Cloud Atlas: Six stories in search of a genuine connection

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Written and directed by Tom Tykwer, Andy Wachowski, Lana Wachowski, based on the novel by David Mitchell

German director Tom Tykwer (*Run Lola Run*, *Heaven*) and Andy and Lana Wachowski, responsible for the *Matrix* films, have teamed up to adapt David Mitchell's 2004 novel, *Cloud Atlas*, for the screen.

Both the book and film are composed of six stories, set in very different times and places.

An American notary, Adam Ewing (Jim Sturgess), travels to the Chatham Islands in the Pacific Ocean in 1849 to arrange a business deal. Back on board ship, Ewing is victimized by a greedy doctor, convinced he has a treasure in his trunk. A slave whose flogging Ewing has witnessed, shows up as a stowaway.

In the mid-1930s, a struggling English composer, Robert Frobisher (Ben Whishaw), finds a position as the assistant to (and somewhat unwitting collaborator of) a legendary, ailing composer, now living in Belgium. Frobisher is writing his own piece, the *Cloud Atlas Sextet*.

A mystery-conspiracy tale unfolds in San Francisco in 1973. Tabloid reporter Luisa Rey (Halle Berry) stumbles on information suggesting that a giant corporation's proposed nuclear reactor has flaws that might endanger the population. The corporation organizes various attempts on her life.

In contemporary London, vanity publisher Timothy Cavendish (Jim Broadbent), in trouble with a jailed criminal author of his, flees to a place of refuge suggested by his brother. Cavendish is horrified to discover the residence is a nursing home where he is a prisoner.

In 2144, in Neo Seoul, Sonmi-451 (Doona Bae), a server-clone at a nightmarish fast food, is being interrogated prior to her execution. She recounts her story of growing awareness and ultimate rebellion against the totalitarian "corpocracy" of the 22nd century.

On a Hawaiian island in the distant post-apocalyptic future, some decades after "the Fall" (presumably civilization's self-destruction), Zachry (Tom Hanks) and the rest of his community live in primitive conditions. He assists a female member of the remaining group of technologically advanced earthlings to communicate with fellow survivors.

The apparently disparate strands of the story are connected in various ways. Each finds a literary/artistic reflection in the subsequent one: e.g., the composer Frobisher (rather implausibly) finds and reads the "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing" while staying at his Belgian chateau; Luisa Rey comes upon Frobisher's love letters in the course of her investigation into the nuclear reactor cover-up; publisher Cavendish is sent the manuscript of "The First Luisa Rey Mystery," etc., etc.

The fact that in the film version the same group of performers (Hanks, Berry, Broadbent, Bae, Sturgess, Whishaw, Hugo Weaving, Hugh Grant, Susan Sarandon, Keith David, James D'Arcy and others)—or a subset—appears in each segment, links the characters in another fashion.

As well, all the central figures have comet-shaped birth marks. More significantly, each confronts various forms of tyranny and predation and has to make a choice to oppose, accommodate him- or herself to, or sidestep that repressive power.

Ewing witnesses barbarities practiced by both European "civilizers" in the Pacific and Maoris against the peaceful Moriori people. He is set upon by Doctor Goose (Hanks), a vicious fraud, who tells him that a tropical parasite is eating his brain away.

Frobisher and his host, composer Vyvyan Ayrs (Broadbent), are both selfish egoists, apparently content to feed off and take advantage of one another. Ayrs attempts to blackmail Frobisher as part of a plan to claim credit for the latter's composition.

Luisa, the daughter of an investigative journalist, has to decide whether to proceed with her own inquiry into the operations of a massive, politically connected conglomerate, at the possible risk of her life.

In the only semi-comical strand of the film, Cavendish suffers under the fiendish Nurse Noakes (Weaving) and enters into a plot to break out of the old people's home along with a few of his fellow elderly residents.

Sonmi, the "fabricant" (clone), is the most oppressed

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creature of all, doomed to a slave-like existence for her 12 years of service for the Papa Song Corp. As her consciousness expands, she too has to make life-and-death decisions.

In the sixth story, Zachry and his community live in constant terror of a murderous tribe of marauders. When the visitor, Meronym (Berry), asks for his help, he has to summon up his courage and reject the demon who whispers cowardly advice in his ear.

If this brief summing up of *Cloud Atlas* strikes the reader as laborious, that effectively communicates the experience of the film itself. This is not a work essentially made from life, but one that largely draws on literary-academic schema. The result, for the most part, is an inert and unconvincing drama.

Mitchell, the book's British author, is capable in the sense that he can effectively and even evocatively place one word or image after another. However, he shares a problem with many other contemporary fiction writers. Mitchell is able to produce, for example, a "tour de force" of a novel in *Cloud Atlas*, complete with an authentic-sounding 19th century journal and more or less invented languages and cultures of the future, without having anything important or original to say about present-day life. (It is probably not accidental that the story set in the present [Cavendish-Broadbent] is the most light-weight). If looked at closely, even the dialogue of the book's various segments shows itself to be clichéd and predictable for the most part.

The author seems intrigued by various Nietzschean and postmodern conceptions. Like Nietzsche (more explicitly present in the novel), Mitchell is uninterested in actual history or historical law and prefers his own semi-mythological reading of humanity's past (and future). For Nietzsche, who propagated the notion of the "eternal return," history was circular, if not merely a construction serving the immediate needs of "life." Along with a fascination with infinite "recurrence," the German philosopher's musings about the "will to power" find a prominent place in Mitchell's work.

The author is certainly no orthodox Nietzschean. Although he tells us in the post-catastrophic portion of his book that "a hunger in the hearts o'humans, yay, a hunger for more" brought about humanity's near-extermination, his novel suggests that this predatory, appetitive instinct is not the only one present in the human breast. Kindness and generosity are also possible. And individual acts of benevolence have their consequences (as of course do their opposite), rippling across time.

In other words, we have a choice whether to live in a brutal, exploitive world or not. In the novel, in one of his final diary entries, Ewing, who has decided by now to become an abolitionist, writes: "If we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, if we *believe* divers races and creeds can share this world […] peaceably […] if we *believe* leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass."

This is a very feeble and inadequate foundation for any serious project, including a novel or a film. Individuals come up with their own "truth" and make decisions based on the latter. In fact, Mitchell is the sort of author who inspires approving commentators in general to place the words reality, truth and meaning in quotation marks. "Truth is singular," as one of *Cloud Atlas*'s characters suggests.

Of course, if truth is merely "singular" and subjective, associated with how we would prefer the world to be, then how is it possible that it has an impact on one's friends and contemporaries, much less on complete strangers living decades or centuries in the future?

In any event, as a work of art, *Cloud Atlas* is no success. The film founders under the burden of its makers' various, perhaps contradictory ideological concerns. Spontaneous, organically developed moments are few and far between. Jim Broadbent is characteristically amusing as the put-upon Cavendish, Halle Berry is effective as the driven, anxious Luisa Rey and Ben Whishaw comes across as an egotistical, self-involved artist

However, virtually no sustained moment or action in the Tykwer-Wachowski work stands on its own, it functions (labors) instead to prove something definitive about human cruelty or compassion, determinism, free will and so on. The unintended result is that the different moments, none of which is especially convincing on its own anyway, tend to cancel one another out. This lengthy film, which cost a good deal of time and trouble, makes very little impact.

The author also recommends:

An essentially unprincipled approach [including Heaven, directed by Tom Tykwer]
[29 October 2002]

Briefly noted [including *The Matrix Revolutions*]
[18 November 2003]

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