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Imagining Global Amsterdam:

History, Culture, and Geography in a World City

Edited by Marco de Waard

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5. Romance and Commerce: Imagining Global Amsterdam in the Contemporary Historical Novel

Joyce Goggin and Erinç Salor

The central undertaking of this essay is to address the topic of Amsterdam-based historical fiction, and to ask how two different subgenres of the contemporary historical novel – the visually oriented, ‘museumized’ heritage novel on the one hand, and the cyberpunk-inflected ‘history-of-science’ novel on the other – present aspects from Amsterdam’s ‘Golden Age’ past to present-day audiences. Specifically, this essay seeks to relate examples from those two subgenres to the cultural heritage industries that have become such a vital feature of the current cultural and economic landscape. At the centre of our concern is the nexus between the global economy, cultural heritage and tourism, and the various forms of cultural expression – film, television, popular fiction, popular history, art books, and the like – that stand to profit from a globalizing heritage and tourism market and which inscribe themselves in its discourses, in ways that remain to be explored.

In recent years, the heritage industry has received particular attention in film studies, where it has been described as ‘transform[ing] the past into a series of commodities for the leisure and entertainment market’, in many cases turning ‘the commodity on offer’ into ‘an image, a spectacle, something to be gazed at’ in ways replacing ‘critical perspective ... by decoration and display’ (Higson 2006, 95). In this sense, heritage film can be said to have a generally conservative and hegemonic character, ‘legitimizing the *spectacle* of one class and one cultural tradition and identity at the expense of others through the discourse of authenticity, and the obsession with the visual splendours of period detail’ (100; italics in original). As noted, our examples here will be taken from novelistic fiction, in this case fiction published over the last few decades which is set in or around Amsterdam in the seventeenth century. Significantly, these texts, while contributing to Amsterdam’s own heritage traditions, primarily address foreign – mainly Anglophone – readers, playing specifically on their interest in the city’s history, art galleries, and museums. In so doing, they differ from the customary focus of heritage film on national treasures such as, most typically, literary authors whose works are seen as masterpieces; they rather draw on a larger, transnational cultural heritage – even if the logic of commodification may work in similar ways. Indeed, the novels under discussion here can be said to lend strength to various aspects of the Amsterdam ‘brand’ that presents the city as an important node in the global circuit of cultural tourist destinations. The result, in the cases we will discuss, is a sort of pastiche fictional form constructed from a potpourri of

famous historical figures, distinctive national architecture and sites, and a visual aesthetic perceived to be specifically Dutch – in short, from various elements of the seventeenth-century Republic that have come to signify ‘Dutchness’ in the eyes of global audiences.

Of such possible markers of national heritage, we want to study what might seem an odd feature of Amsterdam’s history to celebrate in popular fiction, but which is pivotal to the novels to be discussed here. Both texts, Deborah Moggach’s *Tulip Fever* (1999) and Neal Stephenson’s *Quicksilver* (2003), are punctuated with customary signifiers of seventeenth-century Dutch culture such as genre painting and windmills; yet their stories focus on the market and, as Diana Wallace points out in an important article on the subject, on ‘the beginnings of capitalism, not as heroic exploration or trade, but as financially risky and morally ambiguous’ (Wallace 2006). Hence, of the many possible ways to imagine Amsterdam in cultural production, both texts enlist familiar references and tropes from Dutch art history in the backdrop rather than at the heart of the narration, revelling primarily in the ‘glory’ of seventeenth-century finance and trade. As Wallace emphasizes, however, the fascination for this ‘glory’ is not unqualified: at times, the narratives about speculation and economic risk-taking in the Republic slide from a romanticization of commerce into something like a cautionary tale. Indeed, an ambiguous relationship to ‘Golden Age’ finance and economics characterizes both novels, throwing up important questions as to how the memory of early-modern capitalism articulates the economic anxieties – and related cultural sensibilities – that characterize the present moment.

While both novels represent trade, commerce, and finance, however, they do so in distinctly different ways, differing both in terms of genre and in terms of how they generate readerly appeal. Deborah Moggach’s *Tulip Fever* is a page-turning romantic mystery that is set entirely in Amsterdam. It features an unhappy young wife, Sophia Sandvoort, who is seduced by a handsome artist, a fictive contemporary of Rembrandt’s, and the plot that unfurls touches both on the art market and on the market in tulips that has become such an iconic feature of the Dutch seventeenth-century economic landscape. Of the two novels we have singled out for discussion, this ‘airport novel’ seems most clearly connected to the contemporary global heritage industry. Through sixteen reproductions of Dutch seventeenth-century masterpieces, bound into the text as colour plates at key junctures in the plot, it appropriates a large number of features of Dutch history and culture, using them like story boards to suggest a particular mise-en-scène. The art reproductions effectively act as objects of nostalgia that help readers to ‘focus on the visual’ (Wallace 2006), as if to whet their appetites – and train their gaze – in advance of a touristic visit. In this regard, *Tulip Fever* may be classified with Rosalind Laker’s *The Golden Tulip* (1989), Susan Vreeland’s *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* (1999), Tracy Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), Will Davenport’s *The Painter* (2003), and many other Anglophone novels that have revisited Dutch ‘Golden Age’ culture in recent years: all eminently visual, ‘painterly’ texts that highlight the domestic, the feminine, and the everyday in romantic plots which commonly involve an artist who is now world-renowned.¹ At the same time, while those novels all flirt with the visual codes of the art gal-

lery, many of them look forward to their own film adaptation. As we will see, *Tulip Fever's* visual descriptions and gestures could be analyzed as heavily pre-mediated, adopting a filmic language as if to court the interest of film directors and producers.²

Neal Stephenson's *Quicksilver*, on the other hand, was written as the first installment in the author's swashbuckling, three-part *Baroque Cycle* (2003-4), in which various characters visit Amsterdam over the space of a few chapters. Like *Tulip Fever*, *Quicksilver* features a striking heroine through whose eyes readers experience the hustle and bustle of the seventeenth-century Amsterdam market. Yet whereas Moggach's account of the Dutch tulip craze of the 1630s is indulgently romanticized – presented as it is through the baffled eyes of a naïve focalizer – Stephenson offers a more hard-boiled view of the early-modern market through his heroine Eliza, who values commerce above romantic dalliance and who stops in Amsterdam to 'make money' while giving financial advice to local traders (2003, 557). Another salient difference between the two novels involves the question of genre and narrative form. In this light, it is worth recalling that Stephenson became famous for *Snow Crash* (1992), a pioneering cyberpunk novel, and that he has since developed an interest in what one reviewer has called 'history-of-science fiction', i.e. fiction that specializes in self-consciously anachronistic plots that centre on the history of computer science, artificial intelligence, complexity theory, data management, fictional technology, and the like (Shulman 2003, 11). Exemplary of this strand in Stephenson's work, the *Baroque Cycle* tells a story of early Leibnizean computing technology, thus implicitly addressing science fiction and cyberpunk audiences as well as heritage consumers. For the purposes of this essay, it is likewise important to stress the transnational scale of Stephenson's narrative. *Quicksilver* ambitiously uses cities from all over (Western) Europe and the United States for its setting, taking readers on a *tour du monde* across countries and capitals while highlighting various cultural connections and transfers between them. In terms of the articulation of Amsterdam in globalizing contexts, this makes the novel an interesting second case study. Placed alongside Moggach's *Tulip Fever*, Stephenson's novel sheds more light on the role of contemporary popular fiction in what could be called the globalization of European cultural memory – understood here as the transmission of historical memories which, for a long time, were primarily articulated in the context of the nation-state, to global frames of references. Among others, this transmission entails the incorporation of such historical fictions within a new, vaster scale or geographical logic.

Given the element of cultural and historical 'translation' that is clearly involved in both novels, the question of readership is integral to our argument here. For example, one wants to ask who might be interested in stories set in an imaginary Amsterdam of nearly four centuries ago, and why? And why would Anglo-American authors develop a special interest in Amsterdam in the first place – an interest that necessitates that they embellish their stories with hackneyed clichés and tropes about 'Dutchness' so as not to alienate their international readers? While it would be simplistic to argue that either author has a direct, expressly conceived role in the more generalized touristic project of showcasing Europe's

major historic settings and cultural offerings, it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that both cater to – and seek to profit from – the massive flow of tourists to European capitals that is increasing yearly. Indeed, Europe’s reputation as an ‘open air museum’ is an enormous economic resource, and it is this European calling card upon which certain strands of contemporary cultural production draw, including the novels under discussion here.

In what follows, then, this essay will investigate in detail how both novels imagine the Amsterdam they seek to show their readers, while relating this imagining to the current climate of cultural heritage tourism and branding. In the process, we will also explore how both authors mobilize signifiers of the Dutch ‘Golden Age’ to suggest historical analogies with the current, crisis-stricken global financial market. As we will see, there is a fascinating tension between these novels’ interpellation of the contemporary cultural tourist – i.e., the tourist-reader who is beckoned by what might be referred to as the historical theme parks formed by Europe’s capital cities – and the more critical, self-reflective project to use the detour of the past for trying to think through, and come to grips with, the predicament of our present financial-economic climate. To unravel and clarify this tension is a major underlying aim of this essay.

Gambling, Speculation, Heritage

Over the past few decades, historically minded depictions of gambling and of the great speculative crazes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have become a prominent feature of both ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural production. Tellingly, in the Louvre, such a famous representation of gambling as Georges de La Tour’s *Le tricheur à l’as de carreau* (1635) has become the emblem for the museum’s entire Sully wing. That this formerly obscure painting now serves as a path-finding icon for the Louvre’s seventeenth-century collection, gracing the cover of various guides in the museum gift shop – not to mention calling cards, calendars, coffee mugs, and other merchandize – indicates an acute public awareness of this image and underlines its contemporary resonance. Indeed, *Le tricheur* and other representations of early-modern gambling have become familiar fare at a time when gaming is a major and still growing industry in many countries, as well as an important source of government revenues in the form of state lotteries, state-run casinos, and gambling machines. Moreover, as the perception deepens that the current global financial system itself incorporates high-risk forms of gambling, links are increasingly made in film, advertizing, television, and literature between famous moments in the history of gambling, speculation, and finance and today’s critical markets.

The relevance of these considerations for the Amsterdam-based historical novel has been summed up by American novelist David Liss, who has reflected explicitly on the role of gambling and speculation as a plot driver, selling point, and structuring metaphor in his own fiction. Liss has explained that he is aware of the public interest in the history of gambling and finance, and that he sought to cater to it in his first novel, *A Conspiracy of Paper* (2000), which fictional-

izes the events surrounding the South Sea Bubble of the early eighteenth century. Asked if he saw parallels between this historic economic moment and the ‘internet frenzy’ of the late 1990s, Liss – who previously wrote a dissertation on the subject of eighteenth-century finance – commented that ‘[i]n recent years, a number of scholars have begun writing about eighteenth-century financial markets, and the fact that so many people are suddenly drawn to this topic suggests that something in our own cultures makes it relevant’ (Liss 2000, 447). Not surprisingly, Liss’s next novel, *The Coffee Trader* (2003), was set in seventeenth-century Amsterdam and articulated similar cross-historical parallels. Likewise, Deborah Moggach has said that she was ‘impressed with the parallels’ between the Dutch tulip craze at the historical juncture which her novel attempts to represent and the global economy now. If, however, by her own account she ‘was unaware of [these parallels] when [she] wrote’ *Tulip Fever*, and did not recognize them until later, the point is nonetheless striking: her novel is representative of the important role that gambling and speculation play in the current social and economic imaginary, as part of the zeitgeist that influences cultural production.³

Examples of this trend in fiction have continued to come to light since Liss’s and Moggach’s novels were published, borrowing new momentum from the 2008 market crash. To give just one telling example, in Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010), the notorious arbitrageur Gordon Gekko, played by Michael Douglas, holds forth at length on the subject of ‘tulip fever’ in Amsterdam in the mid-1630s as a perfect parallel to the hiccups and speculative crazes of the current financial market. As he delivers his monologue on the topic, he moves to a historical chart decorated with tulips, underlining how ‘Golden Age’ Amsterdam resonates with modern Wall Street as a birthplace of today’s late-capitalist order (Figure 5.1).⁴



5.1. Michael Douglas in *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010). (Twentieth Century Fox).

Fictional Gambles and Other Risky Endeavours

In light of the perceived similarities between the globalizing market in which the Dutch Republic and its merchant-burghers were such central players, and the global financial markets of today, we now turn to an examination of *Tulip Fever*. The principle historical element of Moggach's narrative is, as its title suggests, the bizarre economic panic that took place in the Dutch Republic between 1634 and 1637. Over this period a futures market grew up around tulips which, at that time, were a new, exotic import into Western Europe from Turkey. Tulips became enormously popular and outrageously expensive due to their exotic provenance and the many shapes and colours that could be artificially bred (MacKay 1980, 89-97; Dash 1999, 36-64; Pavord 2000, 56-102). At the peak of the mania, when an average year's salary ranged from 200 to 500 guilders, people paid more than 5,000 guilders for a single bulb.⁵ The market in which tulip bulbs were sold involved a system of trades carried out in brown cafés along the Kalverstraat; here, abstract paper futures were written on the bulbs, which then circulated as commodities in and of themselves, as a means of making more money from money.⁶ As an episode in economic history, then, tulip mania invites reflection on the processes of financialization and dematerialization which have accompanied Western capitalism in its evolution over time, allowing the novelist to reconsider the pervasive influence of modern finance on everyday life. As the background material for a romantic plot, its attraction is enhanced by its shared momentum with what is often seen as a period of stark moral conflict, that is, Dutch Calvinism sitting uneasily with the affluence enjoyed by Amsterdam's burghers. It is well-known that it was only in the seventeenth century – in the wake of Calvin's decision to permit interest on commercial loans – that the age-old Aristotelian warning against the 'unnatural' use of money to beget money began to lose ground; it is this disputed financial 'sin' that lay at the heart of the tulip trade and which lends it its adventurous, transgressive nature in the fictional world inhabited by Moggach's characters.

Tulip Fever commences just before the market collapses, and it is to the futures market that the protagonists turn as a solution to their dilemma. The story opens on Cornelis Sandvoort, a wealthy Amsterdam shipping merchant, and his young wife Sophia as they dine in their 'large, echoing house on the Herengracht' (2). Over their meal of bread and herring, Cornelis asks his wife, '[in] this transitory life do we not all crave immortality?' – an obvious ploy to introduce the notion that they should have their portrait painted and their images preserved (1). Cornelis then hires Jan van Loos, a respected still-life, landscape, and portrait painter who, according to the novel, has been recommended by the art dealer Hendrick Uylenburgh and his protégé Rembrandt van Rijn. As Sophia poses beside her decrepit husband, she contemplates a table with curios that forms a portion of their portrait: 'draped with a Turkey rug', the table 'carries a globe of the world, a pair of scales and a human skull', thus speaking to her in the familiar syntax of seventeenth-century vanitas paintings (10).⁷ Over the course of the long sitting needed to complete the portrait, Sophia also has the opportunity to observe the handsome young portrait painter as he plies his trade. Unsurpris-

ingly, an affair ensues, spurring her on to hatch a plot in which she pretends to be pregnant with Cornelis's heir while concealing the pregnancy of her maid and cohort, Maria. On the night that Maria gives birth, they plan to stage Sophia's death in childbirth and to present Maria's baby to Cornelis who will keep her on as a nurse, while Jan and Sophia sail away to the colonies.

Significantly, the 'terrible gamble' that Sophia and her lover undertake is financed through a market on which one *Semper Augustus* bulb is sold 'for six fine horses, three oxheads of wine, a dozen sheep, two dozen silver goblets and a seascape by Esaias van de Velde' (27). The lovers concoct an investment scheme that involves pawning Sophia's jewellery so that Jan can 'buy a considerable number of bulbs, to spread ... speculation and cover ... inevitable losses' (137). Over the course of the novel, however, Jan leaves more 'controlled' speculation behind; he becomes '[consumed] by his fever, [spending his] days in four different taverns, whispering the password to enter the rooms where the trading takes place ... in a feverish fog of tobacco smoke' (152, 147). It comes as no surprise, then, that the gambling plot falls through, in ways that are reminiscent, as Wallace points out, of *commedia dell'arte* and Restoration comedy (2006). The characters are once more left to ponder the vanity of things, which each does in a different way – wrapped up lightly by Moggach in the pastiche-like manner that is the hallmark of her prose.

In 1999, the year Moggach's novel was published, a number of detailed popular histories of the tulip craze appeared, including Anna Pavord's *The Tulip* and Mike Dash's *Tulipomania*. These books all shared a common indebtedness to scholarly studies such as Simon Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches* (1987), where the tulip craze is discussed in the context of a general inquiry into early-modern Dutch capitalism and its moral and cultural implications (Schama 1991, 350–71).⁸ The remarkable confluence between popular fiction, popular histories, and scholarly histories on the same topic was observed widely in the press, in terms that allow us to historicize Moggach's project in more specific ways. Generally, what prevailed was a strong sense of recognition. *The Economist*, for example, spoke of 'tulipmania-mania', citing the coincidence of the books just mentioned as a sign that 'the rickety global economy has reawakened our interest in financial disasters' ('The Queen of the Night', 1998). Likewise, *The Guardian*, reviewing Moggach and Pavord in tandem in 2000, complimented both on having 'found the perfect millennial metaphor' with their discovery of tulip mania as 'the prototype example of inflated market optimism' (qtd. in Wallace 2006). Another commentator called the surge of interest in the tulip craze 'a cliché of the frenzied Internet era', exclaiming further that '[few] pundits could resist comparing high dot-com stock prices to the historic craze for fancy flowers' (Tischler 2003). Such sustained historical parallels underline that in periods of economic experimentation such as the seventeenth century and the present, methods of generating wealth become more complex while instruments of credit (and indeed, paper money itself) go hand in hand with a willingness to accept intangible signifiers of wealth such as tulip bulb futures, shares in companies which one never sees, or, today, 'patents, copyrights, and goodwill' (Davis 2003, 20). In a dematerializing economy such as our own and, to a limited extent, that of

the Dutch Republic, intangible commodities, like instruments of credit, begin to supplant tangible assets such as real estate or precious metals. This brings with it a tendency to erase the line between gambling and speculation and a propensity to embrace systemic risk while expanding credit as leverage for traders.

Deborah Moggach's interest in the seventeenth-century Dutch bulb market clearly plays on a heightened cultural awareness of financialization and dematerialization and their social repercussions – as do other popular novels that have fictionalized tulip mania, such as Philippa Gregory's *Earthly Joys* (1998) and the first volume in V. A. Richardson's *Windjammer* trilogy, *The House of Windjammer* (2003). Her account of the 'Golden Age' economic landscape appropriately includes not just the tulip craze but various other forms of financial speculation and credit, along with folk who will gamble on everything from the sex of a child to the time of day. As Jan meditates: 'how stolid we look, but underneath we are all gamblers. We are a people possessed' (143).

The question arises as to what effect Moggach's revisitation of this episode in the history of early-modern finance produces. In view of postmodern critiques of the 'nostalgia mode' and the penchant of so much (recent) historical fiction for toothless, uncritical pastiche, it may be asked what perspective the novel opens up on this period and – by implication – on our crisis-ridden present. How does it situate readers in regard to both? Although some critics have found in *Tulip Fever* a 'morality tale' for modern times, a 'moral critique of the dangers of capitalism' (Wallace) – a reading that is lent support by the novel's refusal of a happy ending – many aspects also neutralize the novel's allegedly salutary potential. For example, the recycling of *commedia dell'arte* plot conventions, the novel's general style and tone with its shifting focalization and refusal of deep interiority, and finally the painterly, tableaux-inspired aesthetic all combine to make *Tulip Fever* an implicit celebration rather than a critique of the culture of excess and risk-taking which it revisits. For the most part, what prevails is a romantic and indeed 'feverish' interest in the extremes of the 1630s market. Moggach's choice to place Sophia and her lover Jan in the group of 'floristen', or secondary traders on tulip bulbs, underlines this. Floristen never saw the flowers but simply traded up, buying futures and re-issuing them in the form of paper sold at a higher price. As Sophia explains with excitement: 'We have long ago lost sight of bulbs; they have become an abstraction. We are buying bulbs we have never seen and for which we have not yet paid, gambling on new varieties, that [sic] their price will rocket, trading onwards and upwards' (151). *Tulip Fever* is manifestly about the transgressive, libidinous energy and desire which it associates with the financial-economic culture that drives its plot – not so much offering a cautionary tale, as romanticizing 'Golden Age' commerce in counterpoint to the moralizing vanitas theme with which it flirts. In all of these ways, then, Moggach's novel both contains and soothes the economic and financial anxieties on which it plays.

The Painterly Novel and the Heritage Business

Not only does *Tulip Fever* offer a fictionalized re-telling of the Dutch tulip craze, the text also implicates the visual arts in its romanticization of ‘Golden Age’ finance and commerce, in ways that connect it to today’s cultural heritage market. To begin with, the novel does this on a thematic level – most obviously so through the figure of Jan van Loos who, both a gambler and a painter, reminds readers that art, too, is a risky and ethereal commodity.⁹ Indeed, as Jan risks his and Sophia’s entire fortune along with a still-life in which tulips bloom in concert with daffodils and lilies, the text links painting, sexual excess, and volatile trade practices. As Sophia notes – here, as elsewhere, Moggach uses her characters’ speech to sketch in the historical context – the still-life shows ‘[f]lowers from different seasons bloom[ing] impossibly together’ (85). Likewise, her husband remarks that the *Tulipa clusiana* which he bought for the marital portrait were ‘forced under glass’, yielding a botanical impossibility that offered an opportunity for ostentation (26). As Moggach is aware, the techniques necessary for growing and forcing flowers from other, vastly different climates were pioneered in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, where the floral still-life symbolized the fantastic wealth pouring into Amsterdam through colonial trade. These bouquets of flowers, imported from around the globe and then grown in Holland, were the privilege of the wealthy to enjoy, and paintings of them were displayed as the tokens of one’s wealth (Bryson 1990, 130-3). That the van Loos still-life finances the romance at the heart of the text, however, is also indicative of a fictional world in which all relationships are somehow connected to wealth flowing from a collective gamble on volatile markets, all of which are part of the exotic wonders of global trade. *Tulip Fever*’s interest in the art market is thus on a par with its interest in the trade in tulip bulbs. Indeed, the novel casts both markets as analogues of each other to sustain a general buzz of excitement. Hence, as one bulb grower says to Jan, ‘[s]trange isn’t it? That flowers are transient but a painting lasts for ever ... Yet one bulb of that tulip is three times more precious, in financial terms, than your painting of it’ (142).

Yet the novel’s engagement with the visual arts is not restricted to its thematic treatment of them; it also extends to the text’s formal self-presentation, techniques for characterization and description, and modes of readerly address. As we noted above, the novel has a distinctly painterly quality, which is most clearly in evidence in its evocation of everyday life in the Republic by means of prosed ‘establishing shots’ that recall famous Dutch seventeenth-century paintings:

A woman plays the virginal; she catches the eye of the man beside her. A handsome young soldier lifts a glass to his lips; his reflection shines in the silver-topped decanter. A maid gives her mistress a letter ... The mirrored moments are stilled, suspended in aspic. For centuries to come people will gaze at these paintings and wonder what is about to happen. (25)

This kind of self-conscious commentary is repeated throughout the text, drawing the reader into two worlds simultaneously: the picturesque Amsterdam of the

'Golden Age', but also, folded into that historical world, the mediated Amsterdam that has come to readers through a museumized collective memory comprised of streetscapes and domestic scenes by Nicolaes Maes, Pieter de Hooch, and other famous Dutch painters. Hence, the novel frequently oscillates explicitly between both worlds, with proleptic references to the future glory of art works which the reader catches a glimpse of as they are still in the making. One example is contained in a chapter titled 'The Painting', where the narrator conjectures with almost metafictional irony that, in centuries to come, 'people will stand in the Rijksmuseum and gaze at [van Loos's] canvas' featuring Cornelis's exquisite *Tulipa clusiana* (31). A second chapter by the same title opens on a description of Rembrandt's unveiling of his Danaë waiting for Zeus to 'descend on her in a shower of golden rain'; the painting, the reader is informed in passing, now 'hangs in the Hermitage, the loveliest nude [Rembrandt] has ever painted' (115). Similarly, a parallel is drawn between Rembrandt's *Danaë* and van Loos's fictional portrait of Sophia, which '[c]enturies later ... will hang in the Rijksmuseum. Scholars will quarrel about her identity ... [and] [p]apers will be published about her place in van Loos's work' (116). In passages such as these, Moggach anticipates readers' desire to view seventeenth-century masterpieces, and accommodatingly discloses their locations in the museums and galleries of Europe. In so doing, her novel effectively extends an invitation to readers to visit the Rijksmuseum and the Hermitage, while reproductions from the London National Gallery's collection of Dutch masterpieces included in the text promote the excitement of world travel for purposes of art tourism.¹⁰

In this regard it is important to note that the reproductions, placed strategically throughout Moggach's novel, interact with the text by establishing the dominant aesthetic code for its descriptions and characterizations rather than by taking on a function in the plot. The colour plates rarely coincide with particular moments in the text as a means of illustrating a specific event or a scene in the narrative, as one might well expect. Rather, they saturate the novel with a generalized seventeenth-century atmosphere that appeals to readers' knowledge of 'Golden Age' art works, and which predetermines their visualization of *Tulip Fever's* fictional world. For example, the vanitas scene, part of the Sandvoort portrait, occurs at the outset, whereas the reproductions of paintings by Steenwyck and Heda that answer to the description are provided at the close of the novel, after the 'vanity' they symbolize has passed. There is one point in the text however where word and image powerfully collide: just after the dénouement, a detail of de Hooch's *Musical Party* is inserted at the precise moment that the focalizer surveys the Herengracht, providing the reader with a compelling description of the wealth commanded by denizens of the Dutch Republic (184-5). The combined effect is a thoroughly pre-mediated visual aesthetic, and a persistent articulation of today's topography of cultural heritage, which are ostensibly intended to add lustre to the historical romance plot. Indeed, as a book that lends itself to skimming as well as close reading, *Tulip Fever* seems to aspire to the condition of the glossy art catalogue or the museum shop commodity. As one critic glossed such practices in reference to this and other 'Golden Age' novels, they offer 'Vermeer with veneer'.¹¹

A Baroque Universe: Stephenson, Finance, Systems

Where Moggach romanticizes early-modern trade and commerce, the art market, and, by implication, today's cultural heritage industry, Neal Stephenson's interest, as an author of cyber- and steampunk fiction, is in complexity, abstraction, and information overload. Stephenson also takes a more sustained interest in the transformation of modern governance and statecraft, the rise of mercantile states, and the emergence of complex systems. When he gives interviews, it is about topics such as the nexus between the state, science, and technology, terrorism and military security, and what he calls the 'power disorders' that sporadically disrupt the body politic (Godwin 2005). In this regard, his work forms an interesting case study to consider alongside Moggach's museumized heritage fiction. For Stephenson, the Dutch 'Golden Age' is not a self-contained world to indulgently bring to life for the space of some 200 pages. Rather, his ambitiously plotted fiction revisits the Dutch seventeenth century in order to advance daring, speculative historical theses about the modernity we inhabit. In doing so, he takes a special interest in what Randy Martin has characterized as the ongoing 'financialization' of everyday life and, in particular, the ways in which finance persistently colonizes things once thought intangible (risk, good will, intellectual property, experience, fun) and which then become saleable as commodities.

Quicksilver, the first volume of the *Baroque Cycle*, has been described as a 'great fantastical boiling pot of theories about science, money, war and much else, by turns broadly picaresque and microscopically technical ... something like a Restoration-era *Gravity's Rainbow*' – albeit substantially longer at 927 pages (Poole 2003). Together with the second and third volumes, *The Confusion* (2004) and *The System of the World* (2004), it is set in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and spans the entire known globe at the time – from the Mogul kingdom in India to the 1683 Siege of Vienna, from the ballrooms of Versailles to the witch burnings of Boston. Among Stephenson's interests is the story of Leibniz and his designs for early computational engines, a strand that establishes the *Cycle* as a distant prequel to the novelist's *Cryptonomicon* (1999), a techno-thriller about cryptography, computing, and information technology in the 1940s and the present 'internet age'. While Stephenson uses Leibniz to offer a fictionalized account of early attempts to invent a computer, he is also interested in the coincidence of these attempts with modern finance, and particularly 'the triumph and spread of universal market rationality' that can be traced back to those days (Langley 2008, 7). Thus we also get to see Newton take his place as the head of the Royal Mint, London, marking the moment at which the endless possibilities of modern finance became manifest. The volume takes us likewise through the founding of the Royal Society, the Plague in 1665, and the Great Fire of London in 1666, and it includes a study of the lives of pioneers of modern science such as Robert Boyle, Christopher Wren, and Robert Hooke along with an adventure story about the fictional character Daniel Waterhouse, son of a fanatical Puritan, Drake Waterhouse, and Newton's roommate at Trinity College, Cambridge. Yet another strand in *Quicksilver*'s crowded and encyclopaedic narrative focuses more directly on early-modern markets and the financialization

of the quotidian that necessitates ever greater complexity and abstraction. This feature of the text centres on the fictional characters of Jack Shaftoe, King of the Vagabonds, and Eliza, a slave of Scottish descent whom Shaftoe rescues from the ruins of an Ottoman harem during the Siege of Vienna. It is to this third strand in *Quicksilver*, which takes us to Amsterdam in the 1680s, that we now turn.

Given Stephenson's interest in the processes of financialization that were taking root in early-modern Europe and many of its colonies, it is of no small consequence that *Quicksilver* includes Amsterdam in its spectacular, wide-ranging world tour. Stephenson describes 1680s Amsterdam as well as a contemporary cyberpunk guru might, as a sort of deconstructed commercial metropolis where '[t]here were tolls everywhere, but no centre of power' (466). Indeed, he visualizes the Republic as being populated by 'the Dutch, who worshipped motion above all. For whom the physical element of Earth was too resistant and inert, an annoyance to traders, an impediment to the fluid exchange of goods' (483). In other words, Stephenson's Dutch Republic is a sort of dematerialized, thoroughly liquid non-place through which goods pass to be miraculously converted into paper. In keeping with this view, as Eliza and Jack make their way to Amsterdam, the Dutch Republic is described as an ever-complexifying system of canals whose sole purpose appears to be the transport of colonial luxury goods. Their approach follows 'nearly unbroken queues of carts laden with goods, fighting upstream against as heavy traffic coming from the north', as they take in 'long skinny slabs of flat land divided one from the next by straight ditches full of standing water'. As Stephenson goes on to explain – in a way befitting the contemporary image of Amsterdam and the Netherlands as unconventional, libertarian, drug-tolerant places – 'what happened on that land was always something queer: tulip-raising, for example', and '[o]dd-looking fields growing flax, hemp, rape, hops, tobacco' (466-7). And while this passage lights on many of those racy commodities currently associated with Amsterdam, it goes on to connect the city to its artistic tradition as the protagonists encounter stables filled 'with *painters* – young men ... who sat before easels making copy after copy of land- and seascapes' to be 'stacked and bundled and wrapped into cargo-bales' (467). Here again, Amsterdam is imagined as a commercial city that equally embraces dubious commodities and questionable practices, but still resonates with the kinds of cultural heritage for which the Dutch seventeenth century is known.

Once they are in Amsterdam, Stephenson allows his characters to passively focalize the busy scene of commerce and speculation, and to linger over the startling panorama to which they are treated in the centre of town:

[T]he city's new weigh-house [was] almost completely obscured by a perpetual swarm of boats ... Sloops coming in duelled for narrow water-lanes with canal-barges taking the weighed and stamped goods off to the city's warehouses, and every few minutes a small heavy cart clattered away across the Damplatz, laden with coins the ships' captains had used to pay duty, and made a sprint for the Exchange Bank, scattering wiggled, ribboned, and turbaned deal-makers out of its path. (481)

For the rest of their stay in this vividly imagined global commercial centre, Jack pretends to be an invalid so as not to be forced to work by the industrious Dutch. At the same time we read that Eliza, the self-proclaimed 'money-market speculator', 'seemed content to while away time in a coffee-house alongside the Damplatz' that 'straddled an important migration-route' where traders gathered to '[flock] down the street to a large courtyard called the Exchange' (479). From the outset of the novel, Eliza displays remarkable intelligence and an intense interest in the workings of commodity trading and financial markets. The first indication of her unusual gift is her instant understanding of the 'bourse' of Leipzig, which is already characterized as promoting global trade. Here, she and Jack watch as money-changers fling 'assorted coins' into a melting pot just under 'a wall chart of exchange rates' for 'Louis d'or, Maximilian d'or, souverain d'or, rand, ducat, Louis franc, Breslau ducat, Schildgroschen, Hohlheller, Schwertgroschen, Oberwehr groschen, Hellengroschen, pfennig, Goldgulden, halberspitzgroschen, Engelsgroschen, Real, Ratswertmark ... English shilling, ruble, abassid, rupiah' (422). The currencies of a growing international trading community materially meet and merge here, just as francs, guilders, and marks are now consolidated in the euro. Also worthy of note is that in describing the Leipzig 'bourse', Stephenson finds in it early intimations of the progressive dematerialization of a market wherein '[t]here were no goods in evidence, only bits of paper', as metal is magically transformed into this more abstract medium (422).

The Amsterdam-based chapters continue this exploration of the 'coming of age' of modern finance and, by implication, the global economic trajectory in which we currently find ourselves. Hence, while Eliza chats with traders and learns the ins and outs of the futures market, Stephenson has her educate the reader in the niceties of bridge loans and the construction of 'ducat shares, which have one-tenth the value of proper VOC shares and are far more liquid' (528). And importantly, as in *Tulip Fever*, much of the context is filled in through the characters' detail-filled speech and dialogue – as if they are not just there to carry the plot, but also to function as tour guides, propelled back into the time where the narrative is set but essentially modern in their response to the action.

At this point the question of genre and readership reasserts itself. While Moggach's romance describes its characters in vaguely commercial terms against a background of 'Golden Age' visual splendour, Stephenson's hybrid 'history-of-science fiction' whole-heartedly embraces money as Eliza, untrammelled by love or gendered relations with finance, brazenly refers to herself as 'a trader, not a shareholder' who has come to Amsterdam to 'make money' (528, 557). Eliza embodies the pivotal moment that lies at the crux of Stephenson's history of technology and finance, while Jack represents the old, realist economic order and is, therefore, made uncomfortable by the lack of metal circulating in the market. In Amsterdam he worries that he sees 'no goods or money changing hands' on a stock exchange which Eliza knows the Dutch call the '*Windhandel*' or 'wind business' because it is driven 'by a trickle of paper passing from hand to hand' like 'a breath of air on the blades of a windmill' (482, 483). As Jack complains that 'this money [she] speaks of is but a chimæra – a figment of the collective imagination of ... rabble bellowing at one another out on the Dam', Eliza wel-

comes the new economy like ‘the warm wind that you feel on your face’ (557, 483). Loath to hold money in reserve, she happily trades low-value shares, which have the advantage of being ‘far more liquid’ than the more stable VOC shares (528). And she is equally happy to borrow money for leverage and to ‘use options so that [she] will make money if the price [of VOC shares] falls’. No stranger to insider trading, Eliza explains that this ‘is called short selling’ and announces that an investor ‘will begin betting that VOC stock will drop soon. And rest assured, it will’ (529). In a moment of almost Rabelaisian grotesque, she even describes her birth in financial terms, explaining that she ‘bear[s] the same relationship to [her] mother as a dividend does to a joint stock corporation – viz. a new piece of wealth created out of the normal functioning of the old’. In short, Eliza explains, she ‘was liquidated’ when she left the womb (439).

Again with regard to the question of readership, it is certainly also significant that the critical debate surrounding Stephenson’s work has discovered in it the same ambiguous relationship to Enlightenment modernity that is often said to characterize cyber- and steampunk fiction. A recent discussion of his neo-Victorian novel *The Diamond Age* (1995) links it to the ‘tendency to “idealize complete knowledge” and mastery’ that informs most steampunk novels, even while also seeking to appraise the author’s attempt to recover the ethical potential of the relationship between humans and material things (Forlini 2010, 73). The encyclopaedic *Baroque Cycle* bespeaks a similar aspiration to mastery and totality. Although the ostensible motivation behind the project is that of critical genealogical work, its desire to offer an all-inclusive popular account of the beginnings of modern finance seems to overrule its critical or investigative impulse. The author of *Quicksilver* seems to relish the excitement of the mechanisms of dematerialization heralded by the *Windhandel*, and often indulges in prolonged, meandering descriptions and dialogue that serve no other purpose than to revel in the spectacle and drama of early-modern global trade. Indeed, as Eliza enjoys the anonymity afforded by Amsterdam’s booming market, through which she passes incognito, she is not so much a moral or critical centre in the narrative, as the vehicle of a kind of displaced tourist gaze that has been transposed back in time. At one point, she and Jack stroll past ‘Damplatz’ and the Stock Exchange, comparing the relative virtues of the Paris and Amsterdam markets, when she suddenly proclaims: ‘I belong in Amsterdam’ (483). This establishes her – with anachronistic irony – as the neoliberal subject par excellence, the model of today’s tourist-visitor who says ‘I amsterdam’ in between a gallery visit and a shopping spree on Kalverstraat. Just like Moggach’s Sophia, then, Eliza is essentially modern – as close to the present-day reader or Europe-bound traveller as to a ‘Golden Age’ female prodigy escaped from the clutches of an Ottoman vizier.

Conclusion

This essay has focused on the representation of early-modern Amsterdam as a source of fascination, romance, and entertainment in two subgenres of the popular historical novel. We have discussed how various aspects of the Dutch

'Golden Age' – genre painting, the tulip craze, early-modern finance – have been adopted as plot drivers and selling points to charm and beguile readers. Deborah Moggach's *Tulip Fever* is a period piece that seeks to provide visual and sensual pleasure, unfolding a narrative about risk-taking and gambling along the quaint canals of seventeenth-century Amsterdam that treats readers to an intimate view of the city's past. Pre-mediated by the visual codes of the art gallery, its cultural eye-candy cheers readers on to hop on a plane and catch a little of this historical sense of place for themselves. Neal Stephenson's *Quicksilver* is more ambitiously historical in its attempt to historicize modern science, technology, and finance. In its fictional world, modern finance is a Dutch invention, and Dutch finance is rapidly making its way into Leipzig and Paris as it gathers steam to go global, hastening headlong towards increasing speculation and dematerialization. In dwelling on this historic episode, the novel seeks to rethink the consequences of the 'financial revolution' (North and Weingast 1989) for modern culture and everyday life – even if, like *Tulip Fever*, it also projects an aura of excitement around aleatory economic practices, succumbing to the very charms from which it seeks to (re)gain distance.

All things considered, then, what is one to make of the Amsterdam- or Holland-based heritage novel that has formed such a sustained hype in the market for popular English-language fiction since the early 1990s? For many readers, there must be something reassuring about the possibility suggested by those novels to situate the beginnings of disaster capitalism very precisely in space and time – as if to anchor it safely in a foreign, slightly exotic and romanticizable *lieu de mémoire*. Amsterdam's historic role within the genealogy of modern finance is well-known, while the cozy, village-like character of its inner-city centre, the picturesque setting offered by its canals, and the whiff of foreignness that it exudes for Anglophone readers make it an easy vehicle onto which concerns about contemporary urban and economic life can be displaced. In this regard, this trend in popular fiction may indeed be close – politically and ideologically – to heritage film and to earlier literary forms of postmodern historical representation, as its generous use of pastiche would seem to underline. At the same time, it should be considered that the heritage depicted in this fiction no longer belongs to the Netherlands, but rather to a globalized world and a cultural economy that are characterized by the international circulation of urban images and place-bound cultural markers. In this context, the Dutch Republic is an historical signifier that refers to an open, internationally connected economy and market, and it should come as no surprise that Amsterdam's age-old association with the modern 'world system' now pushes it to the fore in the global cultural memory that is taking shape today, specifically around economic and financial themes. Notwithstanding their Eurocentrism and their commodified character, both novels foster a sense of global interconnectedness through which fates and fortunes can be seen as closely, even intimately linked. In this sense, they contribute to the cosmopolitanization of cultural memory, raising awareness of the volatility of the economic and financial system through which we are connected.

Notes

- 1 This corpus of texts is also expanding outside the English-speaking world: a notable French contribution is Sylvie Matton's *Rembrandt's Whore* (1997, English translation 2001).
- 2 Filmmaker Steven Spielberg still owns the rights to *Tulip Fever*, although the 2004 attempt to bring the story to the screen was unsuccessful. Meanwhile, Moggach herself has focused increasingly on heritage screen adaptations and teleplays (e.g., in 2008, she authored a BBC adaptation of *The Diaries of Anne Frank*).
- 3 These quotations are taken from an email correspondence between the author and J. Goggin, dated 9 Jan. 2005.
- 4 The parallel is complete if one considers that Wall Street is a name with a Dutch pedigree: it figures as Walstraat on maps of New Amsterdam from the 1660s (Frijhoff 2006, 262-73).
- 5 When, after three years, the bubble burst, the government stepped in and ordered that outstanding contracts be liquidated at 3.5 per cent of the original price of purchase (Pavord 2000, 156). For more details concerning tulip fever, including an index of prices at the time, see Schama (1991, 350-66) and Zumthor (1959, 291-312).
- 6 Cf. John Kenneth Galbraith, who refers specifically to this period as the moment at which the Amsterdam Bank and others 'saw money as a way of making money' (1975, 13).
- 7 Vanitas paintings were intended to remind viewers of their mortality as an antidote to hubris, financial or otherwise. These paintings regularly contained a display of familiar *memento mori* such as skulls, pipes, and playing cards with which viewers were familiar. See Koozin (1990), chapter 1.
- 8 More recently, Anne Goldgar has published *Tulipmania* (2007), probably the most comprehensive scholarly work on the topic to date.
- 9 This historical parallel, too, was recognized in the press: in 'A Second Tulip Mania', Lewis and Ford refer to the contemporary art market as another tulip craze, seeing how it is characterized by 'incredible tulip-like increases in the value of the hottest artists' (2008).
- 10 Note as well that most editions of the text include a complete list of the sixteen reproductions intercalated in the text and their locations.
- 11 Joanna Briscoe, qtd. from the *Sunday Times* in Wallace (2006), with specific reference to *Tulip Fever* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.

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