

A Conversation with Douglas Coupland: The Hideous, the Cynical, and the Beautiful

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Volume 36, Number 2, 2011

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc136_2art13

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Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Gray, B. C. (2011). A Conversation with Douglas Coupland: The Hideous, the Cynical, and the Beautiful. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 36(2), 255-278.

A Conversation with Douglas Coupland: The Hideous, the Cynical, and the Beautiful

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY BRENNA CLARKE GRAY

DOUGLAS COUPLAND IS ONE of Canada's most successful novelists, producing a consistent stream of international bestsellers since the launch of his literary career with *Generation X* in 1991. But Coupland is also an important cultural critic and accomplished visual artist; he works in all media, from critical essays to cultural commentary to collage, sculpture, and painting. Across his oeuvre, Coupland remains committed to discussing contemporary North American life as it is, neither idealizing nor condemning it. Born in 1961 on a Royal Canadian Air Force base in Germany, Coupland relocated with his family to West Vancouver in his early childhood; his father's military career has influenced Coupland's work, especially his visual art such as 2001's *Spike*. Coupland studied visual art at the Emily Carr Institute (now University) of Art and Design in the early 1980s, and furthered his education in art and design in Italy and Japan. He now holds honorary doctorates from Emily Carr, Simon Fraser University, and the University of British Columbia, where his archive is deposited.

Among his most successful novels are *Microserfs* (1995), *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1999), and *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003). Coupland contributed to Penguin Canada's *Extraordinary Canadians* series with an engaging and lively but wholly unconventional biography of Marshall McLuhan in 2009. In 2010, Coupland was asked to give the annual Massey Lecture; he chose to conceive of it as a "novel in five hours" that came to be titled *Player One: What Is to Become of Us*. His most recent work is 2011's *Highly Inappropriate Tales for Young People*, a provocative collaboration with illustrator Graham Roumieou. But literary works do not exclusively define Coupland's career; recent forays into the performing arts, clothing design, large-scale public monuments, and visual art intersect with his literature to shape a much more interesting and diverse artistic life. In 2004, for example, Coupland wrote and performed a one-man show called *September 10* for the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. He also dabbled in clothing design in 2010 with

a collection exploring Canadian identity for Roots Canada called *Roots X Douglas Coupland*. Increasingly sought after for public works, his best-known large-scale visual art projects include Toronto's *Monument to the War of 1812* (2008) and *Canoe Landing Park* (2009), Vancouver's Terry Fox memorial (2011), and Ottawa's Canadian Fallen Firefighters Memorial (to be completed in 2012). One of his most interesting visual projects, the *Souvenir of Canada* project, demonstrates Coupland's commitment to telling stories in multiple media: it includes two photo books, a documentary film, and an art installation exploring past representations of Canadian identity. Recent art exhibits include *Mom & Dad* (2009) and *In Dialogue with Emily Carr* (2010). Coupland's current visual art project is slated to open in the fall of 2012: for his *Museum of the Rapture*, he has been asking people to submit objects that are them-but-not-them — things that would be left behind after a religious rapture took away the bodies of the faithful, such as dental bridges, breast implants, or wigs. His public appeal for contributions to this latest project can be viewed on his website, at www.coupland.com.

Coupland and I sat down to talk in August 2011 at a coffee shop in his neighbourhood in West Vancouver. This is Coupland's first academic interview in his twenty-year career, and so we started by discussing his seeming reluctance to involve himself in scholarly conversations about his work.

BCG I love the construction of academics in *The Gum Thief*, particularly in Glove Pond and the creative writing instructor. So I want to start by asking for your thoughts about your relationship to the academy, or scholarly readings of your work.

DC I don't really know any of these people. I just don't know that universe at all and I don't follow it. It's like, do I know the plumbers' universe? I really don't. Where I fit in and where people have put what I do is still the art and design world. I am finding, though, that as time goes on and a certain regime starts to vanish, and a newer regime comes in, there's a lot more acceptance. I think with *Marshall* and with *Player One*, there's finally, certainly amongst some people, a grudging acceptance. [*laughter*] Like, okay, he's not going to go away. I look at J.G. Ballard, who I think is just wonderful, and it wasn't until the day he died: "Oh. He was kind of neat, wasn't he?" So I'll have to die to get some level of that recognition. It is getting easier as time goes on. For

people twenty-five and under, I've been around their entire lives. So there's this weird ubiquity to me for them.

It seems to me, certainly of late, that there's a grudging acceptance [by academics]. Any writer my age is still far too immersed in the culture to have any objectivity, which is why I think Europeans can see a bit more of whatever historical timeline or trend we're following and where I fit in. As is natural, I think.

BCG You get read often by Marxists who want to read you in an aggressively anti-capitalist way, particularly with respect to the early novels.

DC One of my favourite writers is Eric Hobsbawm. Wonderful writer, especially historical writer. The astounding coincidence is, in a liberal secular democracy, Marxism as a tool for political action is more or less obsolete, if not completely dead. But it still makes an interesting framework for dealing with our culture, which is highly transactional. The earlier novels, especially, really push that blankness of capitalism to its farthest limit, which is probably why they liked it. I don't know if Marxists see it as the end of the universe or if they see it as something conscious, but it is something conscious. It was interesting — like, when Frances Fukuyama said “the end of history,” the moment I heard that I thought, he's busted, something's going to happen. And of course, 9/11 happens.

I've been reading the *Guardian*. Are we having news fatigue? Like there's just been too much real news lately. There's been no crap news! [*laughter*] Or fake news.

BCG Real news that's not just pushing something else off the front page. News that is legitimately news.

DC If there hadn't been 9/11, the headline would have been, “Shark Attacks on the Rise in Southern Florida.” I have this theory that if you look at the *New York Times*, the *Globe and Mail*, and the *Guardian* or the *Independent*, and they all have three different headlines, then the world's probably okay.

BCG And if they're all talking about the same thing, we're in trouble?

DC Yep. Pretty much.

BCG I really want to talk to you about your relationship to capital-C capital-L Canadian Literature. I don't want to rehash all the Judy Stoffman and the *New York Times* blog stuff from a couple years ago, but you did write in that blog that you don't feel that you write Canadian Literature. In recent years, however, between the Giller nomination and the McLuhan Project and the Massey Lecture and Canada Reads —

DC It's so weird! When you and I sit here and we talk about CanLit, we each know exactly what we're talking about. But to try to explain that to a non-Canadian, you know, what is it? It was a certain form of chest-thumping or nation-building, certainly in the 60s and 70s when there really had to be some sort of definitive break. But when was the last time you heard the name Timothy Findley? Out of that whole genre of writers emerged Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro who would have emerged anyway. You read articles about people in the former East Germany having pre-wall parties where the food is bad and everyone wears terrible clothes because they miss the comfort of that. I think there's sort of the same political reality — and it is a political reality — in CanLit. The arena, the audience, the available tickets, it's all gone. It's just something that used to exist.

The Canadian thing was not some big agenda of mine. It started out very simply with Scott McIntyre at Douglas & McIntyre asking, "Well, what do you think defines Canada now?" It was a very straightforward indexing, *Souvenir of Canada* 1. And that led to 2, and then — it was never something I mapped out. It was, and still continues to be, something completely organic.

Slight tangent — I feel sorry for young writers out there who think that CanLit still exists. Please tell me they don't exist. Please tell me this. Because it doesn't exist. Do you — okay, quick time out from here. Does that still go on in the universities?

BCG It does.

DC Oh my God, that's so scammy and weird. And sad. Oh boy. So, if you're really really, really, really, really nice, Coach House will publish your chapbook or something? And the problem with that is it doesn't seem to address real life. I've sort of decided that my books should always be set in the extreme present, and in the last ten years, they've all been within five miles of where we're sitting right here.

So the question was fitting in to CanLit?

BCG Well, it sort of seems like you're at the party now, if the party still exists. You're engaging with these institutions and pillars in a way that you weren't really invited to do earlier in your career. And now there seems to be a space for you.

DC I mean — I guess if I wanted to, but at this point why would I want to? The only thing that bugged me is that back in the day, they said, "Doug's really trying to join our party." And after a while, it's like, stop saying that. I don't even know who you are. So that's my basic answer, if I can go retroactively back to the question. The party's over. And I've got my own party going now. I'm actually more interested in, is there a Canadian version of the whole McSweeney's movement? I think that would be far more interesting. And as students get to fourth year and beyond, people just do become more sophisticated, and what are they leaning toward? I think that's really where the good work in the future is going to come from.

So, Canada qua Canada? It started with visual work and just sort of — there's an artist A.A. Bronson, who used to be part of General Idea. The other two are dead now. They were this gay art cooperative out of Toronto in the 70s. And he's really exalted in the art world. He's been around forever. He knows everyone and does everything. He runs this chain of bookstores called Printed Matter, which does really esoteric books, like there'll be three thousand pages of just one line going through every page, that kind of stuff. Last summer we were at this thing in New York and we were talking, and he says, "Well, you think a lot of what you're doing is about Canada. But it's actually more about death." And I said, "What are you talking about?" And he said, "Well, look, you've got Terry Fox. Dead. Marshall McLuhan. Dead. A lot of your books deal with death, dying, and ghosts. Canada and extinct notions of what Canada used to be. Had you thought about that, Doug?" And I'm going, "He's right! He's right!" And so, since then, I've begun to do a lot of visual work that really addresses death in a very straight-on way, albeit using a lens of science and pop culture, which is just who I am.

So when you talk about Canada qua Canada it's also about what used to be. And it's also about death. But not about nostalgia. Because I'm not homesick for any of that.

BCG I do see a sort of movement home in your fiction, particularly compared to the earlier novels.

DC Just the first two books were. I was living in California when I wrote the first one. And the second one was just sort of all over. I mean, how many novels? Like thirteen? And eleven have been set here?¹ And I still get people with facial hair in literature departments saying, “His books are all set in the States.” Which means they haven’t looked at anything I’ve done. So.

I think people like aestheticizing something that they’ve never looked at before. It’s a big aesthetic. I love it when I get people who come from Pennsylvania or Italy or something and they’re like, “Ooh, we went to all the streets listed in *Girlfriend in a Coma* and took pictures.” To me, that’s wonderful. Suddenly, something that was blank or invisible now has a beauty to it. It’s funny — this girl I went to high school with, who I barely knew, her house (in my mind) was always Richard’s house in *Girlfriend in a Coma*. And we had our thirtieth reunion and she asked, “That’s my house, isn’t it! I know it!” And actually yeah, Mary, it is. And then they sold it and noted, “Was the house in *Girlfriend in a Coma*.” Someone bought it. A friend bought it. So that’s a really weird twist on capitalism, I suppose.

When you write about something set in your own neighbourhood, there’s an effortlessness about it that gives it an authenticity. And that’s true whoever you are and whatever you’re writing.

I’m doing this one, actually it’s the book I’m working on right now — I won’t say it’s the filthiest, but it’s the rudest book ever written. And it’s about the world’s worst human being. His name is Raymond Gunt and he’s a B-unit cameraman in London. His ex-wife is a casting director who sends him off to the States to work as a cameraman on some sort of reality show set in the Pacific. He never actually gets there. And it’s just the *foulest* language, and really crude stuff. And it’s very liberating and therapeutic to read. And I suppose I have to make sure that — well, we can’t publish it until after we unveil the national firefighters’ memorial next September.

BCG You don’t want them crossing paths.

DC They’ll be like, “What? We’re taking his name off it.” This is a way of saying, for a little bit, I’m pulling back and not doing anything here.

BCG I was reading your play *September 10*, and you refer in that play and in a couple of other interviews since to 9/11 as marking the end of the age of magical thinking. I'm interested in how this ties in to the idea of the end of history that you were talking about before. The concept of the end of history gets proven wrong by 9/11 in a lot of ways. So something I've been interested in is the way you use September 11 as a touchstone in your more recent novels. I'm thinking of the way Bethany in *The Gum Thief* refers to her heart as her World Trade Centre when she's describing the breakup. And it's this very sort of visceral way to describe something that only someone who came of age at a very specific time would say. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about 9/11 in your work and its significance to some of the things you've done in the last ten years or so.

DC It's almost exactly ten years, isn't it? Does it feel like a lot or a little to you?

BCG It feels like a lot to me.

DC Yeah. It's interesting. When they killed Osama bin Laden, they had all these spontaneous (well, I'm sure they used BlackBerry or Twitter) parties. Like, woo hoo! And you realize that there are all these people in their early twenties who've grown up with nothing except this. That makes them, I think, very, very different people than myself. Because I remember the 70s were like a pit. The 80s were about climbing out of the pit. The 90s were actually kind of a golden age, because things were good. So I'm glad we had that final bubble.

I would have thought, more the Americans than the Canadians, simply because we're not quite as delusional, would want people to acknowledge that there's 6.5 billion people on the planet and we share it with them. And it would strip people of delusion. But, of course, the complete opposite thing happened and people became *more* delusional than ever. And I see that *Inside Job* stuff and my heart breaks that people can be that fucked up.

And let me get a little bit random here, and slightly poetic. I think 2001 was the last year that we actually think of as being a year. Like, the 20th century was 1989, 1990, 1991. But what's 2002? What's 2003? It's like buying gas or something. It's not even time. It's something else. We don't have that bubble of modernity that just accidentally happened to

be encapsulated by the 20th century. Lately, we just have this yawning, gaping infinity. We're in a vacuum. Fear of the vacuum.

I'm not helping you out here. I want to be more succinct. I've never actually thought to be so specific about it. Can you narrow it down just a little bit?

BCG Yes! I see 9/11 coming up again and again and again in your fiction. *Hey Nostradamus!* was the first novel you wrote completely after 9/11. In that novel, I was so fascinated by the fact that you never actually mention September 11, and you're always about what's going on in the immediate moment, but in those years at the end of the novel, 2003, 2004, it doesn't come up at all. And yet, I see the whole school shooting scene as maybe working out some of the anxieties around that. I know everybody read it primarily as a working out of the anxieties of Columbine, people talk a lot about it in relation to that. But this idea of these faceless bullies who get —

DC It's about the intrusion into a halcyon existence of something absolutely hideous. Yeah. You might be on to something. There's this TV show called *Hoarders* — do you ever watch that?

BCG Yes! Disturbing.

DC It's A&E. It's the most successful show they've ever had in the 25 to 49 category. And they have *Hoarders* marathons. People just sit and watch them. But people don't talk about it. I flatter myself that I'm a collector, but I hoard like anyone else. I just hoard stuff in frames. And the thing about hoarding is that you take someone who has a slight predisposition to whatever, and then you hand them some form of extreme loss and you can almost time it. Two years later, this utterly unwitting response behaviour happens. Even something like with Terry Fox. He lost his leg, and then two years later, he's hoarding miles.

I think for everyone 9/11 was a massive loss, and there was that two-year period where the churning goes on deep inside you, and then all the manifestations started coming out. Curiously, I think the last decade has been one with absolutely no defining style of its own. Like, nothing. You can't look at something and say, "That's really 2007." There's just nothing. And the only real defining style of the decade, aside from maybe Apple products, is the aggregation of lots of small objects — eBay helps, and Craigslist, and all of that. A thousand erasers or a thousand

owls or whatever. That's just hoarding that's been triggered by some kind of loss as a culture.

The first visual art show I had, *Spike*, with the soldiers and the bottles, opened on September 8 in Tribeca. And then I flew out on the 10th to Madison, Wisconsin. I flew out of LaGuardia, and that was back when if someone was flying, the whole family went to the gate. You could hold a bunch of crap. "Oh, I'm in a hurry!" "Oh, just take it." I do remember thinking, well, that can't last long. And looking out the window and thinking, "Is this my last trip? Will I be dead before I come back again?" Not realizing that Manhattan would actually be the one that vanished before me. I got to Wisconsin, and I woke up, and the airports were all shut down. We all remember that day. And being Canadian, they wouldn't rent me a car, because the policy was don't rent a car to a Canadian because they'll just drive home. There's actually some good Frank Lloyd Wright architecture [in Madison] — that was something I would have liked to visit there, but I couldn't. And after five or six days, there was the possibility that I actually might get stuck there. Now being stuck there has morphed into what if there's an Icelandic volcano and you get stuck in Europe for six months. Or, what if the euro collapses and you're stuck in your house forever because you'll never sell it. We're now in an age of earthquakes. It's just never going to stop.

9/11 was the first domino in that process.

I have a thought about publishing. The thing about publishing is it's the most self-negative industry on earth. It's always on the brink of collapse. Two days ago, the *New York Times* online — by the way, I pay \$12.95 a month for the full version and it's money well spent — down at the bottom of the front page said, "We hate to say it but publishing's actually doing really well right now." On the worst news day of the last five years.²

People really aren't reading as much as they used to. They are buying a lot of books, which is great, but they're not reading them. Of course, it's all going online.

BCG You can hoard ebooks without anybody knowing. They're just hidden away in your Kindle somewhere. They don't actually take up physical space but you're still not really reading them either. They just kind of exist.

DC All these extreme changes. It worries me a lot, sometimes. But I've always sort of known it was coming, so I'm not surprised by it or anything.

BCG A central theme of your work is storytelling and the essential nature of stories — and that extends beyond your novels to include your artwork, such as the clock tower for the recently renovated Don Mills plaza, which tells the story of these CMHC [Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation] houses and their significance to the Canadian cultural landscape.

DC The piece is called *Supernova*. Our sun is not the first sun. Another sun had to die and explode before our sun got born. So in order for the new Don Mills to emerge, the old one had to explode. That's how that happened.

BCG In *Generation X* and *Generation A*, storytelling is right there in the framework of the text, but in your art, storytelling is still really essential. What I find so interesting about your work is that regardless of medium, story seems to be important to you. And you're an experimental fiction writer, when you write fiction. And many experimental fiction writers are more interested in what they're doing experimentally on the page and maybe less interested in plot. You don't lose sight of story. It's the one thing that I see continuing throughout your career, regardless of the medium you're working in.

DC Well, it doesn't come from any family oral tradition. I have three brothers, but we never got bedtime stories or anything like that. I always kind of wonder what that would be like. Like, "Oh wow, my parents are showing *me* attention! I can't believe it!"

Story is an engine. You have to have it if you're going to discuss ideas of any kind. Some books are heavier than others. Some are deliberately bonbons. But without story, how are you going to pull people through a very long trip of 100,000 words? And the problem with experimental fiction is that the characters don't have names, they're *he*, they're *she*, they change point of view, and you just — you don't get through them. And then the writer has a new book and you don't look at the new book. We're wired for stories. We all know that. And — where does it come from? I don't know where it comes from.

BCG I think the Massey Lecture is a really good example of it. You chose to tell a story instead of a more traditional lecture.

DC I think of the Massey Lectures as *24*. It's just like ding-ding-ding-ding-ding [singing theme from TV program *24*]. It was really freaky writing that. Knowing that no matter what there was no way out and no escape. I had to detonate that bomb by four hours and fifty-nine minutes. So that was that tendency taken to a real extreme.

You know, I always write in one direction. I never go back and cut and paste. I never insert something. That's part of the game. That's part of the rules. You can't invent a new character and insert them. In most cases, I know where I'm going, but in the bonbon books like *All Families* or the one I'm doing right now, I actually don't know where it's going to end up. I know roughly where it's going to end up, but, "Oh, that's what happens next!" There is that kind of delight in the unknown.

BCG Do you still write your novels longhand? When I was in the archive at UBC, I noticed even *Hey Nostradamus!* was in spiral notebooks, all longhand.

DC If you weren't here and I was by myself, I might have a notebook and a paragraph and then take it home and transcribe it. But not as a whole piece. Every day, I save a copy of whatever I am writing on Gmail. And I've been doing that the last several books now. And so what we really would like to do is have a big screen the size of this floor. And version one, day one [makes digital noises]. And then you do a time-lapse photo. Changing, massaging. To the final draft. But I think in terms of archiving, that's the future. Not so much reading texts but as data visualization. That's the way I think of it in terms of leaving a trace or a memory of the creation of something. In my head, that's where I see it very distinctly. And it will happen some day.

Remember there was that shooting at Virginia Tech two years ago? Someone looked up Wikipedia: Virginia Tech Shooting, and it got updated every ten minutes by whomever, and that individual did screensnaps and watched the whole thing change. That is where revisionism comes in. It's on YouTube, where else? And it was remarkable. I'm kind of in awe of whoever is bright enough to think of that. Here's a shooting, and it's an art project. It really was.

The next wave of archivists has this new thing called Born Digital. And in the archiving community, that's what they call it. What they

don't have is a protocol for it. They want your laptop. And, no, you're not going through my laptop. They don't want you to go through and delete your own history, so they want it as raw as possible. And there's still no official protocol on that. And there may never be. I mean, "Hi, here's a chunk of my brain. Just take it." I mean, you can't do that.

So I think that again, treating the evolution of a story as data visualization, that is the direction it wants to go in. And then imagine if you saw it again, if there was an insert, it would be red for a second, and then if you delete something, it disappears. You really can see an imaginative or creative process in motion. I bet you anything it will exist in two years. I want to do the first one. It'll be raw. But I think it will become great. And now I want to do it right now!

BCG Okay, I'm going to take you to talk about autism for a minute, because it's been a theme that has emerged over time for you, from *Microserfs* in its nascent form to a fully developed autistic character in *Player One*, who is able to narrate through her own perspective and point of view. I'm wondering where the interest in autism spectrum disorders comes from.

DC Oh, it comes from my family. I can't name names. When you grow up, you think, "Oh, our family, we're the normal family." And then in your twenties that delusion is sort of damaged but not gone completely. And then the reality sets in. With our family, we had a whole spectrum of adult-onset spectrum disorders, which kind of ripped the family apart. Out of the blue, two people just electively vanished. Autistic creep. Is that an expression? I look back and the roots of it were the way one of my brothers was obsessed about the way he came across to other people, which became an obsession with authenticity.

It was actually right around *Life After God*. Within one eighteen-month span, my older brother and my mother's sister, they both just — I don't even know what the phrase is. They just had these massive breaks and they abandoned their roles. Family, friends, absolutely everyone. And that was twenty years ago. And still, no one's ever heard from them or seen them ever since. We know a bit about where they are and that they're not dead.

And then my older brother, he and my cousin have the same thing. It's sort of like borderline functional solipsism. My younger brother is blessedly normal. I mean, I do what I do, right? It's not a normal life

but I get away with it. But I look back on it now and it's just like this firestorm that went through our family from 1989 to 1991. And not everything grew back. And it was really rough. I didn't know what was happening. We were talking earlier about how you have a loss, and it takes a few years before — and I look back on it now and I'm glad we're having this conversation because I can see that it's probably not a coincidence that *Life After God* came out when it did in relation to that family forest fire. Actually, I think fire is a big metaphor in that book. In the story "1000 Years Later."

History favours a certain kind of personality at a certain period in time. I'm old enough to remember when people didn't know what a nerd was. And the first time I remember ever hearing the word *nerd* was on *Happy Days*, when Joanie calls Ralph Malph a dren. What's a dren? It's a nerd spelled backwards. But everyone was like, "Well, what's a nerd?" And then it was the rise of the personal computer and the fact that people who create software and people who are fluent at working with these technologies tend to have a subset of behaviour characteristics we call nerdiness. And then as we moved into the new millennium, we started rewarding people who were nerds. By that point, nerds are common as dirt. But we start rewarding a different subset, which is like people with mild autism spectrum disorders. So, I mean, who knows what we'll be rewarding in ten years?

And my family is as engaged with the culture as anyone else. It probably doesn't surprise me in retrospect that our family gets caught up in it as much as anyone else's.

I loved writing *All Families*, because that was the catharsis book for me personally. The happier side of your family sort of disintegrating. Which also by the way got completely ripped off by *Little Miss Sunshine*. Like, dysfunctional family in an orange VW bus with a children's pageant thrown in? I'm still pissed off about that to this day.

BCG While we're talking about *All Families are Psychotic*, it reminds me that while 9/11 is this touchstone in your fiction, the death of Diana was kind of a touchstone in your fiction as well, pre-9/11. It comes up later on in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, with Karen missing the whole Diana spectacle and thinking of Diana in this very different way than everybody else. And celebrity death generally is a significant theme in your fiction and non-fiction. Kurt Cobain's death, obviously. Celebrity death seems to be something we rally around as emblems of

a moment. I'm wondering if you've ever thought about why celebrity death comes up so much in your work.

DC It's like I've been saying, death, death, death. If you're in front of the camera, which I'm not, thank God, growing old in public is just this ghastly new form of torture that we invented basically in the 1930s in film.

BCG And now in HD.

DC Now in HD! And take someone like David Bowie: it is literally killing him that he is growing old. In the 40s, there was Norah Desmond retreating to the Hollywood mansion.

BCG When Michael Jackson died, you tweeted that we like our celebrities to die because it makes mortality a much less scary place. There's somebody we know who's gone there.

DC Ah, yeah. I read the obituaries now in the *Sun* because every single day I read the obituaries, someone's parents are there. And it's very common — the wall between me and death is gone now. My parents are still alive but they're not in very good shape. And then sometimes, like three weeks ago, it was someone I went to high school with. I mean, part of the weirdness of dying in a modern culture is knowing that in some form or another this all goes on. Park Royal goes on. Currencies are exchanged, metals are extracted from the planet, and things still continue. You're not a part of that. You're part of this thing called eternity, and once you're in one, you can't go back to the other. An endless source of frustration to me. I just keep on thinking that if I think about it hard enough, I'll find the magic gateway from one to the other. I think that's a lot of what I do.

I was talking about Tottenham four days ago, and they're like, "What did Vancouver do?" The Stanley Cup riots were sort of the model on which to ... the new tradition is like the flash mobs with brooms. There's this whole new way of looking at everything. Reread Marshall.

BCG I loved your biography of Marshall McLuhan. I just loved it.

DC Thank you. I was dragged kicking and screaming into that one.

BCG Were you really?

DC Oh, by John Saul. And I said yes twice and then bailed out twice. And finally he just said, “You can’t. You have to do it.” So I did it. McLuhan was right about everything.

BCG He really was. But he wasn’t positive about it. People read him and they think he would have loved all these media technologies, but —

DC Oh he would have hated it.

BCG He would have hated everything!

DC But he would have had the satisfaction of being right. So now I’m doing a very comprehensive index of thing he said equals PayPal, equals eBay, equals YouTube, equals Facebook, equals all that. Because you know, if he’s right about that, he’s probably right about the bits that still seem weird. So what is that thing [that McLuhan talked about] that has yet to be invented?

BCG We’ve been talking a little bit about death, and I’m going to go a little bit further and then we’ll come out into some not-death stuff. Maybe. Your work is full of apocalypses.

DC Not-death stuff. Sorry. That’s a good expression.

BCG Your work is full of apocalypses, and not just end-of-the-world stuff but also small personal apocalypses. Like what the shooting is for the protagonist of *Hey Nostradamus!* or what Karen’s coma is to Richard. And some apocalypse theorists suggest that apocalypse is by nature hopeful, because it’s an end, but it’s also a beginning of whatever’s next — that thing we can’t see into is implied in the idea of an apocalypse. And I see apocalypse working that way in your writing as far back as, say, the mushroom cloud at the end of *Generation X*, when it creates an opening into a new world for the characters. Your engagement with apocalypse is something that, again, like storytelling, is throughout your career, throughout the different media you work in, and I’m wondering what you see as the role of apocalypse in your writing?

DC Okay. It’s an anecdote, and it’s a long one, but it does come back around. So my dad was in the Air Force. And he’s a gun nut, and a hunter. And so my older brother’s a taxidermist, and so I grew up in this house where all the walls were covered with guns or dead animals or pictures of jets and squadrons, and more dead animals and more

guns, and so I remember even as an early teenager saying, “Man, once I get out of here, my place is going to be so fucking different than this.”

So I finally ended up getting the place where I’m in now, and it’s like sort of modernist and it’s very — it’s of an era. And I was collecting for about eight years and a friend of mine was over at the house, and I was telling her about growing up in that environment and wanting to come up with my own place. And she said, “Doug, what’s wrong with you? I mean, look, you’ve got that print there, it’s a huge jet fighter, an F111. You’ve got a green military soldier you made in 2000 over there. You’ve got these two huge pieces of *Star Wars* jet fighters. You’ve got car crashes and burning buildings over there. You’ve just taken everything you grew up with and just came up with a different isotope of it or inflection of it.” And I thought, “Oh my god, she’s right.” And then once I knew that, I just got rid of anything that didn’t have to do with death and destruction. And now I sort of focus on that. I feel very comfortable surrounded by death and destruction. I’m not saying that for effect, I just really, really do. The only thing I don’t have is weapons. It would creep me out to actually have a gun in the house. But art about guns I don’t mind.

So it’s partly a reflection of my experiences growing up. We didn’t have an air raid shelter, but it was always a need to be prepared for the worst. And then on my mother’s side, there’s a lot of preachers, and they’re from the prairies around the same time that McLuhan experienced with his family. And, you know, if there’s not a belief in eschatological thinking or apocalyptic thinking, there’s certainly, if nothing else, a comfort with it. Or, a “Well, why not?” as opposed to a “That could never happen.”

What weirds me out is how fantastically apolitical I am. I really wish I could be political. But I try and it never comes across as authentic. It doesn’t feel authentic in my head, it doesn’t come across as authentic. I’m never going to be political. And I wonder what it would be like to have grown up in an environment where, if you didn’t like the way the world worked, you’d run for office and change it or whatever. To me that’s just inconceivable. I don’t get country and western music either, but I know it exists.

So why death? At night when I dream, the only people who have appeared in my dreams are people who are either dead or people who went crazy and I’ll never see again. I want to dream about people who

are living. I can't make my brain do it. I'm trying to do lucid dreaming. I can't. I only dream about dead people. And it's just driving me up the wall. And I thought, well, if you were fifty and living a hundred years ago, everyone you knew probably would be dead. And the thing about dreaming about dead people is that when you're dreaming, they're not dead. They're still alive. There's this sort of barrier in your brain that protects you from knowing that, but you know something's wrong. So you never quite connect with them. And I dream about my aunt who went crazy, and I'll never see her again and my brother. But they're not crazy.

Which explains everything and nothing. I turn fifty in December. "GEN-X TURNS FIFTY." I'm waiting for those ones. You know, Gen-X turns sixty, Gen-X turns seventy. Et cetera. Gen-X dies. You know, there is this weird sort of spectral inevitability, or spectrum-like inevitability, to the whole thing.

BCG It's funny because I talk about your work in academic circles a lot, and there's a certain population of academics, older academics, who will always refer to you as the "voice of a generation." And what I find so fascinating is that I think people seem to find you and find your work and become connected to it or not, I think, in their twenties. Regardless of their generation.

DC Yeah. Absolutely.

BCG And I think you're far more speaking to and about, or at least in a way that resonates with, a very particular moment in life as opposed to a moment in history.

DC Hm. Okay.

BCG And I find it interesting because that's a fundamental misreading, I think, of what you do that still deeply informs the way capital-C capital-L Canadian Literature reads your work. Between that and the fact that you were successful in the US first, there's always going to be a suspicion.

DC Only because my Canadian publisher refused to publish it. I've told that story a million times.

BCG I don't want to make you rehash the *Gen X* stuff.

DC Thank you!

BCG I'm not going to belabour that point. I just think that you're a writer of the twenties.

DC I think in terms of brain architecture, that's when I think there's a certain kind of seed I write that takes a certain kind of soil that's prepared a certain kind of way. That's maybe one way of looking at it. I also do think visual thinking is part of it too.

People either are or they're not visual thinkers. And that's just wiring. Like you are or you're not right- or left-handed. If you are, you run with it. If you're not, you're never going to get it. So don't bother. I think I write for people like you. You are a visual thinker. Guaranteed. I could talk Pantone numbers with you. I could talk about rewinding a film in slow motion, and you can see it in your head. Most people can't do that. And so it's a certain kind of brain at a certain point in its development, which is probably twenty to thirty. And if I click, I really click. But if I don't, I don't.

I think every writer looks at something that seems to be a universal flavour. Like Robert Ludlum or Harlequin romances. I have no idea what's going on in them. I read them and I just don't get it.

BCG It's just something I've always found interesting because most of your characters are in their twenties. This idea that you somehow only write for and about Generation X is so ludicrous.

DC No one cares what happens to people after thirty-five. They really don't. Go through all the books in the library, with the exception of *The Old Man and the Sea* — everyone's basically thirty-three or younger. That's about as high as you go. It's not so much people don't respond to older people, it's just that when you're younger, there are still so many more genuine options open and available to you. If the character's younger, they don't have to take the kids to the daycare centre and they don't have to have their brother-in-law sleep in the den because he lost his money to his gambling addiction or something like that. There are possibilities.

Usually what's interesting is that in most books that appeal to a very broad audience, the characters don't have family members or religion or history or anything. They just go. And there's maybe an intelligence to that. I don't think I could do it.

BCG I want to talk about irony a little bit with you. Because you get pigeonholed as the irony guy. You do talk about irony a lot.

DC I love irony.

BCG You do use irony and talk about irony a lot. Critics read you and assume everything is ironic in your books and in your art. And one of the pieces that makes me think about this is *Corporate Safety Blankets*.

DC They're beautiful.

BCG They're gorgeous! I have these photographs of them that are just incredible. Obviously there's an ironic reading to that, there's an ironic message. But there's also kind of an earnest message in that people do take comfort and security and find beauty in branding. We do it all the time. I guess the question is, is the irony filter always on? And I'm not trying to set up a false binary between irony and earnestness —

DC Right now I'm into visual irony a lot. It's not a filter. I just think it's beautiful. An ironic situation or a properly conceived ironic object is a gorgeous thing. So it's an aesthetic for me the same way that death is. Maybe I can get death and irony in the same object. Even better! For me it's an aesthetic experience, which I can discuss rationally, I suppose, but still it's an aesthetic experience.

I think the best most ironic novel of all time is *Scoop* by Evelyn Waugh. I've read it five times. It's one of those books that I go back to again and again and again. It's set in a banana republic in Africa and the editors fax in and they get the name wrong, and instead of sending in the right person, they send the weekend botanical writer to report on a bogus uprising in some obscure African country. And it's just sort of the whole tale of woe and mayhem. Which probably has a lot to do with what the filthy novel I'm currently writing ends up becoming. It's my *Scoop*.

It's just so funny. Relentlessly, endlessly funny. This village of three huts and they're giving it a bicameral legislature and a decimalized currency. You'll love it.

BCG I was reading an essay on *Girlfriend in a Coma*, in *Essays on Canadian Writing*, which unfortunately isn't publishing anymore. The writer of the piece used the word *bricolage* to describe your work, and described you as a *bricoleur*, specifically. So then I went wandering off to find definitions of this concept, and one that I read that I liked was "to make creative and resourceful use of whatever materials are at hand,

regardless of their original purpose.” Which is fantastic, I think, as a way to describe what you do.

DC Okay. Actually, yeah. Yeah!

BCG Because I see it enacted literally in your visual art. You work in collage, and your totem poles made of children’s blocks are a perfect example. But also in your fiction: you pull from pop culture and take whatever’s going on into your fiction. I don’t know if other writers are not aware of what’s going on in pop culture or if they feel it doesn’t belong in literary fiction, but there tends to be a barrier that doesn’t exist in your writing. So do you feel equally comfortable in all media? And can anything be art?

DC Oh, absolutely. Anything can be art. That’s one of the best things about art school. I mean, if you get some skill out of it, great, but it’s just a way of looking at the world. If I really had to, I could turn the contents of this table into something to show at the Tate Modern. I’d never do it, but I know if I had to, I could. Part of art is not just making art out of anything, but taking something that maybe people don’t think of as being aesthetic and saying, “Look. It’s beautiful.” That’s what pop art is about. People were living in this culture full of signage and hamburgers and Campbell’s soup, and it was like, no, if you step back, there’s kind of a beauty to it.

Art is always possible. Almost anywhere. The only place art really isn’t possible is in bad art. Which is really, really strange.

I collected a bunch of meteors, and to mount them, you have to slice off the bottoms. This guy who has a metal cutting band saw was going to slice the bottoms off. And he was balking. Like, “What if there’s some weird space virus in there?” And I told him, “Actually, to be honest, that chunk of metal right there is the only space within a one-mile spherical bubble where there’s absolutely no possibility of life.” And it’s kind of like that with bad art. It’s the one place you’re guaranteed you’re not going to find art at all.

And that sounds sort of harsh and judgmental. I’d rather people were trying to make art and failing, rather than not trying at all. That’s sort of my problem with the States at the moment. They’ve sort of given up on hope or beauty or possibility or anything. I mean, it’s just sort of, like, existing. So depressing.

That was a good question.

BCG And I was asking if you feel equally comfortable in all media. I mean, you move so seemingly seamlessly between film projects and—

DC In my head, it doesn't feel different. It all just feels like an impulse or an urge or an idea that just happens to manifest itself using whatever material is at hand.

There's a nice meditative quality I get out of *making* things. Like cutting or painting. I like that. And that's a very different kind of buzz than you get when, like, ooh, you have a really great day in London. There are different kinds of buzzes. But to me, it's all about something that used be in here is now out there and physically exists. So in that sense, it all comes from the same pot, same kitchen, I dunno. Insert metaphor there.

BCG I'd love to hear your thoughts about *Generation X* being part of Canada Reads. I don't know if you get involved at all.

DC Oh, it was so cynical. Oh my god. Oh, I wish I'd just said no, right at the start. The thing about the CBC is they don't have any money. And so they have to generate content with no money. So CBC Reads [*sic*] is not about reading, it's about generating a lot of radio time for no money. That's all it's about.

It's very, very cynical. And honestly, a pizza flyer could win the contest. They could care less. They really don't care. That's being a little bit over-cynical. I just think it's unfair to the younger writers who maybe don't have enough worldly experience and think it's actually about the books. If there's ever a writer who says, "Guess what! They want me to be on Canada Reads!" I would be there with an intervention team saying, "No. Don't even. Don't go near it."

BCG What was so negative about it?

DC Well, the Gillers are kind of the same way. For a strangely low amount of money, Scotiabank can generate huge, astonishing amount of press. That's what it's about. That's all it's about. It's not about quality. I mean, thank you for nominating me, that's great, but it's about Scotia-McLeod / Scotiabank getting tons of press for \$50,000, which is chewing gum for them. That's been the big disillusionment. If the Giller is touted as the Acme of Canadian Literature, then that's really sad. Only having seen the machine from the inside do I know that.

BCG How involved were you in Canada Reads? I mean, I guess they ask if they can use the book, or can they kind of do what they want?

DC GUESS WHAT?! YOU'VE BEEN CHOSEN! And I have very good publishers, and they're like, do it, do it, do it. And okay, I'll do it. But it was weird. *Gen X* isn't published in Canada, it's only distributed. They said, "We want to do a whole bunch of books." But actually, no. You have to go back, you have to — I only make about three and a half or four cents a copy from *Generation X*. It was such a bad contract. First books never make any money for the writer. And so I said, "If you want to sell in Canada, you have to try to redo the contract." So it was a way to get a bit of historical repatriation. And that's all.

BCG Did you listen to the debates?

DC No! It was just depressing. And this nice guy, Rollie Pemberton, Cadence Weapon. He's really lovely. I liked him a lot. But they lock you together in a room before you go out on this stage and it's really combative and they're doing that whoop-whoop thing and it was just painful. And I said, "That's it. I cannot go any further in this." It was hideous. That's all.

BCG That sounds very weird.

DC It was hideous. And the Gillers are not hideous, they're just creepy.

BCG I can't remember who wrote it, but someone did a great piece about how the Gillers ends up reifying the exact same types of Canadian novels every year, and how they have all this long list of really interesting stuff, but the shortlist and winners are always the same.

DC It's basically just all about Scotiabank. It's not the books.

BCG I want to talk about sexuality briefly. You came out to the media in the promotion of *Eleanor Rigby*.

DC What year was that?

BCG 2005, I think. I have the article.

DC Okay.

BCG And I was going to start this question by saying you don't really write gay characters. But then I started thinking, and I actually think it's much more interesting than that. Because you write a lot of heterosexual characters, but with the exception of, say, *Player One*, which is all very clinical, your characters aren't heavily motivated by sexuality, and you don't tend to write sex scenes very often —

DC Evelyn Waugh never had a sex scene. Margaret Drabble's never had a sex scene. It's like, what is this culture that we live in where we're like, "Oh wait, there's been a hundred pages and there hasn't been a sex scene?" I mean, think about it. That's kind of weird.

BCG No, it is weird. The question isn't really why don't you write sex scenes. I'm interested in your thinking about sexuality and your characters. I'm asking it on a cultural level. Sex as a motivating force doesn't seem to exist in your novels in the same way it exists in pop culture.

DC For me, it's more about sort of being forced to have an alien perspective, whether you want it or not. I think whoever the characters are — that's a distinction, whatever they are, whoever they are — they tend to have perspective on the world which is not typical. I think that's how sexuality usually reflects itself.

I will say, in the new novel I've been telling you about is nothing but sex. That's all it is. And filthiness. So I am finally addressing that in a real flaming car-wreck manner.

In terms of being a teenager and realizing, oh, you're different, like, the same week that AIDS is invented. So that's a part of your life, to even act upon it is really like a death sentence. So we go back to death again. And so I put that whole aspect of my life in a meat locker for so long. You have to remember, there aren't that many gay guys out there my age because they're all dead. And I'm alive. I'm always very aware of the fact that there should be a lot more people like me, but they're dead. Someone wrote about it. Maybe you can find the quote through Google. In the 80s, there's like one great big elaborate dinner party where every ten minutes they took a dinner guest out on the patio and shot him. Any sort of deviancy or abnormality that normally stems from sexuality just got funnelled into the extraterrestrial. I got to radical and different points of view through the minds of characters. That's where it went or that's how it mutated and got inflected. I think.

Especially since I went prematurely grey! I'm like the wise old guy now. Like, fuck! I was in IGA across the street yesterday to pick up some last-minute stuff in the produce department, and you know how you walk past the pillar with the mirror on it? I am the Old Man and the Sea now. That's my role. And yeah, I could go out and like dye my hair, but — It's all over so quickly. I can't believe how quick life is. I'm just glad I was able to make a go of it, and I'm still able to. I think I get it from my mother. I'm one of nature's advice givers. Like, I really give good advice. If I give you a piece of advice, follow it, and you will win. Because you followed my advice.

And I think maybe in a lot of ways, what I write can be construed of as advice. Do as I say, not as I did.

NOTES

¹ Coupland's US-set novels are *Generation X* (1991), *Shampoo Planet* (1993), *Microserfs* (1995), and *Miss Wyoming* (2000). *All Families Are Psychotic* (2001) straddles the Canada-US border; the family is from Vancouver but much of the action takes place in Florida. The other novels are all set primarily in Canada, including the Japanese-only release *God Hates Japan* (2001).

² Coupland and I spoke on 10 August 2011, just days after the start of the Tottenham Riots in London.