Chaos and Order in Joseph McElroy’s Lookout Cartridge

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1 Joseph McElroy has produced eight novels reflecting on the ways human experience, seen as a collaborative network, can be conveyed within the constraints of the linear process of writing. His novels are intricately composed, dwelling on the linguistic nature of narrative and involve experimentation in narration, syntax, and structure. *A Smuggler’s Bible* (1966) presents a reflection on sacred texts and offers an opportunity for the unusual assemblage of eight stories that David, the narrator, reads aboard a transatlantic ship. *Hind’s Kidnap. A Pastoral on Familiar Airs* (1969) is an inquiry of kidnappings, the deciphering of which relies on a “dense nightmare anonymity—New York, Brooklyn Heights, terrible genealogy, the self in relation to others.” *Ancient History: A Paraphase* (1971) is composed of detective puzzles that question the meanings and causes of psychological evolution, as field theories are applied to people’s lives and contaminate the processes of perception, thinking, and writing. *Plus* (1977), the disembodied brain of a scientific researcher, with all its traces of an intimate life, is put into orbit in order to communicate with Earth and send information about his reactions to sunlight. *Women and Men* (1987), is an evocation of the connections between communication systems. In the 1,192 page novel, McElroy ambitiously creates communicative and integrative systems that make the structures of our lives. *The Letter Left to Me* (1998) presents a boy reading a letter from his dead father, the written words of which enable a mental discussion between the two characters. *Actress in the House* (2003) tells the story of actress Becca and lawyer Daley, as they “begin a precarious period of discovery, [...] slipping a boundary to both past and future.” These different examples show McElroy playing with intimate life, technological data, and scientific systems as themes and structures, allowing a certain conjunction [...] of ordinary women and men, children, family, domesticity—that whole area—and this other, we may say larger, matter, which involves technology and science and disaster, urban planning and that whole thing.

2 For McElroy, science is not an abstraction isolated from human life; rather it is part of people’s personal experience. In *Lookout Cartridge* (1974), the interrelation between life
and science is most apparent since the author thought of the book “as being a computer in itself.” The novel focuses on the life of Cartwright, a businessman who accidentally recorded terrorist activities when shooting a film with his friend Dagger. The film has disappeared and Cartwright, much like typical detective protagonists, puts his life in danger to find it and understand its disappearance. However, this outline is only deciphered progressively once the reader reintegrates a general idea of the fragmented narrative. It is impossible to achieve a unified and coherent comprehension of the narration when reading the novel because it is fractured into different times and spaces so that the reader loses his or her coherent axis of chronological elements.

Cross categories and multiple reciprocal structures blur temporal and spatial bearings, as well as the hierarchy of events. Influenced by chaos and system theories, McElroy creates a world both disordered and highly organized. Indeed, his attention to extra literary information demands narrative and stylistic deformations that create obstacles for his readers, which forces them to ponder how and why disorder both forms and challenges narrative patterns and interpretive methodologies. Such treatment of data plays with the risk of incommunicability, but also implies that order can arise out of chaos. In realizing that the narrative’s relational networks point equally to integral order and disorder, the reader needs to formulate new reading methodologies, attempting a progressive ordering of a mass of contradictory elements. In this essay, I will elaborate on the nature of such methodologies, as I explore the multiple systems of information that create a new kind of “order” and the ways in which the complex organization leaves space for the reader to intervene in the making of the narrative. Such chaotic reading processes allow us to reconsider the possibilities of linguistically organized systems and contemplate the implications of the relationship between open systems and literature.

When reading the novel, it is hard to find bearings because time and spatial structures are never clear. Cartwright mentions the “crossed connections one often overhears in the London telephone system,” and reading the novel often feels like witnessing such connections. As McElroy notes, “in Lookout Cartridge there is in the sentences and in the information a vast amount of overload to give the reader a sense of teetering on the edge of not understanding.” Therefore, in approaching the novel, we experience a sense of failure: we lose control over information because we are not accustomed to go through it the way the novel forces us to.

The story starts with Cartwright’s fall in the New York City subway, and his puzzlement about who pushed him and why. Cartwright first meets with Claire, Dagger’s niece after his arrival in New York. During his discussion, he realizes that Dagger had involved people in the film without telling him. He also finds out that his film has been viewed by other persons, and that, Outer Film, the company Claire works for, made a movie parallel to his shooting; they used some of his scenes. While Cartwright is making these discoveries in New York, the original copy of his film is stolen from his house, his wife Lorna starts an adulterous relationship with a young man from her choir, and his daughter Jenny goes out with Reid, who is distantly involved with Outer Film, and may be using Jenny, who had typed her father’s film diary, to gather information about Cartwright. In making links between his film and the events surrounding him, Cartwright realizes that other families are involved: Gene, Jack, and Paul Flint want to destroy his film because they are implicated in the terrorist network caught on tape. To put an end to the terrorists’ violent threats, Cartwright decides to destroy his film when he finds it in Dagger’s apartment, but the terrorists have also stolen his diary, and they still hunt him.
Cartwright soon realizes that he can undermine them, as they are more divided than he first thought. When captured by the terrorists, he "sow[s] confusion among them." In addition, Jack Flint, who wants to stop his family’s involvement with terrorist activities, has set up a camera to record the activities in the warehouse where the terrorists are holding Cartwright, which bewilders them. Their power is further disseminated when, on the novel’s last page, Cartwright throws a TV set on Len Incremona, the most violent terrorist member.

Adding to the intricacy of these networks of people and power, McElroy constructs a dense time and space structure: within seven days, Cartwright goes to New York City from London, flies back to London, goes to New York again and returns to London. Then, he takes a train to Glasgow, flies to the Hebrides where he goes to the Stones of Callanish and Mount Clisham. Back in London, he “loops” to New York where he goes back and forth within a labyrinthine space (apartments, lofts, warehouses, and cabs). On top of these complicated movements in space, McElroy’s treatment of time is complex. Cartwright’s flow of ideas conflates different times so that earlier episodes involving his friends and family and the shooting of the film interrupt the present. Indeed, Cartwright shot scenes in Corsica, Stonehenge, the London Underground, the Marvellous country house, and other places. Descriptions of these shots or excerpts from Cartwright’s shooting diary layer the narrative. As Arthur Saltzman notes, in Lookout Cartridge, a “mental locus is chewed out.” However, the logic of Cartwright’s mind is often obscure, so that the relationship between past and present events remains incomprehensible, and in some cases, it is impossible to distinguish past, present, and future.

This dense temporal and spatial structure is part of the general sense of connectedness in the narrative: the terrorist Nash says of Cartwright that “he’s got connections, connections.” Being connected gives you power: if Cartwright connects with people or makes connections between them and/or events that surround the disappearance of his film, he may put an end to his quest. What is more, in being connected to the right people, one can enter social spheres that are closed to others, or use one’s acquaintances to solve issues, which is also what protagonists are doing in the novel.

While the protagonist and the reader’s connecting activity in putting together pieces of detective puzzles is typical in detective novels, in McElroy’s fiction, this activity introduces confusion. The reader is left probing the role of connections in mystery solving. In this context, we wonder, “Is Lookout Cartridge a detective novel? Yes. No. A mystery? Solvable? Yes. No. Is Cartwright our good guy? Yes. No. Is he an amateur detective? A parody one? No. Who is Cartwright? A computer virus.” Piotr Siemion summarizes the reader’s puzzlement, and in calling Cartwright a “computer virus,” he implies that the protagonist enters systems to destabilize their effectiveness, which is also what the novel itself is doing to the detective genre. The novel uses ingredients of detective novels: an important object disappeared, terrorists violently keep control of the situation, and Cartwright attempts to solve the mystery, just like any detective whose goal is to find out people’s hidden motivations and restore order and truth. However, the intellectual puzzle of Lookout Cartridge does not reach the goal of a detective plot: our coordinating activity does not enable us to reintegrate retrospectively all of the steps that solve the mystery. Indeed, “the more Cartwright discovers, the more pieces fit the puzzle, the more puzzling everything becomes.” In addition, the end does not offer a climactic explanation tying all the threads of the narrative. "Lookout Cartridge is a journey. But many
of its arrivals feel unsettlingly inconclusive,”¹³ McElroy states in his introduction to the book, “One Reader to Another.” Although we understand in the end that Cartwright disempowered the terrorists, other sub-plots are un concluded. The author adds in the introduction, “we may also want to know what happens to Cartwright’s daughter Jenny at the end. We may have to wait.”¹⁴ Thus, by means of coordination, which is also fundamental to the detective, the reader understands that what is at stake is not resolution. This discovery has implications on our conceptions of knowledge and power, as it implies that the connectivity model does not directly lead to control. As a matter of fact, in complex systems, characters and readers are often fooled. For example, at first, Cartwright thinks nobody knew about the content of his film or his own diary, which turns out to be wrong, and the terrorists, who seemed to be a closed system under tight control, are threatened by his film and searches.

These reflections on power and connectivity have repercussions on our reading methodologies. If our goal is not just to solve the puzzle of the novel, then we have to reconsider the functions of these mythologies and written compositions. Reading a detective novel implies linear deductions from hypotheses. However, in Lookout Cartridge, the “accumulation of ‘clumps of data’”¹⁵ hides a logical progression. Thus, the story progresses through an unlinear mode of organization. Although unlinear reading and writing is impossible, McElroy attempts to disturb our linear access to language to the extent that linearity itself represents unlinear modes of expression and thinking.

The integration of contradictory modes of representation implies that opposed poles coexist in the novel: disconnection paradoxically creates connection and vice versa. Indeed, McElroy includes “connections composed of disconnections” in his fiction; the text is “designed to break so that the reader [...] feels pieces reforming as if attracting and acting at distances from each other.”¹⁶ This mode of presentation of information is the result of McElroy’s interest in complex structures—adaptive structures made of a large number of elements that interact dynamically and nonlinearly by exchanging energy or information. In such structures, “the behavior of the system as a whole cannot be predicted from an inspection of its components.”¹⁷ As Paul Cilliers explains, the behavior of the complex system is not determined by what is contained within its components, but by the nature of their interactions. Thus, the dynamic set of relationships of complex structures can generate “patterns,”¹⁸ simple modes of operation that structure the components’ interaction. In this context, seemingly rambling, Lookout Cartridge consists of stable patterns that emerge out of the interactions between the elements of the narrative. First of all, McElroy sets up the novel around Cartwright’s penetration of the terrorist system. The protagonist does not understand why his film is missing, but progressively gains power in entering the terrorist circle so that “an entire relational network or fictional topology emerges, articulated primarily by metaphoric extensions of the way Cartwright inserts himself like a ‘cartridge’ into various spaces and systems that constitute his ‘world’.”¹⁹ Cartwright himself alludes to his position as “a cartridge filling its place.”²⁰ He says, “I was a cartridge myself” or “I am a lookout, I am a lookout between two forces.”²¹ The more the narrator sees himself as a cartridge, the more the narration mimics a cartridge-like vision. Cartwright’s experience presents a parable of the whole novel since “readers ‘have’ only this Cartwright-Cartridge”,²² or, as Gregor Campbell puts it, “the insertion of narrative Cartridges becomes McElroy’s fictional technique.”²³
In that sense, Cartwright can be considered as an attractor, or that which, in chaotic systems, makes every movement converge toward its path of action, creating new equilibriums. He also appears to be a governor, which in Information theory is understood as any central device—including message—which acts within a system or on parts of a system to alter its ‘state’ or behavior.”24 Indeed, every character is linked to Cartwright by a close or distant relationship, and he has the ability to disrupt the order of the systems he enters. However, contractions and divergences compose the overall connectedness of people to Cartwright, which explains the seemingly disordered organization of Lookout Cartridge’s world.

The tension between chaos and order concurs with hints in the narrative about scientific modes of organizing and understanding information: characters discuss the impact of recent technological developments, explaining, “now you’re going to have plasma crystals and that’s a digital system that changes the whole future for us, analog computers are antiquities. Not yet the other says.”25 In this passage, the debate about the analog and the digital leads us to consider their impact on reading practices. Thomas Leclaire reminds us of the distinction between these two modes: the digital is a “simple-minded linear” process and the analog represents “the power of simultaneous and relational calculation.”26 Digital representations use arbitrary codes whereas analog representations use real images. Language can be associated to the digital through its use of codes and it cannot be “simultaneous” like the analog. In the context of Lookout Cartridge, the book opens on a digital pursuit; Cartwright wants to find out who destroyed his film, which is a linear quest. However, as Cartwright interferes with multiple networks of people—the terrorists, his daughter’s world, his wife’s circle of friends and her affair, his own relationships including his disloyal friend Dagger—he realizes that he must loop into these networks and deal with them simultaneously. Each clue inserts Cartwright into a sub-system, just like a cartridge in the complex system of the book. Cartwright’s experiences correspond to the process of reciprocal relations in system theories. Ludwig Von Bertalanffy defines a system as “a set of elements standing in interrelations.”27 In such systems, there is “a discontinuity in knowledge between the parts and the whole.”28 However, chaos theory reveals that order arises out of systems because of their self-organizing abilities; “microscopic random fluctuations […] can bring about macroscopic transformation.”29

Such transformations characterize McElroy’s novel, which is laminated into pieces interlacing and forming a general system. Elements that seem inconsistent at first progressively penetrate the computer-like narrative and change it. In an interview with McElroy, Bradford Morrow points out that the author “establishes little words, or phrases, that become the nuclei of linguistic energy fields around which the text begins to form.”30 He associates this notion to the use of shtip in Lookout Cartridge. During a conversation between Lorna, her friend Tessa, and her father, Dr Zeidel gives a summary of the different meanings of shtip, which “first means a push […] a push in the teeth in the sense of bribe to keep the mouth shut; then […] don’t push in where you’re not wanted; and shtip of course in the sexual sense; and you have also […] when the mother says to her child at the table stuff and hush, eat and shut up.”31 While this concept appears insignificant to solve the novel’s mystery, Cartwright refers to it in various contexts, and it gains importance: “I got a shtip in my gut—Tessa’s Yiddish for stab—and I wanted a long hot bath,” “The shtip came again and again like the film paying out in my dream,” “My shtip exemplifies the maple and parallel sorties which raise our brain above the digital
computer to which it is akin.” The word, first attributed to Tessa’s Yiddish, integrates Cartwright’s vocabulary. Later on, the narrator links shtip to information on Māya, another parallel theme in the novel that we cannot easily assimilate to Cartwright’s quest: “A shtip in time, says an old Māya proverb I adapt from the Hindu, may well have to be its own reward.”

The first time we come across a reference to the Māya, Cartwright says “Māya Māya Māya was one word. The others didn’t understand. Hell, I didn’t understand Māya either. Not then.” A little further on, he mentions Dudley, Tessa’s husband “correct[ing] Tessa at a Mexican restaurant”: “(Kokulcan did not simply arise in Yucatan as a Mayan god reborn from the Aztec Quetzcoalt [...] for about this time Kokulcan who has some but not all of Quetzcoatl’s characteristics first shows himself among the Maya of Yucatan).” These are extracts from a long and theoretical paragraph dedicated to Mayan history, as Dudley is a scientist doing research on it, but Cartwright also says: “Māya is the world this side of the truth,” “I am Māya.” At the end of the book, “Maya” comes up in everyday life, in “Maya jaguars.” It is as if Mayan history and symbolism were apart from the general plot, but told in parallel, and finally enter it, progressively. Thus, when shtip and Māya interconnect in the narrative, two different patterns of information commingle, which accentuates the sensation of “stereo or lumping narrative effect.” That is why McElroy mentions the “secret means of revelation [...] of the Hindu Maya of which I make in Lookout Cartridge what Roland Barthes might call ‘terrorist use’.” The reference to Māya and shtip progressively contaminates the narrative, much like Cartwright’s penetration in various systems. In the end, shtip represents the overall journey of the book, qualifying the ways in which “different levels are considered to be connected through coupling points.”

Cartwright keeps remembering a ball a childhood friend, Ned Noble, threw at him; its movement and the final TV fall, associated to shtip, represent Cartwright’s power and the curves of his connections to people.

Shtip also qualifies our reading experience since the novel is a literary mode of connection, a leap toward the reader. In this respect, we can compare the organization principle of the novel to the way reading works: “literary texts inevitably contain elements that are not immediately decodable and that therefore function for their readers as what information theory would call noise.” When we read McElroy’s fiction, we struggle and may have to re-read it. This is particularly clear in his use of dialogues and voices: there is no punctuation differentiating speech from narration, which creates improbabilities, as the narrative itself is broken into dialogues, monologues, and summaries of sequences of the film, themselves narrated or scripted. In the following excerpt, Cartwright is “showing an American girl London,” and having a beer with her—a “college friend Sub’s wife’s former roommate” whose name he has forgotten:

In a small antique pub where every varnished line seems out of plumb you buy her a late lunch. You tell how Wren couldn’t get his way after the Great Fire, the Parisian unity of radiating axes offended the English mind, so London remains neighborhoods. Yes, instead of a baroque wheel (you say, wondering about another pint and about Connie), or for that matter say a grid like Manhattan, you say—but then you say Oh Christ and with a smile raise your mug and she touches and says, Thanks for riding down in the elevator with me and she means it.

First, this passage is ambiguous because Cartwright does not remember the woman’s name until he names her “Connie” here. Secondly, “you say,” “you tell,” “and says” saturate this passage and ironically underline the fact we are reading a dialogue that is not presented as it should be. The brackets introduce Cartwright’s thoughts, but his
observations about having another beer and about Connie start with, “you say,” which is misleading. In the last sentence, there is a shift from direct speech to reported speech. “Thanks for riding down in the elevator with me” are the words Connie uttered, but “she means it” would be “I mean it” in reality. As a matter of fact, “she means it” is a phrase we can attribute to the narrator, whose role and reliability we question in such moments. Our doubts about the narrator and the saturation of voices make it harder to follow the story. Here, reading can be associated to filtering noise because we progressively organize data: what appears disturbing at first in the narration turns out to be the intersection of a new system with the first. This implies that, as readers, we go through intersections of systems, shifting between local and global, micro-systems (and from different angles to approach such systems) and the macro-system of the book. Indeed, McElroy has always had interest in shifting visions, and the “microscope and telescope” have been sources of inspiration for his writing.

In the novel, the relationship between micro and macro visions relates to fractals theory, a theory dedicated to the ways in which the infinite decomposition of a simple process’s primary pattern creates a complex process. In fractal images, the degree of irregularity is regular; irregularity repeats itself regularly. Koch’s curve, for example, is a fractal model in which a global image decomposes analogically into smaller images adopting the same form, which creates a complex structure. In *Lookout Cartridge*, analogy governs the arrangement of information on different levels. First, McElroy plays with analog identities. Numerous characters look alike: Jenny, Cartwright’s daughter, resembles Claire so much that her father takes one for the other: “back down the swarming block I saw Claire; it had to be Claire because she still looked much like my Jenny”; “Jenny was in London and she did not wear lipstick, though she looked a bit too much like Claire.” In addition, there are two Johns, two Jims, Mary and Marie, and so on.

Fractal structures also appear thematically: elements appear separately but, at the same time, each detail is linked to the other pieces it was fragmented from and to the book as a whole. Echoes between micro and macro visions organize the novel. Structurally, *Lookout Cartridge* is composed of seventeen numbered chapters and fourteen named sections called “inserts”: Printed Circuit Cut-in Flash-Forward, Vacuum Insert, Yellow Filter Insert, Slot Insert, Dagger-Type Cassette, Carriage, Unplaced Room, Love Space, The Marvelous Country House, Corsican Montage, Lookout, A Route to Paul’s, Hinge, and Cartridge. These inserts deal with the footage of the film (although a binary opposition between the inserts summarizing the footage and the narration focusing on Cartwright would be a simplification since the two parts of the narration are more permeable, regardless of the structural divide). Similarly, the chapters are themselves composed of juxtaposed subject-matters. Those subject-matters are presented with different styles and tones. Therefore, the interpolated sections of the novel resemble a Chinese-box composition where everything is interconnected and analogically organized. Visually, the inserts do not appear on a separate page: they physically insert the chapters, making the text typographically dense. Thus, the inserts and chapters are different layers of the narrative that make circuits through networks of information. To that extent, the “novel’s structure is signaled by the novel’s appearance as a constructivist-like assemblage.”

This composition, in line with the analog models that influence the structure of the novel, emphasizes a spatial figuration of information. That is why John Johnston stresses the spatialization of McElroy’s writing: *Lookout Cartridge* is “a cognitive map.” He shows that the novel reflects on iconicity because it combines different means of perception and
Scriptural signs are used to transfer visual ones and are organized as visual signs. In his article “Holding with Apollo 17,” McElroy explains that he thinks of “fiction as a new cartography,” and the organization of Lookout Cartridge leads us toward “topographic” concerns. This is Tony Tanner’s approach to the novel: he focuses on Lookout Cartridge’s map-like structure. Indeed, elements are represented through various means in the book, just like in a map where graphic icons are superimposed to colors, for example. Both elements can be seen and do not mask one another, but they give different types of information; the more combination of means, the more information. In McElroy’s fiction, the numbered chapters and inserts appear to be metaphorically superimposed, like in a map. Thus, each section gives information that other means of representation complete.

Through Cartwright’s search, McElroy asks us to consider, “how do we assemble a book? How do you read a map?” The book includes reflections on maps and map reading: “But the map came first,” states Cartwright, and as he explores a map with his son, Will, we come across a description of the way maps work: “The map that Will now knelted on […] was almost half blue […] You see, he said, you have to think of each of these isarithms as if a plane had passed through the land at a certain height. These are the z levels.” Will attempts to explain cartographic means of revelation to his father, which may help him decipher Jenny’s map and the terrorists’ position. Besides, Cartwright’s name, phonetically close to “cart-write,” underlines cartography activities. Thus, the protagonist leads us to consider different ways of presenting and reading signs, while reminding us that “the map is not the territory.” The distance between the map and what it represents forces us to reflect on signs’ arbitrary nature.

When Cartwright goes to Callanish, for instance, the description of the Stones includes various means of description, abstraction, and mapping:

> It took me five minutes to walk past the few cottages and up through the gate to the stone […]
> The gate had no lock, the site no watchman. Few came […]
> I didn’t have to be up in the air to see what I had here at Callanish.
> A Celtic cross.
> The long lower limb was the so-called avenue, a rungless ladder running roughly north to the arms, which were single lines reaching left or east and right or west. The top limb was another single line of stones pointing over the crest of the headland down toward the inland reach of the sea-loch that on the map looked so like a fjord […]

Here, we move from the “cottage” to “the gate” and “the lock.” “The gate had no lock, the site no watchman” introduces two different visions, two different scales. If we focus on the gate, we think in terms of lock, but if we concentrate on the site, we refer to a watchman. The two express the same idea, but are different approaches or lenses to the same situation. While we move closer to the site, the sentence “I didn’t have to be up in the air to see what I had here” interrupts the description of the Stones. Here, we adopt a new vision and imagine the monument from the sky, yet another lens to reality. At this point, we expect Cartwright to describe the Stones since he has set up a variety of approaches to depict the site. However, the depiction of the Stones themselves is limited to a neutral designation of the monument, “A Celtic cross,” yet another mode of description. Right after this short sentence comes a long one, this time describing the cross, which introduces a scrutinizing look at its arms. Every limb is systematically located in space: “north,” “left or east and right or west.” This description ends on the cartographic vision of “the sea-loch that on the map looked so like a fjord,” which
changes again the referential approach of the characterization of the cross. All these changes filter the representation of the Stones; we must go through various kinds of abstraction to achieve an overall vision of the monument.

22 Such modes of representation are to be understood in terms of “photographic double-exposure, creating through their tense and paradoxical coexistence a third space identifiable with neither of the original two—a zone.” Photography, in relation to mapping, is essential in Lookout Cartridge and its focus on film. Indeed, different scales, layers, and close and far visions are juxtaposed and superimposed in the book. Filmic devices also influence the structure of the novel since film editing disturbs linearity and allows the filmmaker to “control” temporality. As McElroy explains, “clearly, even in its absence, the film impregnates the narrative. If you feel that it even gets into the novel’s way of telling what happens, you are probably right.” This implies that, at times, the narrative appears as seen by a camera, with all the traces of fragmentation and decomposition of the filmic and photographic medium. The framing of the narration by a camera is striking when writing achieves zooming effects and changes in scales and angles of vision, as we have seen in the above section.

23 This device also implies a circling of elements through the camera. The title, Lookout Cartridge, conveys the idea of a circular movement since a cartridge is a round object. Settings in the novel are also circular: the Stones of Callanish, the circular Country house, and Stonehenge. Motions follow circular patterns too (movements around the bonfire and loops between New York and London). Thematically, the circles of friends and the circular Mayan calendar also evoke circularity. In addition, the name Cartwright is linked to circles, or more specifically, cart making. Besides, the protagonist often refers to circuitry during his quest: “Circuits in the head make the image feasible,” “I had slipped into other circuits,” “It is my closed-circuit scope.” Here, Cartwright uses circuit images to map out visions of human activities, and he “loops” to make sense of systems of people. Such loops link different moments of the narration that are physically fragmented so that the reader also gathers information in a circular mode.

24 However, when dealing with “the transformation of sphere into flat map,” Cartwright mentions a theory about “line of compass-bearing,” “which [...] is a rhumb line—really not straight at all, a gentle loop from one point of the great circle you were following to another, but in practice a plottable and constant bearing the wheel-watch could hold till you ordered a change.” Here, the “line” is “not straight” and it seems to be the point of departure of a non-linear figure, although in reality, a line is straight by definition. The sphere becomes a map and the line transforms into a circle. Consequently, McElroy invites us to reflect on two-dimensional spaces, which use linear trajectories that can never be grouped, and three-dimensional systems that are dynamic because they contain three degrees of action enabling analog evolutions. Thus, the tension between the linearity of language and unilinear patterns constructs meaning in the novel:

I moved parallel to Dagger across the interior of Sarsen Circle northwest [...] for outside the circle the line of New Druids and others proceed toward us [...] The Indian from Kansas City came through the circle across our advancing path from right to left [...] In the glimmering dark just where the circle’s outer circumference bent out of sight, a man was taking pictures with [...] a very large double-lance reflex [...] We’d stopped moving here ten feet outside the circle [...] Round the circle and frame of another portal I saw Tessa [...] I said, We back away into the circle at their speed. Dagger said, Right. 

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This passage from the insert “Hinge” describes Druids’ meeting at Stonehenge in Cartwright’s film. Movements in and out of circles sector the space. Images of circles saturate the pages describing this scene, but lines also interfere: “parallel,” “circle,” “line,” “right to left,” “circle’s outer circumference,” “ten feet outside the circle,” “round the circle.” In the spirit of fractal imagery, there are also imbrications of circles in the passage: the camera’s round objective films a man whose vision, also framed by a circle, focuses the “Sarsen circle.” However, although an objective is round, what one sees when looking inside a camera is a rectangular vision, and the final image is rectangular. This combination of circular and rectangular visions evokes a kaleidoscope-like image where rectangular visions fracture the circumference of the object.

Such visions affect our relationship to linguistic arrangements: Lookout Cartridge’s syntax expresses formally visual shifts through excessive use of parentheses, dashes, and commas. McElroy speaks of “complex,” “cumulative sentences,” and explains that “sometimes the sentence becomes a narrative in itself”; it “go[es] on and branch[es].”

Just like Cartwright who inserts himself in-between circles of people, sentences insert cartridges of information:

The crowd on the approaching pier is pink, mauve, and brown—red, white, and yellow—green as blood when it flows under the sea—and the crowd is also blue, cornflower, cobalt, navy, chinks of blue in the white shirts, black kerchiefs, w...—but no blue is there on the pier quite like the space you call the sky, a blue you’d catch hold of only on film, where it still is nothing till processed and projected.

This long and complex sentence opens the insert “Corsican Montage.” Here, the filmic vision provokes a semantic displacement: the pier “approach[es],” not the “crowd.” The film presents a colorful composition of “pink, mauve, and brown” and “red, white and yellow.” Dashes separate metaphors and comparisons and make clauses both connected and disconnected; syntactically they seem joined, but semantically, these clauses do not always relate. The information in-between dashes seem to “branch” on its own and loop back into the circuit of the sentence. In addition, the images of this passage are puzzling since “green as blood” associates blood to green instead of red. The complex construction of the novel thus “becom[es] congruent with syntax.” In that sense, Lookout Cartridge does not merely provoke a reflection on complex structures, it also forces us to participate in them, as we adopt our reading techniques to McElroy’s syntactical experiments.

In other words, the novel destabilizes our reading methodologies because, as the writer explains, structural, semantic, and syntactic displacements are “dangerous. You are threatened with forgetting where you were.” McElroy indicates in his introduction of the book that such destabilizations also include our vision and activity in the novel’s circuit: “Trust your sense of being in this book. If you feel enclosed and way inside its widening breakneck circuitous system, you may also feel that you yourself are some subject of this fiction. (You are, after all, being talked to.).”

Indeed, the narrative constantly addresses “you,” which at times refers to an auto-referential “you,” as Cartwright often talks to himself: “you forget the first name as you take her hand,” “you bear two halves of best bitter back to your lanterened nook thinking that Lorna said, Don’t you dare bring her home for dinner.” We encounter shifts from interior and subjective visions of Cartwright’s life to visions of his life told by a “you”
spectator. In such cases, because of the idiosyncratic punctuation of the novel, it is difficult to distinguish free indirect speech and interior monologue.

In addition, the text includes a “you” that unquestionably refers to the reader: “You who read this have me,” “if you are not sure where you are, you have me,” “(if no keep looping; if yes, proceed.)” or “read slowly but not so slowly it is not clear.” “You who read this” establishes a relationship with the reader based on trust and sympathy, and “if no keep looping; if yes, proceed” introduces a didactic tone. This phrase evokes Choose-Your-Own-Adventure-Books in which one conducts the evolution of the plot by making choices when directed to do so. In playing with such modes of storytelling, McElroy gives a certain liberty and an active role to the reader, but the phrase, “if no keep looping; if yes, proceed” also refers to computer information. This formula offers two possibilities, just like “binary code[s] on which digital computers and models of neural action in the brain are based.” Our choice, then, resembles a choice between “zero and one, on and off,” which implies a mechanical reaction to language. Here, the question of the reader’s freedom is complex because, much like Cartwright, when readers think they control the situation, they realize that they have yet again entered a system of information that encircles their every intellectual move. Therefore, the fact that we are “some subject of this fiction” implies that, on the one hand, we feel encased in the system; on the other hand, we participate in the processing of the “cartridge” of the book.

At the beginning of the novel, Cartwright says: “Dagger DiGorro knows all about it. I just take pictures. I don’t develop them.” Because the novel draws a parallel between the film and the novel itself, we are invited to think of the text in terms of a cartridge in need to be processed. In that sense, the dual relationship of empowerment and disempowerment illuminates the fact that “text and readers can switch places: a story of the reader structuring the text easily becomes a story of the text provoking certain responses and actively controlling the reader.” Such interactions between reader and text induce the processes of open systems, “defined as [...] system[s] in exchange of matter with [their] environment, presenting import and export, building-up and breaking-down of [their] material components.” That is why Steffen Hantke underlines that the “denouement” of the novel is “projected outside of the novel itself.” Indeed, while McElroy does not want to simplify one’s access to information, he hoped “to connect the reader to [his] connections” through his composition, to make “bridges of meaning.” In that sense, the text is “a pre-communicative utterance” that does not “deny the impersonal clarities of modern systems,” but our act of coordination is part of these systems. Indeed, for McElroy, “the overload of information is partly an act of giving.” Therefore, Lookout Cartridge is not a mere accumulation of data but a reflection on the effects of contemporary culture and ideologies, the fragmentary nature of human knowledge, the movements of consciousness, and the limits and possibilities of narrative structures. The novel is a poetic demonstration on the possibilities of linguistically organized systems that fosters a reflection on the ways in which we read, interpret, map out, decode, and process language.
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NOTES

2. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 404.
14. Ibid., p. 3.
21. Ibid., p. 21, 306.
33. Ibid., p. 455.
34. Ibid., p. 26.
35. Ibid., p. 308.
36. Ibid., p. 388.
37. Ibid., p. 530.
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46. Ibid., p. 103.
50. Ibid., p. 152.
56. Ibid., p. 404.
57. Ibid., p. 175.
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60. Ibid., p. 56.
66. Ibid., p. 34, 35.
67. Ibid., p. 6, 8, 32, 35.
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ABSTRACTS

In Lookout Cartridge (1974), McElroy insists that we consider language as a system of disorderly connections. Influenced by chaos and system theories, McElroy creates a world both disorderly and highly organized, which forces us to ponder how and why disorder both forms and challenges the narration and our interpretive methodologies. Such chaotic reading processes allow us to reconsider the possibilities of linguistically organized systems and contemplate the implications of the relationship between open systems and literature.

Influencé par les théories du chaos et des systèmes, McElroy crée dans Lookout Cartridge (1974) un monde à la fois désorganisé et extrêmement organisé, ce qui encourage le lecteur à reconsidérer le rôle du désordre qui compose et décompose la narration ainsi que les méthodes d’interprétation du roman. L’organisation complexe du texte invite le lecteur à intervenir dans le développement de la narration, tout comme dans un système ouvert, l’incitant ainsi à reformuler ses stratégies de lecture.
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