrison describes as 'the Ikea-fication of the world'¹⁰ the terminology logically reaches out to infect the realm of personal relationships, as the two characters jeeringly refer to their '[neighbour's] wife slash partner', with her '[b]rown slash auburn hair' (S, 6), thereby conflating the commercial drive with the personal realm. Indeed for Morrison, swinging, only one click away from internet dating, is the perfect illustration of the consumerist approach we have of our private lives, of 'these multiple options that consumerism is giving us in terms of our sexuality'.¹¹ The description of the neighbours in terms borrowed from the discourse of estate agents or large retail stores turns people into signs, and it is the human itself which is abstracted into the semiotic system of consumption.

In this context, humans, like objects, become disposable as they are integrated into the short-time cycle of consumer products. The Ikea-fication process, comically – or maybe very sadly – captured in *Swung* by the sentence 'Jackson Pollock was now available in five colours of Formica. [...] Picasso really was for sale in Homeworld' (S, 23), leads to a version of the world which, in accordance with Zygmunt Bauman's definition of liquid modernity, becomes temporary. The newspeak for this world is created by Alice – Tempworld:

Whenever I sniff Ikea, [Alice] said, I hear the word 'temp'. She'd made him read this book. Some big sociology text. The future is temporary, it said, employment, housing, relationships, marriage. The social

plan for society has collapsed. Every man for himself, till you're too old to compete [...] Hi, welcome to Tempworld. (S, 27–28)

As David discovers on being fired from his job, when his experience of isolation appears as acutely spatial, 'the mirrored walls of the elevator reflect[ing] his face into solitary infinity' (S, 25–26), Tempworld actually freezes the isolation of the individual in time but also in space. This endless duplication of the individual which is experienced metaphorically by David corresponds to the consumerist project of the mass manufacturing of individuality, a topic which is at the heart of Morrison's project:

The old era of mass manufactured conformism ha[s] been superseded [sic] by the even more powerful selling strategy of associating products with unique individuality, implying that shopping is an act of self-expression – the mass manufacturing of uniqueness.¹²

In his novel, Morrison provides his reader with a reflection on the limits of consumerism, by suppressing the flimsy border between products and the human, foreshortening the process to a selling of the human directly. When what is consumed is a concept, an idea, the notion of intimacy, the relations between individuals, in short the essence of the human, then Meg's intended sarcasm in *Distance* that 'shopping is the answer to everything' takes on a new dimension, as David compulsively trawls the internet, looking to consume sex. The fact that sex is not given in exchange for money, as in a commercial relationship, paradoxically even reinforces the parallel with an exacerbated version of the consumerist ideal, as it removes all intermediaries and means of exchange: David and Alice, as well as their numerous swinger friends, not least of whom Dolly, the old hippy woman David nicknames 'Mother Earth' who precisely embodies this perversion of the 'free love' ideal of the 1960s by turning it into a business in which the currency is sex, remove themselves into a consumption that cannot lead to communication, because, as Jean Baudrillard showed as early as 1968 in *The System of Objects*, the semiotic contents of the act of consumption supersedes the act itself, in the process cancelling all possible relation. For Baudrillard, 'consumption is not a material practice, nor is it a phenomenology of "affluence". [...] If it has any meaning at all, consumption means

THE SPACE OF FICTION

an activity consisting of the systematic manipulation of signs.¹³ In consumption, therefore, the human relation, which becomes a relation of consumption, is abstracted from the realm of experience; it is dematerialised: '[t]he relationship is no longer directly experienced: it has become abstract, been abolished, been transformed into a sign-object, and thus consumed' (1968: 219). Baudrillard points to the fundamentally destructive power of consumption as a power which feeds off itself. For him, consumption does not lead to a state of saturation, because it is a reason for living (1968: 223), an element which is taken up again in slightly different terms by Zygmunt Bauman who points out (2000: 83) that the ever greater availability of products in supermarkets, their ability to suggest new desires, can be applied not just to products, but also to identity because identity, like consumption in the modern world, is based on the notion of desire rather than need, giving it an unlimited scope:

The *spiritus novens* of consumer activity is no longer the measurable set of articulated needs, but *desire* – a much more volatile and ephemeral, evasive and capricious, and essentially non-referential entity than 'needs', a self-begotten and self-propelled motive that needs no other justification or 'cause'. (2000: 74)

Morrison attempts the literalisation of those postulates by transferring from the system of objects to that of human relationships. David's impotence leaves him in the space of desires which he cannot fulfil, a fact which turns him into the perfect consumer, as he very bitterly realises in a monologue that metaphorically places him in the archetypal non-place of consumption, a shopping mall:¹⁴

Impotence. Like being in a land where you couldn't speak the language. Like being in a shopping mall with a maxed-out credit card. An impotent man could easily be the perfect addict. The perfect consumer. A desire which could never be fulfilled. Which left you wanting. More. More of anything. More. (S, 198–99)

David's realisation in this extract, with its parataxis suggestive of anger and rebellion, and the revealing correspondence established between the

first and last words, ‘impotence’ and ‘more’, both being grammatically isolated from the rest of the sentence, suggests the ‘perfect’ vicious circle of desire, and enables him to glimpse the chasm theoretically existing between the consummation of desire and the desire of consumption. Turning consummation, the ‘consummation devoutly to be wished’, into consumption exposes the intimate to the semioticised realm of transactions. The symbol of that inescapable conversion is Mother Earth/Dolly, whose first name, according to David, suggests a curious mixture of 1950s culture (Dolly Parton) and scientific experiment (Dolly the sheep), and whom he aptly describes as ‘[s]ome weird corruption of the concept of free love’ (S, 243). Dolly, an old hand at free love, has indeed become a caricature, a sort of pedlar of sex, who turns up on swingers’ doorsteps with her complete kit, including Viagra, a toy-boy with a penis the size of a man’s forearm, and invitations to orgies in remote places (in a parody of mildly pornographic movies). She, in fact, turns lovemaking into a perfect description of Baudrillard’s definition of consumption: a subsuming of the relationship into sign: female ejaculation, double penetration, multiple coordinated orgasms, all those are but the derisory remnants of a consummation that has been engulfed by consumption. The human in that context appears as hollowed out, only delineated from the outside, from the consumption-enhanced. This is indicated at an early stage in the novel, by Alice’s attempt at creating art:

Magritte. That was the second big idea she had. [...] A picture in negative. No image, just white, framed by a border of children’s wallpaper. Surrealism and Freud. We are empty, everything we will ever try to create is framed by our parents. A little po-mo. An anti-image. White square in the centre. An absence where identity should be. (S, 22)

The aptly-named ‘white room’ – traditionally the colour white indicates purity or the pictorial equivalent of the *tabula rasa*, in this case the white canvas – in which Alice performs her ‘little po-mo’, ‘anti-image’ definition of the human, echoes the white squares on the wedding photographs posted on the swinging website, with their indication of the removal of identity,¹⁵ and finds its counterpart in the last part of the novel, entitled ‘black room’. In the black room, swingers make an ultimate attempt at connecting, by

THE SPACE OF FICTION

indulging in communal sex in the dark.¹⁶ But the scene, first depicted from David's point of view then from Alice's, the latter realising that 'no matter many cocks and fingers pushed into her, she didn't feel connected in any way' (S, 326), stresses disembodiment, fragmentation, in an act which has reduced the human to a seemingly inexhaustible collection of isolated organs, mostly orifices, that interact in a mechanical, mindless manner:

Where was she? Unless she was that hand in his hair, that mouth round his cock. Again he resisted the temptation to call her name. Fingers kneaded the muscles in his neck and his head rolled forward to find the wetness of a woman's crotch. Lips brushed his lips. And as he pushed a finger inside someone he felt a finger slowly push into his ass and his muscles tighten round it. Spit, a woman's wetness smeared into his ass. How many people were holding him? Three, four? Alice. (S, 318)

This description, turning as it does the entire scene in the black room into a grotesque body, both suggests and resists Bakhtin's grotesque, with its insistence on orifices, gaping mouths, and the allusion to his theory of the carnivalesque as an affirmative, militant and anti-authoritarian attitude to life founded upon a joyful acceptance of the materiality of the body. For Bakhtin, the body is potentially disruptive of narrative, especially when other larger narratives such as order, civilisation, progress and destiny begin to lose their authority:

No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook.¹⁷

The orgy in the black room, with its monstrous, grotesque body aims for the very notion of renewal:

As opposed to artificial feast, one might say that carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges,

norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalised and complete. (1968: 109)

But the liberation process oversteps its mark. In a hideous transformation of the real world, where the grotesque seems to seep out of its narrative containers represented by the chapter titles ('black room'; 'white room'), the characters – bodies – encountered by David, roaming the streets of Glasgow after yet another episode of sexual impotence, are evidence that the grotesque, the force of liberation from the narrative of civilisation according to Bakhtin, have been turned into the conventionally, pathetically monstrous. The parade of bodies is a parody of the body whose appearance, according to Fredric Jameson, produces 'an awakening of fresh sight', and which 'diverts a conventional narrative logic of the unfolding story in some new vertical direction.'¹⁸ On the streets of Glasgow on a Friday night, David encounters a variety of female characters encapsulated in reductive arbitrary stereotypes – the bitch, the whore of Babylon (*S*, 197). The parade of desire which floats surreally in front of his eyes (to the extent that some characters, like the very big woman, belong more to the realm of hallucinations than to description) turns the grotesque back into a contemporary and mundane version of the monstrous:

The line for the cash machine. [...] Twenty or more of them in a line. Students mostly. Three goth girls. The one in the middle wearing a corset. Her breasts E-cups at least, held rigid like a shelf on which her crucifix necklace sat. The girl next to her, fishnets and filigree. Blood red lips. Vamps and vampires. The third, thigh-high leather boots. Tattoo at the base of her spine. (*S*, 198)

In spite of the description's focus on the characters as grotesque bodies, what is monstrous about this description is the utter isolation of the individual and the hopelessness of the perspectives of these various caricatures of the human, whose future can only be seen as a repetition of the meaningless present. In *Tempworld*, the world in which, as Alice says, paraphrasing Bauman, the future is temporary (*S*, 31), these women have been reduced to the state of harmless caricatures, whose power to overthrow the system,

THE SPACE OF FICTION

hinted at with the orgiastic, grotesque body of the black room, is doomed from the start:

See them in fifteen years' time. Partner number fifty-five, still wearing fishnets and blood red lipstick, temp jobs and one-night stands. Thinking that they've found a real connection with a man when they find out they loved the same CD from the 90s. (S, 198)

The future may be temporary, or rather, in this case, an unceasing repetition of the present in a horizontal projection that contradicts the vertical direction taken by the narrative under the impulse of the grotesque according to Jameson, but it also points to the dead-end both the white and the black rooms represent. In a similar process that curbs the subversive, the grotesque body/bodies in the black room is/are contained, its/their subversive potential lasting only as long as it/they can be safely isolated in a dark, invisible, self-contained universe. Swinging, as Alice learns at the hands of a co-worker, is not the new free love; neither, as she learns for herself, is it the carnival that has the ability to turn the social order upside down. In a total confusion of senses, organs and identities, an impossible equation in which one is desperately trying to exist in terms of another, the protagonists realise the proximity of the black room to the white room of their existence:

He was no longer David, and Alice was no longer Alice. They were just here, bodies breathing, opening. His eyes seeing faint outlines in the dark. But as the pressure pushed deeper inside him he no longer wanted to see. With each slow thrust, each breath, in and out, deeper and deeper, he was turning inside out. Becoming body, breath, nameless. Touch is fingers, taste is mouth. Ass is taste. Taste is touch. Fingers are mouth. Mouth is ass. Touch, taste. Smell. David. Alice. Lost. (S, 319)

With the help of synecdoche and synaesthesia, this passage points to the irreversible degradation of the ideal of free love which Mother Earth falsely hangs on to. In a meeting of her TV show team on a prospective programme on swinging, which is meant to represent a sort of ultimate

stage of reality TV which, if aired, will portray ‘four houses. Surveillance. Four couples fucking’ (S, 118), Alice realises that the old ideals have been displaced.¹⁹ Alongside absurdly ludicrous neologisms such as ‘polyamorous’ (S, 292) and ‘polyfidelity’ (S, 294) comes for Alice the realisation that the ‘gift’ of fucking, given freely by people who ‘don’t see sex as titillation, objectification[,] [t]his whole consumerist sex-object bullshit’ (S, 295), has in fact been annihilated by the very process it tries to eradicate: Alice’s boss with Scotia TV, ‘the head’ (another synecdoche) gives over the running of the programme to Alice’s friend Pauline, who is the one to laugh at the preposterous idea of free love, and who can supply a few high-profile sports celebrities to take part in the reality TV swinging show. This is a bitter fictional confirmation of Ewan Morrison’s rejection of the practice of swinging when not used as an extension of feelings. In that case, it becomes ‘just variety for its own sake, and has the danger of becoming an addictive behaviour that is simply postponing the lack of real contact and communication between you.’²⁰ Logically therefore, the reversal of the old order in *Swung* has definitely been sidelined, and the grotesque remains as a feeble sign of what might have been.

‘Edinburgh city of ...’: globalia, localia and the empty place

The subplot in *Distance* describes Tom’s jeering comments at his own job with a PR firm, which consists in devising a corporate branding strategy to apply to the city of Edinburgh, with the goal of ‘[s]elling Scotland to the world’ (D, 87) mostly by devising an appropriate catchphrase that can totalise the selling-power of the place. This enterprise soon reaches a dead-end as neither the professional ‘creatives’ nor their customers, the city council officials, manage to come up with a suitably impressive description, leaving the motto – ‘Edinburgh city of ...’ – unfinished for most of the narrative. This attempt, however ludicrous and however much derided by the narrator Tom, is symptomatic of the twenty-first century – of supermodernity, in Augé’s terms – in that it attempts to articulate local and global, as well as physical and virtual realities. The difficulty with selling Scotland to the world is that, as only Tom seems to be aware, it has to reconcile what Claire Larsonneur, in an article about the English novelist David Mitchell, calls ‘globalia’ and ‘localia’. She describes globalia as the phenomenon whereby places exhibit interchangeable features and an extra-territorial location,

THE SPACE OF FICTION

and differentiates this concept from that of non-places by stressing increased uniformity, or 'a set of standard features *systematically* reproduced in any instance of the place'.²¹ Globalia is manifested in the idealised, sanitised version of Edinburgh that Tom's boss, McGregor, is trying to sell to his clients, who seem to believe that only suitably extra-territorial, globalised space can enter the global competition for economic acumen. For Morrison, globalisation is a blanket term that precisely hints at the expansion of globalia into one huge economic market driven by the forces of global capitalism, the epitome of which is suggested by Tom in his ludicrously exacerbated capitalistic bid to privatise the whole of Scotland. In the novel, the drive to level the identity of place is suggested precisely by the missing part in the slogan as well as by the fact that it can only be completed in a non-specific, rather bland way. In the reaction of one of the council officials, 'I love the European bit. European city of ...' (*D*, 90), what transpires is that what matters is not identity, but rather the subsuming of the local into a vague space of 'European' – understood as other than local and therefore global – space, which has become so blank that its very definition has to rely on namelessness ('of ...'). Yet at the same time the way to globalise Scotland in *Distance* is by banking on localia, that is, as defined by Larsonneur (2009: 144), 'spaces of hypertrophic geographical and historical quality'. This is represented by the corporate video that shows the Forth Bridge and the Scott Monument, both being generally considered as evidence of the historical and cultural specificity of Scotland. This paradox of stressing localia to achieve globalia leads to the result, ironically placed very early on in the narrative, that 'the world wasn't buying' (*D*, 87).

In the context meticulously delineated by *Distance*, the space of Edinburgh is therefore an impossibility, a posture, a space wedged between two contradictory drives, aiming for the global and informed by the local. It is dictated to the makers of the video by economic requirements that ruthlessly discard pertinent elements that might be selling the city to the world. This blindly homogenising policy is connected to what Eleanor Bell, borrowing Michael Billig's concept of 'banal nationalism', sees as inevitable: banal nationalism, being a dissolution of the nation-state in a movement that singles out the United States as the global ideal, prompts people to identify with this American-global – therefore univalent – model.²²

In *Distance* Morrison explores how artificial, unreal and eventually damaging 'our unconscious identification with this supposed American global ideal' (Bell, 2004: 85) can be. The American ideal is represented by Meg and her walk-in New York friends who cannot make a creditable imprint upon the narrative,²³ while, back in Scotland, Tom's video empties Edinburgh's geographical and historical markers of meaning by severing their links with identity, relations and history. In so doing, he turns them into empty signs only able to make up a non-place that falls outside of the logic of identity, relation and history. When Tom says, on writing the script for the video, that he 'could write this stuff with his eyes closed' (*D*, 306), he emphasises the purely mechanical object he is thus creating and, therefore, stresses the paradox of using precisely the symbols of history and identity to construct a non-place.

But banal nationalism and the ubiquity of the American model carries its share of constraints. Tom's rant about privatising Scotland, in which he suggests cutting Edinburgh up into chunks and floating the chunks on the market, literalises the hackneyed metaphor of 'selling Edinburgh to the world' in a moment of sheer hung-over bloody-mindedness, and conjures up an absurd yet threatening vision of the marketability of everything, including the theoretically unmarketable, which comes after the marketing of human relationships and of the most intimate connection between people we see in *Swung*:

So here's the plan. We set Edinburgh up as a company and float it on the international market. Edinburgh Inc. Everything in it, the Castle, the streets and everyone in them becomes an asset. Set up a solid border, razor wire, surveillance, the lot, charge people for admission. Privatisise every blade of grass. Turn every irreversible social problem into an asset. (*D*, 235–36)

This literalisation of the idea of the commodification of everything, from history to geography, to identity or even commercially worthless items such as a blade of grass, is an exacerbated version of Guy Debord's concept of the Spectacle (evolved in 1967), which refers to 'a media and consumer society, organised around the consumption of images, commodities, and

THE SPACE OF FICTION

staged events'.²⁴ For Debord, the spectacle relies on a commodification of all the spheres of the human:

The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the *total occupation* of social life. The relation to the commodity is not only visible, but one no longer sees anything but it: the world one sees is its world. Modern economic production extends its dictatorship extensively and intensively.²⁵

What Tom suggests with the privatisation of Edinburgh is that the video should aim to turn the city into what Steven Best and Douglas Kellner call a 'megaspectacle', namely an escalation in size, range and intensity of the Debordian concept, the production of a globalised mass-culture made possible by global coverage, satellite dishes and the internet, an attempt to import and adapt worldwide phenomena such as Star Wars or Disney and apply them to Scotland. In a logical escalation, Tom suggests an extension of this concept of turning Edinburgh into a huge theme park – a megaspectacle – to the whole of Scotland, providing a method and even a logo, 'ScotLAND'. By eventually completing the motto into the cover-all and ultimately meaningless 'City of excellence',²⁶ Tom provides a sarcastic description of his city as a product which can only be captured in an endless repetition of buzzwords sheared of meaning and therefore of any sort of communicative potential, an insight which does not seem to be shared by any of the other characters:

'Yes, yes,' McGregor was saying. 'Great idea. The whole campaign can be words that start with an E – Excellence – Engineering – the Enlightenment – European!'

Embolism. Epidural. Ecstasy. This flash through Tom's shattered mind. A billboard promoting drug use. A kid with a tab on his tongue. Edinburgh starts with an – E. (*D*, 237)

As aptly, if unwittingly, summarised by McGregor, the megaspectacle, the nonsensical city of excellence (and epidural), *is* words, a series of words with either no connections or unfortunate ones, such as the constituting of

Scotland into a huge global theme park for drug addicts, a sort of *Trainspotting* gone global. It is a Baudrillardian semiotic package in which the signs, the only objects on offer in the globalised chain of consumption, are allowed to careen freely in a (non-)space that has set them free forever. This is a vision born in the streets of the city, a macro-level equivalent of the William Wallace impersonator roaming the Royal Mile in real-life Edinburgh and charging the tourists for photographs, a character who looks not like the historical Wallace, whose statue is carved on the pillar of the Edinburgh Castle gate, but rather like the Hollywood actor Mel Gibson.²⁷ Divorced from the history and culture he was born in, this character is but an index of the extent of the banal nationalism which is praised in the name of globalisation.

In that context, the spectacle runs the risk of also becoming what Zygmunt Bauman, adapting a concept evolved by Claude Levi-Strauss, calls a 'phagic space', a place that devours foreign bodies to integrate them fully, to digest them into (American?) sameness, in a cannibalistic process which entails enforced assimilation, the suspension or annihilation of the other's otherness.²⁸ In *Swung* the others' otherness also disappears as the markers of identity and history are shown to dissolve and lose their power in the drive to turn everything into a spectacle. When David and Alice meet a swinging couple in a theme bar called 'La Revolution' packed with Stalinist kitsch and memorabilia, Alice reflects upon the annihilation of the meaning of history in the contemporary world:

The place was supposed to be fun but it made her sad. That history was worth so little, that it had become nothing more than a backdrop to pose beside as you got drunk on vanilla vodka. Swinging and the end of communism. Some connection there. Something to do with the collapse of belief in alternatives. (S, 137)

The world of globalisation as applied to the local depicted in *Distance* provides the reader with one great phagic space: as a megaspectacle, even if only a prospective one, it both assimilates and 'globalises' the local, the individual, by turning them into semiotic objects, commodities ready for participation in the displacement, the spectacle of history and identity. The consequence is that meaning seems inevitably compromised. As Bauman

THE SPACE OF FICTION

indicates, the issue of making the local into a global concept defies interpretation:

Being local in a globalised world is a sign of social deprivation and degradation. The discomforts of localised existence are compounded by the fact that with public spaces removed beyond the reaches of localised life, localities are losing their meaning-generating and meaning-negotiating capacity and are increasingly dependent on sense-giving and interpreting actions which they do not control.²⁹

The gap between the reality of the city and the (aspiringly mega-)spectacle that the advertising campaign is claiming to be turning it into, is ironically made even greater than the semiotic dysfunction by the choice of a location for the shooting of the corporate video, a field of rubble – ‘an area of quality Edinburgh rubble’ (*D*, 308) – soon to be turned into the ‘Hope Park Enterprise Zone’ which may or may not become the huge corporate theme park it advertises itself as. The pathetic little council man parroting his speech on camera, repeating his single buzz word ‘excellence’ to a nauseating and ultimately comical degree, the discrepancy between the emptiness of the location and the overinflated discourse designed to cover the void, are underlined by Tom’s jeering voice which, in the conversation he conducts with the cameraman, provides the narrative with a sustained, divergent voiceover. This effectively reduces the megaspectacle ambition to what it really is in Morrison’s view: a poor attempt at keeping companies in Edinburgh for the economic survival in these times of global competition, rather than an expansion of the city. All those features underline the fact that beyond discourse, beyond the rebranding fashion, what is at stake is the way that public space has segued into distinct, increasingly disparate entities, which reflect a new, exacerbated form of social and economic segregation. For in *Distance* the emphasis is placed on the futility and ridiculousness of the attempt to go global in a gesture that owes more to banal nationalism than to an actual economic and cultural expansion.

The subversive power of empty places

As banal nationalism precludes ‘the belief in alternatives’, the homogenisation of the present (and of the future) is founded on a distortion, a

'banalisation' of the meaning of the past, of its ability to signify.³⁰ The suggestion of the distortion of the historical through commodification has two distinct but interrelated consequences. For Bauman, empty places are spaces which carry no meaning, because they are 'seen to be empty, or rather unseen':

The maps that guide the movements of various categories of inhabitants do not overlap, but for any map to 'make sense', some areas of the city must be left out as senseless, and – as far as the sense-making is concerned – unpromising. Cutting out such places allows the rest to shine and bristle with meaning. (2000: 104)

What is described by Bauman in this extract is precisely the bet for the future of Edinburgh which is taken by the council and by Tom's PR company, I-Com, in the face of mounting evidence against the global corporate image they are trying to build from scratch. Tom, as the sole centre of consciousness of the part of the novel situated in Edinburgh, presents the reader with the return of the repressed, or rather of the empty places that he is being paid to keep out of the picture. Those places relentlessly present themselves to him in the shape of random encounters. The empty places of Edinburgh, the schemes that the council would rather forget and has in fact forgotten, seem to push their way into the narrative, against the will of the dominant discourse, the discourse of capitalist hegemony which, according to Morrison, Tom represents not only because of his job, but also through his opinions.³¹ They return in a haphazard fashion, in a way that makes them appear as isolated textual spaces, short passages, vignettes: the mother from the scheme; Archie, the old Hemingway lookalike from the pub; the Ned, or his girlfriend in the white leather miniskirt, between them trace a very different map of the city (and by extension of the country), a sort of counter-map to I-Com's 'I-map', a map that forcibly reintroduces empty spaces. Tom, on the bus back from a 'corporate' meeting, encounters denizens of empty places:

'Mwaaa, mwaa.'

'Fuckin' sit still, Chelsea. Fuckin' shoosh.'

Seven stops to go. The kid is called Chelsea, like the Clinton girl. His guess was they came from Pilton, the scheme the government had tried to forget.

THE SPACE OF FICTION

'Mwaaa, mwaa, mama.'

The kid reaches for something in her mother's bag. Mother slaps the kid's hand. Kid cries [...].

'I said no and you keep on fuckin' goin' on at me, just fuckin' shut up.' (*D*, 93)

This passage, like the description of the Ned who starts out as a solicitous enough character toward a drunk Tom on the streets, like that of the old guy in the pub, happy to chat to a stranger provided that he can cadge a drink or two off him while imparting his pragmatic wisdom, provides the narrative with the centripetal drive, a movement away from the globalising, outward-going rhetoric, and towards the minute, the most mundane and detailed, towards the empty spaces of Edinburgh, or the reality seen with the closeness of experience. This pull of the real, this mechanical movement that resists the assimilation of all into a phagic, all-encompassing, media-led space is suggested by a metaphor which captures the power of the real, the local:

You flew across the globe through day and night, through infinite skies and expansive thought, then slowly you circled your city and it pulled you down till your feet were on the ground, then it was your street, then the walk, then through the tenement door, the keys in your hand. Gravity sucking you slowly downwards. The curvature of the planet flattening. The weight increasing as the dimensions shrank. The gravity of where you came from, pulling you in, squashing you, till you fitted this tiny hole that was for a key that opened the door to your home. (*D*, 35)

What is indicated here is that there is not one continuous floating space available for any sense of place or any sense of identity. The pull of the land, of the local, is bound to reduce facts to their real proportion, the question being only one of adjusting to scale and to the distortions that fiddling with them can entail. As the character finally fits into the tiny keyhole in a way that blatantly defies verisimilitude, the text seems to predict, very early on, that making up an impossible scale ultimately does not work, no matter how much spin is put into it. The narrative is therefore submitted to those

conflicting movements: one expansive, centrifugal, distributing the notion of identity towards the outside, and the other centripetal, pulling the text back to the most basic, the most elementary, a close-up on the rubble in the corner of the frame in Tom's video. But the centripetal pull of the invisible, of the empty place, the force that is associated with the gravity metaphor in the extract, is also crucially the one that is generative of words to describe the city. If the brainstorming session at I-Com's fails to come up with one single motto for Edinburgh, the characters who inhabit the empty spaces are in no short supply of words to characterise, describe, deride, therefore place 'the city of ...' Tom, thinking about the young mother on the bus:

He turned his head. City of self-pity. City of state dependence. Of three generations of unemployed. Grandmothers aged forty-five. He tells himself it is not just here, it is happening everywhere. [...] City of single mothers. City of lost souls. Of despair. (*D*, 93–94)

After being beaten up by the Ned:

City of mates. City of camaraderie between the downtrodden. [...] city of strangers who went out of their way to help you. City of endless pity. City of fuck off and leave me alone. [...] City of generosity. Genero-city. Generic-city. (*D*, 224)

And lastly, in a comic scene that saves the narrative, and more particularly the treatment of the issue of empty spaces versus phagic spaces, from falling into the melodramatic, the old guys in the pub between them have a whole series of suggestions to make for the slogan:

'C'moan. Edinburgh, City of ...?' shouted Archie.
'Shite,' shouted one. 'Whisky,' another. 'The Scottish Republican Army.' 'Lapdancing!' 'Doleys.' 'Snobby English cunts.' 'Hearts!' 'Albion Rovers!' 'Shortbread.' 'Pakis.' 'Fuckin' tourists.' (*D*, 211)

The tone may vary, but the point is the same. When the zooming in has revealed 'every blade of grass' – to take up the capitalist metaphor of the privatisation of the land – what emerges is yet another concept that is evolved

THE SPACE OF FICTION

by Bauman in a book which focuses on the human consequences of globalisation, and in the introduction of which he states that '[a]n integral part of the globalising processes is progressive spatial segregation, separation and exclusion' (1998: 3). Bauman describes globalisation as effectively creating not just various spaces, but also two significant categories of individuals, whom he calls the tourist and the vagabond, the former living in time, which does not matter to him because he can cross both time and distance easily, while the other category is confined to space, being 'crushed under the burden of abundant, redundant and useless time they have nothing to fill with. In their time, "nothing ever happens"' (1998: 88). What the young mother and her toddler experience is this shrinking not just of space but also of their time, which is blank, with no possibility granted to them of making sense of it, of filling it with events or meaning. This is indicated by another 'conversation' between the daughter and her mother, emphasising a request for meaning that cannot be imparted:

'Wassa, wassa.' The little pink girl pointing out the window.

'Whit? Stop fuckin' gettin' in my face!'

'Wassa. Wassa.'

And he sees what Chelsea is pointing at. And it takes him back to Sean, years before. Hard to describe to a child, but he would have tried with Sean. A warehouse – windows boarded up. To tell his son about post-industrial decline. The British Empire.

'Fuckin' sit down. Shut the fuck up.'

The slap again, this time to the face. (*D*, 94)

What the young mother cannot realise is that the inhabitants of the empty space are also 'vagabonds' in Bauman's terminology, in the sense that they cannot exploit space and chose to move from one place to another in the way tourists do, but are condemned to stay on a piece of land, the Pilton housing scheme or the Glasgow ganglands, which can only go under erasure, with them stuck in it. City of vagabonds. City of Despair.

All of Morrison's novels focus on the vagabonds in spite of the fact that none of them are about the lower classes of society;³² the distinction is in fact the aspect on which the plot in *Distance* is organised: Tom and Meg need to be tourists in order for their story to exist, whereas the painstaking

emphasis on time that precisely cannot be cancelled, the various scenarios Tom tries to imagine in order to be freed from space, from 'distance', and live in time, the radical but manifestly inescapable solution to his problem which is delivered by the Hemingway look-alike in the pub – 'Wan of ye has tae die' (*D*, 213) – the creation of a network of connections between the poorer Edinburgh vagabonds and Tom himself (in spite of the class difference), all those signs point to the fact that his position as a vagabond cannot be exchanged for the power-wielding one of the tourist. In that sense, Morrison is tackling the question of social separation and the social situation in Scotland from a new perspective. He shows that, in a globalised capitalist world, one might have to deal with a reorganisation of the social map, with the middle classes being the vagabonds in Bauman's classification. This leaves a gapingly open blank space of nothingness for the lower classes, an empty space in both the metaphorical and literal sense of the term, in the shape of a social and economic void that leaves behind many characters, only just glanced at in *Distance* as characters who inhabit the non-space of fiction.

In this fictional universe structured by separation and isolation the result is a closing down of space and time. Both *Distance* and *Swung* are claustrophobic novels, for both strive to focus exclusively on the two protagonists' relationship. *Swung*, a novel which stresses the repeatedly failed attempts at achieving intimacy in the contemporary world, reinforces this claustrophobic feeling by alternating David's and Alice's points of view, with no possibility for the reader ever to escape into a third, less suffocating one. Both Alice and David, in spite of their multiple attempts at penetrating other people's bodies or being penetrated by strangers, attempts which are documented in the novel in surgical detail, record the desperate effort to communicate. Ironically, communication is the reason why they have chosen sex, which, according to Alice, precisely precludes objectification.³³ This effort to be in touch, in a sense that displaces the literal meaning of the sexual encounters to reach the metaphorical one, delineates a trajectory which is the exact reverse of the one suggested by Dolly's bad punning on wanting to be fulfilled, as in 'full' and 'filled', which is a movement from the metaphorical to the crudely literal. The swinging website, with its contributors who can ultimately be summed up as a collection of dicks and pussies, as the pseudonym of the first couple encountered by David and Alice,

THE SPACE OF FICTION

Pussygalore, indicates, is itself a world apart. It is a sort of parallel universe to the real world which also reinforces this isolation, the novel only affording the protagonists, as a well as the reader, glimpses of the world around them. As David walks the streets of Glasgow after signing his divorce paper, '[h]e stood there at the bottom of the street and noticed that there were people everywhere. Strange that he'd walked here every day for years and never really taken any notice' (S, 283).

The emphasis is therefore not just on isolation, but also on partition, the deliberate ensconcing of individuals in their own mental, physical, but also electronic prison-house. The novel carries a representation of this compartmentalisation of (physical and novelistic) space in the shape of the revamped workspace at TV Scotia. It is a space misleadingly transparent, with glass partitions ensuring an effect of flowing circulation and communication but which in fact effectively separates the individuals. The novel therefore suggests the metaphor of the open-plan office (a version of which can be seen with the spatial organisation of the West End flats) which allows only for a system of 'sanitised' exchanges of glances, and where no real interaction can take place. As David notes, his relationships can only happen in '[f]rames within frames' (S, 54). This prompts Alice, in another compartment of her life, the swinging scene that she is part of, to yearn for a return to an antiquated form of communication, when she claims that 'she wanted to hear the voices that lived behind the white squares' of the blanked-out wedding pictures posted on the swinging site (S, 138).

In such a version of partitioned space, which promotes one sensory – in some cases sensual – form of communication over the others, it becomes unclear what status remains for David and Alice. Alice creates a parallel space of existence for David and herself which is literally a space of fiction, the space of the stories she tells David in order to induce an erection. *Swung* can therefore be seen as a dual space: a conventional space of fiction which allows the characters to exist, but which they cannot occupy because of the abstraction of this world into a po-mo world, a semiotic world that takes the postmodern postulate to its extremes by staging the fragmentation of the human and which therefore constructs a non-space of fiction, and a shadow space of fiction, the space of the stories in which one of the protagonists attempts to recreate a possible, or fictional universe for the characters to exist in. It is a world in which, in a self-reflexive movement,

the characters have to re-enact the voyeuristic stance which is the basic postulate of all fiction.

In *Distance*, the immaterial space lurking behind the character's narratives takes on more definitive undertones, when Tom first undertakes, as Alice does in *Swung*, to remove himself into a shadow space of fiction, literally, in order for the story in the main ontological level to exist:

Everything had to be 'great'. He had to buy into the dream of self-improvement. Do that impossible American thing which was to believe in yourself, even though you knew the self to be not a thing but all that was left when there was nothing left. He had to believe in himself. Make himself a character in a story. With a goal and obstacles and a happy ending with Meg. (*D*, 307)

What space remains for the characters in their private lives as well as in the public sphere therefore increasingly appears to be a scripted space, in keeping with the main metaphor in the novel, that of scripting one's life, or of living a scripted life (hence the thematic importance of Meg's job as a script doctor). But the metaphor can sometimes become threateningly close to reality, as is indicated by the 'Detox' chapter, where Tom describes himself as a character in a well-known novel:

Take yer pick, mate! – the lady or the bottle? Choose life, chose refrigerators and DVD players and life insurance, choose walks in the country. Choose the *Trainspotting* detox. Cliché or not he had to do it. Draw up the list, like Renton did. He'd already put his hand down the shitter, like Renton did, why not go all the way? Become the cliché. (*D*, 249)

The suggestion made in this chapter in the shape of a joke is that for Tom, there is no other existence but one in which he has to 'go all the way' and 'become the cliché', namely to exist in a reality which has literally already been written, scripted, even published (and filmed). It therefore comes as no surprise to the reader that in a final narrative twist, Tom and Meg's story should be removed to the shadow land of fiction, to a scripted universe turned into a movie. This development turns the whole of the narrative from

THE SPACE OF FICTION

the status of primary diegetic level to that of secondary diegetic level, in the process *de facto* removing the possibility for a relationship to take place on the first level of existence. If *Swung* tentatively represents the necessity to build an imaginative version of the world in order to exist, the end of *Distance* both derides and shatters that attempt by containing the creative escape within the narrow bounds of what has already been scripted, or by upsetting the hierarchy we establish between the real and the fictional or, to adapt this dichotomy to Morrison's fiction, the real and the scripted. This shift works on Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreality of the contemporary world, which he describes as this world 'where the virtual and the real are no longer separable',³⁴ as applied to the creative world of fiction, and to the necessity for a creative exit to the world of liquid modernity.

The artistic dilemma

Faced with the disappearance of both the sense of place and the sense of identity in liquid modernity, Morrison turned to art to indict a world which no longer allows for true expression of the self. He chose several figures of the visual artist to make this point – Alice, and more significantly the trio of artists depicted in *Ménage*, Dorothy, Saul and Owen. While Alice, as indicated above, creates characters in the shape of blanks and therefore defined by their emptiness, in *Ménage*, Dorothy, prompted by her mentor Saul, resorts to videotaping in order to capture the banality of the real and elevate it to the status of art, as the only possible means of capturing the representation of the self. The novel clearly takes a swipe at the Young British Artists, starting as it does from the postulate that dictated their art in the first place. In *Ménage*, Saul epitomises their rebellious stance, when he says for example, '[f]uck art and turn yourself into an artwork. Steal a video camera and record yourself eating, sleeping, taking a shit!' (*M*, 29). And indeed, the intoxicating power of Saul's discourse on both Owen and Dorothy rests on the potential for freedom it contains:

What was the point of adding more art, more reproduction of the same to the stinking stockpile of crap that was our culture? [...] Stop being creative and embrace the beauty of destruction. And in that moment of suicidal despair, reach for your first breath as a truly free soul. (*M*, 30)

But the novel's dual plot and dual temporal structure enables the reader to have access to both the young characters' acts of rebellion and the adult characters' more measured stance, as they have become absorbed in the contemporary art market – with Dorothy a successful artist leading a yuppie existence in Camden and recycling her old artwork over and over again. By turning artistic creation and individual expression, the expression of the 'truly free soul', into an endless cycle of packaging and repackaging the same pieces – which in the process have become products – for the unceasing cycle of consumption, she perpetuates a vicious circle which has forsaken both art and her capacity of expression.³⁵ Her art, rehashed and tamed – or at least having obtained the dubious honour of political correctness – is transmuted into a product and becomes a pale copy as well as a fake advertising of itself, as Owen notices:

It cannot but disappoint – this expensive remake of that stoner game they'd played so many times, only Dot has filmed it and so it entered the canon of art history. The people in this remake are professional actors, their lines scripted. The lighting and production values, superb, almost Hollywood. Their faces, all different in ethnic mix, reflecting the pressure to be politically correct that Dot's work in the last few years had succumbed to. (*M*, 48)

As Dorothy's works are endlessly recycled and turned into commodities which reveal the emptiness of their own meaning, and as Saul, who bridges the gap between life and art by turning himself into a work of art, is discarded from the narrative by literally disappearing into the background only to reappear as a broken man, an empty shell without substance and even as a bitter tramp in Owen's nightmares, what surfaces from the novel is an overwhelming feeling of emptiness, as Morrison explains about Dot's artwork:

They are empty artworks or mirrors to the culture – I had to make them like that because I wanted to show the way that Art got emptied of meaning in the 90s. We became culture addicts, consuming culture that was itself just a mirror of culture that had been made before – recycling to fill the void.³⁶

THE SPACE OF FICTION

The indictment applies in the novel to the inspiration and instigator of rebelliousness himself, Saul, whose philosophy of life and art appears at the end of the novel to have in fact been plagiarised, stolen from a book of quotes. Together with the empty circularity of Dot's works which feed on their own emptiness, it projects the world as a consumerist hell, a world from which no independent critical or creative discourse can emerge. This statement of the dead-end of art appears as a foregone conclusion in an early scene where Owen undergoes an epiphany simultaneously tainted by failure:

It was then as I felt the cars push wind on my face, as I surrendered to their power, that I realised I would never escape from that voice that dared to show me the world in negative, to turn all I had known inside out, and speak to me through other people and things. In that moment all judgment fell away and I glimpsed the fatal beauty of it all. The cars were unstoppable in their force, capitalism could not be overthrown, these things were not external to me, to be critiqued, but inside me, as alive as the toxic car fumes in my lungs. I was of it, and it of me, and the headlights became stars that wept for me. I roared with laughter then and fell headlong into that scepticism that had long been brewing. I fell and all I once believed in fell away. At the end of the overpass I threw my papers to the ground and walked away. Within the week, I had said my goodbyes to Debs and my degree and I became the student of the terrifying laughing man who saw beauty in the crap of the world. (*M*, 23)

This realisation, this hope for a liberation of creativity that conjures up the possible opening up of a path of freedom is doomed from the start as Owen realises that 'these things were not external to me, to be critiqued, but inside me'. The structure of the novel also makes this clear for the reader, by starting on a piece of criticism of Dot's later work which reduces the attempts at rebellious expression depicted in the following chapters to a void of empty consumption, to the status of products that travel the world by FedEx, justifying Morrison's statement that 'the curse of contemporary art is that it is a commodity'.³⁷ Rebellion, independent expression, is therefore pre-empted by commodification, as the vast discourse of emptiness is being

caricatured by the academic-style essays that precede each of the parts of the novel. As meaningless appraisals succeed one another – ‘But the message of [Dorothy] Shears’s work is a non-negative or anti-message’ (*M*, 90); ‘A popular interpretation of this filmed “game” is that it critiques the influence of media culture on the postmodern subject’ (*M*, 131) – the value of art itself is being questioned. In that context, it is the human which seems to be contaminated by this commodification and mass marketing of what is supposedly individual, unique.³⁸ This issue enters the narrative in the shape of an unnamed character who makes a transient appearance and whose role in the plot is unclear as she may or may not be Dorothy’s assistant or agent. As Owen puts it, ‘[s]he seemed like a Wall Street broker or PR girl for some transient product that was basically herself’ (*M*, 100). The girl’s presence in the novel can only be satisfactorily explained as a representation of Dorothy herself, the creative artist with a supposedly personal and original discourse on the world, who basically has only one product left to sell – herself.

Morrison, however, suggests an escape from this creative dead-end, or rather, to the stifling of expression by the overwhelming urge to transform everything, including oneself, into marketable products. In the last chapter the temporal and formal distance between life and art disappears as Owen, lying in a hospital bed, hears a conversation between Dorothy and Saul, who are sitting at his bedside, and simultaneously projects that conversation on a blank screen, while the scene itself is also recast in the shape of the critical essay that the reader is familiar with. This last scene, which conflates elements that were until then distributed into alternate chapters and in which all voices – artistic, narrative, exegetic – coalesce, destroys the distance between life and art for a fleeting moment. It also serves as a reminder that the novel itself is a hybrid, almost a collage, as it puts together text (both the fictional text, and the pastiche of artistic review, complete with footnotes that provide real as well as apocryphal references) and image, with the photos, the stills from Dorothy’s works which are actually photographs that Morrison found on the internet. If one takes into account the fact that he also made trailers – short videos presenting/advertising the book which can be found on his website, and which also tell the story, or at least their own visual version of the story – then the novel as a whole cannot be seen as just a reflection on the emptiness of art in the 1990s. It

THE SPACE OF FICTION

turns into an artistic answer to that statement, by turning the whole of the 'book' or rather the artwork, if one considers its video appendages, into an installation on paper and video, which gives the reader a glimpse of itself. After the chapters consisting of the reviews, Owen's third-person narrative in the 2000s and Owen's first-person narrative in the 1990s, the making of the art object finally, and against all odds, appears in the process of being created in the last chapter, as it dawns on the reader that Owen has in fact been making the composite narrative all along. The artist becomes a synthesis of a variety of identities, setting gender and sex aside, conflating various elements of inspiration.

Thus reconsidered, *Ménage* raises the question of plagiarism, the thematic core of the novel, as a new, valid form of artistic creation, in an age that Morrison calls 'multiscreen', in the process erasing some of the most enduring distinctions that even the postmodern era has struggled to challenge. In an article in *The Guardian* entitled 'Factual Fiction: Writing in an Information Age', Morrison takes the example of the uproar that was created in France when Michel Houellebecq cut and pasted sections of Wikipedia into his novel *The Map is Not the Territory* to predict that 'multi-screening [...] necessarily involves the collapse of a few forms that we have previously held as sacrosanct, not least the distinction between fact and fiction'.³⁹ One of Saul's aphorisms in *Ménage* warns us: 'I fear irony is dead. We shall be laughing ourselves into mass graves' (*M*, 99). Morrison, taking his cue from his character⁴⁰ and working against the disappearance of irony, uses it as the basis for the organisation of his novel, managing to portray the vacancy of art in the 1990s and the dead-end it led artists to, as well as to suggest a way of exploiting that meaninglessness to generate new meanings, new ways of perceiving the world we live in. This reflects the vital role to be played by irony in the literal sense of the word, the Greek sense of dissembling. If one is to draw some optimism from *Ménage*, it is to be found in the idea that art is bound to change the way we see ourselves and therefore the way we are. It empties, vacates and recycles, but also exploits this process to provide fresh ways of describing the world.

So ultimately, what Morrison is carving in his novels is a space of fiction in the vital, very literal sense of a space for art to combat the advent of a reality which, in the sweeping movement of banal nationalism, turns space into non-places, consumerises the unmarketable and threatens to

disempower the human. Finally, therefore, Morrison believes both in the necessity to reconsider our definition of art, and in its capacity to shape events or to alter their course, to have an impact on the trajectory of contemporary history. Put in the aphoristic style that constitutes Saul's trademark, '[a]rt saves us from the prison of history' (*M*, 26).

Notes

- 1 Gallix, Andrew. 2009. 'More Thanatos than Eros: Ewan Morrison Interviewed by Andrew Gallix', First published in *3:AM Magazine*: Friday, August 28 www.3ammagazine.com/3am/more-thanatos-than-eros/ [consulted February 2011].
- 2 Bauman, Zygmunt. [2000] 2012. *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity), p. 2.
- 3 Holcombe, Garan. 2007. 'Author Profile – Ewan Morrison', www.contemporarywriters.com [consulted April 2009].
- 4 Morrison, Ewan. 2009. 'Death of a Nihilist or Obituary for a Nobody', *3AM Magazine*, July 5, www.3ammagazine.com/3am/death-of-a-nihilist-or-obituary-for-a-nobody/ [consulted November 2009].
- 5 Schoene, 2007, p. 15.
- 6 Augé, Marc. [1992] 2008. *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (London: Verso), pp. 63–64. Morrison engages with this notion of the non-place in all his works. *Tales from the Mall*, published by Cargo in 2012, and accompanied by internet resources in the shape of short clips both on Morrison's website at ewanmorrison.com and on YouTube, is a sort of logical conclusion to the exploration of this concept of the non-place and its consequences for human relationships.
- 7 The pronoun 'you' is consistently used by the two lovers throughout their affair in an ungrammatical position as both first and second person pronouns. It is therefore a byword for their love, 'it's you' indifferently meaning 'it's me' or 'it's you' only for the two of them.
- 8 Morrison declared in an interview that he was interested in 'people who lose themselves in different worlds when they log onto the internet'. See Gelonesi, Joe. 2005. 'Interview with Ewan Morrison', *ABC*, www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2007/2014517.htm [consulted August 2009].
- 9 As David says when he logs on, 'Goodbye world, Hello swinging-paradise' (*S*, 112).
- 10 Morrison, in Gelonesi. On Ikea and its eradication of the human and the individual, see Pittin-Hedon, Marie-Odile (2008), "'Learn Your Own Way to Read the Map": rôle et place du roman écossais dans le processus de dévolution', *Babel*, 17, pp. 195–210.
- 11 Morrison, in Gelonesi.
- 12 Morrison, Ewan. 2009. 'Could it be that at the age of ten I had grasped the essence of alienation?' *Scotland on Sunday*, 16 August, www.scotsman.com/ewan-morrison/Ewan-Morrison-39Could-it-be.5558233.jp [consulted October 2009].
- 13 Baudrillard, Jean. [1968] 1996. *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London and NY: Verso), p. 218.
- 14 In *Tales from the Mall* Morrison writes the story of the commodification of the human by starting precisely from the place that epitomises the process – the shopping mall. The result, a mixture of vignettes, anecdotes, short stories and fact-finding sections, can

THE SPACE OF FICTION

- therefore be seen as a logical follow up to *Swung* and *Distance* as it adds to the reflection a disintegration of the traditional means of telling a story. This refusal to abide by the rules separating fiction from reality is an indication of the way the commodification process is taking over our entire – and very real – lives.
- 15 This feature is repeated at a more intimate level, when Alice describes how her mother cut her father's face out of family photographs.
 - 16 It is an ultimate attempt because it is situated at the end of the novel.
 - 17 Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1968. *Rabelais and His World*, Trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), p. 3.
 - 18 Jameson, Fredric. 1986. 'On Magic Realism in Film', *Critical Enquiry*, vol. 12, no.2, p. 307.
 - 19 Alice pitches the show to her boss as 'Big Brother meets key parties meets the 60s' (S, 118).
 - 20 Ross, Peter. 2007. 'Sultan of Swing', *Herald Scotland*, 7 April, www.heraldsotland.com/sultan-of-swing-1.836350 [consulted August 2009].
 - 21 Larsonneur, Claire. 2009. 'Location, location, location', *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines*, no. 37, Décembre, p. 150. Italics mine.
 - 22 See Bell, Eleanor. 2004. 'Postmodernism, Nationalism and the Question of Tradition', in Bell and Miller (eds), pp. 84–85.
 - 23 See for instance the curiously autonomous story of Meg's old neighbour on Fire Island, who gives her a pair of size 10 stilettos before telling her the story of his transvestite boyfriend who died of AIDS in the 1980s, a narrative which could be read as a separate short story.
 - 24 Best, Steven and Douglas Kellner. 1999. 'Debord, Cybersituations and the Interactive Spectacle', *SubStance*, vol. 28, no. 3, Issue 90, p. 132. Morrison both in his fiction and in interviews makes it clear that Guy Debord, and *The Society of the Spectacle* in particular, is a key influence on his work.
 - 25 Debord, Guy. 1967. *The Society of the Spectacle*, Chapter 2, § 42, quoted in Best, p. 130.
 - 26 As Tom scathingly remarks, 'this one word [...] had been used in about fifty other campaigns for everything from men's electric razors to tampons' (D, 237).
 - 27 In Edinburgh all the souvenir shops also sell little statues of a Gibson-looking Wallace, a very real sign of the phenomenon underlined in the novel.
 - 28 See Bauman (2000: 100–04). Bauman contrasts phagic spaces with emic spaces, places which vomit, reject the individual.
 - 29 Bauman, Zygmunt. 1998. *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity), pp. 2–3.
 - 30 Here we touch upon the dystopian, in a perversion of the 1984 model of erasure of the past at the hands of a totalitarian regime.
 - 31 According to Morrison, Tom is 'pro-capitalist against the forces of Scottishness. While Meg, in contrast, is appalled at her own country, the all-American patriotism, and has a dream to escape it and be somewhere more authentic – Scotland', in Gallix.
 - 32 In Joe Gelonesi's interview, Morrison says that he is more interested in middle-class Scottish characters, thus widening the scope of the novels' social analysis.
 - 33 For Alice, 'Fucking was hard to objectify. There was always some kind of human contact. Not just two adverts rubbing against each other. [...] There was negotiation. Empathy. Humour' (S, 155–56).
 - 34 Baudrillard, quoted in Bauman (1998: 88).

EWAN MORRISON: THE NON-PLACE OF FICTION

- 35 Incidentally Dorothy's fate, her being inexorably absorbed in the cycle of consumption, could also express Morrison's own view on contemporary art and particularly the current situation of the YBAs, as the characters in the novel desacralise both the artists who desacralised art and their famous patron, by suggesting titles for Dorothy's own works such as 'Baked Hirst with the formidable formaldehyde sauce!', 'Tampon Terrine à la Emin', or 'Saucisson à la Saatchi', this last a happening which would consist in making 'Charles Saatchi eat his own intestines as a piece of performance art and make him pay for the privilege' (*M*, 205). One notes the food metaphor, which aims for the literal meaning of the word 'consumption'.
- 36 Gallix, p. 12.
- 37 Ibid., p. 10.
- 38 The other artistic movement *Ménage* refers to is of course Pop Art, in particular Andy Warhol's work on both repeating and recycling and on American consumer society. Warhol is actually mentioned in the book, although only in the essays' footnotes. See for example note 6, on p. 91.
- 39 Morrison, Ewan. 2012. 'Factual fiction: writing in an information age', *The Guardian*, Friday 2 March, www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/mar/02/fact-fiction-writing-information-age [consulted April 2012]. It is to be noted that, in accordance with this position, Morrison conceived of *Tales from the Mall* (2012) as a 'multi-screen' art object, as the book was intended to be published by Cargo Crate as an enhanced e-book, with links to Morrison's own videos and other material from the internet. The e-book unfortunately could not be produced, but the videos are still there.
- 40 The distinction between himself and his character is actually very difficult to establish here, as Morrison wrote an article for *3:AM* in which he goes over the life of a supposedly dead artist friend of his who is an exact replica of/model for Saul in *Ménage*. At the end of the paper, however, Morrison confirms that 'In fact my friend didn't die. That was a lie. He never existed. Or rather he was who I used to be'. See Morrison, 'Death of a Nihilist or Obituary for a Nobody'.

**6. The Confines of the Human: Shorter Fiction by
Michel Faber, Des Dillon, Suhayl Saadi, Ewan Morrison
and *Scotland Into The New Era***

The turn of the century has indeed been the symbolic occasion for the publication of many short stories, commissioned or otherwise, by many writers throughout the country. This last chapter aims to examine shorter fiction originating from most of the directions sketched in the preceding chapters, and will analyse stories written by some of the authors appearing in this book. It will address the 'writing Scotland' postulate, namely the connection between the national idea and literary output. Indeed, in the wake of the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and in the run up to the new millennium, Waterstone's, *The Herald* and the publisher Canongate, for example, launched a literary competition for shorter fiction which resulted in the publication by Canongate of the 2000 volume the title of which, *Scotland Into The New Era*, provides its theme. In the foreword to the volume the publisher, Jamie Byng, notes the success of the venture, with 1,251 entries for the first edition of the competition, as well as the versatility of the responses to the question of Scotland facing the new millennium. The collection contains stories by Anne Donovan, Janet Paisley, James Robertson and Dilys Rose, as well as by less established writers. This chapter will look at its particular contribution to the creative redefinition of Scotland, in connection with other 'post-millennial fables'¹ or short stories that were published during the first decade of the 2000s, namely those collected in Des Dillon's *They Scream When You Kill Them* (2006), Michel Faber's *The Fahrenheit Twins* (2005), Ewan Morrison's *The Last Book You Read* (2005) and Suhayl Saadi's *The Burning Mirror* (2001).² They take the reader to various locations in Scotland, both urban and rural as in Dillon's stories, back and forth across the Atlantic in Morrison's fiction or in 'Millennium Babe', Donovan's story in *Scotland Into The New Era*, to London, or the North Pole in Faber's collection, as well as Scotland and the Middle East in Saadi's stories. Between them, these collections of stories therefore map a world that is not contained within the geographical boundaries of Scotland,