Dave Eggers, *A Hologram for the King* (McSweeney’s, 2012)

Dave Eggers’ *A Hologram for the King* plots the expatriation of American Alan Clay, who travels to the United Arab Emirates to sell King Abdullah telecommunications for his city in development. The baldly named ‘King Abdullah Economic City’ would outdo Dubai in its expression of limitless ambition, in size, in defiance of habitat. Following Clay’s dogged attempt to find business there, the plot presents a series of displacements that show how ‘westernisation’ no longer exists as such. The proposed city, whose immediate models are eastern, is an obvious sign not of western imperialism, but of globalisation. Eventually, the contract Clay vies for is finally awarded to a Chinese company (one that has appropriated an American patent). Ultimately, Clay is a detrerritorialised American for whom all roads lead east. Clay’s fate parallels America’s in the era of globalised techno-capital, its great age as a superpower supported by domestic production and national economic agency decidedly past. In the end, Clay remains in the UAE, hoping to be repatriated in a city that doesn’t yet exist. He is the very subject of multinational business, with no real home, no determinate national base. Thus Clay represents American industrialism that has literally lost its place in the world’s economy. He seems virtual, the eponymous hologram, no more American the golden arches or any other multinational brand (such as the Schwinn bicycles he once sold, lost to outsourcing and finally to China). On the other hand, Clay (as his name suggests) is constituted by earth, however pliable. Indeed, like the absurd but realisable city King Abdullah builds on earth that can hardly support it, Clay is a paradox.

Egger’s postnationalist theme displaces rather than foregrounds environmental concerns. While the novel includes careful descriptions of the mountainous land around Jeddah, the coast where the new city is in being built, the desert in between, all appear as an uncanny frontier where the American cannot adapt. No one can because the enthusiastic creation of all-you-can-eat markets promote blatant disregard for human and environmental wellbeing. Unfortunately, when Egger addresses the division of the virtual and biotic, he does so with romantic asides that maintain their separation. Nature, here, provides a romantic counter-narrative to the story of economic progress: ‘The work of man is done behind the back of the natural world. When nature notices, and can muster the energy, it wipes the slate clean again.’ This Ozymandian mystique obscures the premodern history of coexistence between bioregion and human lifeways. The only past the novel really concerns itself with is Clay’s, with its domestic post WW II trajectory leading directly to the Middle Eastern present.

*Hologram* sounds the death knell of American exceptionalism as the late petroleum economy and the information age move the action decidedly away from a North American centre. The American Dream defined by immigration to American shores has itself become an export, many times removed. At one point, the novel describes a sandal merchant whose goods seem indigenous but are actually imported from India, where they can be made cheaply enough to earn him a castle, built in what may one day be the suburbs of the Economic City. Meanwhile, Clay and his staff experience one minor indignity after another attempting to do business with a nation state whose alliances are complex, obscure, and indifferent to the west.

The society Clay tries to immerse himself in, with not much success, is also a theocracy where civil rights are reduced to the worst nightmares of the Cold War, wherein individuals may be denounced by resentful rivals to the state at any time for transgressions.
(here, religious taboos), but where everyone who can finds a way to party like it’s always the end of a millennium rather than the start of a new one. Clay is dragged to one orgiastic bacchanal after another, in a country where drinking and sex outside the strictest possible terms are both illegal. At the same time, personal rights are vulnerable and ambiguous, where they exist at all, and slavery as well as labour exploitation is openly practised. The neoliberal version of globalisation that equates middle class development with an increase of human rights is put to the test here, but more: the midcentury ideology that made capitalism and communism the respective friend and foe of personal freedom is, in the new world order, replaced by a global economy where communists and capitalists compete to provide goods to theocracies, and labourers be damned.

This moral incongruity parallels a disjunction of another kind, one related to a paradox of mobility. Despite the futuristic nature of the technology that Clay retails and the energetic touting of the City as the new frontier, much of the novel depicts Clay waiting for meetings that never happen, his staff bored and enervated by one unproductive day after another while they wait forever for internet service or for the wiring that would let them set up a high tech presentation. The incongruity here is between rapid techno-capital development and conditions that cannot really support state-of-the-art trade. Clay’s business day consists of long, meandering cab rides from his hotel to the City, blocked or dropped communications, searching for functionaries who never show up at their offices, and coping with an underequipped worksite. Eggers depicts a constant sense of wasted time and empty effort without losing the narrative’s drive and his reader’s engagement, while he effectively deconstructs high speed business culture. These setbacks recall Don Delillo’s Cosmopolis where a forward-looking cyber-trading antihero stays stalled in New York traffic for more than half the book. In both cases, the authors reflect on a time out of joint in an entirely new way, a moment characterised, to borrow David Harvey’s famous term, by space-time compression that coexists with incongruous interruptions, as if an older physics were still at work, one that predates virtual reality, one where the rules of gravity still apply.

Hologram for the King reads a bit like a homage to Delillo with its slips into hardboiled syntax and in its way of rendering an alienated protagonist through prose both intimate and restrained. Eggers portrays an overwhelmingly complex world in a quiet way, through a character who is not himself literary or particularly analytic and whose self-involvement is as naïve as his engagement in Saudi Arabia. Alan Clay is a kind of ‘lite’ version of the Hemingway hero, a character pared down even from Delillo’s facile Hitler Studies professor, Jack Gladney. This is not to say, of course, that either contemporary lacks sophistication, but that their decidedly white, male protagonists are somehow historically and deliberately deprived of gravitas. Egger’s novel also shares Delillo’s interest in evoking emptiness. Pared-down episodes have a subtly sinister tone and a rich metonymic import: a brilliant confrontation between Clay and Filipino laborers over another American’s discarded cell phone; the probably irrevocable estrangement between Clay and the only Arab friend he has made over Clay’s own eagerness to display his prowess with a rifle. There are certainly notes of Richard Wright’s classic ‘The Man Who Was Almost A Man’ in that scene, leading one to ask, among other possible questions, why is Clay positioned as an initiate here, as a man who is not quite a man? The way that Eggers imagines Clay as a man-child in a world where there are no moral adults is an important theme of a novel where no one seems to be responsible for anything; everyone is working toward some collective goal but no one is capable of vision beyond impressing a King with the newest of playthings so that he, in turn,

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might impress the world.

As a novel about the future of democracy in the multinational age, *Hologram for the King* is both elegant and chilling, like the spy novels of the Cold War era but without the heroics. A book whose title refers to a simulacrum, it is a book about absence, especially the absence of wisdom, an inauspicious condition for America’s initiation into a new world. That world, with its eastern-leaning economy, makes America the new *old world*, but one whose youthful optimism had long been hypostatised by the culture of retailed innovation, the moral adolescence of the new-and-improved. Eggers novel is neither satirical nor moralistic, rather, mildly elegiac. It shows us that something grave is missing.

**Martina Sciolino**