**Threnody Unthreaded:**

**Iraq and its Aftermath in Richard House’s *The Kills***

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**ABSTRACT:**

Richard House’s epic novel in four parts, *The Kills* (2013), is a sprawling digital novel whose conspiracy thriller plot centres on the reconstruction of Iraq. *The Kills* is, I argue, a kind of threnody: a complex work of mourning which counters what Judith Butler calls the ‘frames of war’ which have delimited our perspective on Iraq and marked certain deaths as ‘ungrievable’. House’s novel provides not only a counter-narrative, I argue, but teaches a strategy of counter-reading. *The Kills* is a fragmented novel which prompts its reader to attempt to reassemble its pieces, a strategy which is enacted by its multimodal form, its manipulation of genre conventions and its multiple plot threads which lack narrative closure. The trailing threads of his unthreaded threnody are a provocation to continue the work of mourning, not by forgetting, but by remaining indignant, inquisitive and engaged in an ethical reading of the transnational world, a task which demands resilient scepticism and assimilative agility.

**KEYWORDS:** Richard House, multimodal, hypertext, Iraq, violence, trauma, threnody

She wants to understand how this started, to unthread a sequence and understand the origin, because everything has a start, a place where what is happening is set in motion [...] Does she need to retreat this far? If this far then why not further, because what she is finding is that there is no single starting point, only multiple threads which appear to bind because of distance, but only ever run parallel?

Richard House, *The Hit*, (12.3)

Richard House’s *The Kills* (2013) is a vast multimodal conspiracy thriller whose plot threads trail far across the surface of the globe. These threads tangle together in a number of knots, one of which is a sum of $53 million, embezzled by an American contractor in the desert in Iraq under the guise of carrying out reconstruction work. House’s focus on peripheral aspects of the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath is, I argue, designed to counter what Judith Butler has called the ‘frames of war’, that is, the dominant media narrative which directs and narrows our gaze. These frames, Butler argues, also limit our emotional response to conflict, marking certain deaths as ‘ungrievable’. *The Kills,* I argue, is a threnody, a work which restores mourning to our response to the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath by focussing on this excluded periphery, yet which makes no claims to capture the trauma of that conflict in its totality.

House’s response reflects the difficulty of narrativizing a conflict whose parameters are difficult to define. In his article ‘In War Times: Fictionalizing Iraq’ (2012) Roger Luckhurst asked, ‘When did the war in Iraq start? With the Gulf War in 1991? Earlier? Is it separable from the war in Afghanistan, the longest military engagement in U.S. history? Has the war in Iraq ended?’ (714). The recent intervention by US and UK military forces against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria suggests that we cannot look forward to answering the last of Luckhurst’s questions with any clarity. These latest developments represent yet another chapter in the seemingly endless narrative of the Iraq War: according to Paul Rogers, ‘We are now at the start of another war – and one that will most likely be measured not in days or months but in years’ (‘Boots already on the ground’).

This war, which lacks either a stable point of origin or a conclusion, is a subject which resists attempts to be brought into sharper focus, seeming to shift before our gaze. ‘Prior to all efforts at commemoration, explanation or understanding,’ Ulrich Baer writes, ‘we must find a place and a position from which we may then gain access to the event’ (40). There is an ethical exigency to explain, to understand and to commemorate in the case of the West’s intervention in Iraq, a series of events whose representation is marked by distortion, obfuscation and a willed amnesia. Nevertheless, so uncertain is our sense of the subject that such attempts are seemingly thwarted before they can even begin.

House’s novel, I will argue, responds to these complications, not by finding a fixed perspective on his subject, but by using its uncertainty as a structuring principle. The fragmentary nature of the novel and its dangling plot threads acknowledge that a totalising view of Iraq is impossible, not least when it comes to measuring, and feeling, the weight of its losses. Judith Butler addresses this question in relation to Iraqi civilians whose lives are so framed as to be experienced as ‘ungrievable’. She argues that,

specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first

apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from

the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological

frameworks, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense (1).

Butler’s sense of the effect of these ungrievable deaths on the psyche of the West draws on Freud’s notion of the melancholic who, unable to grasp what she has lost, is incapable of working that loss through. These frames allow the West’s sense of responsibility towards Iraq to remain dormant, consigning material which threatens to disturb or provoke us to the fringes of the collective subconscious. House’s novel offers a perspective beyond the frames of war yet finally can only gesture towards the outer peripheries of our vision, awakening our sense of what is hidden rather than recovering it. As such, *The Kills* is a threnody which awakens the conscience and opens us up to grief but which, in denying us closure, does not allow us to move beyond it.

House shows himself to be deeply concerned as to the pernicious role which ‘stories’ have played in the justification of the war in Iraq. In an interview entitled ‘An Epic Project’, he discusses his composition of the novel:

I wanted to look at how stories can be manipulative, how dangerous it is for someone to tell you their story. I can remember feeling angry at how complicit I was, we all were, about going to war with Iraq. Why wasn’t I on the streets screaming about it? Why did I swallow the nonsense we were told? I probably knew at the time that it was fabricated, but I didn’t examine it (‘An Epic Project’).

House’s novel represents the opposite kind of narrative to that which was used to justify the invasion of Iraq, not only in that it takes a critical stance on the motivations behind that invasion, but because it calls upon the reader to assemble the disjointed narrative herself rather than ‘swallow’ it. House’s novel resists the idea that narrative requires a stable point of origin or must provide closure. Instead, House’s novel allows agency to its reader precisely because it refuses to offer a complete explanation or give narrative closure; it draws her on to piece the story together yet finally insists that she accept that the conclusions drawn must be conjectural and incomplete. Finally it is less a counter-narrative than an exercise in how to begin counter-reading, that is, approaching dominant media narratives with a combination of resilient scepticism and assimilative agility.

Butler writes that ‘when the frame jettisons certain version of war, it is busily making a rubbish heap whose animated debris provides the potential resources for resistance’ (xiv). House’s novel responds to the ‘frames of war’ by considering the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq from angles which restore elements of the narrative which have been excluded and in so doing becoming a means of resistance. House’s novel draws on the ‘rubbish heap’ of Iraq in a literal as well as a figurative sense: his epic multi-modal novel hinges on a story of contractors who operate at a ‘burn-pit’ in Iraq, one of the huge open air furnaces used to burn everything from human body parts to surplus military supplies. House’s story is not staged in the theatre of war: instead it is the story of corruption, exploitation and high level conspiracy which occur in the invasion’s aftermath. The story of the burn pits provides an analogy for the noxious power of that aftermath which, though excluded by the frames of war, continues to play out in the world around us.

This aftermath is itself a kind of ongoing trauma and one which the frame—which Butler writes ‘seeks to institute an interdiction on mourning’—will not allow us to work through (xiv). *The Kills* is a novel which is saturated in a sense of mourning, yet which makes no claims to be able to grasp all that has been lost, nor to offer a sense of catharsis. House’s strategy is not, then, to attempt to recover all that has been excluded from the ‘frame’ and bring it out into the light, but rather to hint at losses which are all the more devastating because they never quite emerge from the shadows. The kind of resistance which *The Kills* performs here is that of a threnody, a lament which often takes the form of a musical composition. Its power is in the cumulative effect of the mournful tune which plays out in a number of different narrative threads as transpositions of the same sad story, or as one character puts it, ‘multiple threads which appear to bind’ but ‘only ever run parallel’. In interview with Jeff Vandermeer of *The Millions*, House said that, ‘I dislike the transformation of life or events into a received three-part act with an intensity’, a structure which has parallels to the way that ‘media shape events’. *The Kills* eschews these familiar shapes in favour of cycles, repetitions and parallel lines.

In its focus on the peripheral, *The Kills* manages to launch a more sweeping critique of a neoliberal world order in which a deep-seated human drive to do harm seems to flourish. The Iraq sections of the novel are placed alongside sections set in Italy, Cyprus, Malta, Turkey, America and the UK, capturing by fragments a picture of a global network. Once again, the novel’s vision of the world is not totalising; rather it renders audible some of the reverberative noise of the busy machine of global capitalism, an example of what Sharae Deckard calls ‘a world-system novel’ (364). Deckard uses this term to describe Roberto Bolaño’s fragmented novel *2666,* a work to which House is indebted. I will return to the parallels between House and Bolaño, and to Deckard’s ‘world-system novel’, later in this essay.

This novel of fragments and arrested grief is not, however, one which induces a state of disempowered bewilderment or stagnation in its reader. As I will argue, House’s dense text provides its reader with a training ground for negotiating the ethical snares of the globalized world. In his disjointed plots he challenges us to find connections in a globalized world in which cause and effect are enacted in distorted and distantiated ways. The central example of this is in a fable which, if refined to its essential components, can be found to repeat throughout the novel through a variety of characters separated in time and space: it involves the exploitation of an unwary person who is driven by either greed or necessity to seek money without asking questions as to its source, only to find, not only that she has been exploited, but that she is unable to avoid complicity in the exploitation of others. It is a fable which highlights systemic failures of global capitalism, but which leaves open the possibility that we can side-step this trap, if only we seek to understand the ethical implications of our actions and to exercise our agency accordingly.

House seeks to make his readers ethical and autonomous agents of this kind, not only through the fable which I read into his plot, but through a variety of strategies concerning the way the novel is read. First, I consider an unusual feature of House’s novel, that is, its multimodality. I connect House’s use of multiple media with the novel’s subversion of the thriller/ detective genre, suggesting that the reader-detective is encouraged, and yet ultimately thwarted, in the attempt to put together the ‘clues’ which extra-textual information seems to promise. I go on to address the story itself placing it in the context of House’s source material in regards to contractors in Iraq, drawing out the ethical implications of the novel’s focus on trauma and aftermath. Traumatic repetition together with the ungraspable nature of Iraq itself, I argue, informs House’s sequence and structure, producing a threnody which mourns but does not console.

**Media and genre**

I have called *The Kills* an ‘unthreaded’ threnody because it is composed of a number of narratives which, though partially woven together, are frayed, trailing into separate threads. It gives the story an unfinished quality which denies its reader a sense of completion and consolation; it lingers on in the mind and refuses to be forgotten. House achieves this effect, in part, through the features of his novel which have attracted the most attention, its size and its multimodal form, and it is with these features that I will begin.

*The Kills* is a large novel, technically a quartet made up of four books entitled *Sutler*, *The Massive*, *The Kill* and *The Hit.* Together this makes up a narrative on an epic scale, representing over one thousand pages in its printed form and supplemented by over one hundred minutes of film. Nevertheless it is essentially misleading to refer to *The Kills* as a *long* novel, with the suggestion that word carries of a linear plot drawn out over a long period of time. Instead, the analogy of *The Kills* as musical threnody serves well here, where multiple storylines represent separate melodies and multiple media the instruments which play together in concert. We do not hear these refrains and instruments played together as we would listening to music, yet the sad melody of *The Kills* emerges from a kind of layering in which time and space are collapsed, a richness which is more apparent when we hold the novel as a whole in our minds. The effect of connecting the novel’s disparate parts contributes to its emotional depth, but also serves to cast the reader in the role of reader-detective. She must formulate theories of her own if she is to put the dismembered text back together, a mentally-taxing and active approach to the text. *The Kills* is a detective novel of sorts, although it resists the neat resolution of the conventional clue-puzzle.

House’s use of media is significant, then, in terms of its emotional resonance and its play with genre conventions, but before these can be addressed in greater depth it is is necessary to define the nature of House’s digital experiments themselves. Digital novels are still relatively rare and have not always been greeted by the literary establishment with unqualified enthusiasm; certainly, the digital content of *The Kills* made it an unusual entry on the Long List for the 2013 Man Booker Prize. Nevertheless, in her review for *The Guardian,* Kate Pullinger—a novelist who has used multimodal forms in her own writing—commented that, ‘This is the first time I've read a digital edition of a primarily text-based novel where I've thought: yes, this works’. Variant forms of multimodal fiction, and the terminology which can be used to describe it, are evolving as technology becomes available to support new possibilities. The application of Alice Bell’s term, hypertext fiction, might be used in the case of *The Kills* since it is a digital novel which contains hyperlinks with ‘accompanying image, film and sound’ (1). House’s text is interspersed with fragments of chat room exchanges, photographs, audio clips and links to short films, accessed by hyperlink in the digital version or accessible through the publisher’s website for those reading print. House’s artistic background ranges beyond that of a novelist: his years as part of the artistic collective Ha Ha have informed his thinking and he cites artists like Sophie Calle and Sadie Benning as influences on *The Kills* (Pan Macmillan interview)*.* House’s storytelling is fluid in its influences and in its media, reflecting a broader trend towards convergence culture, a term coined by Henry Jenkins to describe narrative which flows across a number of different media platforms (Jenkins).

Why, then, do House’s digitally augmented features ‘work’, and to what effect? The answer lies partly in the way that such technologies promote the notion of a new kind of reader who is more active, even participatory, than is usually allowed to be the case. Jenkins identified that as media technologies proliferate, a new form of storytelling which flows between different media platforms is becoming more apparent, representing a ‘ cultural shift, whereby consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections between dispersed media content’ (3). Much of the content outside of the main body of the text of *The Kills* is not integral to the main plot, but rather adds detail to the world of the text. It is ‘additive comprehension’ (123) as Jenkins calls it, a term which he in turn borrows from the world of gaming.

Since *The Kills* has strong elements of the conspiracy thriller, the promise of additive comprehension is intriguing, seeming to promise further clues on the main body of the narrative. In two of the short films which accompany the first book (‘Eric: Code 1’ and ‘Eric: Code 2’) the reader is provided with a key to the code which one character employs when writing his journal. The information which this code provides gives us extra insights into Eric’s character and back story, but do not help us to solve questions relating to the central plot. The short films, which seem to hold the promise of a clue, really perform the opposite function. In a mystery novel, a clue is usually nugatory information which helps the reader to solve the mystery and, in finding resolution, be released from suspense. In contrast, these short films offer humanising glimpses of characters, often expanding on their memories and reflections in a way which takes us out of the time and place of the main text. The films typically focus on a single character rather than the plot as a whole, their lo-fi aesthetic and switch to a more intimate first-person perspective indicating a break with the main narrative. Whereas the main body of the text conforms to the convention of thriller in which characterisation and interiority is limited and dispassionate in its rendering, these short films complicate the dominant tone. When those characters we have explored through the short films meet with violence or summarily disappear from the text, it is this deeper characterisation which gives emotional resonance to the loss.

It also compels us to attempt to finish the story for that character whose progress is held in suspended animation. House has said, ‘I take it for granted that a reader can complete a story arc without it needing to be spelled out. I have a particular dislike of being instructed, of being told how everything works, how I should feel, how I should think’ (Pan Macmillan Interview). Some elements of the novel make readerly participation a mandatory part of our reading experience. In order to read *The Kill* in its digital version, the reader must choose either ‘heads’ or ‘tails’ with different implications for the sequence of the narrative which follows, either chronologically or character-by-character. *The Kill* is an example of what Espen J. Aarseth terms an ‘ergodic text’ , a term derived from the Greek words for ‘work’ and ‘path’, that is, a text for which requires ‘nontrivial effort’ from the reader in determining how to progress through the text (1). In *The Kill* this ‘nontrivial effort’ is the selection of either ‘heads’ or ‘tails’ *The Kill* might also be described using David Ciccoricco’s term ‘network fiction’, that is a fictional text which ‘makes use of hypertext technology in order to create emergent and re-combinatory narratives’ (4). Although the content of *The Kill* is essentially unchanged, the reader is made to realise that she makes an active choice in choosing how to re-combine, and so read the text, and that this ‘nontrivial effort’ is central to the way that the text’s meaning is made.

There is an underlying irony to these features, which seem to promise the reader greater insight into the text or even a degree of control over its course, but essentially deliver neither. The novel’s sophisticated multimodality and sheer proliferation of material only serve to underline our sense of its skimpiness in terms of catharsis or resolution. The novel points, in fact, to its own limitations to recover all the information it needs to tell a complete story. In the opening of *The Arc and the Machine* (2007)Caroline Bassett argues that anxieties as to the capacity of narrative to capture the weight of information of its contemporary moment is both a feature of the present and a crisis which we have encountered before. Summarising Walter Benjamin’s position in *The Storyteller* (1992), Bassett writes that standing on ‘the threshold of the age of mass communication’ Benjamin argued that ‘narrative could not survive the moment of information’ (1). Similarly, though ‘Narrative has been understood as something that can encompass vast landscapes and single atoms… its place [now] looks less sure in a world where information is pervasive’ (1).

House’s novel reflects this contemporary anxiety, although not by suggesting that stories have become impossible in the information age. Indeed his bold experiments in digital form suggest optimism for narrative’s regenerative power. Instead, he suggests that bewildering times sharpen our appetite for the wrong kind of stories, those which help to simplify the truth and effectively close down our more inquisitive impulses. House’s novel, as we have seen, is a response to his sense of remorse that he was once prepared to ‘swallow’ the story which justified the invasion of Iraq. His novel is full of characters who come to grief because they prove similarly gullible. In his innovative use of multi-modal storytelling, House’s novel mimics the way in which we receive news of the world in the information age, that is, in unmanageable quantities and through a variety of intersecting media technologies.

The additional digital content of *The Kills* encourages the reader to be active, sceptical and intellectually engaged but eventually denies her the satisfaction of feeling that she has mastered the story and can, in narrative terms, trace out an ordered sense of cause and effect. In this, it refuses to offer a reductive perspective on the chaos of its subject matter or to offer a feeling of resolution about events which remain unresolved.

While clue-puzzle elements to the novel drive us on to find culprits and motives, instead we move ever outwards, drawing in a greater number of crimes and of victims. There are parallels here to a Bolaño’s *2666* (2004), a novel which House has cited as a major influence (‘An Epic Project’). Laura Barberan Reinares writes that in Bolaño’s novel, ‘one of the strongest lures’ of the novel is its ‘impassive repetition of the horror, the author showcases an extreme example of an economic system that privileges profits over lives’ (51). House’s novel echoes *2666* in its multi-part structure of loosely linked narratives, its repetition of stories of violence and exploitation which strongly resemble each other and the light it shines on the relationship between violence and the mechanisms of global capitalism.

*2666* depicts a series of murders in fictional Santa Teresa, a poor industrial city in Mexico with many textile factories. There, the abused and brutalized corpses of young women who work in the factories are discovered by a largely indifferent police force. Bolaño hints that the murder of the young women may be linked to some powerful and wealthy figures in the city, but the murders also come to stand for an exploitative system which puts its workers’ bodies in grotesquely strained and dangerous conditions to increase its profitability. Here there is a parallel to House’s engagement with the story of unsafe conditions at the burn pits in Iraq which stands in for a broader critique of the privatisation of war and the dark consequences of pursuing conflict for economic gain. Each novel denies us the unmasking of identifiable villains, finally leaving the suggestion that the evil at the root of the outrages which each novel records is systemic, that a society which values capital over the sanctity of human life is inherently violent.

*The Kills* differs from the metaphysical detective novel, however, in that it is less interested in the classic figure of the detective—the loner and outsider who ultimately restores order to the narrative—than the ‘middleman’ whose inaction, inattention or ignorance does not make her blameless, though making restitution ultimately proves beyond her power. This focus on middlemen, reviewers Jake Kerridge for *The Telegraph* and Kate Pullinger for *The Guardian* noted that *The Kills* offers an unusual perspective on conflict in Iraq; the novel’s work in mourning the middlemen is perhaps more unusual still.

**Story and source material**

The rituals which mark the death of military personnel encode the significance of that death along nationally symbolic lines; the death of a private contractor, however, is another matter. Contractors who work alongside each other are not necessarily nationals of the same country nor are they perceived to serve the nation in the same way, a fact which has a bearing on the way that their deaths are marked symbolically and statistically. A report from the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) discusses the difficulty of recording deaths of third-party nationals, those of unknown nation and how to guess the number of deaths overall when ‘no agency managed a central database for reconstruction or stabilization categories’[[1]](#footnote-1). The paucity of data has helped to obscure the number of contractor deaths in Iraq and divert curiosity from a host of potentially embarrassing issues concerning the role of British and American multinationals in Iraq in the wake of the invasion.

It is to the story of the contractors I turn now, suggesting the source material which House brings to light, recovered from the margins obscured by ‘the frames of war’. I argue that bringing attention to bear on this forgotten group is in itself a kind of resistant mourning, but also suggest that House’s contractors are not merely victims but also unwilling collaborators in a larger conspiracy. By exploring the central trope of the burn pits further, I suggest that there are ethical principles at play in House’s text which are consonant with those emphasized by House’s multimodal form and subversion of the thriller/ detective genre. If, as I have argued, these features work to construct a reader who is active, then I set out to suggest here that House’s story and use of source material serve to underline why such a mentality is necessary if one is to avoid being exploited or becoming complicit in the exploitation of others.

Insofar as a rhizomatic-like plot like *The Kills* can be described as having a centre, we might posit that it is the burn pits in Iraq’s Amrah City where the quartet begins. The burn pits, are, we learn, slated for closure in order to ready the site for a new project for ‘a new military base and new city’ referred to by the project name The Massive (1.3). Though the project exists on paper, we are given to understand that it is a fiction, one of many that have been created as a front for the embezzling of government funds on a huge scale. Those who might act as whistle-blowers discover themselves to be too implicated in the scheme to risk its exposure, while others want only to collect their salaries and return home as soon as possible. An explosion is carried out by the project’s architects at the headquarters of the Massive in an attempt to obscure the paper trail, also providing a distraction during which Sutler, a man hired to act as a decoy, will make his flight. Those on the trail of Sutler miss several clues that the man who goes by that name is merely an auxilliary: a sutler is an archaic term for ‘a person who followed an army and sold provisions to the soldiers’ (OED). Nevertheless, the distraction created is enough to allow Paul Geezler, the shadowy figure behind the scam, to slip away: neither he, nor the missing money, is ever found.

The story of this scam is nested within other narratives, each of which operates as a protective shell for the one inside it. The story of ‘The Massive’ is used to cover the reality of a fifty-three million dollar scam; in turn the story that Sutler is the culprit deflects attention from Geezler. Whether Geezler is really the man behind the conspiracy or is acting on behalf of someone else, we can never discover. There is a further, extra-textual, shell, if we consider how the conspiracy is embedded in the first instance in the justification for the invasion of Iraq itself. It is not my intention to list, still less evaluate, the many reasons which have been suggested as hidden motivations of the Bush and Blair administration in deciding to invade Iraq. It is sufficient to say, however, that one justification proved to be founded on false information: the claim made of the existence of Saddam Hussein’s Weapons of Mass Destruction.

*The Kills* avoids any discussion of the events which bring the contractors to Iraq. More strikingly, the story does not feature a single Iraqi.[[2]](#footnote-2) In interview, House says that he did not travel to Iraq during the writing process, instead drawing on his experience as a child of a military family, moving from place to place without any real sense of the country around them: ‘When I was with my dad on a military base in Malta or Cyprus or Germany, we could have been in England for all the interaction we had with any Germans or Maltese or Cypriots. It was very artificial’ (‘An Epic Project’). House risks allowing his reader to accept the ‘artificial’ state of affairs which seems natural to the characters we meet in *The Kills,* together with their failure to engage with the events which prompt their being in Iraq at all. For an alert reader, however, conspicuous absences demand further attention.

The burn pits are an example of the very real consequences of the invasion of Iraq which has been consigned to the periphery of public awareness, as well as a potent symbol of the mismanagement of the rebuilding of Iraq. They are also in themselves a metaphorical representation of an idea with which the text is heavily concerned: negation and disappearance, and the remnants of what is left of that which we attempt to negate. The burn pits in Iraq, opened as a temporary measure but kept open indefinitely, have proved controversial for a number of reasons. Firstly, they have been linked to the cover up of the lax regulation and misappropriation of government funds under the ‘cost plus’ system. In documentary *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* (2006) Pratap Chatterjee, Executive Director of corporate watchdog CorpWatch, explains that the cost plus system ‘encourages you to run up the cost of a programme because you’re going to get a cut of the final cost’ (*Iraq for Sale*). With contracts awarded to multinational corporations which have grown so large that they have no competition to keep them in check, and little infrastructure to oversee spending, the ‘cost plus’ system effectively represents a blank cheque to the multinational companies who win a government contract. In the same documentary, James Logsdon, a former truck driver for KBR/ Halliburton is interviewed and attests that:

They’d get the wrong equipment, order the wrong stuff, computers still in boxes, new vehicles… They’d just push them in what they call burn pits and then just set it on fire, claiming the loss so they’d get the money for the right equipment or the right stuff they needed (*Iraq for Sale*).

It is also alleged that the pits were illegally used to dispose of plastics and fuels of a kind which, on burning, release a number of highly toxic pollutants. The burn pits in *The Kills* seem closely modelled on these case studies, focusing particularly on the role played by a fictional multinational named HOSCO. *The Massive* describes the reactions of the contractors as they hear that news of what has been happening at the burn pits has got out and there is a chance that legal action will be taken against the men who operated them: ‘We didn’t know what we were burning. No one knew. It wasn’t any one person’s idea’ one man responds (5). Once again, willingness to ‘swallow’ a story and failure to take responsibility for one’s own role is a fatal mistake in *The Kills.* The contractors, convinced already that they are too complicit to extricate themselves from the controversy of what goes on at the burn pits, and implicated further by their acceptance of small bribes from their overseer, feel powerless to resist being drawn into the cover up of the larger scam operated by Paul Geezler, that is, the embezzling of funds for The Massive.

As Chatterjee’s account suggests, the burn pits in Iraq have been used to obliterate mistakes and corruption, but, as we might say, there’s no fire without smoke. The burn pits produce toxins just as the attempt to erase proof of corruption creates new conspiracies and deceit. The smoke and noxious fumes released by the burn pits are serious issues in themselves. There were a number of health complaints from those who operated the pits while they were still open and it has since been alleged that the toxins released during burning have caused everything from chronic skin conditions to terminal cancer in those who have come into contact with the fumes. *The Massive*, opens with a bleak chapter titled ‘Meat’ in which a relentless and affectless catalogue of the deaths of each of the contractors at the site for The Massive is detailed:

Luis Francesco Hernandez was buried without the family in attendance…

(47) Before Luis, by eighteen years, came Clark, who’d had most of his

tongue cut out and his voice box removed (47-48)

Before Clark came Watts, who at forty-seven was struck by the downtown

 bus… Watts had his mind on a bottle of bourbon... (60)

Before Watts came Samuels, whose body was not discovered and whose

death went unrecorded. (80-81)

The list continues in this reverse chronological order, concertinaing together the wasted lives which are scattered over a number of years. One by one these men become dogged by addictions, mental health problems and disease, ending in their premature death, often from cancer. Cases resembling those in House’s novel have come to light since the book’s publication amongst contractors and servicemen alike. In March 2013, the death of Sean Terry attracted media attention. Terry was a thirty-three year old ex US-marine who died of oesophageal cancer; his widow attests that his death ‘was the direct result of his exposure to open-air burn pits in Iraq’ (‘Our plan was to grow old together’). In July 2014 it was reported that a new federal registry of U.S. troops and veterans possibly sickened by toxic smoke in Iraq and Afghanistan had gathered nearly 11,000 eligible names (‘Burn Pit’).

The burn pits demonstrate that in physical terms, when we destroy something it does not so much disappear as become converted into something else. In narrative terms, the long-reaching consequences of the toxins released by the burn pits suggest that when we attempt to destroy evidence and efface blame something inevitably escapes our control. There is no poetic justice in the way that this plays out: just as the smoke from the burn pits works its damage upon the exploited workers who operate the pits, not those who make the profits from them, the consequences of an action are not necessarily visited upon its perpetrators. In fact, the reverse is usually true in *The Kills*: it is those characters who do least harm, and whose innocence breeds unwariness, who are most likely to be harmed by the ‘toxins’ which drift throughout the text. Toxins which, though they have both a cause and an effect, wreak damage on the human body in random and unpredictable ways over time, provide a useful parallel to the way causality functions in the novel. In the next section, I will return to the question of narrative structure and sequence and its bearing on the question of how to grieve for Iraq, a conflict whose origin and end point seem impossible to define.

**Structure and the importance of digital literacy**

Though the first story of the contractors disappears from view, it pervades the other narrative threads in unexpected ways. This is the arrested time of the melancholic, for whom the passing of time serves only to complicate, but not attenuate, a sense of what is lost. House has argued that we

have bad habits when it comes to translating life into any kind of narrative. I think this is almost automatic — and I really want to resist this — the way that fictive structures begin to shape and command history. The sense that events have a beginning, a middle, and an end is pernicious… I find this notion of closure really dangerous and it works against my experience of the world, of history. (Pan Macmillan Interview)

House’s resistance to ‘closure’, which is key to the text’s performance as what I have called an unthreaded threnody, is also encoded in *The Kills* relationship to the digital. Digital media are part of the texture of *The Kills,* but also inspire elements of its structure and represent a theme in themselves. In this section I will consider how networked structures are manifest within *The Kills* but also how the novel suggests the virtues of becoming digitally literate to resist the ‘fictive structures’ which threaten to falsify our view of the world around us.

*The Kills* is clearly a narrative which resists the ‘automatic’ structure which House finds so dangerous and, in so doing, offers a different sense of the ‘history’ of Iraq, or rather, he insists that we recognize its history as an aspect of the ongoing present. Part two, *The Massive*, contains both the earliest and latest points within the story in chronological terms. The ‘Meat’ chapter begins with a photograph of a line of tiny Mexican death heads, an analogue for the list of contractors’ deaths which follow. This first chapter contains the furthest glimpse into the future; Hernandez’s death occurs some twenty years after the rest of the events of the novel, which occur either soon before or after the explosion at the burn pits, orchestrated by Geezler to cover up his larger conspiracy. *The Massive* also revisits the events which lead up to this explosion, going further back in time and offering new perspectives and revelations. As such, the explosion isn’t so much a point of origin for the narrative as a dynamic event whose effects propel the narrative on a new course and splinters it into a number of separate stories.

The centripetal force of the initial explosion upon the narrative is also geographical. The story moves out from Iraq with a host of American and British characters and continues in Turkey, then on to Italy, Malta, Cyprus; characters are introduced from Germany, Norway, France then later Japan and China. Correspondence between these times, places and narrative threads are unpredictable, manifested as unexpected echoes, sometimes between characters who do not meet. This aspect of the text is part of a larger strategy of disorientation which I have noted before, in which House denies his reader a firm grasp of the events he describes in order to activate her to become a reader-detective and to emphasise the complexity of the events on which he comments. I would add to this, however, that the inclusion of these scattered locations allows us to transpose the story of The Massive in Iraq to a more global context, reading this localized story of exploitation as a broader critique of neoliberalism.

Deckard’s term ‘world-system novel’, conceived with *2666* in mind, captures House’s strategy here. Deckard argues that *2666* ‘does not strive to take the whole world into itself, synecdochically enfolding the whole fields of knowledge’ but rather that its success in ‘mapping the incommensurable geographies of global capital’ is achieved by modelling the fragmented condition of the world by creating a “novel in parts”: ‘its structure, moving between classes, geographies, and genres, recreates the fractured social relations of reality in the semi-periphery’ (364). House’s novel, like Bolaño’s, uses fragmented stories to hint at a larger whole, ‘moving between classes, geographies, and genres’, but its digital dimension brings extra possibilities. As a hypertext fiction, the internet is in the novel’s DNA; the structure itself and our means of navigating the novel speak of a world which is densely interconnected in ways which are often chaotic or dissonant. This in turn is echoed in a plot which mimics the ways in which we read hypertext: more lateral than linear, from link to link rather than from top to bottom.

This is not to say that House demonizes the internet as another agent of chaos in the unequal globalized world, or even merely a mirror to it. I have suggested previously that House uses digital forms to encourage us to become a reader-detective; the story itself goes further to point out the ways in which the internet can imbue the individual with greater access to information and a platform for expression. *The Kills* is not only a hypertext fiction in itself but also one which foregrounds the role which digital media plays in informing, and allowing us to shape, our own narrative of our place within events beyond the personal sphere. This is a point which was demonstrated Daniel Bennett offers the example of Salam Pax, the pseudonym for high profile Iraqi blogger Salam Abdulmunem, to suggest the impact of new media on war reporting:

Blogs offered a straightforward publishing outlet for people who wanted to

express their views on events which fundamentally affected their lives. In

turn, journalists began to realise the potential of blogs and other digital

media to complement their coverage of war and terror (1).

Bennett’s example suggests that digital media have the potential to connect people who are otherwise distanced both from each other and from centres of power, mediating the relative powerlessness of their position in relation to the media and those in power.

This is most strikingly highlighted by the narrative thread which follows the wife of a burn pit operative, Cathy Gunnerson, perhaps the closest thing *The Kills* has to a hero. Suspicious of the legitimacy of HOSCO and the burn pits from the outset, she becomes increasingly lonely. She checks her inbox regularly and finding it empty of messages from her husband begins to email partners and family of Rem’s co-workers, later establishing a message board and chatroom.[[3]](#footnote-3) Blocks of text from these exchanges are embedded in the text, including Cathy’s initial fumblings as she struggles to adapt to the new medium. These forums quickly become a place to air grievances against HOSCO, firstly gripes about wages and deprivations in the men’s daily lives, later concerns about the increasingly severe health problems which the men are experiencing. Cathy turns detective, using her chatrooms to acquire more information and using search engines to find out more about the mysterious Geezler and the burn pits. Her Boolean search strings are also incorporated into the text:

“burn pit” +lawsuit +exposure +Iraq, +legislation, +”sleep apnea” +sores +asthma +respiratory problems” (5)

Her investigatory work causes some upset in the chatroom community she has formed and does not, finally, protect her husband against the cancer which we know claims his life, but it allows her to gain a greater clarity than most of the other characters.

Cathy’s increasing digital literacy throughout the novel reflects an outward facing curiosity and a willingness to notice important, even sinister, points of connection which is contrasted against her husband’s passivity and introspection which leave him unable to learn from his own mistakes. She explains to her husband Rem, essentially a principled man, where she feels he went wrong:

You let people take advantage of you. It isn’t that you’re stupid, it’s just

that you don’t see it. They were all running circles round you right from

 the beginning. The simple fact is you just continued to make the same

mistake for the same reasons. You took a job without properly knowing

what it involved, you stumbled into it and couldn’t see your way out, so

rather than drop what you’d gotten yourself into, you just continued (5.4128).

As I have argued, the ‘middlemen’ of *The Kills* can be read as a corollary of the reader, who is urged to always attempt to ‘see’ and not to ‘stumble’ on once we’ve realised our mistakes. This message, borne out in the plot, is aligned with House’s experimentation with form and genre.

Nevertheless, it is also true to say that House is fascinated with what happens when we amplify the virtues which I argue are central here. Amplified to a certain pitch, scepticism towards authority figures and a talent for pattern recognition become the mania of the conspiracy theorist. In his review of the novelJonathan Gibbs writes:

The Kills is a page-turner, but the pages turn back as much as forwards,

as you chase up echoes and repetitions – long-forgotten names and places,

but also wasps, the smell of jasmine, the gesture of pulling a handbag

strap over a shoulder – that might be clues, might be red herrings, might

be the product of my own fevered mind (‘The Kills, by Richard House’).

*The Kills* is a fable about the dangers of failing to ask questions or draw connections, but it is also a novel which toys with our own desire to find meaning where sometimes there is none. This is, I would argue, a pertinent message for the internet age in which our inability to make sense of the torrents of information which are available to us goes hand-in-hand with our susceptibility to dominant narratives which serve the interests of the powerful.

I return, then, to the notion of *The Kills* as a threnody which does not seek to give a totalising vision of its subject so as to console us and help us forget, but which rather rouses us to indignation and instils in us a kind of resistance. Speaking of the ‘media narrative’ of Iraq, House complains ‘There’s an artificiality to all of these stories, because they are always complete, and lessons are always learned. There’s always a point’ and as such ‘there’s a sense of putting something away, of learning from it, and of trying to establish one dominant way of regard’ (Pan Macmillan Interview). A conventional threnody may insist on a ‘point’ to loss and to lessons learned and to usher in the ‘sense of putting something away’. In my concluding section, I will consider the role played by pointless deaths, unexplained disappearances and absence itself in House’s work of resistant mourning.

**Conclusion**

The healing of a traumatic experience is connected with the

transformation of the fragmentary and incomprehensible “mnemic

residues” of the traumatic experience into a coherent narrative [which]

involves two main tasks: the filling of memory gaps that render the

compulsive repetitions of the event incomprehensible, and the

establishment of a temporal distance between the subject’s present and

the past of the traumatic event (Modlinger and Sonntag*,* 42).

*The Kills* is a novel full of ‘compulsive repetitions’ which create a sense of déjà vu as we progress through the text, discomfiting because it suggests that the violence and exploitation we encounter throughout the story is moving in cycles rather than towards resolution.

It is also a novel marked by ‘memory gaps’ which refuse to be filled. Absence is a theme in itself in *The Kills,* or rather a dynamic presence which*,* like a black hole, is not visible in itself but exacts a warping influence on other aspects of the narrative*.* In order to make sense of the story, we must become a particular kind of reader, one who can resist the simple stories and work to assimilate those which are fragmented and full of holes. Like a journalist scanning a document which has been partially redacted, we must attend not only to what is *on* the page, but to what is conspicuous by its absence. This principle is suggested in an exchange between Geezler, the architect of The Massive, and Paul Howell, a man who is about to become his accomplice in the first book, *Sutler*. Geezler relates the findings of a ‘test’ in which subjects ‘are taken to a basketball game and asked to count the passes’ with an incentive to ‘sweeten the activity and make it competitive’ (1.2). A man in a gorilla suit walks onto the court halfway through but ‘nobody in fact gives the gorilla any attention’ and fewer still raise the subject later because ‘if they focus on one task, they won’t see what matters. They won’t see things right’ (1.2). This is almost a direct challenge to the reader to attempt to ‘see things right’, not by focusing on what noisily claims our attention but by taking account of what is on the periphery of our vision.

While *The Kills* pointedly shies away from directly depicting the death and disappearance of Iraqis, the trope of missing people is repeatedly invoked. The story is full of missing people, including Sutler, who is last depicted striding out into a snowy field; Eric, an American student who succumbs to a seizure while climbing; Suzuki, a Japanese woman in flight from her husband and finally Reike, who ends the novel shut in a darkened, sound-proof room with no hope of rescue. In *The Kill*, a silent vigil is held by people who have ‘lost members of their family and who have no idea where they are’ (3956). The carcinogenic burn pits, in which body parts are disposed, hints at the many more lost people, those ‘ungrievable’ deaths, still further beyond the reaches of mourning. As for the Iraqi civilians killed in conflict, the novel does not begin to attempt that we can recover their memory sufficiently to begin to mourn and forget them. The trope of the bodies which are never recovered stand for the ‘memory gaps’ which cannot be filled to allow a ‘working through’ of Iraq. House is, determined to deny us the ability to close the narrative on Iraq and so leave it behind, insisting instead that we let the memory play out with the ‘undiminished vividness of a recent event’ (42).

As I have sought to demonstrate, House’s novel refuses to let us either move beyond loss or to be paralysed by grief: all aspects of the novel are aligned in an over-arching strategy to create a reader who can exercise her own judgement. Early in the novel, a documentary maker named Nathalie reflects:

[W]hen I was a child I was very forgetful, and my parents adored me, they

 spoiled me and replaced everything I lost with something new or better so

 I could become even more careless. I never had anything old. I had the

idea that one person was collecting my things. Not stealing them but

keeping them for me somewhere. This was my excuse. Just imagine all the

things you’ve lost, everything you’ve mislaid, collected in one room, like at

a train station. Safe, all in one place (3.1).

House denies his reader this kind of ‘spoiling’: what is lost, remains lost. By refusing to collect what is lost ‘in one room’, that is, by refusing to create a totalising narrative, he insists that we look on the world with a clear gaze and respond to it accordingly.

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1. http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA592181 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There is one possible exception: Hassan Amer, a British translator working in Iraq, is perhaps to be understood as of Iraqi descent. Amer is killed in a road accident early on in the narrative. It is noted that, due to the nature of his contract in Iraq, his employers will be able to avoid settling any compensation money on his family who are calculated to be insufficiently wealthy to take the company to court. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kathy’s frustration on failing to receive any communication from her husband is strongly reminiscent of Benjamin Percy’s short story ‘Refresh Refresh’, *The Paris Review,* 175 (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)