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An Uneasy Slumber -

Trauma, Dialogism and David Mitchell's Libretto for *Wake* (Klaas de Vries, 2010)

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Introduction

In September 2009, the University of St Andrews' School of English dedicated a two-day conference to the work of best-selling author David Mitchell. Much was made (see e.g. Carolyn Kellogg, *LA Times*, William Skidelsky writing for the *Guardian*, and the discussion following another *Guardian* blog post by Alison Flood) of Mitchell's status as a relative newcomer, his first novel having been published only a decade before, and his core oeuvre consisting of no more than four novels at the time of the conference. Another question, one that remained largely implicit throughout the discussion, was whether it would be at all appropriate to deal with a body of work as obviously accessible and enjoyable as Mitchell's within a scholarly context. The first of the two binaries implied here – the idea that literary analysis is not a matter of enjoyment – remains a matter of personal inclination, and will not be dealt with here. The second binary opposition was addressed by presenting author Courtney Hopf in a comment on Carolyn Kellogg's article, in which she confessed to feeling “troubled by the implication that David Mitchell is somehow not worthy of academic study,” and wondered whether this was merely because Mitchell is still alive and well. In the light of a specific passage from one of Mitchell's own novels, I would like to suggest an alternative interpretation.

As part of a paean to Ursula K. le Guin's influence on authors of his generation, *Guardian* blogger Scott Timberg cites a scene from Mitchell's fourth novel, *Black Swan Green*, in which its thirteen-year-old protagonist and first-person narrator, Jason, is groomed for literary greatness by an emphatically high-modernist, Flemish-born mentrix. Eva van Outryve-Crommelynk, “a desiccated but still glamorous aristocrat of the old school” (Timberg) and one of the many recurring characters in Mitchell's novels, not only chides Jason for his ignorance of the Continental literary canon, but rejects his personal taste in

writing (*Black Swan Green* 203-4, italics in the original):

I mentally scanned my bookshelf for the really impressive names. 'Isaac Asimov. Ursula le Guin. John Wyndham.'

'Assy-smurf? Ursular Gun? Wind-'em? These are modern poets?'

'No. Sci-fi, fantasy. Stephen King, too. He's horror.'

"Fantasy"? Pffft! Listen to Ronald Reagan's homilies! "Horror"? What of Vietnam, Afghanistan, South Africa? Idi Amin, Mao Tse-tung, Pol Pot? Is not enough horror? I mean, who are your *masters*? Chekhov?'

'Er... no.'

'But you have read *Madame Bovary*?'

(I'd never heard of her books.) 'No.'

'Not even,' she looked ratty now, 'Hermann Hesse?'

'No.' [...] 'We don't really do Europeans at school...'

For now, out of the many concepts and assumptions packed into this brief passage, I would like to turn to the idea that speculative fiction does not deal with real life and, partly as a consequence, cannot be classified as literature. *Black Swan Green* itself may not incorporate any obvious features associated with fantasy or science fiction, but *Cloud Atlas* (2004), arguably Mitchell's best-known work to date, relies heavily on a number of speculative tropes. "An Orison of Sonmi-451" features a setting – a near future dominated by a totalitarian world order – and protagonist – a lone dissident hopelessly outmanoeuvred by corporate conspiracy – that place it squarely within a (largely non-Continental) tradition of dystopian speculative writing that has managed to unite non-naturalistic elements with an undeniable literary respectability. The next section, however, a tale of one man's life after the fall of civilisation entitled "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After," cannot rely on a similarly canonical pedigree. I would argue that any reluctance to consider David Mitchell's work in literary

terms is likely to be connected to his reliance on a frame of reference that continues to operate in the margins of the literary establishment, in edgier, often transdisciplinary areas of research such as Postcolonial or Gender Studies.

It seems fitting that an author who has shown such a willingness to engage academically disreputable types of text should commit himself to writing in another marginal genre: the libretto. As Albert Gier argues in the opening chapter of his monograph on the libretto as literary text, a number of nineteenth-century developments – the emergence of Grand Opéra, coupled with a tendency to darken the auditorium during performance and ever heavier orchestration, compromising singers' comprehensibility – eroded the respectability of text in opera to the point where libretti tend to be ridiculed in some circles and roundly ignored in others. Gier (17) quotes Peter Hacks' "Versuch über das Libretto," in which Hacks dismisses libretti as that part of opera which it would not be worth the effort to go into analytically. Without going into the merits of the genre per se, it should be worthwhile to consider the text David Mitchell wrote at the request of composer Klaas de Vries, who had been commissioned to write an opera for the decennial commemoration of what is known in the Netherlands simply as the fireworks disaster ("de vuurwerkkramp"). On 13 May, 2010, ten years to the day after a fire in a fireworks storage facility caused an explosion that killed 23 people, wounded nearly a thousand more, and flattened an entire residential area in the Dutch city of Enschede, Nationale Reisopera (Dutch Touring Opera, itself based in Enschede) premiered *Wake*, "an opera in four acts, with electronic music by René Uijlenhoet," in a production by Stephen Langridge, with designs by Conor Murphy.

De Vries and Mitchell's unlikely partnership ("collaboration – a rare spice for a writer who lives in rural Ireland," as Mitchell quipped in an article he wrote on the project for the *Guardian*) has been covered on both sides of the North Sea, in pieces that highlighted some or all of the following: De Vries' lengthy search for a way into the project, which he did not find

until reading *Cloud Atlas* and deciding he had found his librettist (see e.g. Corinne van den Hoeven's radio documentary, *Terug Naar Enschede*); Mitchell's initial reluctance to take part (dealt with at length in his article for the *Guardian*); and both parties' persistent doubts whether they would be able to treat the matter responsibly, that is, without either insulting or traumatising anyone involved any further. The latter was resolved, in part, by despecifying the opera's subject matter. *Wake* would not be about Enschede or fireworks; instead, the piece came to be based around a cross-section – quite literally so – of ordinary lives in a single three-by-three apartment building “on an ordinary evening in an unnamed city” (Mitchell, “Adventures in Opera”). In a subsequent episode (depicted only in retrospect, through spoken accounts given by surviving characters), the building would be destroyed, along with those living within its walls, during an unspecified but catastrophic event. As if to further underscore the aimed-for universality of the individual stories they tell, the opera's two central acts are framed by choruses that evoke the collective experience of religious ritual. *Wake* opens with a one-act oratorio, a requiem, “the collective, traditional ritual answer to loss on a large scale”¹ (De Vries 13), and closes with what De Vries refers to as a mystery play, an “impossible conversation” between the Living, the Dead and a Memory Chorus. In an online promotional video for the production (“Certo Report”), De Vries refers to the transition between acts one and two as “a move back in time.” *Wake*'s departure from chronological order – opening with a Mass for the Dead in honour of those who, in a subsequent act, are still very much alive – problematises the idea of closure. It also suggests a circular motion, a sense of recurrence that brings to mind the cyclical imagery in William Wordsworth's “A slumber did my spirit seal.”² Quoted in full, the poem concludes *Wake*'s fourth and final act, which De Vries (18) mentions conceiving as “one big lullaby” that “holds everything together.”

1 With the exception of lines quoted from *Mijn Enschede*, which are based on the film's subtitles, all English renditions of material from Dutch sources are my own.

2 In one newspaper feature on the opera (Valkenburg), De Vries claims that “at the end of the [fourth] act, it's time for a requiem, which brings you back to the beginning. I really like cyclical forms.”

What might it mean that a piece entitled *Wake*, commissioned to commemorate a deeply traumatic event, should end in a slumber? Oddly, given the extensive commentary that both Mitchell and De Vries have offered on their collaboration, neither seems to have commented on this intriguing juxtaposition. On closer examination, the opera's brief fourth act reveals a number of further tensions and inconsistencies, contrary to De Vries' claim (18) that unlike the “calegidoscopic” second and third³ acts, this final section was conceived as a single, unified entity, with a final chorus that “breathes an atmosphere of resignation” (19). Intriguingly, De Vries mentions having initially approached act two in a similar, unitary fashion, meaning to “turn the entire second act into one big passacaglia” (*ibid.*), a seventeenth-century musical form characterised by a succession of variations on a repeated ground bass. These intentions could not be realised, however, since “the characters took over. Ultimately, eighteen of them proved stronger than me, alone with my idea of the passacaglia” (*ibid.*). While De Vries presents the matter as a simple case of being outnumbered, this does not explain why he feels he had no such trouble conceiving act four as a single unit, despite the involvement of all eighteen characters, plus a chorus. His preoccupation with unity (17: “My chief concern, while composing [act two], was to make sure it became a single musical entity”) suggests a more fundamental tension between what Mikhail Bakhtin might have thought of as “the chaotic and particular centrifugal forces of subjectivity and the rule-driven, generalizing centripetal forces of extra-personal system” (Holquist 27).

Drawing on traces left by *Wake*'s original production – an audio recording of a live performance, the libretto as published in the programme booklet, promotional footage – and a frame of reference informed by Bakhtin's theory of the novel, the following explores this apparent conflict of interests between composition (the one) and characterisation (the many).

3 Act three has the surviving characters (all speaking parts) speak their lines over a soundscape provided by René Uijlenhoet rather than Klaas de Vries, and factors into the latter's struggle with Mitchell's characters only indirectly.

It suggests an interpretation based on *Wake's* status as a commemorative project and a representation of coping and dealing with trauma and loss by narrative means – a practice that documentary filmmaker Astrid Bussink (quoted in Hoes), herself a survivor of the explosions in Enschede, has called “giving it a form.” Ultimately, it concludes that the uneasy slumber that concludes the opera reflects the limitations of this process of integration, and of the closure and resolution it promises.

The study follows a three-part structure. The striking set designs for the opera's second act, a visual representation of the narrative frame that links nine largely unconnected stories into a common superstructure, serve as a point of entry into the first chapter, which offers a Bakhtinian take on Mitchell's work in general, and act two of *Wake* in particular. Key concepts such as dialogism and addressivity are used to account for *Wake's* vivid portrayal of everyday life in act two's nine rooms, and the subsequent shock of absence once the (largely unspecified) disaster has occurred. The second chapter focuses on *Wake's* fourth and final act. It contrasts two possible interpretations of Wordsworth's “A slumber did my spirit seal” and its role within the libretto, and traces the disappearance of the many different idioms that featured in act two from the lines given to the Dead in act four. A section on the way in which, like the victims, the nine rooms of act two retain a ghostly presence in act four leads into the notion that the forms and frameworks used to represent trauma and loss can never entirely accommodate such events. This notion is explored further in the third chapter, which examines another project related to the fireworks disaster's decenary anniversary: Astrid Bussink's documentary *Mijn Enschede* (“my Enschede”). For the most part, the film follows the contours of a well-defined journalistic genre that allows for narrative closure, however unsatisfying. Outside this narrative frame, however, traces of the disaster continue to make themselves felt, most obviously when an incident resembling the original traumatic event imposes itself upon Bussink unexpectedly. Assuming that a similar mechanism operates in

Wake accounts for the unsettling tensions that run through its fourth act. Its musical and literary templates offer a means of addressing a traumatic event, but in rendering it understandable, they cannot account for what characterises such an event as traumatic: its very incomprehensibility. A surplus of loss remains, and consequently, the closure implied by De Vries' use of a lullaby motif, especially, does not ring true.

1 “There are many rooms in my father’s mansion” (*Wake*, act 2, scene 21)

In an interview with Ben Coelman (8), and again in the fourth installment in a series of articles (“VOC en NL”) written for Dutch weekly *Vrij Nederland*, Mitchell mentions a fascination with the Dutch custom of leaving the curtains open after dark, allowing passers-by a glimpse of people’s lives. Accordingly, the libretto for *Wake* coalesced around the image of a three-by-three grid of literal windows into ordinary people’s lives, offering views of nine rooms in a single building. This image – which Klaas de Vries (12) compares to a game of noughts and crosses, and which may have factored into Mitchell himself (“Adventures in opera”) likening the writing process to filling out a sudoku puzzle – was rendered onstage through video projections, with nine screens set into an upstage scenery flat to suggest windows in a façade, and a downstage area that could be made to represent the interiors of individual rooms.⁴ As the occupants of a specific room came onstage to perform, the screen showing their room would cut to black, to indicate that its interior had shifted to the downstage area. The other screens would continue showing what happened in the remaining rooms, so that “when the spotlight is elsewhere, the stories in each room continue to develop, like nine silent movies showing simultaneously” (Mitchell, “Adventures in opera”). The title of this section, *Wake*’s second act, refers to what is visible onstage at any one time: “Nine Rooms”. Nine rooms, not nine apartments or nine households, as co-composer René

4 A photograph of the sets for act two has been included as an appendix; see page 39 below.

Uijlenhoet describes them in Corinne van den Hoeven's radio documentary on the opera; the distinction is small, but significant. Out of the nine households featured, six consist of multiple persons; these people live in apartments, not bedsits, yet only a single room in each of their homes is shown. What we see and hear of the characters is a slice of life, not only in terms of duration – a few lines, a few bars per character before disaster strikes – but also in that what we, the audience, are able to pick up on, peering and listening in through the fourth wall, is limited by three more walls.

The visible simultaneity of nine stories unfolding side by side hints at another, invisible simultaneity, of lives lived in rooms that we know must be there, but which we have no access to from our current perspective. Suggesting “a background white noise that creates the illusion that the world is much bigger” than what is actually shown onstage (Mitchell, quoted in Dillon 5), the “Nine Rooms” act in *Wake* applies a principle very similar to the “compounded short story” form that enables Mitchell to “suggest a larger fictional world around and beyond that of the specific story he is at that point telling” (Dillon 4-5) in his novels. Sarah Dillon duly takes the act's *mise-en-scène* as a guiding metaphor for Mitchell's entire oeuvre, “with each novel, both those written and those yet to be written, constituting a room in the house of fiction he is constructing” (6). A little further down, she modifies the metaphor in order to accommodate Mitchell's extensive use of narratives within narratives (such as the story of Autua, embedded in *Cloud Atlas*' “Pacific Diary of Adam Ewing,” or indeed the entire structure of *Cloud Atlas* itself) and Russian-doll imagery (e.g., the infinitely fertile Goddess in *Thousand Autumns*, whose unborn daughter already bears a granddaughter inside her, and she in turn a great-granddaughter, and so on). Such use of layering, Dillon suggests, should be regarded as a form of narrative *mise-en-abyme*; in Mitchell's house of fiction, “on the wall of each room is a picture of that room, which itself contains a picture of the room, and so on” (Dillon 9). What Dillon's elegant framing amounts to, however, is an

undue flattening of the house into a façade, of the rooms themselves into a surface, and the windows that provide access to them into picture frames. Crucially, the mise-en-abyme effect she refers to would entail an identical perspective for each “layer” of the picture-within-a-picture; a substantial part of the interest in Mitchell's stories-within-stories, however, lies in the means they provide for exploring a range of different, and highly distinctive, narrative points of view. Instead, I would suggest adopting Russian semiotician and literary philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel (the applicability of which extends beyond texts that would traditionally be thought of as novels) as a general frame of reference for analyses of Mitchell's work.

Remarkably, given the impact Bakhtin's work has had on various disciplines within the humanities, none of the critical essays that came out of the 2009 conference (see Dillon address the extent to which Mitchell's compounded approach to writing epitomises Bakhtinian “novelness” (“romannost”; see Holquist 70). The image of a text (or, as in act two of *Wake*, a stage design) that combines multiple discrete perspectives to hint at what lies beyond its own limits, a vast world that any one text or image could not possibly render in its entirety, suggests the “unrealized surplus of humanity” that Bakhtin (37) believed made it impossible to “incarnate once and forever all of [an individual's] human possibilities and needs” within the limits of literary genres like tragedy or epic poetry, since there is “no form that he could fill to the very brim, and yet at the same time not splash over the brim.” To Bakhtin, the novel is not a genre as such, in that it has no fixed formal requirements; what characterises novelness is a capacity for letting different voices enter into dialogue with one another. Such dialogism may take shape through the juxtaposition of different narrative styles in a single text, or in a narrator's adoption of a specific character's way of speaking. Novelness can thus be an aspect of texts that are not usually classed as novels, as Bakhtin argues with respect to ancient Roman parody and literary travesty, which “paved the way for the impiety of the

novelistic form” (59). Moreover, rather than focus on any one of these texts in particular, Bakhtin considers them collectively, as bringing into being “a special extra-generic or inter-generic world” where “each separate element in it – parodic dialogue, scenes from everyday life, bucolic humor, etc. – is presented as if it were a fragment of some kind of unified whole” (59-60). His subsequent description of this inter-generic world as “something like an immense novel” (ibid.) calls to mind Mitchell's sense of his own work “bringing into being a fictional universe with its own cast,” where “each of my books is one chapter in a sort of sprawling macronovel” (Mason 6).

Within a Bakhtinian frame of reference, objections to the proliferation of styles in Mitchell's novels appear quite beside the point, a perverse application of the monologic principles of poetic genre to a mode of writing that by definition does not adhere to them. “If there has been one consistent criticism of Mitchell,” Wyatt Mason (5) writes, “it has been that his virtuosity is mere ventriloquism, a capacity for imitation that suggests he lacks originality.” Unsurprisingly, ventriloquism is one of the images Bakhtin (299) uses to describe the relationship between an author and the many languages that enter his or her writing: “The author does not speak in a given language (from which he distances himself to a greater or lesser degree), but he speaks, as it were, *through* language, a language [...] that he merely ventriloquates.” The text-immanent dialogism that Bakhtin sees as the novel's *raison d'être* would be impossible without some degree of ventriloquism, a stylistic tension between the language characters use and the language that represents them. The idea that an extensive use of recognisable generic styles and distinct narrative voices amounts to an abdication of one's “own” voice as an author (again, see Mason 5) only holds as long as one ignores the author's actual involvement in the writing process. Writing a text narrated by one of its diegetic characters means engaging with that character's voice, so that the resulting words represent an interface or encounter between – at the very least – two languages: that of the

character in question, and that of the author. While discussing Pushkin's verse novel *Evgeny Onegin*, Bakhtin (46) observes that “the author is far from neutral” in his representation of Onegin's manner of speaking, “a period-bound language associated with a particular world view.” Indeed, he “polemicizes with this language, argues with it, agrees with it (although with conditions), interrogates it, eavesdrops on it, but also ridicules it, parodically exaggerates it and so forth” (ibid.). In *Cloud Atlas*, for instance, “The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish” derives part of its humour from the way Mitchell has the narrator's caustic put-downs reflect as much upon his own self-importance as on the shortcomings of those he chooses to mock. Consequently, “the author participates in the novel (he is omnipresent in it) with *almost no direct language of his own*. The language of the novel is a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other” (Bakhtin 47; italics in the original). Rather than a shortcoming, then, the pervasive but indirect involvement of Mitchell's voice in his novels is a testament to their dialogic potential. But what of his writing for the stage?

In view of Bakhtin's insistence on the dialogic relationship between author and text, even in the absence of a clearly delimited authorial voice, his rejection of drama (including, presumably, music theatre) seems remarkable. His conviction that “in drama there is no all-encompassing language that addresses itself dialogically to separate languages,” that “there is no second all-encompassing plotless (nondramatic) dialogue outside that of the (nondramatic) plot” (Bakhtin 266) appears to have prompted a blanket dismissal of dramatic dialogue as being, however ironically, non-dialogic. This position has been adamantly rejected by, among others, Marvin Carlson and Jennifer Wise, who observes that “Bakhtin's most definitive statements about the novel are, paradoxically, built out of dramatic metaphors” (21). Recently, referring to act two, scene two of *Hamlet*, Philip D. Collington argued “that the plurivocality of drama can generate the lively dialogic interanimations that Bakhtin limited to novelistic discourse,” by means of an “unobtrusive linguistic *baseline* against which the

embedded forms and styles contrast markedly” (238). I would argue that in the case of *Wake*, a reversal of this same principle applies – a sudden lack of contrast between individual voices in act four, after two acts of “lively dialogic interanimations,” leaving the common baseline to stand out instead. This verbal absence of dialogism is amplified by an additional, visual cue denoting absence: the comparative emptiness of the stage following act two, the literal lack of a framework ordering individual characters' stories. Crucially, this contrast can only be perceived in full (visually as well as verbally) from a position outside the space of representation, that is, from a position in the audience. In order to account for the involvement of an audience or readership in the effects a performance or text may have within our current, Bakhtinian framework, it should be useful to go into the concept of addressivity at this point.

At its most basic level, addressivity (“the overwhelmingly social nature of communication,” Holquist 81) refers to the idea that words are never uttered in a vacuum; “every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates” (Bakhtin 280). With respect to novels and drama, Carlson (318) renders this as the notion that “the receiver of this utterance, both real and presumed, shares the responsibility for the creation of its meaning.” A good example of such shared responsibility can be found in chapter six of Mitchell's latest novel, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010), part of which is set on the artificial islet of Dejima, a Dutch trading post connected to Nagasaki harbour, at the turn of the eighteenth century. The chapter ends in a farcical scene that sees the titular character, referred to as “Domburger” here, on account of his having been brought up in Domburg, Zeeland, tricked into assisting a demonstration of a tobacco smoke enema by the speaker, Dr Marinus:

'Domburger: *in guerno* for favours granted, shall loan his *gluteus maximus* to medical science that I may demonstrate the passage of smoke “through caverns measureless to man” from anus to oesophagus, whence smoke trickles through his

nostrils like incense from a stone dragon, though not, alas, so sweet-scented, given its malodorous voyage...' (68)

On one level, the entire scene offers Mitchell's take on a pictorial genre that has become associated with one work in particular, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559). Bruegel's oil-on-panel painting gives literal renditions of at least 80 sixteenth-century Flemish and Dutch expressions, most of which are no longer in use, and few of which have corresponding English equivalents.⁵ The scene excerpted above pivots on a colloquial expression that has no equivalent in Dutch: blowing smoke up someone's backside, meaning to deceive them – which, it turns out, was exactly what Dr Marinus was doing when, in a previous scene, he promised De Zoet an opportunity to speak privately with a female student, in return for De Zoet's assistance during that afternoon's lecture “on Human Respiration” (*Thousand Autumns* 60). Although the chapter ends before the procedure is actually carried out, it becomes clear that the lecture in question involves a more literal demonstration of the expression. The scene does not require this double meaning to function as a comedic set piece, and the assumption that the dialogue, rendered by the author in English, was actually uttered in Dutch does not require much of an effort to uphold. In order to “share the responsibility for the creation” of this particular aspect of its meaning, however, the audience would have to be familiar with the (English) expression.

The Dutch doctor's apparent reference to Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (“through caverns measureless to man”), meanwhile, is puzzling. The chapter heading puts the date at 10 August, 1799, and while according to John Spencer Hill (67), the “most widely accepted date [of composition] for *Kubla Khan* is October or November 1797,” the poem remained unpublished for nearly twenty years, first appearing in print on 25 May, 1816, as part of “an octavo pamphlet of sixty-four pages entitled *Christabel; Kubla Khan, a Vision; The Pains of*

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the painting's rhetorical structure and its contemporary textual and iconographic context, see Meadow.

Sleep" (70). Who is Dr Marinus addressing when he quotes a poem that none of the people present – himself included – could have heard of? And why does the written account of his spoken words include quotation marks? How would these have been audible, or in any way perceptible, when spoken?⁶ The only conceivable audience to whom both the line itself and its explicit flagging as a quotation would make sense is one that has access to both a literary intertext containing *Kubla Khan* and the printed text of the novel. In other words, Dr Marinus is addressing the early twenty-first century reader by way of his late eighteenth-century students. This would also account for why the corresponding passage in the novel's Dutch translation (*De niet verhoorde gebeden van Jacob de Zoet*, 98) does not flag the excerpt from Coleridge's poem as such: even if a singularly authoritative Dutch translation of *Kubla Khan* were available for reference, the passage will not have the same force of recognition for Dutch audiences.

Had the passage featured any other speaker, the anachronism could have been dismissed as an error on the part of the author. However, since Mitchell has stated that "there's much more than meets the eye with Marinus" (quoted in Dillon: 7), the incongruity can be taken to support his portrayal, in *Thousand Autumns* and elsewhere, as a character that cannot be fully contained within any one text and, consequently, "splashes over the brim" (Bakhtin 37). In *Wake*, too, we meet a Marinus who seems aware of things he could not possibly know. As his character biography ("Nine Rooms," 30) informs us, he "seems to know Otto's secret, which would be extraordinary, because Otto never [told] anyone. But the rules of the ordinary do not apply to Marinus." Next to a proliferation of diegetic readers and listeners in Mitchell's work, *Thousand Autumns* has Marinus reach across the limits of point of view (which here lies with De Zoet) and out towards the book's *extradiegetic* readers. In the absence of a diegetic listener who would be able to recognise the quotation as such when

6 While Bakhtin uses the phrase "intonational quotation marks" (44), he uses it to refer to indirect quotation and the ironic incorporation of a specific style into one's own speech, rather than direct quotation.

it is uttered, Marinus' odd use of quotation marks draws attention to the medium through which the reader encounters him – not unlike the way in which the set designs for act two of *Wake* underline the role that the fourth wall plays in theatrical performance. Rather than efface the fourth wall, offering the audience a view from nowhere in particular, *Wake* makes a point of presenting the audience with a limited point of view, through a set of windows set into a façade that is itself represented onstage. As individual scenes play out along the downstage area, and the corresponding “windows” through which the audience is supposedly witnessing these events unfold are blacked out, their outlines light up instead; each narrative is presented along with its frame, the limits of its point of view. As in *Thousand Autumns*, these limits only become visible as such when looked at from the outside. The physical presence of a reader or observer outside the space represented thus becomes a key component in the emergence of meaning during reading or performance. In *Thousand Autumns*, Marinus' nod towards the reader furthers the impression of an as-yet “unrealised surplus” that extends beyond the text; in *Wake*, in the absence of an overarching plot (the various characters have only limited interaction), the nine windows of act two provide the audience with its chief narrative frame of reference, setting up the impact of its subsequent destruction in act three – the “shattering of prior forms” (Lifton, quoted in Caruth: 134) on several levels at once.

Wake's addressivity, its orientation towards and reliance on an observer, is particularly relevant to analyses that go into its representation of trauma and loss, and people's subsequent coping efforts. Both Ernst van Alphen (111) and Robert Jay Lifton (see Caruth 134-5) speak of traumatic events in terms of an unavailability of plots, forms or narrative frames that would accommodate such experiences, while psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor Dori Laub attributes survivors' inability to tell their stories to an absence of witnesses, people who might “provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed” (66). Accordingly, Frank's account of the disaster in act three breaks down the moment he and

other characters recall the destruction of act two's nine rooms (*Wake* 56):

FRANK

...I'm sorry, I can't go on with this.

I'm sorry.

To Laub, the ability to witness an event requires an ability to distance oneself from it, to take up a position on the outside from which the event can be observed, interpreted and put into perspective. If, in a particularly distressing situation, people are unable to adopt this position themselves, they cannot bear witness to what happened – not until they find someone willing to provide this missing outsider's perspective by listening to what they have to say. In a sense, “the listener (or the interviewer)” witnesses the event being recounted “*before* the narrator does” (Laub 69). Just as every word is directed towards an answer, in order for a survivor to be able to speak out, someone – here, the audience – needs to be listening.

While the act of bearing witness can take place “belatedly, as though retroactively” (Laub 69) once a committed listener has been found, holding out “the promise of truth as the return of a sane, normal, and connected world” (73), the achievement of testimony does not actually fulfill this promise. Testimony is “a dialogical process of exploration and reconciliation of two worlds – the one that was brutally destroyed and the one that is – that are different and will always remain so” (74). This juxtaposition of worlds in the process of dealing with trauma and loss might account for why Mitchell opted to include Wordsworth's poem in the libretto, at a point where the opera's surviving characters face the task of reconciling their own survival with the deaths of their friends and loved ones. As it turns out, however, this interpretation of the poem's function within the libretto is not quite borne out by its musical setting, which seems to rely on the promise of reconciliation alone, without an acknowledgement of the difference between a living, speaking self and a self remembered by others.

2 An uneasy slumber and a haunting house

Traditional interpretations of “A slumber did my spirit seal,” which for reasons of convenience has been included in full below, have tended to deal with it as if it were one of the “Lucy” poems, identifying the unnamed “she” mentioned in both stanzas as “the doomed or threatened heroine of poems like 'Three years she grew,' 'She dwelt among the untrodden ways' and 'Strange fits of passion’” (Rzepka 56). Consequently, its shift from simple past tense in the first stanza to present tense in the second is taken to contrast a time of blissful unawareness – the speaker's “slumber” – with the present, harsh reality of his beloved's mortality:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
 I had no human fears:
 She seem'd a thing that could not feel
 The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
 She neither hears nor sees;
 Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course,
 With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Within the context of the Lucy poems, references to “the touch of earthly years” and a female figure who now has “no motion”, “no force”, and who “neither hears nor sees” could only refer to transience and a woman's death, respectively. According to this perspective, the realisation that accompanies the transition from past to present, from what “seemed” to what is, has the speaker emerge from his slumber just as “she” succumbs to unending sleep – a fitting note for a text such as *Wake* to end on. However, as Charles Rzepka points out, this grouping of “Slumber” with the Lucy poems, and the accompanying identification of “she” as

Lucy, is largely a product of Victorian editing practice (much like the concept of the Lucy poems themselves, as an internally consistent unit within Wordsworth's oeuvre). While the image of “a thing that could not feel” in “Slumber” is very similar to that of “mute insensate things” in “Three years she grew,” the former stands out from the other four traditionally included in the Lucy poems – all of which refer explicitly both to Lucy and to her (impending) death – in that it makes no mention of Lucy, death, or the relationship “she” has to the narrator. Referring to Hugh Sykes Davies' “Another New Poem by Wordsworth” (1965), Rzepka (56) observes that “within the context of the poem as a purely autonomous work,”⁷ the most likely antecedent for the pronoun “she” would actually be “my spirit.” Rzepka does not go into Wordsworth's use of personification elsewhere, and given that he equates speaker and poet, it might seem counterintuitive that the speaker (assumed to be male) should think of his own spirit as feminine. Still, having a man's spirit personified as a female figure is not unheard of in Wordsworth's work (e.g., book eight of the 1850 *Prelude*, ll.449-50 has “an image of his ghost/ Or spirit that full soon must take her flight”; see also Davies 136-8). Moreover, while the opening line in “Slumber” can be taken to refer to a period of time (during which a slumber kept the speaker's spirit sealed), its use of simple past (“did seal”) is equally consistent with a depiction of a single moment (at which the speaker's spirit was sealed). Going with the latter interpretation, the three lines that follow seem to sketch either the circumstances leading up to that moment – a lack of “human fears” in the speaker, a female figure's (his spirit's?) seeming imperviousness to “the touch of earthly years” – or, alternatively, the experience of that moment itself. Rzepka (57) suggests the following paraphrase for the first stanza: “A trance overcame me – 'my spirit' seemed to be a thing existing outside of time. I had no fear of death, as ordinary humans do.” The second stanza

7 Keeping in mind that the idea of any text or utterance ever being “purely autonomous” is problematic – although from a Bakhtinian perspective, poetry as a genre does strive for the monologic and self-contained; see Bakhtin 1986, 286-8 and 296-8.

then shifts to the present to describe the moment's aftermath, either a continuation of the slumber, or a sense of oneness with nature that is itself dreamlike. Unlike the conventional interpretation, such readings have the poem end the way it begins, with a slumber or dreamlike state of mind, reflecting the cyclical imagery (“rolled round in earth's diurnal course”) of its final lines. To further cement the plausibility of such readings (and their “pantheistic implications”), Rzepka (56) draws connections between the speaker's slumber and “that serene and blessed mood/ In which [...] we are laid asleep/ In body, and become a living soul” in *Tintern Abbey*.

What remains, then, is the question how each of these two possible interpretations might affect the role the poem plays when it becomes part of a piece such as *Wake*. Traditional readings would seem particularly appropriate to the opera's subject matter, insofar as they rely on the assumption that the poem contrasts two worlds, one of which has been “brutally destroyed” (Laub 74). Interestingly, Mitchell appears to have employed a motif that corresponds to this conventional interpretation of Wordsworth's “Slumber” at least once before. The final pages of *number9dream* have the narrator, Eiji, wake to news of an earthquake in Japan that may or may not have harmed his love interest, a nightmarish reality he longs to wake from in turn (418: “I would give anything to be dreaming right now”). The novel's very last paragraph (*ibid.*) juxtaposes Eiji's anxious visions of a modern city destroyed by forces of nature (“Are the airwaves and cables jammed [...] because Tokyo is now a landscape of rubble under clouds of cement dust?”) with the serene timelessness of his physical environment, the small island where he was born: “Outside, a century of quiet rain is falling on all the leaves, stones and pine needles of the valley.” The image bears a striking resemblance to the “rocks, and stones, and trees” that end both Wordsworth's poem and *Wake*. If, however, Mitchell's use of Wordsworth's poem here serves to signify a rude awakening similar to the one that ends *number9dream*, this puts the libretto at odds with the music,

which was expressly conceived as a lullaby by De Vries, governed by a “gently rocking melody” of minor thirds that “fits in seamlessly with the slumber mentioned in the poem's opening line” and “holds everything together” (18). A promotional video uploaded by Nationale Reisopera, in which De Vries paraphrases the poem's final lines as “I can feel myself sinking into, or becoming part of earth's eternal course,” further confirms the impression that he went with the alternative, unitary, pantheistic interpretation of the poem, according to which the opera ends on a note of release, of letting go.

Like Wordsworth's uneasy slumber, the ghostly figures of the Dead in *Wake's* fourth act have a significance that is far from clear-cut. Both De Vries and Mitchell have spoken of the “‘impossible conversation’ between the Living, the Dead and Memory” (Mitchell, “Adventures in Opera”) in terms of wish fulfillment, a “chance to say what needs to be said” (ibid.); an opportunity for these characters to pick up where they had been forced to leave off, and thus bring matters to a more satisfying conclusion – in keeping with De Vries' likely interpretation of Wordsworth's poem. What ghosts and spectres tend to signify, however, both in critical theory (see e.g. Jacques Derrida's mid-1990s “hauntology” of Europe's uneasy relation to ideology, following the exorcism of “the spectre of Communism”) and in Mitchell's novels (see Dunlop 208-11), is the unfinished business itself, its lingering, pervasive impact on life rather than its resolution. Brushing against the grain of the closure and release it seems to offer, there are incongruities throughout *Wake's* fourth act that lend this final, morality-play-inspired⁸ section of the opera a general air of unease. “Act four: Rocks, and stones, and trees” may have been envisioned as a conversation, yet none of the characters seem to be addressing anyone in particular. The Dead, especially, caught up in their roles as allegorical figures, appear to have lost all sense of who (rather than what) they are, eschewing any use of the first person singular, speaking either collectively or through the very

8 De Vries (18) speaks of a “mystery play”; according to Robert Potter (7), the traditional tripartite division of medieval drama into three distinct categories (mystery, miracle and morality) is “arbitrary and unhistorical.”

“platitudes and phrases” that survivors Mr and Mrs Boxer, who have now lost both their sons, reject outright at the start of the act (58: “Damn their platitudes and phrases/ I do not care. I do not care”). Very little of what constitutes these characters, the distinctive properties that emerged over the course of the previous two acts – Otto's guilt, Vita's knowing diffidence towards Macroom's carefully plotted advances, Tom's resentment towards his parents – has any bearing on what they say here, or how they say it. While former submariner Willem's use of a maritime metaphor (60: “So navigate by maps or stars; meet trouble and capsize”) seems appropriate enough, a line such as “What if our game concluded in a contrary result?/ Would you want us to inhale grief and exhale guilt?” (ibid.), here given to Johan and Otto, could have been uttered by any of the victims. Indeed, the difference in tone between these rhetorical questions and Johan's and Otto's lines in act two, which are characterised by short, highly charged outbursts (42: “Lads! No! Boys! Ref! But!”) and reluctant, painful recollection (43: “I thought – at first – I'd – I'd – I'd... hit a deer... or...”), respectively, is striking. Audiences may recognise a specific performer as portraying a given character, and readers of the libretto may refer to line attributions, but apart from these, it becomes difficult to determine who among the Dead utters which line. If anything, the composer's efforts to retain, throughout act four, elements of the specific musical idioms associated with each character in act two (see De Vries 18: “They keep their own instrumentation and their own tempo”) only serves to underline the absence of the verbal idioms associated with them. One way in which the impossibility of this conversation manifests itself, then, is in a dearth of voices, a jarring breakdown of the text's rich heteroglossia. The only voice that remains audible is that of “a common baseline discourse” (Collington 238) which manifests itself as a series of commonplaces (*Wake* 58):

DOT AND TOM (to the Living)

Your pain

is testimony we were loved

and therefore blessed.

We mourn you are marooned,

distressed.

We do not wish to be your wound.

IONA

But anger sharpens

grief anew –

a piece of us, you see, died too.

Why not me?

Why you?

Rather than offer a dialogue between distinct voices, the text expresses a single, overwhelming desire to move on and restore a semblance of normality – the “return of a sane, normal and connected world,” as Laub (73) has it. A succession of phrases taken from everyday contexts presents an enticingly dull image of everyday life going about its business (*Wake* 59):

MISS SCALLAMACH

“News and Views”

FRANK

“Pay and Display”;

SPIDER

“Best Before”

MR BOXER

“Submit your taxes.”

CASPAR

My world ground down,

MARINUS

while theirs still spins on its

humdrumming axis.

MACROOM AND VITA

The universe uncrumples,

indifferent and unfussed.

As the exchange moves between well-worn tropes of mourning – the disaster's victims calling upon the survivors to “Honour us, by living fully” (60); the notion that nothing will ever be the same again, contrasted with the universe's blatant indifference to death – the characters' need to engage their sense of loss strains against the text's formal adherence to a genre (the late medieval morality play) that is deeply conventional, “a generalized [...] conception of the human condition” (Potter 10). The inclusion of a straightforward memento mori, especially, a reminder that “All that is here shall cease to be” (*Wake* 59, quotation marks in the original), comes across as rather too glib to be entirely appropriate.

While the need to speak out in order to deal with what has happened prompts the characters in act four to adopt voices that are not quite theirs, a similar mechanism emerges with respect to the opera's main narrative framework, the nine rooms of act two. When act four has surviving characters Spider, Cleopatra, Miss Scallamach, Caspar and Frank list everyday items that remind them of those they lost to the disaster – outlining “A hole that keeps the shape of what is lost,” one of the glosses Diane suggests for the word “grief” in scene 22 of act two – the effect is touching, if perhaps a touch overly familiar (60):

SPIDER

Junk mail still arrives
for you,

CLEOPATRA

still thrives,
your coriander.

MISS SCALLAMACH

Your cashmere gloves,

CASPAR

the songs you loved,

FRANK

your birthday in the calendar.

Most of the items listed here, however, are unlikely to have survived the kind of blast (two blasts, even) that killed every occupant in an entire apartment building, and that – according to the survivors' accounts in act three – could be heard across town (56):

FRANK

...anyway, I heard... this noise.

I thought, A bomb.

MRS BOXER

And then we heard this...

low rumbling, like thunder...

MR BOXER

But it didn't die down,

it got louder...

MRS BOXER

And the people in the street had
stopped, like statues...

FRANK

...people were running,
in all different directions.
Then there was a second...
almighty...

Taken individually, none of the items on the list would be impossible to account for. Spider's claim that junk mail still arrives for Macroom sounds plausible enough, assuming that anything sent to the old address (which must have been rendered uninhabitable by the blasts) is being redirected. Small items like Dot's gloves, which Miss Scallamach might have had on her when she went to run an errand that evening, could have made it through the disaster through sheer coincidence – much like the character herself. Similarly, Cleopatra's remark about her half-sister's coriander could have been prompted by the unlikelihood of its survival, a testament to its ability to thrive, and the idea that someone like Frank would enter his late wife's birthday on a new calendar is both affecting and very much in character. Still, while none of the individual items listed here go against what we learn of the disaster, they do not provide a particularly close fit either. The list derives its poignancy from its cumulative effect, evoking a familiar, domestic environment that continues to operate as if an equally familiar figure, now absent, were still part of it. Within the context of the opera, however, this environment has been affected, too; the list traces the outline of a “hole that keeps the shape of what is lost” against a background that is no longer there. The domestic environment that features, implicitly, in the list – the kitchen table or windowsill that Vita's coriander now sits on, the wall that Frank has pinned his birthday calendar to – can only be that of the survivors'

new homes, an environment that those killed in the disaster were never part of in the first place. Within this new, unfamiliar context, the presence of familiar items in the absence of those they used to belong to evokes a second absence, that of the items' former, familiar environment. In this way, though no longer part of the scenery, the nine rooms of act two nevertheless retain a ghostly presence in the opera, along with their former inhabitants, by virtue of remaining conspicuously absent. The destruction of the building, a literal “shattering of prior forms,” entails the destruction of the very frame of reference that would allow the survivors to account for the pain of absence. As they attempt to articulate this pain in act four, characters necessarily refer to the framework available to them, their new living environment, even though this frame does not quite fit.

It appears that much of the tension in act four derives from the forms used to “say what needs to be said.” Assuming that some formal genres would arguably be more appropriate than others for dealing with the matter at hand, securing a sufficiently close fit between form and substance might nevertheless not be an option. Cathy Caruth (153) suggests that “the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated [...] may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall.” Narrative closure offers a means to “move away from the experience of shock by reintegrating it into a stable understanding,” but this movement can only occur at the cost of “the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*” (154, italics in the original). In order to further illustrate the relation between a traumatic event's “affront to understanding” and the forms chosen to represent it, I would like to turn to another project undertaken to coincide with the fireworks disaster's decennary anniversary: Astrid Bussink's *Mijn Enschede*.

3 Finding and fitting forms: *Mijn Enschede*

In his article for the *Guardian*, Mitchell (“Adventures in opera”) mentions “a one-man demonstration against the opera,” which made him revise his text “imagining [he] was watching the premiere sitting next to someone who had lost a daughter or a dad in 2000.” Watching Astrid Bussink’s 2010 documentary film *Mijn Enschede*, one begins to suspect that the “WAKE IS LIES man”, as Mitchell calls him, may well have been “Don H.,” whom Bussink films as he performs part of his own, politically charged “Disaster Opera in E minor” – set, tellingly, to Kurt Weill’s “Ballad of Mack the Knife” from the *Threepenny Opera* – while standing in the crater left by the explosions:

Mayor Mans has a secret [the Dutch has “doofpot”, cover-up]
 which he keeps in a safe
 And so people are still missing
 and many a soul is still miserable

The image is powerful; with the hood of his anorak pulled down over his eyes, a lyric sheet in one hand, a small tape recorder in the other, and his voice raised in accusation, H. offers a counterperformance that could hardly be any more different from *Wake*’s setting of Wordsworth and its “atmosphere of resignation.” Bussink, an Enschede art school graduate about to move to Amsterdam at the time of the disaster, can see where he is coming from. “After all these years, it was still unclear who or what had caused this disaster. Which bugged us.” Having introduced viewers to “Crimo,” who carries out experiments in his garden in an effort to disprove official reports on the disaster, to former firefighter Ben, who gives guided tours around the affected area, and to Don H., Bussink clearly knows what type of narrative frame she should be working with herself. Hers is a detective story, and her role in it that of an intrepid investigative reporter looking into “the mystery of the disaster.” She sets up

headquarters in a luxury flat that overlooks ground zero of the explosions, part of an apartment complex erected where her own student flat stood before it was flattened, along with 200 other residential buildings in the area. Over the course of the film, she is shown covering its walls with (photographic) material she collects, the way a police officer in a crime drama might create a wall chart to help them crack a case. Finding that many of the people she talks to are primarily looking for someone to hold to account (“We wanted a culprit,” as she puts it in voice-over), Bussink decides that her task will be finding and interviewing André de Vries, a man who was charged with involvement in the fire that set off the explosions, and who disappeared after he was acquitted on appeal nearly three years later. Afterwards, in interviews with Dutch and Flemish media outlets (*Tubantia*, *Cobra TV*), Bussink admits to having been “sucked in” by her role, to the point where she felt she might be able to solve or at least contribute something to “the case.” While, contrary to her own expectations, she does actually find and speak to De Vries (“Somewhere in Germany,” as the caption has it), the encounter is singularly anticlimactic, even embarrassing as Bussink realises she is imposing herself on someone whose life, like those of a number of other people she has spoken to, has been wrecked by the disaster.

Significantly, the documentary does not end there. In a subsequent scene, Bussink is paying another visit to retired firefighter Ben (who, unlike four of his colleagues, made it out of the disaster area alive) when a fire breaks out at a neighbour's house. A Christmas tree in the background hints at upcoming New Year's celebrations – with fireworks, of course, stashed in people's garages. Again, Ben takes charge of the situation, turning a garden hosepipe on the flames until a professional fire brigade arrives; Bussink helps the neighbour carry her children to safety, then looks on anxiously, flinching at the sound of firecrackers going off. Once again, the end of her stay in Enschede is marked by the accidental ignition of fireworks in a fire. “As if the disaster wanted to remind us once more of its existence,” her

voice-over observes. “As if we hadn't heard the last of it.” Her investigation may be over, yet – the coincidence is staggering – the experience it deals with, the actual fireworks disaster, keeps repeating itself, a classic scenario of a traumatic past intruding upon the present. This is why I would disagree with her claim (outside the documentary itself, in an interview with *Cobra TV*'s Frieda van Wijck) that the banality of her conversation with De Vries (“So... How've you been?”) points to an emptiness at the core of her search for truth. I would argue that, instead of showing that Bussink's story has no resolution, her film hits upon a crucial paradox: a formal conclusion – she has found what she set out to find – that is nevertheless clearly not the end of it.

One of the benefits of having made the film, Bussink tells Van Wijck, is that she now has the documentary to discuss with interested parties, “So I don't have to talk about what happened to me that day. I can talk about the film now, and that's made it manageable or something.” These comments hew surprisingly close to Cathy Caruth's take on the role that narrative memory can play in dealing with traumatic events. Referring to Pierre Janet's 1904 case study of the heavily traumatised Irène, Caruth observes that “her cure is characterized by the fact that she can tell a 'slightly different story' to different people: the capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort” (153). This does not have to mean, however, that what cannot be integrated into such a narrative does not become part of it. Virtually no evidence remains, in *Mijn Enschede*, of the fact that Bussink was home when disaster struck and her house was destroyed, and that she has struggled with this – something she does mention in interviews with, for instance, *Tubantia* (Bosman) and *VPRO Gids* (Hoes). These experiences, which she may have realised could not become part of a straightforward narrative such as underpins her documentary, have nevertheless made their way into the film, which performs what it does not – could not – address explicitly.

The process is prefigured within the documentary itself, in a scene that begins

approximately nineteen minutes in. The clip features Ferdi Lammerink, “market vendor and singer,” a man who knows his way around pathos. As he plays a recording of his own cover version of Frank Sinatra's “Strangers in the Night” (complete with “doo be doo be doo” section towards the end), to Dutch lyrics that lament the feeling of being a stranger in his own home town, Lammerink reaches over to a side table, pointedly adjusting a picture frame that holds a photo of the disaster area, in sepia. The glass of the frame is cracked.

L: Top class drama, isn't it? If I had any tears left, I would cry. [In English] *No tears.* Yeah.

B: Does it upset you to hear this again?

L: Nah. I'm play-acting a little, acting sad. [Gestures towards picture frame] That's what you wanted, isn't it? Or did you think I'd cry for an hour on the couch? I'll do that when you've left. [Scoffs]

Within the boundaries of a familiar format – here, as in the various operas written about the disaster, a combination of textual, musical and visual cues – there is room for drama, but not grief. Lammerink may seem to be merely contradicting himself when he claims to have no tears left, then says he will “cry for an hour on the couch” once the camera crew has gone. Arguably, however, his words reflect a distinction between grief as a concept and grieving as a practice, what Ernst van Alphen (110) has referred to as “the split between the living of an event and the available forms of representation with/in which the event can be experienced,” which interferes with the experience of a traumatic event itself, as well as with its subsequent representation. While the concept of expressing grief through crying has here been incorporated into a well-defined format that can be used to address the disaster and its aftermath, this integration relies on a displacement, even a supplanting, of crying itself. According to the tropes available within the format Lammerink uses, dealing with something as devastating as the fireworks disaster exceeds people's capacity for expressing grief; it is

only by referring explicitly to this inexpressibility – that is, by announcing that one “cannot cry” or “has no tears left” – that the experience can be dealt with. Similarly, Bussink's investigation, her means of addressing the issue of the disaster, obviated her addressing her actual experience of it. Whereas in *Wake*, what remains outside the space of representation once the disaster has occurred – characters' voices, the building they shared – retains a ghostly presence because of its jarring absence, *Mijn Enschede* shows the fireworks disaster imposing itself upon Bussink, seemingly out of the blue, at a point when her story is supposed to have run its course. While projects like *Wake* and *Mijn Enschede* offer valuable opportunities to engage the incomprehensible by, as Bussink puts it, lending it a form, any one such form is unlikely to accommodate traumatic experience in its entirety. Consequently, the slumber that ends *Wake* on a promise of release and blissful oblivion remains haunted by what it cannot represent.

Conclusion

This study has offered an analysis of one of bestselling British novelist David Mitchell's most recent pieces of work: the libretto for an opera that was commissioned by the Dutch Nationale Reisopera to commemorate the decenary anniversary of a catastrophic event that occurred in the city of Enschede on 13 May 2000. The so-called fireworks disaster killed 23 people, wounded approximately 1000 and destroyed some 200 residential buildings. Although Mitchell and the opera's composer, Klaas de Vries, were careful to avoid any direct references to the circumstances of the disaster in Enschede, the resulting piece, *Wake*, deals with an event that, like the fireworks disaster, destroys lives and homes alike. Here, I have focused mainly on the opera's second and fourth acts, the first of which presents the soon-to-be victims in their homes, nine apartments in a single converted townhouse, by means of an ingenious set design that suggests the audience is looking in through these characters' front

windows. In the absence of an overarching plot, it is this literal framework that provides the characters' individual stories with a degree of coherence. Accordingly, the subsequent (implied) destruction of the building, narrated (though not actually shown) in act three, corresponds to the destruction of both the surviving characters' and the audience's frame of reference, a traumatic “shattering of prior forms” (Lifton, quoted in Caruth: 134) on an architectural as well as a semiotic level. Act four uses a different template, that of the late-medieval morality play, for an “impossible conversation” between the disaster's victims (the Dead) and its survivors (the Living), with a chorus (Memory) offering commentary that culminates in a canon-like setting of Wordsworth's “A slumber did my spirit seal.” There is something not quite right about this final act, however. Even though the Dead remain recognisable as the same characters who appeared in act two, they seem to have lost their distinctive ways of speaking; meanwhile, the Living resort to “platitudes and phrases” (*Wake* 58).

In an effort to account for this unsettling tension, I have drawn on Mikhail Bakhtin to argue that *Wake* stages a tug-of-war between the novelistic dialogism of Mitchell's libretto (which unfolds most obviously in act two, but collapses along with its narrative framework in act three), and the univocal monologism of the traditional musical forms that, according to De Vries (19), lend the opera “a clear structure and coherence.” This monologism manifests itself most explicitly in the composer's stated intention to “reconcile all opposites” (18) in act four. Musically, the opera ends on a comforting note of closure and release, a lullaby, in keeping with De Vries' apparent interpretation of Wordsworth's poem. The final act's text and stage design, however, hint at what has been lost, and what cannot be represented in any other form than the form that has been lost: the lives and living environments destroyed in the disaster. Giving (narrative) form to a traumatic event may be the only way to approach or address it, and thereby deal with it, but as Astrid Bussink's film documentary *Mijn Enschede* shows,

finding a form does not prevent the original trauma from continuing to impose itself outside this framework. Framing traumatic events in such a way as to that render them comprehensible means that what characterises an event as traumatic, its incomprehensibility, remains unaccounted for. It is this ambivalence that is reflected in the uneasy slumber that ends *Wake* – a representation, not so much of a traumatic event as of the way people deal with such events – and in the inconclusiveness of the closure it offers.

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Appendix

Fig. 1: Nine rooms. Set designs by Conor Murphy, video footage by Thomas Bergmann.



(Photography by Marco Borggreve)