

# “Safely at Risk:” A Reading of *Lookout Cartridge*



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In June 2006, Joseph McElroy gave a lecture on risk-taking in the context of fiction writing. He focused on the risks writers might take when experimenting with narrative forms. He also pondered whether writers *are* “seriously risking perils,” and explored the implications of the risks they, knowingly and unknowingly, might take (“Risk”). Risk-taking in fiction has evident consequences for readers in “disappointing” their “expectations” both through the “content” and “procedure” of writing (“Risk”). McElroy’s own fiction offers an adventurous approach to content and procedure, which has led readers to address the difficulty of his work—its intricacy, abstraction, nonlinearity, and erudition both seduce and destabilize them.

Indeed, McElroy’s novels encompass a broad range of subject-matters: chaos theory, cybernetics, biology, information sciences, technology, geology, cognitive sciences, astronomy, fractals theory, ecology, relativity, politics, meteorology, and so on. As he grants, “letting heterogeneous nonfiction-like materials into the composition of fiction feels like a risk” (“Risk”). However, not letting these materials in is also a risk: it forces an artificial distinction between areas of life that are not opposed and separated. That is why McElroy’s fiction involves such

materials: at times, the boundaries between the literary and scientific or theoretical data become permeable, as in his 1974 novel *Lookout Cartridge* which McElroy envisioned as “a computer in itself” (*Anything* 244). The computerization of the novel immerses the reader into a complex system of seemingly random connections between narrative lines, character motives, time and space structures, and linguistic arrangements. In fact, the narrative feels like a large web dangerously building around the evolution of Cartwright, a businessman who accidentally recorded terrorist activities when shooting a film with his friend Dagger.

The plot of *Lookout Cartridge* addresses risk-taking in various ways: the disappearance of Cartwright’s film as well as his dangerous quest to understand its disappearance and find it trigger hazardous situations. The story starts with his arrival in New York City, where he meets with Claire, Dagger’s niece, and finds out that, although he was oblivious to it, Dagger showed their film to many people and involved others in it. What’s more, Outer Film, the company Claire works for, made a movie parallel to Cartwright’s shooting which uses some of the scenes of his own film. Meanwhile, the original copy of the film is stolen from his house, his wife Lorna has an affair with a young man from her choir, and his daughter Jenny goes out with Reid, who is involved with Outer Film. It turns out that Reid may be using Jenny to gather information about Cartwright.

In following Cartwright’s adventures, the plot explores different forms of danger, but as McElroy notes, Cartwright “is safely at risk” (Personal Interview). The paradox of being “safely at risk” also involves the reader in “the danger and traveling of the book,” as the content and procedure of the novel do not follow safe paths (Personal Interview). In examining these forms of risk, McElroy invites us to reflect on the nature of reading and writing: in what ways is *Lookout Cartridge* a risky text? How does the text endanger writing and reading techniques? What does it mean to read dangerously, and what is at stake in such techniques?

The sense of danger is palpable from the opening of the novel, which presents a series of falls, first in a helicopter above New York City, then down a subway escalator. The first fall stresses the unsafe helicopter position and its need to land:

It is a silent flash there in the city's grid, and as I happen to look down at that precise point I am thinking of the real estate prices.

From my height the detonation noise is a signal of light only. My cabin responds by at once easing its forward motion so we're barely moving. We hover level with the 900-foot tower at 40 Wall Street, three quarters of a mile to our right. We have a new purpose.

We dip, and the controls alter the tilt of the rotor head's swash-plate ring, which is above my head out of sight in the open air.

[. . .]

Something is wrong, we throb, we rock, we drop, we wait. (3)

The scene depicts Cartwright as an outsider overlooking the city, which stresses his controlling position, also his precariousness, as the helicopter encounters technical difficulties.

Likewise at risk is visual representation, so important in the book ("silent flash," "the detonation noise is a signal of light only," and "I did not hear the flash, I saw it"). Here, the visual elements are disconnected from the sound they are linked to. Thus, perception and sound are not well associated: noise and image, although linked in action, become strangely decomposed. The helicopter scene concludes with elusive statements and questions:

This light without sound is not the beginning.

Was there a beginning?

Sound without illumination maybe. (4)

The fragmentary and distorted means of representation of the first moments of the narration foreshadows the major themes of the novel: how danger affects meaning, knowledge, memory, and power.

Cartwright's second fall, down the escalator, adds visual uncertainty to the odd vision of the opening fall:

Such a field of noise was coming everywhere, from tile, concrete, the chill-blown street above, the tracks below, and even

as if from the change booth where a black girl in blue-smoked cartwheel glasses pushed out tokens without looking up from her paper—that till I was through the turnstile and to the brink of the escalator and put my foot on it hearing behind me the click of steps closing fast yet seeming oddly slow, I didn't guess why the toddling graybeard in a herringbone with the hems drooping who'd preceded me through the turnstile had made for the stairs instead. (4)

Saturated with an excess of information comparable to the noise it describes, the sentence constitutes a paragraph on its own. It juxtaposes phrases with an accumulation of commas: “from the tile, concrete, the chill-blown street above, the tracks below.” Here, we follow a top-to-bottom movement: up (“the tile”), down (“concrete”), up again (“chill-blown street above”), and down (“the tracks below”). It is as if the narrative does not know where to look. This disorientation sets up Cartwright's uneasy and paranoid quest and initiates a parallel quest of the reader about to venture into this “non-safe fiction” (“Risk”).

Visual elements stressed in the opening falls expand on the connotations of the title of the novel. Cartwright notes, “I am a lookout, I am a lookout between two forces” (306). His detective activities and the terrorist hunt for him highlight that characters (and readers) are on the watch and are also being watched. Cartwright's outsider perspective gives him the ability to create nuclear links between people and events, but thus exposes him to danger. The movement “out” embodies Cartwright's need to escape the terrorist network. In addition, the outer movement inscribed in “lookout,” reverberates in the recurring movements of the novel: Cartwright always seems to be on the move, going from one site to the next, his burden, his power.

His quest follows nuclei of people who get involved in the disappearance of the film: Gene, Jack, and Paul Flint are implicated in the terrorist activities caught on tape. What's more, the terrorists hunt Cartwright down, even after he destroys his film when he finds it in Dagger's apartment. Eventually, Cartwright is captured by the terrorists, but Jack Flint, who wants to stop his family's involvement with terrorist acts, has set up a camera to record the activities in the warehouse where

the terrorists are holding Cartwright. The terrorists' power is further dissipated when, on the novel's last page, Cartwright throws a TV set out of an apartment window onto Len Incremona, the most violent terrorist member.

Cartwright's adventures involve fast paced journeys between New York City, London, Glasgow, and the Hebrides. Cartwright also shot scenes in Corsica, Stonehenge, the London Underground, the Marvellous country house, and other places. In each of these locations, further movements within the Stones of Callanish, Mount Clisham, apartments, lofts, and warehouses punctuate the narrative and include a series of trips via planes, cabs, cars, and trains. These travels are even more complicated if we take into account the temporal structure coexisting with them.

Past friends and family scenes and the shooting of the film interrupt Cartwright's detective quest. Indeed, Cartwright moves mentally between places, ideas, memories, associations, and anticipated events, while omitting transitions and clues about such shifts in time and space. For instance, at the beginning of the book, Cartwright is walking in New York City and thinks of his daughter Jenny while shopping. Suddenly, the narrative shifts from Manhattan to Cartwright's apartment in London: Lorna is packing for him, and Jenny asks for "a memory." We then read, "if I could only get away to my plane and to New York Jenny would be safer in London," and with no transition: "I paid Goody's by check" (46). Here, the narrative follows Cartwright's consciousness and bypasses chronology, so that it is difficult to integrate the outline of his comings and goings. As McElroy explains, "in *Lookout Cartridge*, I've begun by apparently putting obstacles in the way of the reader" (*Conjunctions* 147). The reader's lack of grasp on spatial and time shifts appears to be an obstacle: much like the protagonist, the reader feels threatened by the amount of information overflowing in the novel. Consequently, the reader wanders circularly through bits of information, hoping that they will eventually make sense. McElroy clarifies that in the novel "a mass of material will generate a time, a plot—the film (whose loss the book is about) and the sources of the film—I say 'plot' not only as tale of events and thoughts which are deeper 'events,' but as conspiracy. So there is a lot coming at the reader" (Personal Interview). This implies that the reader progressively reintegrates a general idea of

the plot, but reintegration does not come without a sense of failure: the more we go through the overload of information, the less things seem to make sense.

McElroy thinks that this sense of loss in the mass of information of the novel “is dangerous:” “you are threatened with forgetting where you were” (*Conjunctions* 148). This threat comes from the uncomfortable sensation that information in the novel is both extremely disordered and highly organized: in *Lookout Cartridge*, “the coherence seems everywhere to be almost fanatic yet describes a world which is chaotic” (McElroy *Conjunctions* 152). This is obviously a risk, as the narrative may not make sense or may lose the reader’s attention. In fact, most readers point out this difficulty: a narrative “laminated into a dense temporal structure” (Johnston 96) and “built out of an accumulation of ‘clumps of data’” (Hantke 90) allow for interruption; it feels like a “chewed out” “mental locus” (Saltzman 98). These reactions to the novel derive from McElroy’s interest in “disintegration, integration, [. . .] that’s been the impulse right from the start” (*Conjunctions* 152). The disintegration and integration of an overwhelming amount of literary and non-literary materials allow for interruptions that might lose the reader in the seeming incompleteness of the narrative.

These breaks allow a gathering momentum that, in weaving impressions and themes, becomes another kind of plot. This plot might more accurately render the intricacies of Cartwright’s situation: the “narrative pattern” that goes away “from the main story and then wonderfully and unexpectedly returns to it” is a risk that can “create a long lever capable of lifting great weights” (Personal Correspondence). Hence, in taking the risk to frustrate the reader, McElroy also creates a reading environment where linguistic and narrative actions mold our experience of the novel. The movements of the text thus materialize both the characters’ activities and the reading flow.

These movements rely not only on the adventurous narrative structure, but also on McElroy’s sentence construction, which is full of “rapid interruptions and saturation” (Thomas Leclair 144):

The phone was ringing on the receptionist’s desk. I was receiving signals and the Cartwright-DiGorro enterprise looked like passing into receivership. Whole printed circuits sailed softly

through the new soft-warped slots of my head. Micro-circs.  
Faster than a speeding bullet, slower than an old movie. (220)

The paragraph above opens on a commonplace image—a phone is ringing— but there is a shift to judiciary or financial lingo with the word “receivership,” and then to a poetic and abstract vision of Cartwright’s mental activity. In using the prefix “micro” and a diminutive, the single word sentence, “micro-circs,” interestingly doubles the creative essence of compound nouns. The following sentence prolongs the elusiveness of the scene: “Faster than a speeding bullet” cannot be “slower than an old movie.” The sentence might refer to the fact that a film shows twenty-four images in one second, but such a reference is implicit. In this paragraph, the shifts in visions and themes, as well as the literal juxtaposition of the words in the compound noun, stress the associative mode of reading the novel incites.

McElroy’s disruption of traditional punctuation throughout the novel also highlights this mode of reading: there are no inverted commas in the text, which adds to the novel’s density and improbabilities, as the following discussion between Cartwright and Monty Graff, his expeditor, reveals:

I said I thought I might sell the diary as a scenario for a feature film. He said Very funny, and said by the way I didn’t expect him to believe we’d only had one small rush and the rest hadn’t been processed. For why that and nothing else?

It’s certainly implausible, I said.

I think your film isn’t destroyed, he said.

I would like to think that, I said. (102)

Here, the lack of differentiation between speech and narration forces one to look for clues, to pause, and to go back.

The chapter structure of the novel also adds to this difficulty. Into the seventeen numbered chapters are inserted eight that are named: “Yellow Filter Insert,” “Slot Insert,” “Dagger-Type Cassette,” “Unplaced Room,” “Love Space,” “Corsican Montage,” “Lookout,” “Hinge,” and “Cartridge.” Visually, the inserts do not appear on a separate page: they physically enter the chapters, the typography, the film method. Footage,

montage, and other sections of the film also interrupt the narration of the numbered layers of the narrative.

The rendition of the film in the novel further disrupts our reading habits. The linear dissolves, as films rely on cuts, editions, and transformations. This manipulation of time in the filmic realm emerges in the novel's narrative. In fact, McElroy explains: "clearly, even in its absence the film impregnates the narrative. If you feel that it even gets into the novel's way of telling what happens, you are probably right" ("One Reader to Another" i). Indeed, the book refers to visual representations in its obsession with the shooting of Cartwright's film and in its style. This implies that, at times, the narrative appears as seen by a camera, with all the traces of fragmentation and decomposition of the filmic and photographic medium.

Witness here the author's interest in "microscopes and telescopes," which rely on abstraction and fragmentation, both features of the novel's rupturing of information ("Philosophy and Writing"). The microscope allows us to focus on two bodies: first, the one represented in the microscopic vision, which is abstracted from the corporeal bodies that we interact with every day, and second, the material body that the microscopic view delineates. This double position evokes the double positionings of *Lookout Cartridge*, as the novel also compels a dual experience of abstract and material. The relationships between microstructure and macrostructure in the novel take the shape of zooming effects; changes in scales and angles of vision, as in the moves of the camera lens; shifts between frames that fracture the narrative voice; and the actual processing of the film's cartridge. These micro and macro visions often seem opposed, but they are strangely connected: in the terrorist network Cartwright observes, everyone is linked, even if he first thinks events and people are isolated. This connectivity highlights the paranoid qualities of *Lookout Cartridge*: if everything is correlated and presented in an un-hierarchical manner, then everything must be important.

Toward the end of the novel, Cartwright stresses this connection principle. He notes his position when exiting a house: "I was half in, half out" (401). At that moment, his situation is symbolic of his constant placement in and out of places, networks, and situations. He is involved in the terrorists' plans because of his film, but does

not know them; he lives in London, but is American; and so forth. McElroy indicates:

we have two friends, two cities, two countries, a family in and out of focus, and this man, Cartwright, the presence and voice of the book (not the same thing), aware of his power as power he's caught in or a presence he could have that would be clear to him as circumstantial evidence unwitnessed, except in his body and thinking. And in some way, he is safely at risk, and my proposition in the book—which gives the reader a handle to cope with the danger and traveling of the book—is that he is the powerful one in this world because he alone grasps how entrapped he is by it. So there's a paradox. (Personal Interview)

Cartwright's "between-ness" throughout the novel stresses this paradox. He notes: "Between Ruby and Tris on Ruby's bed, I am also between them and their father" (51); "I found myself swelling to fill the space between me and two forces, yet contradicting too as to make some space between me and the rest" (308); "But I was rehearsing; and, even irredeemably between, I knew my power lay not in rehearsing" (358); etc. These in-between positions highlight that power relies on people's relations. Being connected to the right people makes characters more powerful in the book. The terrorist Nash says of Cartwright that "he's got connections, connections" (483). As a matter of fact, the terrorist network insists on connectivity, networking, and hierarchy: Paul is superior to the other terrorists, such as Gene, Nash, Mike or Krish. The last sentence of the novel, "everyone was looking up at me and Sub, and I was not sure what I had seen but I knew what we had done," alludes to Cartwright's position in this network (531). Cartwright is at the center; everything is linked to him directly and indirectly.

This position is central in McElroy's writing. As he explains, "inside and outside have always troubled my coherence though they are reciprocal and dynamic" ("Philosophy and Writing"). These "reciprocal and dynamic" attributes constantly put the reader between two scenes, two places, and two film sequences so that "between the lines—between the *scenes*—you may wish to go with a sense of being not quite in sync with the straight facts" ("From One Reader to

Another” i). This out-of-sync feeling is reinforced when the reader is caught between a sense of immersion in the story and metafictional preoccupations. We read, for example, “but you who read this have me even though here I admit there are things I have heard that I didn’t have in my head exactly. Do not withdraw your hand from the glove port, you haven’t yet found what you imagine you’re not looking for” (66). Such addresses to the reader also appear in the didactic indications, “if no, keep looping; if yes, proceed,” repeated throughout the book. This phrase evokes Choose-Your-Own-Adventure-Books, where the reader participates in the evolution of the plot by making choices. This mode of writing invites readers’ participation, so that the risk of alienating them with fragmentary information also enables the production of the text, which in *Lookout Cartridge’s* case, remains a “a pre-communicative utterance,” a cartridge in need to be “processed” by readers (Paulson 99–100). In that sense, much like Cartwright and the networks he explores, the reader, as an element exterior to the book, is essential to it.

Because of these participatory qualities and of the detective scheme of the novel, the reader, like Cartwright, takes up fragmentary evidences: chunks of Cartwright’s diary, recollections, objects, phone calls, etc. The work of the detective and the reader is to restore order and truth when establishing correspondences between people’s actions and their hidden motivations. Ideally, at the end of the novel, the detective and the reader eventually know as much as the author when retrospectively reintegrating the whole story at the end. McElroy disrupts such conventional detective devices: in his work, options are never narrowed to one, as in a traditional detective novel. Interestingly, the coordinating activity of the detective mode reveals that what is at stake is not resolution.

Obviously, the absence of resolution is a risk because the reader may end up frustrated or lost. However, the destabilizing ending enacts one of the most important points of the novel: “knowing is not knowing.” McElroy explains that one of his first impulses was to “write a story about a sense of [. . .] being caught between what is known too well and what is known too little. About being caught between wanting to be free, independent, and wanting to be secure, protective” (*Anything* 241). In the plot itself, Cartwright thought that he knew his

life and controlled it, but he is suddenly inserted in a system that he does not understand: his friend Dagger is disloyal, his daughter is going out with a terrorist, and his wife is flirting with another man. As stated in the novel, “you will not have both power and the understanding of it” (504).

Deprived of a sense of hierarchy of events, the question of power and connectivity takes on another meaning. For McElroy, “to think is to disarrange something,” which illuminates this question (“Philosophy and Writing”). As it turns out, the disarranging of events and people strangely highlights new combinations of data. As McElroy notes, “trust some sense you have in the *telling* being the story too” (“One Reader to Another” ii). Hence, like Cartwright, the reader progressively realizes that the solution to the riddles of the novel might not be in the amount of information and its meaning as much as in the ways in which each piece of information is framed, presented, acquired, repeated, and modified. As Steven Weisenburger suggests, “the reader is also inserted into the survival-experience and discovers that what matters is not a final why, but how one might manipulate the journey” (287). Therefore, through a reflection on the constructed-ness of information, *Lookout Cartridge* invites us to re-think linguistic and narrative conventions.

Consequently, the destabilizing overload of data, as well as narrative and stylistic deformations that seem, at first, to be obstacles, lead us toward a mode of reading that emulates a decoding of data, a processing of the novel’s cartridge. The reader’s processing of information is attuned to the computer-like system progressively penetrating the narrative structure. Entering the novel, one feels that the fiction has been filtered through Cartwright’s probing consciousness. Nevertheless, as the text becomes more filmic and computerized—the narrative obsessively refers to the “8 millimeter cartridge,” for example—the narrative feels more like a cartridge left to the reader.

Cartwright’s consideration of himself as a cartridge inserted in different organizations clarifies this process: at first, he explains, “Dagger DiGorro knows all about it. I just take pictures. I don’t develop them” (52). The lack of processing of the photos can be interpreted as a lack of involvement in situations, which makes it impossible for Cartwright to understand them and eventually escape them. The change in his involvement makes up the story of *Lookout Cartridge*. Cartwright

explains later, “I am like a cartridge filling its place” (267) and “I was a cartridge myself” (21). He also underlines the double meaning of cartridge in French: “cartouche means fine work and cartridge” (241). *Lookout Cartridge* embraces these different qualities, something written—the book we are reading—and something taped by a camera. That is why Frederick Karl underlines that there is a different language (as in a computer), a different sense of space and time (banked, cartridged, enclosed, housed, and inserted), and a serial-like source of materials which make up the narrative (383).

These linguistic and narrative differences evoke scientific experiments that put researchers “at risk of being infected by what [they] diagnose” (“Risk”). While the linguistic journey does not physically contaminate readers, the “energy” that comes from the risks of this unsafe fiction affects them. Such energy comes from McElroy’s wish not to “risk missing the real.” This paradox leads him to create fictions that are “rougher, less finished almost, with gaps, interruptions in [them] across which energy jumps like the various positions of vibrations” (“Risk”). The “unattached” and “raw” materials “assembled in separated pieces” allow for patterns and movements that physically lead our reading. This stress on the physicality of reading comes from McElroy’s conception “of thought physically, as if it were a bodily, not quite a metaphorical process” (“Risk”). Therefore, his treatment of such energy makes the risks of writing more tangible.

Interestingly, the computer trope, which calls for the dangerous integration of abstract and non-literary materials and forms, also leads to a more palpable mode of reading, one that stresses its embodied qualities. Thus, McElroy looks for compositions that do “not deny the impersonal clarities of modern systems,” while using these systems to make reading more material (“Neural Neighborhoods” 205). The at times obscure narrative patterns and contents point not only to the risk of the failure of meaning, but also to the productive phenomenon that this risk enables. The technological qualities of the cartridge-like novel might risk alienating the reader, but their immersion of the reader in a different mode of production emphasizes the tangible strains of writing and reading.

McElroy’s description of his writing stresses the physical qualities of language. In fact, whole sections want to fly apart, but are held

together” “alive,” always palpable (*Conjunctions* 152-3). Likewise, his previously mentioned interest in “narrative pattern” that may go away “from the main story and then wonderfully and unexpectedly return to it” to “create a long lever capable of lifting great weights,” suggests that for him language is not strictly a discursive formation but an embodied method we are invited to adopt, with the risk of interruptions and unlinear ruptures drawing the reader to participate in the creation of meaning. We might even call this a mutual constitution of reader and text.

This mutual constitution is central to the notion of risk, as when at risk, one is fully immersed in the present and must make choices in accordance with rapid analyses of dangerous situations. The participatory mode of reading of *Lookout Cartridge* mirrors such intense activities. Therefore, the parts of the novel that make us uneasy also provoke an instinctive reaction close to the ones experienced at hazardous moments. That is why the fact that *Lookout Cartridge* does not look and feel like a traditional story makes it more intensely present and frank. The composition of the novel stresses the dual experience of abstract and material, as the non-literary interruptions of the plot and the computerized mode of reading lead us to envision narrative risk-taking as a way to achieve a more palpable narrative production.

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