"The old world of words gives way to the world of code": Literature and the Alt-Right in Hari Kunzru's Red Pill

Claire Chambers

Introduction

In 2025, Hari Kunzru published an essay entitled "Surviving the Manosphere" for the *New York Times*, using Netflix UK's wildly popular television show *Adolescence* (Barantini 2025) as an entry point for vivid discussion of contemporary masculinity. In the essay, Kunzru avers that a gruesome commingling of cryptocurrency, fitness, right-wing populism, and misogyny creates the present culture of desperate late-capitalist struggle. Our future seems set to be a "loveless wilderness of 'zero trust' interactions" where young men must adopt a "grindset" to survive and thrive. Success is measured by ruthless neoliberalism in the form of rug-pulls, scams, pick-up artists, and "one simple trick" hustles. In this bleak system, losers are discarded as "sub-5" betas (if male) or haggard ex-OnlyFans performers (for women) (2025, n.p). The internet thus cultivates predatory masculinity, converting humanity—adolescent or otherwise—into a marketplace that rewards competitiveness and exploitation at the expense of relationality.

Five years earlier, Kunzru's sixth novel Red Pill (2020) had centred on one man's psychotic break during the run-up to Donald Trump's election victory in 2016. This text, then, is an example of what Nicholas Gaskill categorizes as "Trump panic fiction," a novel portraying "how America lost its mind" (Gaskill 2024, Andersen 2017, titles). The category has surely regained urgent topical relevance in 2026, as the world wrestles with Trump's whirlwind of tariffs, illegal military interventions, rejection of international law, and threats of further belligerence. Over the course of scrutinizing an individual's mental crisis, the novel also explores collective issues, such as the intersections of surveillance, creeping authoritarianism or even fascism, the refugee crisis, xenophobia, racism, the manosphere, and the alt-right. Responding to Kunzru's novel, my article asks: what kind of political or ethical force, if any, can literature (and, to a lesser extent, other arts and modes of resistance) still exert in contemporary culture? Ours is an age that has moved far away from readers' solitary contemplation of well-written texts. Instead, today's so-called "attention economy" (Goldhaber 1997; Wu, 2017; Williams 2018) privileges content over argument, immediacy over sustained writing or reading, shouty but fleeting messages over deep focus, and the pursuit of shares and likes above all.

The predominant setting for *Red Pill* is a writer's retreat in Germany. Our unnamed narrator–protagonist has found some respite from his young family. He usually occupies a loving but cramped New York City apartment with his wife Rei and their pre-school daughter Nina. This is hard for the narrator, a dilettante and an occasional author because, unlike his human rights lawyer wife, he has no workplace to escape to. Now spending three uninterrupted months at the fictional Deuter Center for Social and Cultural Research in Wannsee, in outer Berlin, the narrator faces Rei's discontent at parenting on her own while juggling her demanding job as an attorney back in New York. This makes it all the more important that the book the narrator hopes to write during his German retreat will be a success. Yet when freed from disturbances, he

confronts his own creative paralysis amid multiple self-imposed distractions as he tries to write a monograph about "the lyric I" (Kunzru 2020, 15)[1] — or, the self, as manufactured, mediated, and mobilized by lyric poetry.

Surveillance and the World of Code

In Wannsee the narrator struggles with the late Herr Deuter's communal, collaborative ethos. The centre may even have misinterpreted this openness as their right to surveil residents without these guests' knowledge or consent. On first arrival, the narrator has to submit his gaze to an "iris scanner" operated by a technician wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the image of a "sleepy-eyed cartoon frog" (27). Resenting the centre's emphasis on communal activities, shared meals, and open plan office working, our protagonist later becomes offended that his productivity is being tracked. However, it transpires that this computer-generated scrutiny of his "hours spent, documents created, sites visited, and so on" was agreed on the consent form he had signed, unread, when taking up his residency grant (59). The narrator is indignant about this not due to any salacious secrets that may be uncovered, but because his mere banality will be laid bare. "What I wanted to hide," thinks he, "was my ordinariness, the fact that I was nothing special, not very bad or very good, not inventive or daring" (96-97). His exponentially scrolling solipsism means "the tracks on which my mind ran had been rutted over centuries by the wheels of my forebears" (97). What an author needs, of course, is not this hackneyed way of thinking but something original to put out in the world. The narrator used to be a "difficult writer, given to obscurity and tortuous sentences," who could nonetheless periodically convey ideas "in some positive manner onto the page" (12). Over time, however, he has morphed into a terminally online lurker who becomes paralysed whenever the "little wheel" symbolizing internet disconnection starts to spin on his screen (161). His chronic digital distraction collapses time and attention, rendering him incapable of the slow, bookish contemplation he needs for his book and, consequently, his family life to flourish.

In *Lost Focus*, Johann Hari modernizes Marshall McLuhan (1966) to argue that the message put out by the medium of Twitter (now X) is that "the world should be interpreted and confidently understood very quickly" (Hari 2023, 86). By contrast,

> the medium of the book tells us several things. Firstly, life is complex, and if you want to understand it, you have to set aside a fair bit of time to think deeply about it. You need to slow down. Secondly, there is a value in leaving behind your other concerns and narrowing down your attention to one thing, sentence after sentence, page after page. Thirdly, it is worth thinking deeply about how other people live and how their minds work. They have complex inner lives just like you. (Hari 2023, 88)

The narrator has lost just these skills of slow, complex thinking, focused attention, and empathetic imagining. He regularly bewails his inability to concentrate, finding anything more than an episode of his guilty-pleasure cop show *Blue Lives* too taxing. And as I will show *Blue Lives* is a cold television series replete with almost pornographic violence and no moral compass, chipping away at its viewers' capacity for empathy.

In *The Burnout Society* the German-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han writes that contemporary humanity has transformed from Michel Foucault's disciplinary society of panopticons, hospitals, prisons, and asylums into an "achievement society" (2015, 8–10). This atomized, inward-looking civilization is preoccupied, according to Han, with self-disciplining and the vapid cheerleading of self-help culture and social media. Global capitalism's acceleration of working practices, the necessity of multitasking and attendant hyperactivity, and a loss of deep concentration are causing new social afflictions. Whereas in the disciplinary society citizens contended with infections, Han states that

our contemporary malaise is depression, burnout, and metaphorical "infarction."[2] An emptily busy populace is starved of spiritual and intellectual oxygen, so that no cells containing "the emphasis and energy of rage" can be produced (2015, 23). In characteristically spare, gnomic prose, Han distinguishes between productive rage and unproductive anger (the latter being what we might today call clickbait-driven outrage): "[W]e are […] losing the capacity for rage […]. The future shortens into a protracted present […]. It lacks all negativity, which would permit one to look at the Other" (2015, 22). Han paradoxically extols "negativity" along with rage as dynamic means of coming to terms with, and gazing honestly at, difference and otherness. Anger/outrage, by contrast, is superficial, inward-looking and ineffectual—and it is this emotion that Han sees as defining the present era. In the novel's opening chapter, the narrator encapsulates such notions when he thinks: "If I wanted a fight, all I had to do was look at my phone" (12). The triviality and short attention span of social media-generated antagonism is why this protagonist tries to steer clear of online conflicts and instead keep his focus on reading and writing. Yet it is when the digital sphere diverts him too much from his already "distracted essays" (12) that his sense of self starts collapsing and he experiences, in Han's terms, infarction and burnout.

As the narrator's mind unravels, he comes to believe that there are even hidden cameras in fellows' rooms filming their most private of activities in order to maximize their self-optimization. This vision of the Deuter Center stands in parallel to the panoptic gaze of what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) has termed "surveillance capitalism" in our digital age. The narrator thinks the same incel-like technician he encountered earlier is being paid to watch clandestine video footage. This includes shots of one of the residents, Edgar—of whom, more will be said shortly—wandering about his room in an unattractive state of middle-aged undress. However, the narrator is by this point in the novel already in the throes of depression and paranoid psychosis, so it is almost impossible for the reader to divine the extent of this suspicion's merit. The concept of the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham's (1995/1791) and

Foucault's (1979/1975) architectural and disciplinary model of social control, is hinted at in *Red Pill*. Kunzru gestures towards our digital devices as the modern-day panopticon, with online activity being monitored, collected, and commodified. Given the novel's Berlin setting, the notion of constant surveillance draws eerie parallels with the oppressive regime of East Germany, where the Stasi's watchful eye cast a long shadow over citizens' lives. This authoritarianism goes further back, its tentacles reaching into the rise of fascism,[3] and even into the very different late-Enlightenment and post-Revolutionary thought of Heinrich von Kleist and Joseph de Maistre.

The World of Words

At one communal dinner our narrator reluctantly attends, the above-mentioned guest, neurophilosopher Edgar, berates the poetry critic as follows:

> Even if one accepts the continued cultural importance of poetry, as opposed to some mass medium, say television or social media, even radio, any of which would surely be more powerful and effective—if only in terms of reach, numbers participating—even then one has to ask about the mechanism by which poetry would do anything as powerful as, how did you put it, "reformatting contemporary selfhood'? (43–44)

Edgar is a gadfly who believes in science, majoritarianism, and open research. As obnoxious as he is, buried in his bombast is a reasonable point about literature's limited circulation and impact. It is a dig the narrator finds hard to counter. Edgar himself is a populist author, writing books with such inflammatory titles as *Wrongthink: The Authoritarian Left and the New Religion of Social Justice* (270). The tomes' back blurbs are culled from conservative newspapers and praise Edgar's free speech credentials. Unsurprisingly, then, Edgar's attack on poetry's supposed elitism leaves our mentally fragile protagonist floundering, unable to defend the lyric poems he wants to research.

Later, the narrator will meet one of the "mass medium" content producers Edgar refers to here. Gary Bridgeman, known to his friends for mysterious reasons as Anton, is a slick alt-right agitator. This charismatic creator and director uses his popular TV show *Blue Lives* (to which the narrator, too, has become addicted) to normalize nihilistic violence and contentious politics. Indeed, *Blue Lives* is a furtive, diverting hate-watch the narrator tries to conceal from the Deuterian panopticon. Through the programme's title Kunzru evokes the reactionary Blue Lives Matter movement (Solomon & Martin 2019; Shaw 2023, 181), as well as the blue light emitted by our phones and other electronic devices. While binge-watching the cop show as he procrastinates, the narrator also spends stretches of time eating at what he calls the "blue light Chinese" (61). The character gives the restaurant this name because the eatery, run by immigrants, is "rendered alien—almost submarine—by blue lighting" (57). Kunzru links the blue glow that bathes this migrant-run establishment and our screens to a cultural logic that valorizes hyper-individualism and enables the self-interested cruelty dramatized on screen by *Blue Lives*.

Keeping with the chromatic kaleidoscope, I should zoom out to the broader web of texts and note that Kunzru's fiction forms an informal triptych—*White Tears* (2017), his excavation of music and racist terror; *Red Pill* (2020); and *Blue Ruin* (2024), a meditation on art, borders, and contagion (for this last novel in the trilogy, see Chambers 2026, forthcoming). Together, these books' tricolour palette gestures towards the national flags of the US and UK, suggesting a splintering rather than unity. Paul Gilroy's arresting provocation in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987) shadows this cluster of novels. Kunzru's constructed worlds, too, register the discord woven through those familiar banners, revealing the racial, sexual, and class tensions that lurk beneath their unified surfaces. I read the blue glow emitted by our devices as part of a cultural circuitry that helps produce 'red-pilled' attitudes. These, in turn, facilitate white-supremacist rhetoric—a recursive process that upends the ordering of Kunzru's trilogy.

Kunzru's novel suggests literature's power lies not in mass appeal but in the steady, intimate work of private reflection. The narrator's quest to articulate the notion of a coherent self in lyric poetry ends in frustration. Whenever he tries to focus on it, "the fullness that I ought to have found was missing" (50). This failure seems to vindicate Edgar's sneering claim that poetry cannot compete with the glowing allure of screens. Yet the novel upholds that an unsettling solitude is poetry's virtue. In the digital era, poetry acts as a salve to the relentless speed of modern life and reveals beauty in the ephemeral details of everyday life. To this end, Kunzru implies, a fuller understanding still comes via words on a page and, in a watched world, writing a book redirects and refreshes tired ways of seeing. In Kunzru's view,

> If one job of fiction is nouning the verbs, so to speak—fixing the flows, and trying to pull out understandable and particular things from this abstract mass of the network—it's also the other way round. It's verbing the nouns, it's opening things up that we thought were fixed. As fiction writers, we can show how peace tips into war, what it's like to navigate the job market. Fiction is a networked form.[4]

Red Pill offers the modest hope that while reading and writing may not "reformat" an entire society, they can help an individual's thinking and mental health, one page at a time.

Arms and the Man

Red Pill's Anton is a fictional amalgam of Richard Spencer and Jordan Peterson (see Shaw 2023, 192, 196, 180), but also Andrew Tate, Rich Roll, and Charlie Kirk, among many other far-right, alt-right, or "alt-light" influencers. His hair is in a "foppish" style known as the "fashy haircut" and he has the guns—muscular arms—of a wellness advocate who is no stranger to the "Warrior One" yoga pose.[5] Anton's showmanship and ideological fervour about the "idea of North," akin

to Nordicism and its fantasizsed whiteness, (181, 232, 260), parallel the rise of amoral and often racist populists on platforms such as YouTube, Telegram, and TikTok. Anton's literary allusions, including to de Maistre's conservative works, add an intellectual patina to the police procedural, forcing the narrator to engage with the philosophical underpinnings of authoritarianism and extremism. As Kunzru shows, we are entering a new era, one in which right-wing talking points, memes, and agitprop have infiltrated the mainstream. Society is fracturing into increasingly polarized camps. Protected from the quagmire, an unaccountable elite made up of edgelords like Anton pulls the strings. This calls into question whether literature can (or ever could) carve out a space for deep thought and empathetic imaginings. The question is especially pressing in a world governed by spectacle, algorithm, and instant gratification. The novel thus takes a hard look at contemporary political landscapes and the red pill of digital hatred.

When the two men meet in a random encounter at a party, it pushes the novel to explore the complexities of identity and race, with Anton making troubling statements about racially othered people. The main character's Indian father adds a layer of autofiction to the narrative and an extra degree of sensitivity in the narrator's response to his white tormentors. That said, we do not learn anything about the patriarch's immigrant experiences and marriage to an English woman (the narrator's mother). In their first meeting, Anton invites the half-Indian protagonist to eat with him and his friends at a Turkish kebab restaurant, where he proceeds to say some disgustingly racist things about Turks, other racialized people, and migrants. "Come inside or stay in the dark," he invites the narrator, poker-faced (171). Our protagonist reflects: "So much of what he said had that particular tone, that suggestion of double meaning. Come inside or stay in the dark, as if he were about to initiate me into a mystery, offer me the red pill" (171). The alt-right pivots on such language, which could be ironic but is definitely coded. This chimes with what Kristian Shaw calls a far-right context in which earnestness is lampooned and "sincerity and empathy fail to register in hyper-ironic online environments of

mockery and trolling" (2023, 164). Returning to the quotation, in the context of the alt-right and adjacent online communities, the term "red pill," drawn from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, is often used metaphorically to refer to a person's awakening to what the right sees as some harsh realities of the world, particularly in relation to crude ideas about race, gender, and politics. Kunzru unmasks the insidious nature of racism that persists in a supposedly enlightened, technologically-advanced age.

In due course, the narrator has lost his bearings so much that he takes a flight to Paris solely to stand up at a public event there and ask a hostile question about Anton being "on the wrong side of [...] history" during the Q&A for the latter's appearance at a promotional panel advertising a high-end vodka. Anton shoots back that "Cultural Marxism" has addled the narrator's brain (210). Mike Wendling explains that for the alt-right, "Cultural Marxism" functions as a catch-all conspiracy theory that collapses every progressive cause—from feminism and environmentalism to multiculturalism—into a single sinister plot. The supposed masterminds shift depending on who is speaking: Jews, Muslims, leftist academics, bankers, or the "deep state." Elastic enough to unite neo-Nazis and mainstream conservatives alike, the slur's power lies in its vagueness (Wendling 2018, 81). Though loosely traced to the Frankfurt School, which is also referenced at intervals by Kunzru,[6] it mostly signals a knee-jerk hostility to liberal culture. In expressing this antipathy, the alt-right recasts ordinary social change as manipulation by a shadowy intellectual elite rather than by capital, technology, or other systems.

In this fractious context, at the talk someone takes the narrator's picture, which apparently soon circulates virally online:

> I was holding the mike, speaking and gesturing with my free hand, my eyes wide and my mouth hanging open in an idiotic "o." I looked angry, slightly unhinged. The picture was given various captions, mostly satirizing hysterical

"social justice warriors" as brainless authoritarians who shouted and screamed. A popular one just had the word "RAAACIIIST!" in all-caps. (217)

In their book *Framing Muslims*, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin present a detailed reading of "Islamic Rage Boy," a 2007 internet meme. This was the epithet foisted on Shakeel Ahmad Bhat, a young Muslim whose rictus of contorted anger appeared in pictures of several South Asian protest marches. His image was then photoshopped into various scenarios, many of them highly Islamophobic, and used to sell a range of spin-off products. Morey and Yaqin explore this as a case study of stereotyping or what they call the "framing" of Muslims in contemporary society. Sure enough, while Western internet commentators viciously attacked Rage Boy for his perceived beliefs, the reality was more complex. Far from being a textbook violent Islamist, Bhat comes from a peaceful Sufi Kashmiri background, driven to protest by Indian police violence against his sister in the war-torn province. Just as Bhat's "grand, severed head frozen in a convulsion of fury" is conveniently "detached from the body his personal history and […] political background" (Morey and Yaqin 2011, 23), so too the angry South Asian (though not Muslim) face of the narrator is memed and reduced so as to devalue condemnation of racism and elitism. When one of the most popular memes presents the narrator's angry visage above the caption "RAAACIIIST," this is a downplaying of charges of racism. Indeed, Wendling argues that "casual label-tossing" feeds the alt-right's playbook (2018, 11). As demonstrated by his research, some far-right figures wear the slur "racist" as a badge of honour, others dismiss it as routine online bait, and both responses neutralize accountability. As Kunzru's passage shows, the alt-right performatively recast "social justice warriors" as brainless authoritarians—shouting, screaming, and incapable of reason—thereby caricaturing and dismissing their criticisms. Returning to Han's theorization of rage and anger, it helps to explain why the narrator's ultimate withdrawal from online squabbles into his introverted scribbling of "antiviral content"

(226) feels purposive rather than Luddite. He wants to preserve the rare, genuinely righteous energy necessary for genuine, outward-facing rage and collective attention. Yet the same forces that produce his burnout—fragmentation, distraction, and the commodified immediacy of attention—negate that potential, collapsing a sustained, political ire into episodic, performative anger. What might have been a disciplined, critical indignation is instead rendered as a frozen image and a punchline stripped of context. This incapacitates any sustained relation to the other, exactly the kind of loss bemoaned by Han.

"The old world of words gives way to the world of code"

"The old world of words," then, is ceding to "the world of code." This idea is articulated by the narrator at the height of his mental illness. Having watched the corporate video of Anton that was played at the vodka event multiple times and after 'doing his research' into the video's setting, the protagonist has gone completely off grid to a bothy near a cliff edge in the Scottish Highlands. There the narrator thinks he can confront his nemesis in a final showdown, but his own suicide seems more probable. Floridly unwell, the narrator writes screeds that will never be read about the new, digitalized and non-literary world of the mid-2010s:

> I wrote about plagues and melting glaciers and drowned cities and millions of people on the move, a future in which any claim of allegiance to universal human values would be swept away by a cruel tribalism. I wrote about a system that would eventually find itself able to dispense with public politics altogether and put in its place the art of the deal: a black box, impossible to oversee, visible only to the counterparties. There would be no checks and balances, no right of appeal against the decisions of the deal-makers, no "rights" whatsoever, just the raw exercise of power. (226–227)

Kunzru's narrator stirs prophecy and psychosis into a barbarous soup of late-capitalist catastrophe. As Michael F. Miller observes of passages such as this in Kunzru's novel, "we must seriously entertain the possibility that we are living in a ruined future" (2023, 1268). The phrase "plagues and melting glaciers and drowned cities and millions of people on the move" distils climate, contagion and displacement within an apocalyptic syncopation.[7] Refugees and rising seas are the background but also the ethical fulcrum around which those human rights defended by Rei and her lawyer colleagues are being eroded. That erosion is made chillingly procedural in the image of a world where political judgement is replaced by opaque transactions and "no 'rights' whatsoever." Here Kunzru satirizes a transactional politics reminiscent of the grifting favoured in Donald Trump's ghostwritten memoir *The Art of the Deal* (2020/1987). Law and appeal are hollowed out in favour of raw power.

A technologically-fuelled form of vertigo follows. Kunzru's narrator insists that our sensory perception disintegrates as "the old world of words gives way to the world of code" (227). Literature which, as I have argued elsewhere (Chambers, 2019), is the medium best suited for conveying the full range of sensory experience gets translated (according to the narrator's thoughts presented after the block quotation) into metrics and quantified as mere data. In the climate emergency, man's main "technical advance" is "dust and radiant heat" (227)—barren outputs that flatten and threaten experience. Ordinary "human intuitions" are being corroded because, as the narrator laments, "machine vision is not human vision" (227). Amid this epistemic rupture, the protagonist tries to overcome his suicidal ideation to warn his fellow humans that nonhuman actors will pursue "interests and priorities" alien to them. More than that, meretricious "metrication" is designed to strip phenomena of their "aura," dissolving the notion of human exceptionality (227). The passage diagnoses technology's reordering of what counts as real when code displaces language and sensory perception, in a technocrat-led unmaking of humanity.

One novelist in a position to understand both the world of words and the world of code is Vikram Chandra. Eight years older than Kunzru and from India rather than Britain, Chandra is also a lifelong programmer. In 2013, he published his non-fiction book *Geek Sublime: The Beauty of Code, the Code of Beauty* (Chandra 2014a), whose subtitle, in its American edition,[8] has a balanced, mirrored structure that anticipates Kunzru's words in my framing quotation to this section, and this article. Kunzru was on a panel with Chandra soon after this publication had been released, at JLF Boulder, where the book was mentioned and so Kunzru is likely to be aware of it (Jaipur Literature Festival 2015, n.p.). In his volume, Chandra makes the case for "an identification that aligns what programmers and authors do [that] makes them—somehow, eventually, the same" (2014, 9). Both groups of people, according to the author–coder, deal in language processing, edit (or "debug") their work, and strive for beauty and use value. Six years later, writing against Chandra's faith in code's creative kinship, Kunzru exposes a techno-dystopian Trumpist landscape where automation no longer uplifts but undoes the human.

Chekhov's Gun

At one point, the narrator is taken to a shooting range by the Deuter Center's porter for a little relaxation and further acquaintanceship with each other. Although the cerebral narrator proves himself a "surprisingly good shot" (69), his wry observations on this scene are entirely literary: "Every writer knows about Chekhov's gun. […] *One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off. It is wrong to make promises you don't mean to keep*" (69; emphasis in original). In Anton Chekhov's terms, the "gun" symbolizes any props, *dramatis personae*, or dialogue the Russian playwright considered unnecessary—elements that had no meaningful connection to the play's broader narrative. For Kunzru and his narrator, though, the motif is loaded. First, the allusion to Chekhov gives readers a clearer sense why the auteur Gary

Bridgeman's friends call him Anton. Not only does the yoga afficionado have nice guns, but Bridgeman also treats storytelling like a firearm or grenade. Casual asides, apparently throwaway monologues and quotes, and background noise and other cues seem incidental but detonate into real-world menace. Anton weaponizes *Blue Lives*, layering up a palimpsest of signals that blur entertainment and endorsement. The nickname is probably a private shorthand for his method, as an apparently genial producer whose theatrical insertions read like Chekhov's gun—insignificant until, suddenly, they are not.

Second, Kunzru wrongfoots Chekhovian ideas of superfluity by not having this particular gun go off. Although his narrator is suicidal, the driving range gun remains in the realm of sport, and this character's story arc is of mental collapse and recovery rather than ending his life. Kunzru thus refuses Anton's narrative neatness and televisual sensationalism, preserving the textual gun as an ambivalent, unresolved signifier that resists narrative neatness and closure.[9] In a further subversion of Chekhov's "rule[…] of writing" (69), a man comes into a cafe the narrator is frequenting, and his hair is "styled in the same nineteen-thirties undercut as Anton and Karl." The narrator asks himself: "When had I stopped assuming that a fashionably dressed man [...] in a cosmopolitan urban neighborhood, would hold liberal social views? Now I was wondering if he went on the internet and posted about throwing people out of helicopters" (143). Nothing comes of this ominous sign, but the moment at once shows the narrator's escalating paranoia and the hurtling into the mainstream of what were once seen as extreme views.

Third, Kunzru further complicates Anton's and Chekhov's dismissal of the extraneous by including a monologue from a former punk turned Stasi informer. In this way, the novelist insists that the "incidental" can be the very mechanism that splices past injustices into the novel's present, making the gun thrum and emit heat rather than remaining inert. The analogue coarseness of punk lyrics, along with the physicality of music and dance, together shadow forth another defence on

Kunzru's part of the "world of words." This defence centres on countercultural orality, human sensory perception, and the power of music.

Witnessing the narrator in one of his bouts of mental distress, the cleaner who tidies the narrator's increasingly chaotic and putrid room at the Center has a story for him. This woman, Monika, tells the protagonist about her experiences as a drummer for a band in the East German punk scene up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Kunzru's novel invokes a visceral sense of punk; indeed, for Monika, encountering the music and fashions for the first time is "like being electrocuted, jolted out of her dead skin" (90). Snake-like, she sloughs off her previous encasement as a mousy if reluctant rule-follower in the DDR, spiking up her hair to join two other disaffected young women in a band they name *Die Gläsernen Frauen* or the Transparent Women. They scream-sing about the male gaze: "*You want to look? | Go ahead | Go ahead | Are you happy now?*" (94). From being pellucid, a glassy pane for the DDR's authoritarian policies to be projected through, Monika has become a drummer producing pure, extra-linguistic noise. Her first gig is described as follows:

> There wasn't a stage, they just walked out into silence, some scattered clapping. And then they attacked. One two three four, into their first number, which was just Katja shouting "Stupid bear! Stupid bear!" while Elli played some chords she'd copied from a Ramones song. […] She battered her kit and it sounded like dead bodies hitting the ground and the guitar and the vocal fed back so the whole thing was just a mess of distortion, you couldn't say what it was, or if it was music exactly, but it had something. Energy. Life. (118-119)

The excerpt isolates an instance of unconventional, rebellious musical performance and the transformative power of music and virtually meaningless lyrics to energize an audience, defying pre-conceived ideas

despite the derivative chord structure. Kunzru highlights the elements of surprise, violence, and the allure of nonconformity in pop music. As such, although visual and surveillance imagery takes precedence over the auditory in *Red Pill*, a space is cleared at its core for a pogoing and anarchic group of young East German Punks. The group is ultimately defeated, however, splintering because of surveillance through sound rather than the gaze. It transpires that one of the band's members has been spilling out all their secrets to the eagerly-listening Stasi. Monika ends up imprisoned, coercively controlled, and broken in a way that the paranoid but privileged narrator finds difficult to imagine. The vignette is usually ignored or only briefly discussed by such critics of *Red Pill* as Nicholas Gaskill (2024, 11), Miller (2023, no mention), and Shaw (2023, 168). Yet, as Sherryl Vint notes (2023, 190), this East German section is vitally "important" for the novel's overarching concerns about privacy, surveillance, and authoritarianism.

One Chekhov's gun entanglement that does get tied up in *Red Pill* is the frog logo from the IT technician's t-shirt. To explain this, I need to recap the novel's ending, as it culminates in a kind of rewriting of *Mrs Dalloway* (Woolf 2026) from a similarly shell-shocked masculine perspective to that of Virginia Woolf's Septimus Smith. In the final "Home" section, the narrator has been rescued from the Scottish bothy where he was probably about to die by suicide, and is undergoing medication and therapy in New York. No longer allowed to indulge in internet surfing, alcohol consumption, extreme emotions, or even "an excess of personality" (277), like Mrs Dalloway he is helping prepare for a party in honour of Hillary Clinton's presumed victory. Rei and many of the friends who come to their house for the celebration, like the British-Indian narrator (and Kunzru himself), are probably not white. Yet, as affluent professionals, they are only made hyper-conscious of their racialization in white-majority America when confidence ebbs away at the party as Trump's victory becomes inevitable. Suddenly realizing that precarity which the narrator has been cognizant of for some time, Rei starts whispering conspiratorially to

him about making contingency plans to leave the United States of America. The frog we saw earlier on the iris-scanning technician's shirt now resurfaces when the narrator returns to his old online haunts to watch the reaction to Trump's election. There, in dark corners of the internet, the narrator watches far-right "superheroes and sarcastic cartoon frogs emitting rays and force fields" (279). This amphibian is Pepe the Frog which, as Shaw notes, had innocent slacker origins, but "gained traction on alt-right forums and became a white nationalist icon," especially after a retweet from Trump (2023, 184). Wendling (2022, 92), the global affairs think tank Chatham House (2023, n.p.), and Joan Donovan et al. (2022, 151–153) confirm this, with Wendling answering his own rhetorical questions as follows: "Is he sometimes joking? Yes. Is he alt-right? Now, definitely" (2022, 92). Meanwhile, Donovan et al. use Kunzruian language to show how Pepe is "extremely popular with the emergent red-pill right" (2022, 154). Yet Shaw is wrong to assume that the narrator initially "recognises" the cartoon figure (2023, 184). It is only once this normie has gone down a deep, shitpost-clogged rabbit hole of far-right content that the narrator understands the frog's ironically authoritarian import. And by that time, it is too late, since this so-called "meme magic" has propelled Trump into the White House, heralding America's callous "new dispensation" (228, 166). Kunzru thus converts Chekhov's gun into a memetic trigger, revealing seemingly small cultural props that, once fired, reshape political reality.

Conclusion

To conclude, the novel considers whether, and to what extent, the tolerant should be tolerant of the intolerant. In *Red Pill*, Kunzru is interested in the internet's dark side and an erosion of confidence in progress and democracy. He portrays liberal echo chambers, alt-right memes like Pepe the Frog and social media trolling. Increasingly, both liberals and rightwingers only listen to other individuals who share and reinforce their views. Yet, Kunzru makes a concerted effort to listen to the far-right politics of racist Trump supporters, unapologetic white

supremacists, and QAnon conspiracy theorists. Neither condoning nor condemning either side in any wholesale way, though clearly making strong judgements, Kunzru exemplifies the power of radical listening.

Kunzru employs a fragmented narrative style, with the "lyric I" often spiralling into the abyss of psychosis. This fragmented self serves as a reflection of the fractured world depicted in the novel, mirroring a disintegration of societal norms and values typified by Trump's win over Hillary Clinton. His psychosis manifests in thinking regular people are crisis actors, finding significance in random coincidences, and believing that everything is a simulation, as in *The Matrix*. Kunzru deftly incorporates real-world elements, such as the refugee crisis, contemporary art, and the influential work of Ai Weiwei, into his narrative. These elements highlight the stark contrast between the privileged domain of a writer's retreat and the grim hardships faced by refugees. As the narrator's mental health is nosediving, a father and daughter he sees scavenging for food in a dustbin, and later against the backdrop of a charging-cable-laden camp, serve as a stark reminder of the disparities in this interconnected world. Angela Merkel's decision to keep Germany's borders open during the 2015 refugee crisis—framed by her declaration *Wir schaffen das* "We can handle this"—became a lightning rod for national debate. The slogan and her open-door policy simultaneously drew admiration for its moral clarity and fierce backlash from anti-immigration groups such as Pegida, whose protests epitomized the fractures running through contemporary Europe.

Kunzru's novel traverses the porous boundaries of reality and imagination, just as the writer's block that plagues its protagonist blurs the line between creativity and despair. These thematic threads are embroidered within the overarching hoop of Weimar and Stasi Germany, times when the world teetered on the precipice of chaos, much like the splintered state of the contemporary world depicted in this novel predominantly set in the 2016 defined by Trump and the so-called refugee crisis. Trump's recent malign actions of abducting the Venezuelan President or continuous threats about annexing Greenland

have created a similar sense of chaos, testifying to humanity's persisting inability to learn from history. As we have seen, *Red Pill* looks at the right from the hallucinatory perspective of a mentally-ill narrator finding himself increasingly deluded that he and Anton are locked in an existential battle over the world's future. While the current global scenario, with war in Ukraine, widening fractures within NATO, the continuation of the Palestinian crisis and much else, does not signal any early exit from the chaos, the recovery of the narrator does hint at how the individual may still regain his sanity with certain conscious choices in which literature can of course offer some assistance. It is this muted, sceptical hope that remains the only hope in the novel's portrayal of a world in crisis – a crisis that has only deepened further since its setting a decade ago, in 2016.

NOTES

1. Subsequent references are to this (2021) edition of Kunzru's *Red Pill* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the main body text.

2. Han 2015, 1, 6, 10. Speaking medically, infarction is the death of tissue caused by a lack of blood.

3. This mirrors today's intellectuals and cultural figures failing to stem a rising tide of extremist far-right mobilization.

4. Kunzru 2012, n.p. This keynote speech has been transcribed from YouTube, with a light edit for oral grammatical inaccuracies, punctuation, verbal tics, and duplicate consecutive words.

5. Kunzru 2020, 138, 168. On the "fashy haircut," see Wendling 2018, 84.

The wellness-to-far-right pipeline is by now familiar; see, for example, Marczyński and Tebaldi 2025.

6. Kunzru 2020, 12, 58, 176. In "Ethnoracial Utopianism and Speculative Aesthetics After the End of History," Sherryl Vint argues that Cultural Marxism is very different from and much more utopian than Bolshevik vanguardism (2023, 191). The latter inverts agency, manufacturing conditions to reprogramme minds through "Zersetzung" (the name of one of *Red Pill*'s parts, see endnote 7, below). Vint defines Zersetzung as "techniques of psychological manipulation used by the Ministry for State Security (STASI) to suppress anti-government activities by undermining the mental stability of those anticipated to be dissidents, techniques that included subjecting them to repeated disappointments, social isolation, and similar psychological abuse" (2023, 190), as experienced by the novel's Monika. According to Vint, Soviet and East German Marxism thus pervert utopian hope into authoritarian policing twisted up with ethnonationalist fantasies, in a way that percolates into present-day alt-right discourse.

7. It is no accident that the section of the novel this excerpt is from bears the title "An Apocalypse" The novel's remaining three sections carry the following titles, in order—"Wannsee," "Zersetzung," and "Home"—with "An Apocalypse" positioned between the latter two.

8. In its original Indian edition, the title of this book was *Mirrored Mind: My Life in Letters a Code* (Chandra 2013). The British edition, published by Faber & Faber (Chandra 2014b) as *Geek Sublime*, has a different, more self-explanatory subtitle than the American edition, namely "Writing Fiction, Coding Software."

9. This is not to suggest that Kunzru is consistently opposed to tidy endings and well-tied threads. Reviewing his most recent novel *Blue Ruin* (2024), the *New Republic*'s Jess Bergman describes it as containing "multiple Chekhov's guns" (2024, n.p.). Most notably, the white American gallerist Marshal has fallen prey to online conspiracies and keeps an actual cache of guns, one of which will be co-opted and wielded threateningly by another character in a climactic scene towards the end of *Blue Ruin*.

Works Cited

Andersen, Kurt. 2017. "How America Lost Its Mind." *Atlantic*. 320 (2) September: 77–91.

Barantini, Philip, dir. 2025. *Adolescence*. Sheffield: Warp Films.

Bentham, Jeremy. 1995/1791. *The Panopticon Writings*. London: Verso.

Bergman, Jess. 2024. "Hari Kunzru's Escape From the Art Market." *New Republic*. 3 July. https://newrepublic.com/article/182269/hari-kunzru-escape-art-market (Accessed: 8 December 2025).

Chambers, Claire. 2019. *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels*. London: Bloomsbury.

Chambers, Claire. 2026. "Ruinous Pandemic Blues in the Artworld: Hari Kunzru's Blue Ruin." In *Decolonizing Disease: Pandemics, Prose, and Pathogenic Novels*, by Claire Chambers, 238–249. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Chandra, Vikram. 2013. *Mirrored Mind: My Life in Letters and Code*. Gurgaon: Hamish Hamilton.

Chandra, Vikram. 2014a. *Geek Sublime: The Beauty of Code, the Code of Beauty*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press.

Chandra, Vikram. 2014b. *Geek Sublime: Writing Fiction, Coding Software*. London: Faber & Faber.

Chatham House. 2023. "The Evolution of the Pepe the Frog Meme." *Chatham House: The World Today*. 29 March.

https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2023-04/evolution-pepe-frog-meme (Accessed: 6 December 2025).

Donovan, Joan, Emily Dreyfuss, Brian Friedberg. 2022. *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America*. New York: Bloomsbury USA.

Foucault, Michel. 1975/1979. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. by Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin.

Gaskill, Nicholas. 2024. "Reality in America, Redux: On Trump Panic Fiction." *American Literary History*. 36 (4) (Winter): 1049–1075. https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajae120.

Gilroy, Paul. *"There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*. London: Hutchinson, 1987.

Goldhaber, Michael H. 1997. "The Attention Economy and the Net." *Economics of Digital Information Conference*. Cambridge, MA. 23–26 January. https://people.well.com/user/mgoldh/AtEcandNet.html (Accessed: 7 December 2025).

Han, Byung-Chul. 2015. *The Burnout Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Hari, Johann. 2023. *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention*. London: Bloomsbury.

Jaipur Literature Festival. 2015. "Gods Without Men: Narrating the Human Condition." YouTube video. Posted September 30, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MublSFSIrcE (Accessed: 7 December 2025).

Kunzru, Hari. 2012. "On Writing in a Digital Age." Keynote speech at The Literary Conference: Writing in a Digital Age. YouTube video. Posted July 13, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJdHelJcbRM (Accessed: 8 December 2025).

Kunzru, Hari. 2017. *White Tears*. London: Scribner.

_____. 2020. *Red Pill*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

_____. *Blue Ruin*. London: Scribner, 2024.

_____. 2025. "Surviving the Manosphere." *New York Times Review*. 9 October. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2025/10/09/surviving-the-manosphere-adolescence/ (Accessed: 7 December 2025).

Marczyński, Piotr and Catherine Tebaldi. 2025. "The Wellness Pipeline: Tracing Far-right Health Narratives on X." *New Media & Society*. 0 (0). https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448251385082

McLuhan, Marshall. 1966. *Understanding Media; the Extensions of Man*. New York: Signet Books.

Miller, Michael F. 2023. "'Stop Asking for Life to Be a Poem': On Cybernetic Instrumentality." *New Literary History*. 54 (2): 1263–1270.

Morey, Peter and Amina Yaqin. 2011. *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Shaw, Kristian. 2023. "'Food for the Wolves': The Rise of the Alt-right in Red Pill." In *Hari Kunzru: Twenty-First Century Perspectives*, edited by Kristian Shaw and Sara Upstone, 164–186. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Solomon, Johanna and Martin, Adam. 2019. "Competitive Victimhood as a Lens to Reconciliation: An Analysis of the Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter Movements." *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*. 37 (1): 7–31.

Trump, Donald J. 2020/1987. *Trump: The Art of the Deal, with Tony Schwartz*. London: Penguin Random House.

Vint, Sherryl. 2023. "Ethnoracial Utopianism and Speculative Aesthetics after the End of History." *Comparative Literature*. 75 (2): 188–206.

Wachowski, Lana, and Lilly Wachowski, dirs. 1999. *The Matrix*. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures.

Wendling, Mike. 2018. *Alt-Right: From 4chan to White House*. London: Pluto Press.

Williams, James. 2018. *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Woolf, Virginia. 2026/1925. *Mrs Dalloway*. London: Vintage.

Wu, Tim. 2017. *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Struggle to Get Inside Our Heads*. London: Atlantic Books.

Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books.