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PhD Thesis

Faith at the Edge: Religion after God in four novels by Douglas Coupland

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Abstract

Douglas Coupland's novels offer a broad critique of specific cultural conditions on the North American west coast. His primarily suburban characters suffer from identity crises, social fragmentation, family dysfunction, uncreative working conditions, a lack of meaning and a lack of political agency. In *Generation X*, *Life after God*, *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Hey Nostradamus!*, the four novels on which I focus in this thesis, Coupland positions his characters on the edge in manifold ways: on the edge of madness, on the geographical margin of the continent, at the threshold of the end of time, and on the verge of great, transcendent truth. This thematic liminality defines the specific culture about which he writes: middle-class, young, North American, disillusioned suburbanites. The central questions this thesis raises are primarily psychological and political rather than religious. What, after God in this culture is dead, can replace the cathartic and transcendent psychological functions that religion once filled? What can stand in for the sense of agency and social connectedness that ideology founded on religious certainty once conferred? In teasing out Coupland's answers to these questions I examine the multiple layers of spirit in Coupland's imaginative universe: tendencies to romantic notions of environmental paganism, the residual effects of dominant and hierarchical religion, and his tentative probing into an altogether new basis of belief and agency.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I examine the psychological crises of Coupland's characters through the lens of Kristevan analysis. Julia Kristeva's conception of the subject as founded on language, constantly in flux, and always threatened by the return of the abject is uniquely suited to illuminating the post-religious intrapsychic conflicts of Coupland's characters. There is a remarkable parallel between their work: what Kristeva sets out in theory, Coupland's characters play out in narrative. Chapter two reads the spiritual significance in Coupland's locations with theoretical counterpoint from various postmodern thinkers, primarily Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard who have distinct visions of the future. The

third chapter of the thesis looks closely at the apocalyptic themes in Coupland's novels. Apocalypse in Coupland's work refers both to the teleological, religious apocalypse of manifest destiny, and to the literal end of the world and the death of its people. The final chapter is a meditation on the potential for the post-religious religion which Coupland has knitted into his novels. I attempt to express this potential for belief more directly than Coupland has in order to test it against current philosophical and scientific discoveries and collate it with long-standing cross-religious mystical traditions. I find that Coupland's novels do indeed contain the raw material for a coherent expression of a powerful, transcendent belief after God. I argue that fictional narrative, because it is constantly revised and never categorical, a wave-pattern of potentiality rather than a vehicle for singular, static meaning, is the ideal method for expressing and disseminating this new belief. Coupland's very indecisiveness and refusal to settle on a definitive stance makes his deployment of narrative uniquely suited to the task of expressing this new belief.