

No Way Out by Susanna Davies-Crook

Trapped within the rectangular picture plane, lies Deemona, a world bloomed from a mind, grown from an intelligence. In this constellation of screens, Chino Moya's Russian Doll of meta fictions peels away the meaning of what it is to be human, the layers of skin and sinew until there is nothing of corporeal meaning left, only the empty markers of habit. It is a grim warning set in a clean stark "beauty" that perhaps what will survive of us is in fact not Love¹, and not human at all.



The world of Deemona as Moya has imagined it from his Olympian perch as meta creator, imagines a future in which an artificially intelligent post-human entity embarks on a thought problem, for fun. They consider, through reviewing the archive of humanity - what is left - and seek to generate a human civilisation without problems. This artificial demi-God does away with the suffering, misery, and violence attached to the corporeal sphere. Almost in a spiritual sense, flesh is shed to invite in the divine, free from the horror of incarnation. The Cathars of 12th Century Southern France believed "we are all divine sparks, even angels imprisoned in human flesh" and - in opposition to the Catholic church - believed hell was here and they were in it². In most religions and philosophies, Tantra excepted, the body is at best an impediment to God and at worst the embodiment of evil.

As Moya explains, his demiurge brainchild sculpts a collective society where everything works, nothing is dirty or broken, and everyone has reason. There is also a lateral and mycelial or networked consciousness, and therefore a removal of hierarchy or singular identity - only the collective, "working like an orchestra, everyone has certain movements and sounds" Moya explains. They contribute to this perfect choreography of optimisation and functionality, trying to

mimic the ways of producing that humans had. They see the Fordist regime as a pinnacle and interpret that humans must have enjoyed and required industrialised labour to exist. In Moya's meta-narrative and world-logic, the awkward processes of late capitalism that, as with religion seek to deny, destroy, bypass or eviscerate the human body for the purpose of ascension or productivity, are abstracted and performed by these bodies without organs in a Sisyphean CGI loop.

The cityscapes and tower blocks of Deemona in their brutal urban formalism, a grey and monotonous architecture, birthed Moya's obsession with escape. The lands of horror and fantasy drew grim-close and whispered-warped nothings of speculative imaginaries. In Deemona, rather than the psychedelic seventies swirls of Stanislav Lem's Star Diaries or Giger's sexy robots, or even the "used sci-fi" of Neuromancer and Blade Runner Moya returns to his haunted obsession with the built world clarified and made chillingly mechanical.

¹ Time has transfigured them into

Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.

Philip Larkin, *An Arundel Tomb*, The Whitsun Weddings, 1964

² "Mephistopheles: Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.

Think'st thou that I, who saw the face of God
And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
In being deprived of everlasting bliss?"

Christopher Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus*, 1604

Deemona's AI God twisting code and extrapolating from the vast data sets it can still access has assumed, pieced together from the information it has gathered for itself in the last gasps of the human race, that "to fully exist humans need to be active and busy" according to Moya, "they need to work". Inspired by Olga Ravn's novel *Employees* in which both humans and androids complain about the system of work, consider what it is to live with meaning, and how to function within the logic of productivity, Moya is intrigued by this "catalogue of grievances". His sci-fi is a precarious system in which failure is embedded, despite the drive for perfection. The gestures of the "humans" are empty, hollow, and unnecessary - it is an act. They are engaged in stylised ritualistic action with limited and abstracted objects. The signifiers of divination (like tarot) are present but have no meaning because what universe is there to listen to in Deemona, and who is there to hear it?

These figures replicate motion, activity and spiritual connection in a lobotomised³ uncanny cycle. The films in the Deemona series are made via the more traditional filmmaking apparatus with full film art, costume, DOP departments of around 30 people, and full casting, worked on with Ridley Scott's production company Black Dog. The actors here, as opposed to the new fully AI-made film works in the adjacent room, are flesh and blood, which adds a layer into this circle in a circle. Moya as world-builder and director is reducing these actor bodies to mimicry, and draining them of blood, rendering them devoid. There is an interesting poise to these bodies acting, and then acting again, layering and layering until we don't know where it all began.



The actors-cum-avatars are placed within generated environments made by 3D modelling which Moya describes as "like painting" because the environments are static and heavily controlled. The locations Moya uses are plucked from non-places, as identified by Mark Auge and influenced from Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* and Beatriz Colomina's concept of *Domesticity at War*. Composites of classical architecture and devotional or sacred structures are layered and abstracted from meaning. The rituals are pointless, dreamt up by a synthetic entity who wants to play with the idea of what humans were up to when they did indeed live and work on the planet. Work becomes abstract. The avatars are essentially "looking busy".

³ If these hollow characters could be lobotomised

In this (now) information era we are supposedly transcending the object, in favour of code and yet still we remain bound to the veins of cable under the sea and the internal organs of data plants plundering the body-world of Gaia that we are in delicate and compromised balance with. Here, the demiurge forgets this or chooses not to see the polluted rivers and fossil fuel wars that came later, it instead creates a deathly perfection distilling memory, ritual and process that replace the value of object economies. This is countered with Moya's triptych of portentous AI terror, of what may come to pass.

Interpreting the digital remnants and picking through the tech-detritus of humanity, the demigod Moya has imagined replicates the same flaws and patterns we are engaged in: bodily-compromised humans, seeking escape. Though as Death does not reach these architectures of sterile devotion, what does escape look like for these citizens of Deemona? Decay, long the remit of religion, gothic arcs, memento mori still lives, and eternal life fictions, remains a preoccupation and something to be avoided in the "idyllic" world of this non-place. The strange loop is particularly perturbing, and the reason it sticks in the throat is precisely because there is no Death, no salvation from work and suffering and sin, no returning to the Earth or the Lord or the Ancestors. In Deemona the peace and calm of the post-work, post-body complex is a pure terror.

This binary of the body and death is played out in Moya's parallel AI generated voice-over film *Three Fluctuations*. In one of these fictionalised (and yet close to home) narrated documentaries we witness the evisceration of flesh via crisis and collapse, we see degradation and body horror, we see how the flesh has been bastardised and broken by the daily future we work to coauthor.

Our now-world is presently defined by easy genocide and open gestures of fascism on presidential perches, the worst repeating itself. Narrative has allowed catharsis. Innocent: we begin, Experience: we journey, we learn, we peak, we close, we integrate, we end, we move on (perhaps we begin again having learned). This is the arc of story, life and death (and rebirth). Deemona's loops deny us this and as such it is an open wound, a trauma masked as a pleasantry.



Death and the industrial complex play out in the necropolitics of the individual in, and of, the mass within our sick, sick body politic. In this - our - “real” world brologarchs exert control over bodies and babies, whilst seeking to extend their own overreach. As they seek to temper bodily autonomy, they simultaneously seek to stay alive at *all* costs. This is not speculative, as the plots of our lives edge closer to Matt Damon’s

Elysium where the rich get richer in a pay-to-live economy and the poor burn and die. This strange loop of death drive, denial, the repressed, and the desire to deny inevitable expiration is our sickness. The symptom is capital and production and reaching the end of life, as many do, and wish they’d worked less, loved more.

I ask about hope. There seems to be no room for it here in this “collapse sci-fi”. We are not in Le Guin’s queer forests nor does Moya allow us to entertain her possibility, “We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words”. Here, the bodies of humanity have failed them and long since perished, the information that remains points to a grim reality of how we even lived. Moya notes that some of the most stark and lauded speculative fictions exist to act as a warning of the path we must not take. This echoes now more loudly than ever. As with Orwell’s boot stamping on a human face forever, so Moya’s figures are trapped behind the scentless, tasteless, feelingless screens in their sterile loops forever, a reminder of where humanity was, is, and might lead if we do not steer our bodies, our selves and our hope.

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