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Jonathan Lethem, *Amnesia Moon*

The US election this week has sent me back to Jonathan Lethem's second novel, the science fiction picaresque *Amnesia Moon* (1995). The novel depicts a dystopian near future in which a catastrophe has fragmented America into a series of communities that are worlds unto themselves. A character refers to the 'FSRs' – Finite Subjective Realities – in which people are locked into locally distorted perceptions.

The one I was looking for was Vacaville, California, into which the protagonist Chaos stumbles. The town has a number of strange features. For one, the populace has to move house once a week, taking their few possessions with them. For another, they are governed by a system of 'Luck'. The local government tests each citizen's Luck and some are deemed unlucky, which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Citizens also compete to make each other unluckier by writing out violations for each other's behaviour.

Third, government and media are peculiarly collusive. Joining the household of local resident Edie and her young sons, Chaos watches television with them: "'Test Your Luck!' was on, the afternoon game show hosted by President Kentman'. A game show – hosted by the President? Another programme is *Moving Day*: 'Like today', a boy explains, 'when everybody has to move, except it's about how all the government stars change houses'.

'Government stars?', wonders Chaos, like the reader. 'Like movie stars', Edie explains: 'It's not real. I mean, they're really the government people [...] And they're really moving today, but the rest of it, the fighting and falling in love, is fictional'. The members of Vacaville's government are also its celebrities. Citizens watch them go through soap opera lives, unsure how much is real and how much simulated for the cameras. They comprise the whole focus of the media, including magazines: 'The cover stories were all about the television and the government, even when they were versions of magazines like *Time* or *Rolling Stone* and *Playboy*'.

When I first read this novel I found the idea of 'government stars' a bizarre provocation. Even the two words don't seem to belong together, yoking administrative drudgery and showbiz. But speculative fiction has a way of becoming truer. Two days after Donald Trump's election victory, Lethem's vision now seems to me not far from a description of ordinary reality. It's not just Trump: the idea of a televised fiction showing the see-sawing struggles of politicians could apply to the whole election campaign. And the omnipresence of ruling figures as objects of public veneration belongs also to totalitarian and authoritarian states: Vladimir Putin is perhaps closer to a 'government star' than anyone in the US just now. But it is Donald Trump who has brought the idea to mind, because the overlap he offers

between commerce, media and politics seems greater than any other in American history.

President Kentman sounds a little like President Clinton, but we should not historicize *Amnesia Moon* too closely to the 1990s. Lethem has noted that it derives from drafts first written as early as 1983, and in 2003 expressed the hope that ‘some fourteen-year-old kid in Milwaukee reads *Amnesia Moon* and is ratified in his suspicion that the government is television, that George Bush [the younger] is the star of a rotten soap opera’. The novel describes a general interpenetration of the political and the simulated across late twentieth century America, and if any President directly inspired ‘government stars’, it was likely Ronald Reagan. It was once considered surreal that a former cowboy actor was now leader of the free world. But just as SF becomes truer to life, so life becomes more extreme. Somehow Trump’s ascent makes that of Reagan – a former governor of the largest state in the Union – seem tame, normal ... realistic.

Many people are concerned about Trump’s imminent Presidency on numerous specific grounds. Experiencing it from a distance, I also feel a looser, more tonal malaise, simply at the fact that the route to the Presidency now is to be a reality-TV billionaire. Like a character in *Amnesia Moon*, I feel a degree of reality slipping away, but soon won’t be able to register that it was once present. Succinctly, Trump makes a vast contribution to the Philip K. Dickification of the real world. If you’ve read Dick, you’ll think that troubling.

Rereading *Amnesia Moon* has given me a temporary cognitive vantage from which to see the strangeness of what’s happening, via a fiction that got out ahead of the fictionalization of reality. Lethem’s statement from 2003 continues: ‘That’s all I have to offer, what Philip K. Dick had to offer me, solidarity’. But of course a novel can’t itself affect what’s happening. As a new degree of unreality takes hold, people will have to find real ways to deal with its real consequences.