"A Museum of Fifteen Years Ago": Nostalgia in Three Novels by Douglas Coupland

Louis Greenberg

Summary

In several of his earlier books, notably *Generation X*, Douglas Coupland presents his recent past as a lost moral condition and the mid-1970s as the moment of the fall into the confusions of a post-industrial age. His protagonists repeatedly commemorate and mourn the last days of this putative golden age. While it can be argued that there is nothing essentially unique about his X-generation characters' nostalgia, it is clear that Coupland believes that his characters inhabit a special socio-economic period with unique challenges and losses. Focusing on *Generation X* (1991), *Life After God* (1994) and *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998), the article examines how Coupland's characters must negotiate between progressive new forms, expressions, anxieties and styles and an older-fashioned, nostalgic attachment to the past and a search for essential meaning, truth and order. Julia Kristeva's concept of the *chora* and certain ideas of Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard are used to counterpoint and illuminate the discussion.

Opsomming

In etlike van sy vroeë boeke, veral *Generation X* bied Douglas Coupland sy onlangse verlede as 'n verlore morele kondisie en die middel-1970s as die oomblik van die sondeval in die verbysteringe van 'n post-industriële tydperk. Sy protagoniste herdenk en betreur herhaaldelik die laaste dae van hierdie vermeende goue tydperk. Terwyl 'n mens kan aanvoer dat daar niks uniek is omtrent sy X generasiekarakters se nostalgie nie, is dit duidelik dat Coupland glo dat sy karakters 'n spesiale sosioëkonomiese periode – met unieke uitdagings en verliese – bewoon. Met die fokus op *Generation X* (1991), *Life after God* (1994) en *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998), ondersoek hierdie artikel hoe Coupland se karakters die weg moet vind tussen progressiewe nuwe vorme, uitdrukkings, style en angstighede, en 'n oudmodiese, nostalgiese gehegtheid aan die verlede en 'n soeke na essensiële betekenis, waarheid en orde. Julia Kristeva se konsep van die *chora* en sekere idees van Fredric Jameson en Jean Baudrillard word gebruik as kontrapunt en om die bespreking verder toe te lig.

In several of his earlier books, notably *Generation X*, Douglas Coupland presents his recent past as a lost moral condition and the mid-1970s as the

JLS/TLW 29(1), March/Maart 2013
ISSN 0256-4718/Online 1753-5387

© JLS/TLW
DOI: 10.1080/02564718.2013.774178

UNISA

moment of the fall into the confusions of a post-industrial age. His protagonists repeatedly commemorate and mourn the last days of this putative golden age. While it can be argued that there is nothing essentially unique about his X-generation characters' nostalgia, it is clear that Coupland believes that his characters inhabit a special socio-economic period with unique challenges and losses. Focusing on *Generation X* (Coupland's debut novel [1991]1996),[1] *Life After God* (1994)[2] and *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998),[3] the article examines how Coupland's characters – questing, middle-class, young, white, North American West Coast suburbanites – must negotiate between progressive new forms, expressions, anxieties and styles and an older-fashioned, nostalgic attachment to the past and a search for essential meaning, truth and order.

"You should see my parents' place, Dag," Andy says. "It's like a museum of fifteen years ago. Nothing ever changes there; they're terrified of the future" (*Generation* 96). He goes on to describe a particular family photograph:

> Fifteen years ago, on what remains as possibly the most unhip day of my life, my entire family, all nine of us, went to have our group portrait taken at a local photo salon .... [T]he nine of us spent the next fifteen years trying bravely to live up to the corn-fed optimism, the cheerful waves of shampoo, and the airbrushed teeth-beams that the resultant photo is still capable of emitting today. We may look dated in this photo, but we look *perfect* too. In it, we're beaming earnestly to the right, off toward what seems to be the future but which was actually Mr. Leonard, the photographer.
>
> (*Generation* 153)

This portrait serves as an iconic symbol of Coupland's attitude towards the suburban past. A moment was frozen in time in the mid-1970s (fifteen years before the publication of *Generation X*), and its apparent innocence is now lost. This photograph is mirrored by another nostalgic snapshot of a lost time. At the start of the final story in *Life after God*, "1,000 Years (Life after God)", Scout, the narrator, eulogises his past:

> As suburban children we floated at night in swimming pools the temperature of blood .... We would float and be naked – pretending to be embryos, pretending to be fetuses – all of us silent save for the hum of the pool filter.

1. References to *Generation X* in brackets are indicated by *Generation* followed by the page number(s).

2. References to *Life after God* in brackets are indicated by *Life* followed by the page number(s).

3. References to *Girlfriend in a Coma* in brackets are indicated by *Girlfriend* followed by the page number(s).

> Our minds would be blank and our eyes closed as we floated in the warm waters, the distinction between our bodies and our brains reduced to nothing ... like twins with whom we didn't know we shared a womb ....
>
> Ours was a life lived in paradise and thus it rendered any discussion of transcendental ideas pointless. Politics, we supposed, existed elsewhere.
>
> (*Life* 219-220)

This image can fruitfully be read as a Kristevan *chora* or womb state (cf. Kristeva 1982, 1986; Greenberg 2010). In this silent – wordless – space prior to formulated identity, there is no distinction between the (semiotic, rhythmic) body and the (symbolic, linguistic) brain. Adult responsibilities, including the imperative to define political and spiritual identity, are rendered irrelevant and meaningless here. In this passage, this maternal space is described in quasi-religious tones, suggesting its sacredness. It is a holy space, but forever lost. Like the puerile, past-fixated protagonists in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Scout and his friends – "my fellow fetuses" (*Generation* 225) – refusing to enter adulthood, all end up somewhere in their thirties "in the same sort of non-place" (*Generation* 225). This disappointing non-place is all that's left of the swimming-pool womb twenty years later, dried out, empty and forlorn.

"Life was charmed but without politics or religion," the narrator continues. "It was the life of children of the pioneers – life after God – a life of earthly salvation on the edge of heaven" (*Life* 220). Just as it is impossible to return to the womb, so it is impossible to return to the optimistic moment the Palmers' photo was taken. This is the adolescent moment before innocence turned to hard experience, the moment before the potential of an unknown future became the consequences of choices made; it is the moment before certainty turned to confusion. The delicate moment between innocence and the fall is metonymised for Coupland by two real-life women, Karen Quinlan and Patty Hearst.

The title character in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Karen McNiell, is based, Jefferson Faye notes (Faye 2001: 506), on Karen Anne Quinlan, who at the age of 21, in 1975, (very similarly to Karen McNiell) fell into a coma after mixing tranquilisers and alcohol at a party and subsequently became a fulcrum of the right-to-die debate in the Reagan 1980s. Quinlan is a mid-70s archetype of girlhood on the unknowable edge of womanhood, a complex symbol of metamorphosing identity and society. The story, "Patty Hearst", in *Life after God* directly links its pivotal character, Laurie, to Patty Hearst, the granddaughter of publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst. In 1974, Patty Hearst was kidnapped by a radical group known as the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), but soon came to agree with their aims and methods and joined the SLA. "Laurie always wanted to be Patty Hearst," (*Life* 194) the narrator tells. She always

> painted a good picture, one of Patty Hearst ... as a sacrifice to middle-class longing – looted by the forces who would strip our world of tennis shirts and French lessons and gourmet mushrooms: "You are given up for dead, best left in an uninterpreted dream. But then one day you reemerge .... You have become a terrorist, an urban guerrilla, cracking the atom of the culture that created you".
>
> (*Life* 195)

Laurie – seventeen years old at the time – idealises Patty Hearst's revolutionary metamorphosis like a butterfly out of the adolescent pupa. It symbolises the passage of a child out of the womb and into an adulthood of self-actualising agency, the Oedipal destruction of her childhood mould. Laurie's escape from her suburban family into the mysterious margins, the rainy wilderness, is a revolutionary act just like Patty Hearst's. Ultimately, though, Hearst's revolutionary anti-nostalgic act becomes a nostalgic shrine itself.

Elsewhere in *Generation X*, Andy generally considers old photographs,

> the sort of bleached Kodak snapshots taken decades ago and found in shoe boxes in attics everywhere. You know the type: .... When you see such photos, you can't help but wonder at just how sweet and sad and innocent all moments of life are rendered by the tripping of a camera's shutter, for at that point the future is still unknown and has yet to hurt us, and also for that brief moment, our poses are accepted as honest.
>
> (*Generation* 20)

Andy describes photographs – "You know the type" – with an intertextual reliance on a collective consciousness of a shared, idealised past. When we read of the Palmer family photo, we think of "corn-fed", ruddy-cheeked boys in Norman Rockwell paintings; we see the Brady Bunch arrayed up a flight of suburban steps with their "cheerful waves of shampoo". The Palmer photo is inextricably woven with these cultural artefacts. This is intertextuality not in Kristeva's more specific psycholinguistic sense, but in the more general sense which Jameson describes as "a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect, and ... the operator of a new connotation of 'pastness' and pseudo-historical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces 'real' history" (Jameson 1984: 67). Here, Jameson condemns the intertextual style, and the replacement by cannibalising historicism (p. 65) of a history which even he ironises with his use of quote marks around "real". I would suggest, however, that intertextuality – this assumption of common cultural knowledge – enriches the image of the family portrait. The fact that I, someone ten years younger than Coupland and Andy, and raised at the other end of the world, "know the type" and can understand at least some of the cultural layers Coupland weaves into the portrait as a function of globalisation and the televisual archive, that new form of collective memory. Now intertextuality is much more embedded in

cultural products than it was in 1984 when Jameson published his critique, its mechanisms are no longer jarring and readers are conditioned to make such cross-references automatically when reading contemporary material. The Palmer family portrait is a picture of the last moment of Andy's confident security, the time when the poses could be accepted as honest, even if indeed they were not. Norman Rockwell and his ironies died in 1978. Clean-living Marcia Brady has now published a tell-all memoir (McCormick 2008) of her drug addiction and depression, and the sex lives and family anti-values of her co-stars. (Her Brady brother slept with both her and their mother.)

Andy's life beyond the portrait is similarly imbued with moral confusion, compulsion, dislocation, a lack of traditional faith, and the inevitable compromises involved in growing up, and while he appears dismissive of his parents' fear-motivated stasis, he and his friends also pine for that impossible return to the certainties of the past. This ambivalence is encapsulated in Texlahoma (*Generation* 45-52). "Texlahoma is a mythic world we created in which to set many of our stories," explains Andy of the planetoid he and his friends have imagined.

> It's a sad Everyplace .... Life is boring there, but there are some thrills to be had .... Texlahoma is an asteroid orbiting the earth, where the year is permanently 1974, the year after the oil shock and the year starting from which real wages in the U.S. never grew ever again .... It's a fun place to spend one day, and then you just want to get the hell out of there.
>
> (*Life* 45-46)

Texlahoma – a distillation of any isolated rural community in Texas or Oklahoma, affected by the failure in the 1970s of heavy industry but buffered from the more recent trends of soft industry, advertising, media and fashion – is also a museum of fifteen years ago. It epitomises the dullness of Andy's parents' generation, a generation like that of the characters in Claire's Texlahoma story who are doomed to repeat history endlessly and content themselves with small, wistful and repressed dreams of escape from their insignificant orbit. Andy's generation attempts to take meaningful action to "get the hell out of there"; hence his escape from his own Texlahoma in Portland to Palm Springs, Portland's physical and climatological antithesis.

> Texlahoma is also, however, an embodiment of the comforting regularity which is now lost to Andy and his friends. Claire's story involves a litany of childhood artefacts of 1974, "an array of Snoopy plush toys, Jem dolls, Easy Bake ovens, and Nancy Drew mystery novels ... scuffed up Holly Hobby, Veronica Lodge, and Betty Cooper stickers" (*Generation* 48), which point to the womb of adolescence. The critique this story carries is lodged in nostalgic terms, something Coupland confirms with a footnote: "Legislated Nostalgia: To force a body of people to have memories they do not actually

> possess: '*How can I be part of the 1960s generation when I don't even remember any of it?*'"
>
> (*Generation* 47)

As noted, Jameson situates nostalgia as a symptom of the "omnivorous and well-nigh libidinal historicism" (Jameson 1984: 66) of postmodernity. He suggests that leanings towards nostalgia in film (and by extension in certain novels) "restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the 'generation'" (p. 66). By creating Generation X, Coupland might be seen as guilty of nostalgic generation-fabrication. But repeatedly faced with claims that he is the "voice of a generation", Coupland has said, "I speak for myself, not for a generation. I never have" (Snider 1994: n.p). His footnote on "Legislated Nostalgia" shows just as convincingly that he is wary of defining generations, and feels that people of his and his protagonists' age are too easily and gratuitously classified by people of other ages. Coupland most often tries to present individualised characters, and a sensitive reading of *Generation X* reveals that even Andy's, Claire's and Dag's approaches to belief, action and the future differ from each other's. That said, Coupland's individuals often have many shared ideas and styles which allow them to be contrasted en masse with characters like Tyler and Claire's family, the confident, superficial and spiritually apathetic youth, and Tobias and Martin, the acolytes of high capitalism.

"Fashion change", Jameson suggests, is an "iron law" that crystallises false nostalgic notions of past periods and generations. Using a literal sense of the word, one notes that clothing fashions do play an important role in *Generation X*: in an epigraph, Coupland quotes 27-year-old Tracey describing someone's apparel: "the dress was early '60s Aeroflot stewardess .... *And such make-up!* Perfect '70s Mary Quant, with these little PVC floral appliqué earrings that looked like antiskid bathtub stickers from a gay Hollywood tub circa 1956" (*Generation* vii). This is supported by a footnote: "Decade Blending: In clothing: the indiscriminate combination of two or more items from various decades to create a personal mood: *Sheila = Mary Quant earrings (1960s) + cork wedgie platform shoes (1970s) + black leather jacket (1950s and 1980s)*" (*Generation* 17). In these descriptions, Coupland suggests that an idiosyncratic mix of period fashions, rather than being an example of empty, false, nostalgic posturing as Jameson would have it, and rather than classifying someone as a faceless member of a taxonomic group, develops an individual, personal style. Sheila "=" this distinctive fashion formula. The equals sign grants Sheila definition. (Andy and his friends themselves are quick to compartmentalise the attitudes and styles of their parents; not much effort is put into individuating them, and they are seen as a conglomerated generation. In later novels, however,

Coupland presents parents in more depth. Lois and George in *Girlfriend in a Coma* and Reg in *Hey Nostradamus!* particularly, become more complex, discrete characters.)

Jameson goes on to contend that "for Americans at least, the 1950s remain the privileged lost object of desire – not merely the stability and prosperity of a pax Americana, but also the first naive innocence of the countercultural impulses of early rock-and-roll and youth gangs" (Jameson 1984: 67). The 50s do feature as a long-lost object of desire in some places in the novel. Phil and Irene MacArthur, the owners of the Palm Springs bar at which Andy and Dag work, "live in a permanent 1950s. They still believe in a greeting-card future .... We tolerate Irene and Phil's mild racist quirks and planet-destroying peccadilloes ... because their existence acts as a tranquiliser in an otherwise slightly-out-of-control world" (*Generation* 128-129). The MacArthurs' attitude is both a ridiculous throwback and a comforting reprieve from the new world's demands for constant flexibility and political sensitivity. A depressed narrator in *Life after God* is similarly comforted by his mother "in the kitchen making 1947-style cream cheese sandwiches" (*Life* 60).

Most often, though, it is the 1970s which are Coupland's lost object of desire. There certainly was no pax Americana in the 70s (as indeed there was not in the 50s, despite Jameson's assertion: the Korean War and the territorial jockeying of the Cold War involved US forces, and the country was in the grip of race-based violence), and while there was popular revolt over the Vietnam War, Coupland does not seem interested or nostalgic about revolutionary times. More simply, the 70s were when Coupland was an adolescent. When Jameson describes the period of his young adulthood in "'End of Art' or 'End of History'?", his sceptical tone disappears and he valorises that metaphorical decade as the last great moment of innovation and protest: "what we call the sixties ... was amongst other things an extraordinarily rich moment ... in the invention of new kinds of performances .... [T]he politics of the sixties, all over the world ... was defined and constituted as an opposition to the American war in Vietnam, in other words, as a world-wide protest" (Jameson 1998b: 74-75). It's interesting to note how Jean Baudrillard similarly sees this period as the end of political potential:

> The fifties were the real high spot for the US ... and you can still feel the nostalgia for those years, for the ecstasy of power, when power held power. In the seventies power was still there, but the spell was broken. That was orgy time (war, sex, Manson, Woodstock). Today the orgy is over .... Power has become impotent.
>
> (Baudrillard 1988: 107)

These passages recall the frozen, nostalgic image of the recent past discussed above. Coupland, Jameson and Baudrillard are each complicit in

personalising history to match their own subjective narratives. Their nostalgic focal points are primarily linked to their own youth – the 70s for Coupland and the 50s and 60s for Jameson and Baudrillard – rather than to anything unique or specific in culture.

Is there any difference between Coupland's expressions of nostalgia and those of any writer commemorating or mourning his lost adolescence? Perhaps yes. The 1970s brought a collapse in large-scale, modernist industry in the US: car factories and corporate farms, smelters, sawmills and mines went out of business, and many people lost their work. The Three Mile Island nuclear reactor melted down, and inflated oil prices caused by the Middle East instability caused a domestic energy crisis. North America's industrial economy was replaced in the 1980s by money brokerage and the start of the soft silicon industries. Coupland's protagonists came of age in this unique period. Andy notes that Texlahoma, 1974, was stuck in the year after the oil shock, and in the period when people's incomes started to decline in real terms. As a postscript to *Generation X*, he presents readers with a chapter of "Numbers", self-consciously named after the biblical book in an attempt to lend eschatological import to his calculations to show that his adolescence happened in a unique period of socio-economic transition. In this appendix, Coupland compares economic and social indicators from the 1960s and early 1970s with those of the late 1980s. The information demonstrates that in the Reagan era, US Americans under thirty had less money, were less able to buy their own houses, and were less likely to marry than their counterparts of fifteen years before. The numbers also show that they had to cope with this lack of social and economic security at the same time while they were faced with hyperinflation, an onslaught of television advertising, and unprecedented fears of environmental devastation and nuclear annihilation. These circumstances compound Generation X's troubled passage into adulthood. Coupland clearly believes that his nostalgia is justified.

One day Andy, Dag and Claire drive out of town for a picnic in hell. "Hell is the town of West Palm Springs Village – a bleached and defoliated Flintstones color cartoon of a failed housing development from the 1950s" (*Generation* 17). The vacant ghost suburb symbolises the lost promise of the post-war 50s, when every returning GI would have a housewife in every kitchen fitted with an oven and a refrigerator and a car in every garage. The post-war economy was the birth of American suburbs. In the US, the Eisenhower and Truman administrations worked hard to convert military industry into domestic industry and to shift demobilised labour into house-building, a half-hearted public works programme, and factory work (Garraty & McCaughey 1989). The result was new consumer goods, new cars and new houses. Suburbs rose to accommodate the new products, and soon middle-class workers were living outside the cities and commuting in to their city offices in their new cars. The suburbs, intended to be havens of

tranquillity for nuclear families, often caused more frustration than city living, working men spending hours commuting and non-working women – who had manned the factories during the war – bored, isolated and powerless. The failed development at which Andy and his friends picnic is symbolic of the failure of the industrial dream and the decline of modernist economy, after which there is only a blank, guideless space: "the three of us merely eat a box lunch on a land that is barren – the equivalent of a blank space at the end of a chapter – and a land so empty that all objects placed on its breathing, hot skin become objects of irony" (*Generation* 19).

In another episode, after visiting his family for Christmas, Andy visits the Vietnam War memorial in Portland. "The site is both a remarkable document and an enchanted space," he tells. "All year round, one finds sojourners and mourners of all ages and appearance in various stages of psychic disintegration, reconstruction, and reintegration" (*Generation* 174). The memorial appeals to Andy as a place where cathartic rituals are performed, and which connects the various dislocated, fragmented and lost people who come there. Baudrillard sees the Vietnam War as a cultural watershed. He suggests that the Americans dealt with it "as though it were a cartoon, as something remote from them, a television war" (Baudrillard 1998: 108). Its hyperrealism is one of the features that made it, in Jameson's terms, "the first terrible postmodernist war" (Jameson 1998a: 16). Andy, on the other hand, sees the Vietnam War as part of that nostalgic mid-70s moment, a moment *of* history, rather than *after* the arguable demise of history. Contemplating the war, Andy thinks, "[T]hey *were* ugly times. But they were also the only times I'll ever get – genuine capital *H* history times, before *history* was turned into a press release, a marketing strategy, a cynical marketing tool" (*Generation* 175). Succinctly summarising an entire school of media theory, Andy's euphemistic memories of the Vietnam War serve as a display, along with the family portrait, in that museum of fifteen years ago.

Also like the Palmer family portrait, comatose Karen in *Girlfriend in a Coma* is a snapshot of the 70s. She falls – with the decade – into her coma on 16 December 1979. As the first few months pass and "[t]he year became 1980" (*Girlfriend* 1998: 42), interest in Karen's coma begins to wane and only Richard still pays her regular visits. "The seventies were over," narrates Richard. "With them left a sweetness, a gentleness. No longer could modern citizens pretend to be naïve. We were now jaded; the world was spinning more quickly" (*Girlfriend* 45). Karen begins to fade from everyone's lives like the 70s and the gentle naivety they embody; she is a relic tucked away in a back room, "only an idea" (*Girlfriend* 45). During Karen's seventeen-year hiatus, the other characters and Vancouver itself are subjected to a process of subtle yet devastating attrition. For Hamilton, Pam, Linus and Richard, the 80s are filled with cocaine, alcohol and aimless wandering, while Wendy loses herself in her work as a doctor. After the

mid-90s they all return to the same Vancouver suburb, unconsciously readying themselves for Karen's return. Vancouver itself has changed from the city they knew when they were at high school. Sitting on the stuck ski-lift gondola on Grouse Mountain in 1979, Richard and Karen "looked at the lights of Vancouver before the 1980s had its way with the city – an innocent, vulnerable, spun-glass kingdom" (*Girlfriend* 14).

Unlike the Palmer photo, however, Karen comes to life again in the 90s. Karen's mind is unchanged; when she awakes she is able to directly compare the 90s both with the decade in which she fell asleep and with her horrified prescient visions of the future she has now entered.

> [She] has taken many drives ... and has seen the changes progress has wreaked. She's seen the city of Vancouver multiply and bathe itself in freighter loads of offshore money. Blue glass towers through which Canada geese fly in V-formation, traffic jams of Range Rovers, Chinese road signs, and children with cell phones. Karen rather likes the new city and she rather likes the small things in life which are new: blue nail polish, hygiene products, better pasta.
>
> (*Girlfriend* 151)

Despite the use of the word "wreaked", Karen's view parallels Coupland's ambivalence in *City of Glass*, caught between celebrating the new and lamenting the last old. Though she may rather like the new city, Karen is scathing of the people in the new world. She tells Hamilton, "There's a *hardness* I'm seeing in modern people .... Life's so serious now ... nobody even has *hobbies* these days .... They work, watch TV, and sleep .... People are frazzled and angry, desperate about money, and, at best, indifferent to the future .... [W]hat's happened to *time*? Nobody *has* time anymore" (*Girlfriend* 153-154). Hamilton's rejoinder is that "there's nothing *else* to choose. In the old days there was always a Bohemia or a creative underworld to join if the mainstream wasn't your bag – or a life of crime, or even religion. And now there's only the *system*. All other options have evaporated" (*Girlfriend* 154). Hamilton reflects on the paradox that given the multiplicity of options in the new world, there appears to be no real choice; all the varieties on offer are of no consequential difference. What the corporate system encourages us to desire are those things that will maintain its hegemony; the only options we have are the trappings of an essentially repressive system (Bauman 1992: 198-200). Furthermore, Karen's critique and Hamilton's corroborating ineffectual defence is characterised by a confusing disjuncture between the city and its people, between the world and the people who build it. "Friends and family want to protect Karen and her innocence from the modern world," we are told, "the changes that have occurred since her sleep began. Her innocence is the benchmark of their jadedness and corruption. The world is hard now. The world doesn't like simplicity or relaxation" (*Girlfriend* 138-139). The

simplicity and relaxation – perhaps the potential for meditation or transcendence – which Karen symbolises are such cherished ideas that people want to protect her and these notions. But the world is hard; the impersonal world dominated by the economic system will not abide these liberating ideas. It is as if the world were not made up of people.

Another reading, however, could suggest that Karen's sharp awareness of the disjuncture between the 70s and the 90s is due to her not having grown up. At the start of her tirade to Hamilton she admits, "Maybe it's because I'm with an older gang now" (*Girlfriend* 153). Karen is a seventeen-year-old in a thirty-four-year-old's body. She has missed the necessary accretion of "jadedness and corruption" which growing into adulthood entails. Hamilton's resigned pragmatism is a response to the ordeal of his twenties. Perhaps, after all, teenagers in the 90s are still teenagers; it might be that they have hobbies and free time.

Girlfriend in a Coma shows how, by this stage of his career, Coupland moves his nostalgic focus from the earliest novels' personal histories and personal pasts to a concern with broader social authenticity. In both cases, the museum of fifteen years ago commemorates an idealised past – whether a dream of lost youth, lost hope or lost political potency – to which no return may be made; Coupland applies the Kristevan logic of formative psychology to urbanised society to show how its desires to return to political or social authenticity will ultimately be thwarted.

References

Baudrillard, Jean
1988 *America*, translated by Chris Turner. London & New York: Verso.
Bauman, Zygmunt
1992 *Intimations of Postmodernity*. London & New York: Routledge.
Coupland, Douglas
1996 *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. London: Abacus.
1998 *Girlfriend in a Coma*. London: Flamingo.
2000 *City of Glass: Douglas Coupland's Vancouver*. Vancouver: Douglas & Macintyre.
2002 *Life after God*. London: Scribner.
2003 *Hey Nostradamus!* London: Flamingo.
Faye, Jefferson
2001 Canada in a Coma. *The American Review of Canadian Studies*, Autumn 2001: 501-510.
Garraty, John A. & McCaughey, Robert A.
1989 *A Short History of the American Nation*. 5th edition. New York: Harper & Row.

Greenberg, Louis
2010 Douglas Coupland's Treatment of Apocalypse in *Hey Nostradamus!* and *Girlfriend in a Coma*. *English Studies in Africa* 53(2), October 2010: 21-33.

Jameson, Fredric
1984 Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. *New Left Review* 146: 53-92.
1998a Postmodernism and Consumer Society. *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. London & New York: Verso, pp. 1-20.
1998b "End of Art" or "End of History"? *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. London & New York: Verso, pp. 73-92.

Kristeva, Julia
1982 *Powers of Horror: An Article on Abjection,* translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
1986 Revolution in Poetic Language. *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 90-136.

McCormick, Maureen
2008 Here's the Story: Surviving Marcia Brady and Finding My True Voice. New York: William Morrow.

Snider, Mike
1994 The X-Man: Douglas Coupland, from "Generation X" to Spiritual Regeneration. *USA Today*, 7 March 1994. Online: <http://coupland.-tripod.com/usat1.html>. 5 October 2011.

Louis Greenberg
University of the Witwatersrand
louis.paul.greenberg@gmail.com