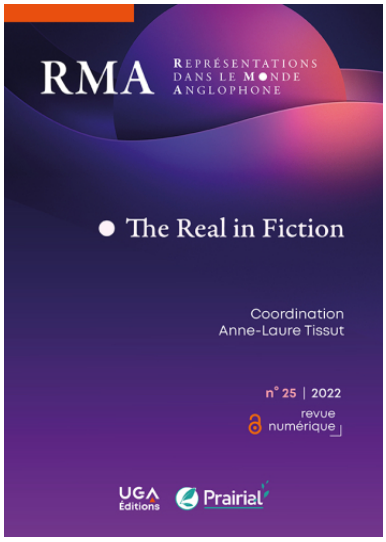

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The Real in Fiction

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INTRODUCTION

By bringing together two notions often deemed to be antagonistic, this project aims at exploring the intricate mesh of our relations with the world as mediatized by fiction—represented, reflected and analysed by fiction as well as questioned by it. Theoreticians, literary critics, a philosopher and an artist joined forces, not in the aim of bringing down the diversity of approaches and definitions to a consistent unity but on the contrary, to illustrate the limitless field of possibilities opened out by the conjunction of the two terms.

Several main lines of analysis are addressed in this volume : the fictional treatment of historical facts, the tentative fictional renderings of the irruption of events in the daily, when the real tears up the seamless fabric of the predictable, or again the literary forms and structures meant to promote illusion and the reader's adhering to the offered fiction by blurring—or even erasing—the traces of the presence of the creator yet at the origin of said illusion

Through the investigation of the effects of fiction upon the readers'—or players'—imaginative configurations as well as upon the forms of their relations to the world, hopefully some of the specificities of the function of representation in literature and games will be brought to light.

SOMMAIRE

The Real in Fiction. Introduction

Le réel dans la fiction. Introduction

Anne-Laure Tissut

DOI : 10.35562/rma.342

TEXTE

1 By bringing together two notions often deemed to be antagonistic, this project aims at exploring the intricate mesh of our relations with the world as mediatized by fiction—represented, reflected and analysed by fiction as well as questioned by it. In order to face such vast and complex notions, theoreticians, literary critics, a philosopher and an artist joined forces, not in the aim of bringing down the diversity of approaches and definitions to a consistent unity but on the contrary, to illustrate the limitless field of possibilities opened out by the conjunction of the two terms.

2 This research partly relates to the ongoing questioning of the aftermath of postmodernism, as addressed by Peter Boxall in his essay *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction*, Irmtraud Huber in *Literature after Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies*, or again by Gibbons, Van Deen Akker and Vermeulen, who focused on the return to more conventional forms of narrative as well as to affects in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*. Pierre-Louis Patoine, in *Corps / Texte. Pour une théorie de la lecture empathique*, also provided valuable insights into the discussion from the angle of reception, by analyzing the mechanisms at work in the reader's immersive or embodied experience of the text. All investigate the reader's various forms of involvement in the text, while her reading practice definitely shows itself as part of her reality, whose emphases and contours are being shaped anew.

3 Granted, conventional forms of narrative never stopped being written, and the shift away from the postmodern spirit of disengaged

play towards a perceptible faith in the possibility of grounding fiction in a number of stable enough principles or beliefs has been progressive. Linda Hutcheon's category of "historiographic metafiction" for instance offers a valuable entry into a discussion of the various possible alliances between an apparently relatively autonomous form of fiction on the one hand, characterized by self-awareness and chiefly concerned with the conditions or circumstances of its own production, and its mimetic function on the other. Indeed in that case the mimetic function does not exclusively relegate fiction to a secondary position compared to the real but both competes with it and enlarges it, by creating other perspectives on and ways of interpreting the real, as well as by introducing new objects into the world as sources of multilayered experiences involving sensations, thought, feelings and emotions. The new developments of conventional forms of narrative as enriched by postmodern thinking and practices may thus allow enlightening some of the specificities of the function of representation in literature in the past and the present. Hence the contributions in this collection are not limited to current literary pieces but include earlier texts, and from the English-speaking world as a whole. Beyond such distinctions in time and space, the relations between the text and the world, the reader and the text, and the reader and the world via the text may be considered in their evolution as well as their potential permanent features. A philosophical approach of games, showing how players in some cases may be deeply engaged in the concrete world while also being immersed in fiction allows a valuable extension of the field of study. Moreover excerpts from artist Paul Heintz's book *Character* offer a dizzying illustration of the mesh of interactions developing between literary fiction and concrete daily life.

4 Several main lines of analysis are addressed in this volume: the fictional treatment of historical facts, the tentative fictional renderings of the irruption of events in the daily, when the real tears up the seamless fabric of the predictable, or again on the literary forms and structures meant to promote illusion and the reader's adhering to the offered fiction by blurring—or even erasing—the traces of the presence of the creator yet at the origin of said illusion.

5 All in all the papers gathered in this volume endeavored to investigate the question of the effects of fiction upon the readers' imaginative

configurations as well as upon the forms of their relations to the world. From a more strictly literary perspective, the collective reflection will hopefully contribute to further the study of realism, in its more recent and traditional forms, by raising the question, among others, of the modalities of creating illusion as well as of the object of illusion—a fixed entity or a process. According to an apparent paradox that deserves attention, choosing to explore the representations of the real through fiction implies analysing some of the ways in which fiction, as Philippe Forest puts it, "ceaselessly questions itself".[1]

6 In "**The Concept of Contamination in Transuniverse Relations: Napoleon in a Fictional World"**, **Arnaud Schmitt** considers the case of novels in which real historical figures appear, to argue that they are contaminated by their ontological environment and become fictional themselves, "one of the tools aimed at creating a fictional experience". Schmitt offers a thorough analytical review of the ongoing ontological debate opposing fiction and the real, in the fields of Narrative Studies, Phenomenology and studies in Fiction, to answer the question of "the type of space" created by the introduction of a historical figure into a fictional universe. Quoting Richard J. Gerrig's thesis, according to which, contrary to Coleridge's famous plea for the reader's "willing suspension of disbelief", our "natural proclivity is not to disbelieve, but to believe that everything is true, even fiction", Schmitt argues that "Between fiction and reality, "there can be no cohabitation, only contamination".

7 In "**'The texture of et cetera' – synchronizing with the blurry real in 21st century artists' novels (Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Kate Zambreno)**", **Yannicke Chupin** examines Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be? A Novel from Life* (2012) and Kate Zambreno's *Drifts* (2020) to bring out the strategies used by the narrators to create the feel of an instant in time and thus grasp the elusive nature of the transient real. In so doing they move away from their initial projects toward new forms, thus rethinking and extending the possibilities of the novel as a genre. In such twenty-first-century version of the *Künstlerroman*, a new form of reality-effect emerges, as the reader "oscillates between the critical response enabled by the metatextual commentaries and

the affective response enabled by the fictional framework", and is thus provoked into "addressing her own subjective sense of the real".

8 In "**Off-Centring the Real in Postcolonial Fiction**", **Arijana Luburić-Cvijanović** offers a historical perspective on post-colonial literatures, from early responses to colonial literatures up to contemporary ones. Her thoroughly documented paper examines the generic diversity of post-colonial literatures—magic realism, the fantastic, the Gothic, science fiction as well as inclusive forms of realism—to enhance the diversity of strategies of self-representation and of "resistance to the conservative realism of colonial texts". Two close studies, of Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007) and of Shaun Tan's graphic novel *The Arrival* (2007), further illustrate postcolonial strategies of "account[ing] for the historical trauma of colonialism" while subverting totalising discourses. All contribute to redefine "mimesis as a dynamic, transformatory engagement with the world, rather than a static attempt to capture the world" (Durrant 182).

9 In his paper, entitled "**The Dark Side of Branding: Language and the Real in Colson Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006)**", **Michel Feith** explores the subtleties of satire in Whitehead's novel. With a special focus on naming strategies, bringing together the history of slavery; poetry and marketing in the reign of corporate societies, and drawing from the philosophy of language, especially the legacy of Plato's *Cratylus* and J. L. Austin's speech act theory, as revisited by philosophers Sandra Laugier and Judith Butler, the paper enhances the ways in which the novel "interrogates the entanglements between language and the real". Further, it examines the consequences of such "different takes on the real" as featured in the novel on the conception of literature, and more specifically of African American literature, that is enacted in the novel's language.

10 In "***Kind One* by Laird Hunt, or a tale of a real twice lost: writing the individual and collective memory of slavery**", **Anne-Julie Debare** demonstrates how fiction may counter trauma by subverting the representations that enable its outburst or its repetition. Indeed Hunt invents a hybrid form of fictional testimony, resorting to the expressive power of tales and myths and a poetics of indirection to constitute a transitional object for the memory of slavery to be passed on. Thus the novel, as it strives to circumscribe the dynamics

of violence, creates a space allowing for the reader's judgement to be suspended while configuring the real and time to make them habitable.

11 **Karim Daanoune**, in "**'Missing people never make sense': Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* or, Addressing the Terroristic Real to Oneself**", focuses on the US Global War on Terror, a historical reality that is addressed "both overtly and covertly in the novel", thus generating a double-entendre effect throughout the narrative. Karim Daanoune argues that the novel stages a return of the repressed real according to an "autoimmune principle" that "ultimately betrays the fact that [...] the enemy was no one else but the United-States itself". Through an analysis of the workings of trauma at both the personal and the national levels, Daanoune demonstrates that Jessica's disappearance points towards the US having directed terrorism against themselves in their very attempt to eradicate it, thus deepening loss and mourning.

12 As a masterly illustration of the subtle ways in which the real and fiction are intertwined, the artist book **Character** is sampled in this volume. Its author, French artist **Paul Heintz**, kindly selected pages from his work as evidence of the pervasive process through which fiction keeps fashioning the very reality from which it was inspired, thus expanding the reading experience far beyond the time of reading. **Florian Beauvallet** offered an insightful introduction to the excerpt from *Character*, shedding light on its both "nebulous [and] straightforward" project of "meeting a character from a novel". In this multimedia "book-as-object" in Beauvallet's words, endowed with "a strong visual identity that borrows from the free-form style of diary-writing, including narrative parts, observational inserts, books extracts augmented with further notes, memos" as well as images and photographs, "all coalescing into various assemblages often creating trompe-l'oeil effects", Heintz documents his quest for the real Winston Smiths who did not inspire Orwell in his famous novel 1984 but still provide disturbing counterparts to its hero in the concrete world. "Heintz's own undertaking in turn reflects Smith's quest for his own self in a world deprived of privacy", the journal becoming "an exercise in mirror writing that strives to articulate the creative encounter of our personal selves with the world as mediated through language" while offering a "meditation on what journal-writing

entails". Through its collage logics *Character* "features front and centre an experience that cannot be fully contained", the journal standing as "a fitting metaphor for the way fiction oversteps into our daily lives as much as we into the worlds of the novels we read".

13 In "**The Realism of Speculative Fiction: Planetary Polyphony and Scale in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future***", **Pierre-Louis Patoine** shows how Robinson's novel responds to the demands formulated by the new climate regime, by upscaling the spatial, temporal and narrative frames, to bring them beyond the scope of individual human consciousness and experience. While reminding readers how reality is constantly made through the interactions of individual, collective and non-human entities, this polyphonic novel illustrates the potentials of speculative fiction to give hope in the powers of imagination to change worldviews and states of affairs.

14 **Maud Bougerol**, in "**Reception and the Real in the Reception of 20th and 21st Century American Short Fiction: Robert Coover's 'The Babysitter' (1969), Ben Marcus's 'Cold Little Bird' (2018) and Brian Evenson's 'Born Stillborn' (2019)**", shows how the metafictional aspects integrated in the stories produce forms of uncertainty which call for an even more active part from the reader. While the mediation of the text would prevent her from reaching the real, she bypasses the impossibility by operating a secondary mediation, relying on affect. As she ceaselessly has to choose between several options in the story by considering what seems real, the reader increases narrative possibilities through her own sensibility and affects.

15 While for the past twenty years, game studies and research in literary theory have discussed the connections between games and fiction but mostly focusing on videogames, **Martin Buthaud**, in his paper "**Wargames as realistic tabletop simulations of fictional events: the case of Warhammer games**", chose instead to contribute to the reflection on the ontology of games by looking at non-digital wargames, through the case of the Warhammer games franchise. Building his argument mostly on Juul's game ontology framework, which analysed the influence of videogames on the classic game model, Martin Buthaud demonstrates that the various material elements involved in Warhammer narrow the ontological gap

between the players and the fictional world in which they feel immersed.

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NOTES

1 "La fiction doit réfléchir la réalité c'est-à-dire la penser comme fiction et elle ne peut y parvenir qu'à la condition de s'interroger perpétuellement sur elle-même." (P. Forest, *Le roman, le réel, et autres essais*, p. 236)

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The Concept of Contamination in Transuniverse Relations: Napoleon in a Fictional World

Le concept de contamination dans les relations trans-univers : Napoléon dans un monde fictionnel

Arnaud Schmitt

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TEXTE

1 As odd as it may seem in this first quarter of the 21st century, literary theory still hasn't solved the real/fiction riddle.[1] What does the real/fiction riddle consist of? It refers to the fact that even though many theories have been put forward, there is no consensus, and that's an understatement, regarding what happens when two ontologies meet in a text defined by an apparently univocal genre and horizon of expectation. The use here of the verb "happen" is essential as it directly refers to the phenomenology of reading, of how readers make sense, consciously or not, of this ontological hybridity. One of the reasons this is still an ongoing issue stems from the fact that to resort to phenomenology implies calling on cognitive sciences and on this specific matter of texts comprising dual ontologies, resources in the field are logically very limited.

2 The fact that two of the most prominent concepts emerging from Narrative Studies in the last three decades are more or less directly related to the real/fiction relation is quite revealing of the sway it holds on this domain. Indeed, whether it is Monika Fludernik's concept of Natural Narratology or Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan and Richard Walsh's theory of fictionality, there is in both cases a strong emphasis on how fiction and reality keep interacting and impacting each other. In her seminal *Towards a Natural Narratology*, the German scholar, drawing on Ricœur and White's works which gave rise to the narrative turn, demonstrates how the very notion of

narrativity is entangled in the way we think, and thus in the way we apprehend our physical and social environment ("situations tend to be comprehended holistically on the lines of frames and scripts" 17), while reciprocally, narratives are the very fruit of our experience, or of "experientiality". She writes: "'Natural' narratology, as I envisage it, relies on a definition of narrativity as mediated human experientiality (which can be plotted on the level of action or on the level of fictional consciousness)" (36). She goes on to underline again how consciousness and narrativity heavily rely on each other: "Narrative is a category of human behaviour that occupies a very special place among behavioural modes. Its function seems to serve a deep-seated human need to cognize oneself in projected semiotic models of a narrative cast" (36). Quite distinctly at first sight, but with a similar underlying paradigmatic logic (i.e. how fiction and more generally narratives permeate through the real, and vice-versa), Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh present in "Ten Theses about Fictionality" fictionality as a key cognitive process in our daily lives. According to them,

> [s]tories presented as invented are regularly and pervasively employed in political rhetoric; as vehicles of cultural memory and ideological negotiation of past and present; in thought experiments, scenario thinking, and risk assessments; and in many other areas of the societal, political, and cultural field. (63)

In other terms, fictional narratives are necessary tools as we carry on with our daily lives. These lives are not only about what actually happens but also about what might happen as we constantly elaborate counterfactuals in order to take the right decisions whatever the stakes are:

> Human beings are concerned not only with matters of fact and with what is the case but also with evaluative questions that encompass possibilities and alternatives—with what is not the case and could never be the case, with what is not the case but could be the case, with what should have been the case, and so on. (64)

3 Natural narratology and fictionality epitomize a more general trend that can best be described by the will to take narrative studies beyond the domain of literature and show how narrativity is applicable to all aspects of human lives.

4 These two concepts also emphasize how major figures of these narrative studies have stopped, at least temporarily, devoting their attention to the study of how reality infiltrates fiction and have moved on instead to analyzing how the latter invades the former (although this is less true as far as Fludernik is concerned). This is all very interesting, but we are not any closer to a better understanding of how the two ontologies "cohabitate" within the same fictional space. And yet, this "cohabitation" has been a common feature of novels, and more particularly postmodern novels for quite a while now. This even pushed Linda Hutcheon to note that "[t]he most radical boundaries crossed […] have been those between fiction and non-fiction and—by extension—between art and life" (10). She typically and rightfully takes autofiction as an example since this must be the genre which has the most systematically tried to blur the lines between reality and fiction, perpetuating and above all intensifying a tradition initiated by the autobiographical novel: "challeng[ing] the life/art borders" and "play[ing] on the margins of the genre" (10).

5 Of course, some steps have been taken to deepen our understanding of the very nature of fiction, from a phenomenological (Jean-Marie Schaeffer's *Pourquoi la fiction*?) or a stylistic and rhetorical perspective (Dorrit Cohn's *The Distinction of Fiction*), or from both (Françoise Lavocat's *Fait et fiction*). But these studies primarily focus on the essential distinction between fact and fiction, not on what happens when these two ontologies meet within the same text. The phenomenological aspect is key as it is important to bear in mind that reading is both a mental and physical activity. Richard Saint-Gelais summed up these two simultaneous levels of experience, these "two modes of apprehension, one material, the other fictional" thus: "on the one hand, turning the page and searching for the first line of the next chapter; on the other, the almost imperceptible suspension of and resumed attention to the characters and their imaginary actions and temporal and spatial settings" (57). Contrary to Cohn who really restricts her analysis to what fiction can do that referential writing cannot, Schaeffer through his concept of "immersion" takes the "two modes of apprehension" into account. However, *Pourquoi la fiction* ? as its title indicates is first and foremost about what characterizes fiction and our reading of it. Lavocat's research embraces the full

spectrum of what we commonly regard as fiction, a fluctuating notion, especially as "[t]he unstable status of fiction shows clearly that the definition of its boundaries has societal and political stakes".[2] She devotes a great part of her book to the panfictionalist approach (see 59–115), an extreme offshoot of the narrative turn according to which every narrative attempt is fictional, even if it aims at recounting facts and real events. Furthermore, "she points out that when it comes to fiction and the fact/fiction polarity, there is no single consensus within the scientific community, far from it" (Schmitt, *Phenomenology* 51) and eventually considers fiction "as a game of crossing ontological borders" (Schmitt, *Phenomenology* 61). However, even if she openly and quite extensively addresses the issue mentioned at the beginning of this article, she does this mostly from the perspective of fiction and her focus remains on redefining fiction as opposed to factual narratives. Her book, similarly to Cohn's[3] and Schaeffer's, is an important contribution to fictionality studies, but while providing a very useful background to this study, it does not fully answer this article's programmatic approach: what *happens* when Napoleon meets a fictional character in a novel? And by extension, what does Napoleon *do* in a novel?

6 Why Napoleon? Because in *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, Marie-Laure Ryan famously used this example to illustrate a particular case in her extensive study of transuniverse relations: "a world in which Napoleon dies on St. Helena and successfully escapes to New Orleans is not possible, since it entails 'Napoleon did and did not die on St. Helena.' But there is nothing inconsistent about either one of these facts taken individually" (31). "There is nothing inconsistent" about the "fact" that Napoleon did not die on St. Helena from a fictional perspective of course. From a historical, thus a referential perspective, it is a different matter and many historians would argue that this "fact" is fully inconsistent with historical records. Additionally, the fact that Napoleon did or did not die on St. Helena radically impacts the perception readers have of this historical figure within a particular fictional context: A) he did die on St. Helena and readers will continue to regard the textual Napoleon as in keeping with the historical Napoleon, an extraneous referential figure imported into a fictional environment. B) he did not die on St. Helena and as the fiction proceeds on, textual Napoleon

and historical Napoleon will drift apart, the former losing its referential features and more or less becoming a character like any other. Of course, doing whatever one wants to do with Napoleon is part and parcel of what we commonly call poetic license, although, as demonstrated by the numerous legal cases spawned by ambiguous memoirs or autofictional texts, or more generally what Françoise Lavocat called "imperfect fictionality or abusive factuality" ("fictionnalité imparfaite ou factualité abusive" 282), this very license often faces serious obstacles in its handling of living persons. There is a fundamental difference between Ryan's case study and Emmanuel Carrère's ex-wife who refused to be included in his autobiographical text *Yoga*, [4] and between these two extremes lie many degrees of textualization of real human beings. John R. Searle takes a similar example to illustrate the difference between fiction and non-fiction. Focusing on a short quote from Iris Murdoch's *the Red and the Green* and comparing it to an extract from a *New York Times* article, Searle shows that despite rhetorical similarities, the author of the article is expected to comply with a certain number of rules, the most important criterion being whether her "assertion is defective" (12) or not. On the other hand, Murdoch's utterance

> is not a commitment to the truth of the proposition that on a sunny Sunday afternoon in April of nineteen-sixteen a recently commissioned lieutenant of an outfit called the King Edwards Horse named Andrew Chase-White pottered in his garden and thought that he was going to have ten more glorious days without horses. (12)

The novelist's assertions are not supposed to bear any relation to the "truth", they have no truth value, even in the framework of Realism. [5] Of course, including real persons (dead or alive) is set to undermine, or at least question the novelist's sense of creative freedom. It creates a problematic bridge between fiction and reality, one that entails responsibilities and a potential non-congruent response from some readers such as Emmanuel Carrère's ex-wife.

7 However, I am not interested in the legal dimension of this response and will "only" concentrate on how the reader fits this extraneous element within his experience of "playful, shared pretense" ("*feintise partagée ludique*", Schaeffer 102). Furthermore, as underlined by

Marie-Laure Ryan, contrary to what happens in phenomenal reality, there can be several versions of Napoleon in a novel, or more exactly any novelist can create her/his own version of the historical figure and most importantly, can choose to tamper with the historical facts and present readers with a much-altered version of a historical figure, which can be quite common in a uchronic novel. However, as altered as this figure can be, it is very often his/her "fate" that is changed whereas the psychological contours remain close to what is known about her/him, such as Charles Lindbergh in Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*. I will only consider the most faithful versions of these figures as they are the ones standing in stark contrast with their fictional environment and seemingly setting the two ontologies against each other.

8 Obviously, any realistic fiction, even more so any historical fiction (a term much more problematic than its common acceptance implies) tries to combine these two ontologies. In 1967, F. E. Sparshott, in his article entitled "Truth in Fiction", took the example of Napoleon before Marie-Laure Ryan did:

> Take first an extreme case, that of a historical novel. What is it that we are asked to imagine? Not that there was a man called Napoleon, for we know that there really was; nor that he escaped from Elba, for we know that he really did. Rather, we are asked to suppose that certain events in this well-known career took place in certain ways, although we do not know whether they in fact happened so or otherwise, or we may even know that they happened otherwise; or to suppose, that among these known episodes, others were interspersed that we know did not in fact take place. The world that we imagine contrives to be a world, and is the imaginary world it is, only because we supplement what the author tells us with what we remember of the actual world in which the real Napoleon lived. (4)

9 Several elements in this quote echo what has been developed above. First, more than fifty years ago, Sparshott asked a similar question to the one I am asking in this article, in a very different theoretical context: What is it that we are asked to imagine when Napoleon pops up in a novel? "What are we asked to imagine" is quite similar to "what type of experience does it create?" Put differently, he took into consideration the phenomenological dimension of this type of

hybridity at a time when such considerations were highly uncommon. Then, he investigates the modus operandi of the author's poetic license in historical novels and points out how this genre is a mix of fictional content and of information drawn from the readers' semantic memory ("only because we supplement what the author tells us with what we remember of the actual world in which the real Napoleon lived"). Although his article doesn't offer any concrete solution regarding how fictional and referential input cohabit and interact within this mostly fictional world, he had the merit of raising the issue and few theorists have picked up the gauntlet since then, quite surprisingly since the "issue" remains highly topical as historical novels have turned into Biofiction, a booming genre.

10 I would like to expand a little bit more on Sparshott's article, and focus on another quote, again relevant to the real/fiction dichotomy:

> The type of fiction most current is not the historical novel, but the novel in which a fictional character is placed in a familiar setting. We are not then asked to suppose (or imagine) that there is a place called London, for we know there is; nor that there is a Baker Street in London, for we may know that too. And we may well know without being told whereabouts in London Baker Street is; in fact, our full comprehension of the fiction depends on this knowledge. What we are asked to suppose is that in Baker Street there is a No. 221b (of which most of us do not know whether there is or not, although we do know where it would be if it existed), and that at No. 221b a Mr. Sherlock Holmes has lodgings (which we are quite sure is not the case). We are asked, in fact, to imagine that among the people we know move others we do not know, that among the streets with which we are familiar are others with which we are not familiar: we are invited to imagine in familiar places and their populations those changes, and only those changes, that the author postulates. If we make further changes, we have not succeeded in following the story that the author is telling. (4)

11 While, as mentioned before, Sparshott also turns his attention to historical novels and their potentially hybrid dimension, the "piece of reality" imported in the novel he surprisingly takes as an example here is not a historical figure or event but the type of topographical information almost any more or less realistic novel includes, historical or not, London and Baker Street in this specific case. First,

there is a fundamental difference between the representation of an actual city you have visited or even lived in and of one you have never set foot in. In the first case, you rely on your episodic memory, things you have actually seen or experienced, in the second case, you use your semantic memory, things you have learned. But there sometimes is a thin line between the two as a city you have seen represented in a book or even more so in a film can become part of your experience, hence the familiar feeling you have when you first go to New York, a city that is the setting of a substantial number of visual fictional works. Furthermore, Sparshott does not take into account the fact that mental images based on literary mimetic descriptions are highly unstable phenomena, and yet this has a tremendous impact on the way we visualize textual topographical information. In *What We See When We Read*, Peter Mendelsund writes that "[w]hat we *do not see* is what the author pictured when writing a particular book" (207) and claims that "[w]e take in as much of the author's world as we can, and mix this material with our own in the alembic of our reading minds, combining them to alchemize something unique" (207). In fact, Mendelsund undermines one of the most fundamental aspects of realism, its ability to recreate, or at least evoke the actual world by supposedly triggering off the corresponding visual imagery. Taking the example of Dickens's description of an industrial harbor in *Our Mutual Friend*, he demonstrates that mental representations of texts are ruled by a form of visual determinism and that in fact what we see when we read is what we have already seen when we don't read. Finally, it is important to note that even in the case of auto/biographical writings, what Ryan calls the "'language game' of nonfiction is not defined by the objective relation of the text to the world, but by the rules that govern the use of the text, and bind sender and receiver in a communicative contract" (Ryan, "Postmodern" 166). But the representation of the real is too wide a topic for this article and again I only want to deal with one specific aspect of it. Sparshott's long quote is nevertheless interesting first because it reveals that the mimetic process in historical fiction is far from simple, and above all that the inclusion of historical figures in a fictional context is the exact opposite of what he describes when we read a Sherlock Holmes story: "We are asked, in fact, to imagine that among the people we know move others we do not know, that among the streets with which we are familiar are others with which we are

not familiar." As a matter of fact, if we read a story in which Napoleon is described as taking part in events that never took place along characters who never existed, we are asked to imagine that among the people we do not know, move others that we know or at least know really existed.

12 But as opposed to Baker Street, Napoleon is not supposed to generate mental images but to conjure up historical as well as psychological content. This poses the problem of the nature of this fictional Napoleon and the type of space "he" creates within a fictional universe. The term "fictional Napoleon" can be interpreted in two very different ways: it can either be seen as a version of Napoleon that remains close to the known biographical data, *the* Napoleon almost everyone has a certain amount of knowledge about, or as a version that is literally fictional, not simply because it is included in a novel such as the first version but because it is hardly recognizable on account of his being transformed by the novelist's freewheeling imagination. As it turns out, there is always a bit of both as soon as you start imagining the historical figure's psychological life even if the latter fits what we know about this person's life. For instance, we know that Lincoln was greatly affected by the loss of his 11-year-old son Willie, but what George Saunders describes in *Lincoln in the Bardo* is a hyperbolic version of known facts. Very similarly, to take an example from another domain, *the* Lenny Bruce featuring in the TV series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* is cast in a historical mold so to speak, but because he becomes one of the main characters, or at least a recurring one, he is bound to depart from this mold and become something more than what we know about the nonfictional Bruce, something *different*. To put it differently, you never really know what goes on in a person's mind, as documented as her/his life might be and once you start delving into this psyche, you inevitably drift away from the historical and move deeper into the fictional.

13 At the very core of fiction, historical or not, lies creative freedom and its founding principle is that it "makes no claim to external truth, but rather, guarantees its own truth" and "[s]ince the text of fiction creates its own world, it is the sole mode of access to it. Unlike texts of nonfiction, fictional texts do not share their reference world with other texts" (Ryan, "Postmodernism" 167). But Ryan reminds us of another, even more important rule:

> Though the fictional text creates an autonomous fictional world, this world can present some degree of overlap with the real world. […] In historical novels, many of the propositions expressed by the fictional discourse happen to be true in reality; but this does not turn the text into a blend of fiction and non fiction. The primary reference world is the fictional world, and unless the narrator is unreliable, all the propositions expressed by the text yield truths about this world. But because propositions can be separately valued in different possible worlds, the real world may function as secondary referent. ("Postmodern" 167–68)

14 This is indeed an important rule, but a problematic one. Napoleon is an obvious case of "overlap", or at least of the "secondary referent" foraying into the "primary reference world", but as interesting as Ryan's observations may be, they do not tell us what the real outcome of this overlapping phenomenon is. Does the secondary reference world, as isolated and limited as its presence can be in a novel, retain its ontological integrity? In other words, does "Napoleon" remain Napoleon? Moreover, Ryan omits to differentiate between the multifarious ways the real world's presence can be felt in a novel: a reference to a person is not the same as a reference to a place, which is not the same as a reference to an event and so on. And of course, there is the obvious example of the metalepsis of the author, when authors pop up in their own fiction, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* being an obvious example. In the final analysis, this trope is nothing more than, again, the secondary reference world suddenly coming up to the fictional surface. Is the "John Fowles" in this novel *the* John Fowles? There is no better answer to this question than Brian McHale's:

> Intended to establish an absolute level of reality, it paradoxically relativizes reality; intended to provide an ontologically stable foothold, it only destabilizes ontology further. For the metafictional gesture of sacrificing an illusory reality to a higher, 'realer' reality, that of the author, sets a precedent: why should this gesture not be repeatable? What prevents the author's reality from being treated in its turn as an illusion to be shattered? Nothing whatsoever, and so the supposedly absolute reality of the author becomes just another level of fiction, and the real world retreats to a further remove. (197)

15 Strikingly enough, Dorrit Cohn offers a similar analysis:

> To me these ambiguous texts [ambiguous autobiographical novels for instance] indicate […] that we cannot conceive of any given text as more or less fictional, more or less factual, but that we read it one key or the other—that fiction, in short, is not a matter of degree but of kind, in first- no less than in third-person form. I hold to this position even in the face of the work that appears to challenge it most powerfully, a work Harry Levin called "the most extensive exercise in the first-person singular". I mean, of course, *À la recherche du temps perdu*. (35–36).

16 Thus, according to McHale or Cohn, there is no "overlapping", no foraying, no co-presence but simply a very no-nonsense either/or situation. Cohn directly contradicts Ryan according to whom "[i]f objects are inherently fictional or real, how can one explain the presence of historical individuals and real locations in a work of fiction?" (*Possible Worlds* 15). But Ryan fails to provide us with a clear notion of what the nature of this "presence" really is, which undermines her own analysis. Cohn also affirms that "fiction, in short, is not a matter of degree but of kind" which also contradicts Kai Mikkonen's view that instead of seeing fiction and nonfiction as polar opposites, we should consider "the relation between fiction and factual representation" as "one of degree, a matter of a continuum of hybrid forms and thereby affected by the possibility of constant fluctuation between the two" (294–95). Of course, what these "degrees" or this "constant fluctuation" might be from the perspective of the reader is never developed, or even broached as a matter of fact.

17 Cognitive psychologist Richard J. Gerrig famously updated one of the oldest adages of literary theory, Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief", by claiming that when we read fiction, we are not skeptical, quite the opposite we tend to believe that everything is true or plausible. He reverses Coleridge's truism and reveals that the real effort on the part of the reader is the "construction of disbelief" (240) which means that we do not need to willingly suspend disbelief since we naturally believe. Gerrig's conclusions have several consequences when we read a generically ambiguous text:

Reading any book *as* fiction is similar to a default position.

- It proves, if need be, that the nature of the text is determined by the position of the reader, and, much more often than not, "ambiguous" means fictional.
- If we decide to disbelieve, it takes an additional cognitive effort. (Schmitt, *Phenomenology* 61)

18 How can Gerrig's "construction of disbelief" contribute to solving the riddle of our fictional Napoleon? By keeping this concept in mind and calling on McHale's interpretation of the mechanisms of metalepsis again, we may now wonder what happens when the reader does not suspend disbelief while reading a supposedly fictional text in which historical figures appear. McHale's view is that once authors have entered their own fictional world, they are *contaminated* by the ontological environment and thus become fictional: "Fiction cancels the reality of the real, of the author. Reality is dissolved within fiction, which is in line with Gerrig's construction of disbelief. This leads us to what I would call '*The Purple Rose of Cairo* illusion'" (Schmitt, *Phenomenology* 61). Why *The Purple Rose of Cairo*? The film's plot hinges on transuniverse relations, as during the screening of a film, the main character, a cinema enthusiast, sees her favorite actor emerge from the black and white film she is watching, and literally from the screen, into her colorful, very real (to her, not to us viewers) world. Both worlds are logically impacted by this bold (and of course highly unlikely) move. Woody Allen's narrative strategy is to build his plot on the very principle of immersion and entertainingly and metaphorically show how fiction can deeply affect our lives ("It is only human to mistake the make-believe for the factual or to believe a lie", Mikkonen 293). Mikkonen playfully reminds us that fictional characters sometimes feel very real to us: "People also appropriate sayings, mannerisms, and behavior patterns from fiction, factual texts borrow narrative devices and metaphors from fiction, and sometimes real events are best described by figures of speech that refer to fiction" (293). This is undeniably true but this does not contradict McHale's logic: if an element crosses an ontological border, the screen in this case, it irremediably is contaminated and the black and white character finds colors in his new reality. Of course, Allen's character goes in the opposite direction of our fictional Napoleon: whereas the former moves from fiction to "reality", the latter does exactly the opposite. And yet, it is my contention than in both cases,

there can be no cohabitation, only *contamination* to use Cohn's own very apt terminology, and one becomes the world one enters. For instance, to take again the example of how characters influence our own personalities or decisions, it is important to remember that these very influences, *imported from* fiction, are no longer fictional once they become either actionable behavior or part of our psychological profile. A more extreme case: if you start acting like a superhero and jump off a roof, there will soon be a painful *reality check*. It is in no way different in the other configuration, since when "historical persons […] interact with fictional characters", they quite logically "perform actions that they could not have performed in 'real life', since these actions link them with invented characters. Hence, they are fictionalized". [6] Schaeffer's "fictionalization" is quite similar to what I mean by "contamination": the nature of the element imported is drastically altered, so much so that it bears little resemblance to the original version. Even the most genuine version of Napoleon—a highly questionable assertion as how can a man dead for several centuries be similar to his evocation in a novel published so longer after his demise?—will have to comply with the rules of the primary, and *only* reference world. Fictional Napoleon is not real Napoleon, at best he is a fictional ghost of the referential one.

19 We should also bear in mind that any hybrid proposition, whether tenable or not, requires a lot of attentional energy and that "once the reader has established a prevalent perspective, he tends to persevere with it as long as possible" (Fludernik 20). Indeed, "we normally avoid mental overload by dividing our tasks into multiple easy steps" and abide by "the law of least effort" (Kahneman 38). The principle of contamination is a direct consequence of this cognitive reality; to some extent we cognitively surrender to the dominant ontology and it is through the highly distorting prism of the latter that we perceive these exogenous elements, such as Napoleon, or more exactly "Napoleon".

20 To conclude, there are by and large two schools of thought when it comes to the overlapping of fiction and nonfiction and they are very well summed up by Mikkonen:

> Radical forms of segregationism think that fiction is pure imagination without truth, that fiction has no ontological status, while radical

> integrationism assumes that there is no genuine ontological difference between fiction and true representation [...]. The segregationist ontology argues that fiction can put forward true statements—but does not need to do so—*only* about imaginary beings (the truth value of a proposition may only be assigned separately for each possible world). Fiction does not therefore equal lying but involves nonexisting or nonactualizable entities. (303)

21 I have adopted in this article a clear stance in favor of "segregationism" even if the type of segregationism I feel close to is not based on the belief that "fiction is pure imagination without truth, that fiction has no ontological status". Fiction does have an "ontological status", but one that is fundamentally distinct from reality. This difference conjures up Deleuze and Guattari's brilliant observation that "art does not think less than philosophy, but it thinks through affects and percepts" ("*L'art ne pense pas moins que la philosophie, mais il pense par affects et percepts*" 64). I simply believe that each of these two ontologies "swallows up" and "contaminates" any element imported from the other ontology. It was my purpose to argue that fiction can actually involve existing or "actualizable" entities, such as Napoleon, but once the latter is *integrated into* its new environment, it loses its reality and becomes part and parcel of the immersion experience and of a new language game. To answer a question previously asked—what does Napoleon do in a novel?—, "Napoleon" does exactly what fictional characters do: it is one of the tools aimed at creating a fictional experience.

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NOTES

1 What follows is an updated and modified version of the concept of *contamination* as presented in Schmitt (2017, 60–65) and Schmitt (2020, 4).

2 “Le statut instable de la fiction montre bien que la définition de ses frontières a des enjeux sociétaux et politiques” (12; translations from French texts are my own unless stated otherwise).

3 To be fair, Cohn does address the question of embedded “external references” and provides an answer that has deeply influenced my own approach: “These imaginative manipulations of more or less well-known facts highlight the peculiar way external references do not remain truly external when they enter a fictional world. They are, as it were, contaminated from within, subject to what Hamburger calls ‘the process of fictionalization’” (15). However, as indebted as I am to these remarks, Cohn does not explore any further this process of contamination.

4 <www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2020/11/26/controverse-autour-de-yoga-d-emmanuel-carrere-je-ne-veux-pas-etre-ecrite-contre-mon-gre-affirme-helene-devynck_6061254_3260.html>.

5 Also, when it comes to a novel’s so-called relation to *some* truth, we should keep in mind that “a novel may be full of independently verified facts, while a biography may be based on unfounded claims and controversial interpretations” (Ryan, “Postmodernism” 166).

6 “*Les personnes historiques qui interagissent avec les personnages fictifs accomplissent des actions qu’elles n’ont pas pu accomplir ‘dans la vie réelle’, puisqu’elles les mettent en relation avec des personnages inventés. De ce fait, elle se trouvent fictionnalisées.*” (Schaeffer 140).

RÉSUMÉS

English
Richard J. Gerrig revisited one of the most persistent myths of literary theory, Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief” to point out that, contrary to what the English poet believed, our natural proclivity is not to disbelieve, but to believe that everything is true, even fiction. He reversed Coleridge’s concept and revealed that the real effort on the part of the reader is the “construction of disbelief” when one reads fiction; we do not need to willingly suspend disbelief since we naturally believe. But then what happens when one reads a novel in which real historical figures such as Napoleon are mentioned, or even used as characters? The best way to answer this question is to adopt similar conclusions as the ones reached by Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* regarding authors who project themselves into their fiction, metalepsis of the author in other words: “the supposedly absolute reality of the author becomes just another level of

fiction, and the real world retreats to a further remove." Thus, when authors enter their fiction, they become fictional themselves and reality is *dissolved* within fiction. I argue in this article that when a real person enters a fictional space, she or he is *contaminated* by its ontological environment, that is to say fiction.

Français

Richard J. Gerrig a revisité l'un des mythes les plus tenaces de la théorie littéraire, la fameuse « suspension consentie de l'incrédulité » de Coleridge, afin de démontrer que, contrairement à ce que le poète anglais croyait, notre propension naturelle n'est pas d'être incrédule, mais de croire que tout est vrai, même dans la fiction. Il a ainsi inversé le concept de Coleridge et révélé que l'effort de notre part consiste réellement à « construire l'incrédulité » lorsque nous lisons des romans ; il n'est pas nécessaire de suspendre l'incrédulité car nous sommes naturellement crédules. Mais que se passe-t-il lorsque nous lisons un roman dans lequel une figure historique telle que Napoléon apparaît, ou est même utilisée en tant que personnage ? Le meilleur moyen de répondre à cette question est d'adopter des conclusions similaires à celles auxquelles Brian McHale est parvenu dans *Postmodernist Fiction* concernant les auteurs qui se projettent dans leur propre fiction, les métalepses de l'auteur en d'autres termes : « la supposée réalité absolue de l'auteur devient juste un autre niveau de fiction, et le monde réel s'éloigne encore un peu plus. » Ainsi, lorsque les auteurs rentrent dans leur fiction, ils deviennent eux-mêmes fictionnels and leur réalité est *dissoute* dans la fiction. Dans cet article, je défends la thèse selon laquelle lorsqu'une personne réelle est incluse dans un espace fictionnel, elle est *contaminée* par son environnement ontologique, c'est-à-dire la fiction.

INDEX

Mots-clés

contamination, ontologie fictionnelle et non fictionnelle, relations trans-univers, suspension de l'incrédulité, construction de l'incrédulité

Keywords

contamination, fictional and nonfictional ontology, transuniverse relations, suspension of disbelief, construction of disbelief

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“The texture of et cetera” — Synchronizing with the Blurry Real in 21st Century Artists’ Novels (Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Kate Zambreno)

« The texture of et cetera » — *Synchroniser le réel dans trois romans d’artistes du* XXI*e siècle (Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Kate Zambreno)*

Yannicke Chupin

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PLAN

TEXTE

1 How do you capture the living tissue of the present moment while eschewing the problem of illegibility? This is the question posed by a certain class of 21st century novels which are concerned with both creation and the contemporary reality. As Peter Boxall writes in his monograph on the 21st century novel, our reality is “difficult to bring into focus, and often only becomes legible in retrospect” (1). Borrowing the visual imagery of train scenes from Sartre’s essay on *The Sound and the Fury*,[1] the critic argues that “the place we are occupying at any given time is a lateral blur, which resolves into a picture only when we have left it behind, as it fades into the distance” (2). Experiencing the contemporary means failing to discern it distinctly and tasting instead its blurry and unregimented texture. But “blurry” is not a word that fits with the novel’s expected function of enhancing our perception of reality. How then can the novel reorient that sense of failure and revise traditional generic

constraints so as to better capture our fleeting sense of the present moment?

2 This question encompasses another notion: the rise of the nonfictional in postmillennial novels. As early as 2003, Ben Marcus praises writers like John Haskell, David Markson or John d'Agata for relieving fiction from the "burden of unreality, […] the nasty fact that *none of this ever really happened* that a fiction writer daily wakes to" (Marcus 2003). When fiction sidetracks the story to redirect its attention to the reality out of which it was born, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction narrows and more creative possibilities arise. In *Reality Hunger*: A *Manifesto*, David Shields famously proposed an *ars poetica* for a group of avant-garde artists "who are breaking larger and larger chunks of 'reality' into their work" (3). An "artistic movement" is forming, Shields claims, remarkable in its "deliberate unartiness": "a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real" (5). Not long after, Jonathon Sturgeon hailed the emergence of a new kind of novels that dramatizes the "lure" of the real while laying bare the problems of literary creation in our contemporary world. A 21st century version of the *Künstlerroman* is emerging, Sturgeon writes, that "eschews the entire truth vs. fiction debate in favor of the question of how to live or how to create" (Sturgeon 2014). Sturgeon's formulation—to live or to create—emphasizes the life-art dichotomy that has traditionally represented the two activities as utterly distinct if not incompatible. Even though avant-garde practices in the early 20th century attempted to subsume the art-life conflict into one unique modality (Bürger), the divide remains central in many a novel on creation in the 20th century. À *la recherche du temps perdu* is a supreme example, as the novel dramatizes the two irreconcilable selves of a writer, the social one and the creative other, who parasite one another: "Un des moi, celui qui jadis allait dans les festins des barbares qu'on appelle les dîners en ville […], avait gardé ses scrupules et perdu la mémoire. L'autre moi, celui qui avait conçu toute son œuvre, en revanche, se souvenait" (Proust 617). [2] The long-held myth of solitary creation is also what first drives the narrator in Sheila Heti's novel, *How Should a Person Be* (2010), to defer art in favor of life. Sheila, a young writer who has been commissioned by a theater company to write a play

about women today, exposes her dilemma in terms that recall Marcel Proust's: either you retire from the world and write—"*it is time to just go into a cocoon and spin your soul*"—or you live your social life and don't write—"I neglected this plan in favor of hanging out with my friends every night of the week" (5). But Heti's protagonist fails to integrate at this stage that such a division of the subject is a romantic fiction to overcome. "La littérature […], ça se fait toujours avec de la 'vie'", Roland Barthes wrote (59). This simple fact is what enables the French philosopher to start his *Vita Nova*, a late-life phase that he defines as a project combining the reality of his social commitments, including his contract as a Professor at Collège de France, and his desire to write a novel. The project will materialize in a series of lectures now collected in *La Préparation du roman*.

3 In the 21st century, a new generation of novelists, among whom Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Jenny Offill, Tao Lin or Kate Zambreno, to cite only a few, do not hold back from integrating the reality of their lives within their work, exploring the complex articulation of life and creation, not by delineating the life and adventures of a fictional subject as the traditional *Künstlerroman* would do, but rather by focusing on the everyday texture of the writing-and-living process. [3]

4 In such novels, the articulation of how to live *and* to create can then be regarded as the matrix of the literary object to come. The novel becomes a laboratory where to explore the real in relation to the advent of creation. The dynamics of such novels do not rest so much on the generic scenario of plot development but rather on the unfurling of live thoughts about being and creating in the contemporary world. In such novels, as Daniel Katz writes of Lerner's novel, "personal experience […] is itself indistinguishable from theorizing about the aesthetic" (6). Their narrators are also painfully aware of the irreducible mediation of any written transcription of the real: "What I really wanted to write was my present tense, which seemed impossible" (5), notes the narrator of *Drifts*, a novel by Kate Zambreno that struggles to x-ray the present moment. "How can a paragraph be a day, or a day a paragraph?" (5), she continues, revealing the incommensurability of real time and textual forms. In Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*, the narrator is a poet who promises himself he "will never write a novel" (65) and as Lerner later specifies in an interview "it's because [Adam] can't imagine writing

prose that could manage to capture all the noise and irreducible contingency of the real" (Rogers 234). In *How Should a Person Be*, Sheila Heti retraces her narrator's itinerary from struggle with the commissioned play to a reorientation towards a "Novel From Life", the subtitle for her actual novel, a nonce form [4] spiraling out from the record of real-life moments spent in conversation with fellow artists.

5 This article aims to look at the strategies used by such writers to transcribe the elusiveness of the present moment within their creative work. The focus is on three novels that span a decade of fictional self-writing in the early 21st century: *How Should a Person Be? A Novel from Life* (2010) by Sheila Heti, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), by Ben Lerner, and *Drifts* (2020) by Kate Zambreno. Starting with an analysis of the creative struggle around the transcription of the real, it then looks at how "live records" of the real weave their way into the narrative structure of the novel. It finally observes how the pursuit of a genre-codified literary object is eventually redirected towards the quest for new forms and structures that assimilate the novel to a formal possibility to a "formal possibility" rather than a literary genre (Kurnick 228). [5]

"Life's white machine"

6 In Ben Lerner's first novel, Adam Gordon is a young American poet spending a year abroad on a prestigious fellowship during which he is concerned with the dead end of literary writing: how to capture the immediacy of the real without reducing the texture of our days to an artificial narrative? The ruminations of the budding writer embed within the fictional framework a reexamination of one of the prevailing theories bequeathed by structuralism, the fatal inadequacy between the word and the world. The choice is either the conventional narrative that flattens any salience of the real, or the accretion of details that weave the real feel of the present moment but whose written record deprives the text of any "intrinsic content":

> These periods of rain or periods between rains in which I was smoking and reading Tolstoy would be, I knew, impossible to narrate and that impossibility entered the experience: the particular texture of my loneliness derived in part from my sense that I could only share it, could only describe it, as pure transition, a slow dissolve

> between scenes, as boredom, my project's uneventful third phase, possessed of no intrinsic content". (63–64)

7 How to depict a moment whose essence lies in its evanescence? In Kate Zambreno's *Drifts*, the narrator accumulates inchoative notes circling around that crux: "The problem with dailiness—how to write the day when it escapes us" (75–76); "how [others] deal with the vastness and ephemerality of the day" (158). The narrators of *Drifts* and *Atocha*, both failing to transform their feel of the present moment into communicative language, echo Rilke's solipsistic plea in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, as recorded by Zambreno in her book: "My god, if any of it could be shared! But what would it be then, what would it be? No, it is only at the price of solitude" (*Drifts* 32). In retrospect and in writing, dailiness, repetition, the feeling of the ambient real, the flickering texture of evanescent moments can only read as transitional, as "a dissolve between scenes" (*Atocha* 64).

8 In one of those early "scenes", Adam explores the very Woolfian "moments of being" that escape the framework of novels. Recalling his morning routine in Madrid, the narrator struggles with the description of moments of enhanced reality whose existence depends upon nothing else but an acute awareness of life's ineffable continuum. The situation is not comparable with the epiphanies cherished by modernism; instead of an isolated moment of ecstatic radiance puncturing the arc of a narrative, it consists in the infinite series of acute perceptive instants of the close-grained texture of reality. Such experience, heightened by "hash and tobacco", results in the text in a list unfurling present, past and prospective sensations and memories (15–16), before surrendering to the near-impossibility of their articulation: "I would feel […] most intensely love for *that other thing*, the sound-absorbent screen, life's white machine, shadows massing in the middle distance, although that's not even close, the texture of et cetera itself" (16). The "sound-absorbent screen" and "life's white machine" here seem to suggest not the "white noise" of a self alienated by the external pervasiveness of technology or politics, but some kind of immersive environment for the self, that unfurls an indistinct but intensely present form of reality yet unrecorded, shadowy, hardly legible, like the lateral blur on

the window of a moving train, and whose sight or feel is a challenge to proper description: "although that's not even close" the narrator admits (64). The phrase "life's white machine" is borrowed, like the novel's title, [6] from John Ashbery, the narrator's favorite poet. It somehow translates in our context into the mechanical and unqualifiable substance of everydayness. [7] A delineation of feelings or cherished objects from the past that attempts to capture that feel of experience in the text is eventually subsumed into Adam's final rephrasing: "the texture of et cetera itself." "Et *cetera*" or, in Jacques Derrida's term, "the abyss at the heart of things [...], which in one go swallows everything into its gulf" (285), is a remarkable phrase precisely because it first reads as a non-word, the negligible remainder, a drab expedient for what translates in English into "the other things", and in this context into the accretion of all of the unspecified in life that does not fall into the temporal structures of the narrative. In its abbreviated form, "etc." concludes many sentences in *Atocha*, when the narrator simply leaves a sentence hovering *in medias res*, not bringing it to full resolution. [8] But in this passage, the word is fully developed. Thus foregrounded, the Latin phrase textually exposes the challenge of seizing in language that residual piece of the real just before it is falsified by representation, before "it falls under the rules of Aristotle and fails to make contact with the real" (64). If "the other things" fail to be actualized in prose—they can never be named without losing touch with the elusiveness that characterizes their experience—their presence is manifested by the Latin phrase, which materializes their ghostly existence on the page and activate the "poetics of virtuality" (Katz 2). What if the novel, then, could salvage that indistinct blur —"these other things"—from oblivion? What if one could consider them as the epic moments of a text while the eventful moments of life became the mere "ligaments" between them? Is such a novel possible and is it legible? Didn't Karl Ove Knausgaard have such a strategy in mind when he wrote *My Struggle*? In a review cunningly entitled "Each cornflake", Lerner observes that the inclusiveness of Knausgaard's attention is important because "it is less interested in the exceptional life than in the way any life can feel exceptional to its subject" (Lerner 2014). The questions on the poetics of the novel that *Atocha* embeds within its fictional structure are typical of what Nicholas Dames (2012) and then Mitchum Huehls (2015) identify as

"post-theory theory novels": novels that display an awareness of post-structural theoretical concepts that are not used to close the text against itself as was often the case a few decades earlier, but that are instead put to creative use in order to build rather than deconstruct, to compose rather than decompose.

9 In all three novels discussed in this article, the narrators' fantasy of capturing in prose the "texture of et cetera" bespeaks the desire of a new class of novels to find their own way to chart a real that exists beyond the limits of the text. The three novels borrow from the canonical genres of the *Künstlerroman*: they all expose the maturing development of a young writer grappling with a literary project, but also diverge from the generic expectations of the genre by attempting to fuse together the life and the art, the everydayness and the poetics of the novel. Like the contemporary fiction analyzed by Pieter Vermeulen in *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel* (2015), a book that focuses on the new possibilities offered by the novel's elasticity in the 21st century, the three novels "die into form" (Vermeulen 1, 4), which means they depart from "the novel as codified genre to explore what forms of life and affect emerge after the dissolution of that genre—a dissolution that these novels explicitly stage" (4).

Live records

10 One recurring thematic element in all three novels is the focus on the instruments that help register live fractions of the real. Cameras and photographs, notebook jottings, instant messages, email correspondence find their way into the thematic and narrative structure, all recording fragments of the narrator's interaction with the real. In accordance with what Shields sees as the "deliberate unartiness" of the "raw [...] seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored" (5) material of a new literary movement, the three novels display keen attention to the means of transcribing the real into their work.

11 One of the structuring devices of Sheila's novel is the record of actual conversations. In an interview with *The Paris Review* (La Force), Heti stresses the influence of Kenneth Goldsmith's *Soliloquy* on her writing, one of the conceptual poet's most famous experiments,

consisting in a 488-page unedited transcription of every single word he spoke within a week in April 1996. In the second section of *How Should a Person Be?*, Sheila's attention is drawn to an expensive tape recorder displayed in the window of an electronics shop; the instrument changes her methodology and reorients the forms of the commissioned play she has been failing to write. Sheila starts recording her conversations with the visual artist Margaux Williamson, focusing the exchange on her difficulties with the play (59). The long sessions she later spends transcribing the exchanges act as a turning point in her artistic maturation: "It wasn't my play, but it felt good. […]. I felt closer to knowing something about reality, closer to some truth" (158). Sheila soon extends the use of the tape-recorder to her analyst, other fellow artists, friends and a shopkeeper. The seemingly verbatim sections of the novel, which run over about a third of the 306-page novel, give a sense of the "blur of the real" through the unfiltered real-life conversation, that includes redundancy, hyperbolic marks of affect, speech-fillers, marked pauses and unproductive retorts, like "No. I can't think of anything" (70). But unlike Goldsmith's *Soliloquy*, the conversations are not linearly transcribed in dense margin-to-margin format. Somehow haunted by the play Sheila is not writing, they are disposed in the form of theatrical cues (name of the speaker centered, cues beneath), and interspersed with italicized descriptions looking just like stage-directions, recording either bodily reactions ("*Misha shrugs*" 155), feelings ("*Margaux grows very embarrassed as they walk away*" 111) or rhythm ("*Pause*" 106). The conversations are also organized into chapters, whose titles revive the Picaresque tradition of the episodic structure ("At the Point Where Conviction Meets the Rough Texture of Life"; "Fate Arrives Despite the Machinations of Fate"; "Sheila wants to quit"; "Sheila wants to live"; "Sheila Wanders in New York", etc.). What the novel boldly displays is the cohabitation of two contradictory impulses: that of canonical literary structures (the classical five-act play, the origins of the modern novel) combined with the unedited transcript of the real. Another form of real-time exchanges lies in the transcription of technology-based messages, whether typed mails or voicemails. Again, the everydayness quality of most exchanges seems to exclude rephrasing and foster immediacy but on the other hand all the messages—either from Sheila or from her correspondents—are disposed in numbered paragraphs:

> Margaux emails Sheila…
> 1. there was a robbery and they're blaming it on me.
> 2. i can't leave the neighborhood! i haven't felt this at home in decades!
> 3. legally i don't think they can make me leave but they live above me and work below me and my tolerance is gone. (35)

In several interviews, [9] Sheila Heti says the numbers refer for her to the numbered verses in the Bible. The transcripts emphasize a tension between faithful speech transcription, including nonmeaningful utterances, and the return to the roots of Western literature in the forms of highly canonized models, here the numbered verses of the Bible. Set against a traditional or sacred structure, the roughness of the transcripts marks Sheila's liberation from the canonized ideals of beauty: "I had spent so much time trying to make the play I was writing—and my life, and my self—into an object of beauty" (13). [10] While the narrator first portrays Sheila as enslaved to the aestheticization of both her creative work and life, the transcribed emails and recordings leave room for the gritty texture of the real. As Myra Bloom observes, this is true of the general structure of the work, as the novel is partly "inflected by the conventions of the Künstlerroman" but its formal experimentation and resistance to aestheticization embody "the novel's spirit of radical definition" (179, 177).

12 In the three novels he has written so far, Ben Lerner provides another take on the record of the real by repurposing real pieces of art and writing in his narrative. Paintings, film stills, photographs, poems and fragments of articles he published elsewhere are repurposed in the fictional framework of the novel. *Atocha* also embeds a digitally mediated record of a live conversation. In chapter two, a virtual exchange between the narrator and his friend Cyrus, then in Mexico, runs for 10 pages (68–78):

> Me: you there? what's up in xalapa
> Cyrus: Yeah. Went on a kind of trip this weekend. Planned to camp.
> Me: i was going camping here for a while.
> Me: hello?
> […]
> (*Atocha* 68)

13 The small-talk that initiates the conversation soon turns to the narrative of a tragic event Cyrus experienced on a trip where he saw a young woman drown. The bare and direct style of instant-messaging first contrasts with the involuted sentences of an otherwise voluble narrator. But the digital format makes the reading experience reflexive itself. Patrick Hayes gives an insightful reading of that passage as a counterexample to the widespread idea that the immediacy of experience can only be disclosed by voice. The passage, embedded within a novel, foregrounds the glitches of instant-messaging by refusing to exclude interruptions, the mishandling of typographic norms, the overlapping and time-delayed cues, all of which fracture Cyrus' momentous narrative, threatening to break it. Instead, they make the accrued intensity of Cyrus' story and of Adam's attention even more palpable as the narrative progresses and moves towards its fatal conclusion. Hayes aptly connects this paradox to the reason why Adam loves the poetry of John Ashbery. By drawing your attention to the means by which your experience is mediated, "Ashbery's poems allow you to attend to your attention, to experience your experience, thereby enabling a strange kind of presence", Adam reflects further in the novel (*Atocha* 91). The stumbles in Cyrus' discourse enhance that "strange kind of presence", both activated and frustrated by the many ruptures in the text. As the instant-messages near the tragic outcome of Cyrus' experience, his messages grow longer, while Adam's interruptions become rarer, shorter and repetitive ("jesus", "jesus", "fuck", "no", "jesus, man", "jesus I am sorry you", 72–73) suggesting both his heightened attention and rising anxiety, that are in turn experienced by the reader. The extract is one of the many instances when reflexivity heightens our feel of the real.

14 In Zambreno's novel, another instance of the avid pursuit of the real in fiction resides in the narrator's obsessional note-taking habit. The self-reflexive novel follows a diaristic form, although elliptical and loosely dated ("early in October", "in the beginning of the month", "at the end of September", etc.), stitching together years of scribbled notes, jottings, memos, printed out emails, Post-it notes, all of which were rearranged by the narrator in her notebooks before being turned into the fragments that compose the book. *Drifts* is a 327-page novel composed of short entries (ranging from one short paragraph to three pages of text), surrounded by large areas of blank space, and

occasionally interspersed with uncaptioned photographs, either personal or historical, but connected to the text surrounding them. The title of the first part, “Sketches of Animals, and Landscapes” is borrowed from a drawing by Albrecht Dürer. “Sketches” is an apt descriptor of the provisional nature of the narrator’s notes, and “landscapes” is also in the book one of Zambreno’s idiosyncratic manners to designate the backdrop against which her meandering thoughts are delineated. The narrator, a published novelist whose next book is under contract, confesses early in the book her fascination “with the writing one is doing when one is not writing” (6), by which she means memos, email correspondence and jottings of all kinds. Her obsession for provisional writing forms extends to the letters and notebooks of well-known authors and artists, the “bachelor notetakers” (10), “my hermit bachelors” (206) as she calls them, among whom Rainer Maria Rilke, Robert Walser, Franz Kafka, Albrecht Dürer, all central in *Drifts*, but also J. M. Basquiat, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Joseph Cornell, Chantal Ackerman and many others. The books and art the narrator relishes and cites in *Drifts* are not the canonized oeuvres of master artists but their diaries, papers and sketches, their own unfinished and unpolished record of time passing.

15 The evanescent nature of the narrator’s records finds a counterpart in a simple syntax that unfolds narrative segments in the present tense, descriptive or inchoative verbless clauses about everydayness, about the weather and changing seasons, and about her desire to write “Drifts”, “a novel that contains the energy of thought”, or “a drifty essay on time” (230).

16 The narrator’s keen attention to slow-paced elemental changes in the texture of time appears in the very first pages of the book where she exhumes a letter from Rilke to his wife. In it, the poet notes with intense attention the “various tones and textures” of three branches of heather his wife enclosed in the envelope (3). Further in the book, a double spread of forty photographs of Genet, the narrator’s dog, gives a visual rendition of that quest for art forms that could capture the slippery nature of time (40–41). The dog is seen lying on the couch; the sequential plate of vignettes first evokes the unprocessed and pre-edited nature of photographers’ contact sheets, but because the subject hardly moves from one picture to the other, the

infinitesimal changes in the dog's position also recall Victorian chronophotography and how it fragments tiny sections of time over multiple photographic exposures of animals to better understand movement. The spread may even read like the visual version of the "texture of et cetera" that Adam Gordon is after in *Leaving the Atocha Station*. For pasted all together, what these photographs record is no dramatic moment, but quasi-inertia, or the ligaments that follow and precede "sharply localized occurrences in time" (*Atocha* 64), the "et cetera" of life, moments that contain nothing but themselves. This repetitive exposure to the unfolding of time is one of the narrator's devices to "layer time": "If I took a photograph of the same tree every day […] it would be about the taking of the picture, the process and the ritual, a way of marking the day and layering time, which is increasingly what the project of art is for me", the narrator notes (158). Such attention to the "marking" of time in writing sheds light on the writer's disarray when another writer of "so-called autofiction with a half-million dollar advance on his last book, wins the so-called genius grant" (75). The book is easily recognized as 10:04, Ben Lerner's second novel, which encloses within its plot the history of the generous advance that prompted its publication. The narrator's sour note might first denote the competitivity of the New York literary scene, but the real concern is philosophical and linked again to time: "How did this writer have the confidence to write his novel seemingly in real time over a year?" she wonders. The question reflects the narrator's obsession with the measurement of time and how it imperceptibly changes you before you even know it, so that synchronizing the self you write with the self you are is impossible. Having for her part failed to find a publisher for her previous manuscript, the narrator is disturbed by the distance that now alienates her from that book: "What would it be like, I wondered, thinking of the genius grant winner, to write a self in the time you were the self you wrote about in your book, so you were sure it was you?" (137); in other words, is it even possible to write a novel in real time?

"Decreation"

17 In the three novels discussed, narrators are seen initially searching their way to the creation of codified literary objects that fail to

materialize, whether a long research-driven poem on the Spanish Civil War's literary legacy in *Atocha* (23, passim), a play about women for a feminist theater company in Heti's novel (39–47, *passim*), or a contracted novel on time in *Drifts* (11, 13, 160, *passim*).

18 By exploring new forms to encode the real in language, all three narrators eventually drift farther from the literary object first considered. In fact, all three novels mark the authors' gradual disengagement from the contracted work towards a form that frustrates generic expectations but is more open to accidental and heuristic development. The situation is as described by Pieter Vermeulen: the perpetual anxiety over the obsolescence of generic forms is artistically productive as it offers forays into new forms of writing (1–18). Sheila, the narrator of Heti's novel, morphs into Sheila Heti the author when she renounces the impossible play and produces instead a novel from "the rough texture of life" (21). What remains of the idealized commissioned play is the spectral form of a five-act structure superseded by the episodic structure of the Picaresque novel, delineating episodes that are in reality the preparatory stages of the novel to come, that is, the novel we are given to read, which eventually fuses historical and fictional authorship, the fictional Sheila and the empirical Sheila Heti.

19 Ben Lerner, a writer committed to poetry first and foremost, claims that he never thought he would write a novel until the novel was there: "part of what enabled me to write the novel was the fiction that I wasn't writing one: I was sitting down and writing prose for hours […] and I kept saying to myself: if I were writing a novel it might look like this" (interview 2011). In the actual novel, the long narrative poem that Adam must write as part of his fellowship program is set aside for the creation of more experimental forms of poetry that follow the rhythm of the narrator's encounters with the personal, social and political life in Madrid and results eventually in the production of a book. The process is reconducted into 10:04 where the six-figure contract obtained from the promise to turn a short story into a novel about fraudulent correspondence finally enables the advent of the book that now exists in the real world as 10:04.

20 All through Zambreno's novel, the narrator is under contract for a book called "Drifts" (5), which is, in words taken from the early stages of the novel, "a different book from the one I am trying to write now" (7). In the course of her writing, she compares her own difficulty to Kafka's complaints when trying to prepare a text for publication while his true desire is "to let a work take shape unforced" (13). Failing to write the present moment in a conventional novelistic form, she produces instead a book about "that fleeting feeling in the morning, of possibility" (325).

21 The narrators have shifted from the codified genre expected of them —by a theater company, a publishing house or an institutional program—to a unique form specific to their quests. The situation may recall what Anna Gibbs finds symptomatic of fictocriticism: "a way of writing for which there is no blueprint and which must be constantly invented anew in the face of the singular problems that arise in the course of engagement with what is researched" (Gibbs).

22 Scholars Rachel Saagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan provide an illuminating insight into that reorientation from product to process. The operating mode in *How Should a Person Be?*, they argue, is the twenty-first-century version of Roland Barthes' *La Préparation du roman*. Barthes insists that the writing process needs no withdrawal from the world. Instead, it requires his constant interaction with the real transcribed into writing through daily practice of notation, a word that should really be called "*notatio*", Barthes writes, as the word better transcribes the very gesture of taking note of the real, of extracting from the uninterrupted river of life a tiny segment and "mark" it ("marquer, isoler quelque chose dans ce flux ininterrompu", 61). His method relies on the accumulation of "*notulas*", simple one-word notes jotted down on bits of paper in the course of his activities, then expanded into "*notas*" transcribed on a notebook the next day (253). That layered inscription of the real is mirrored in both Heti and Zambreno's novels, whose narrators are both occupied in many instances at transcribing swiftly taken notes or recorded exchanges into preparatory material for a novel, as is Sheila in the following instance: "A feeling of my true freedom came up inside me, and I sat down before my computer and calmly transcribed the message Margaux had left me on the tape-

recorder" (157). As for the narrator in *Drifts*, she is constantly writing up, gathering, arranging, composing her notes into a notebook.[11]

23 Barthes was not interested in producing the novel itself but in its preparatory stages. "[J]e vais faire *comme si* j'allais faire un roman" (67), he writes in a section entitled "*Comme si*" (67–70) and the thought is echoed years later by Ben Lerner: "if I were to write dialog it might look something like this, if I were giving shape to something like a chapter it might have this kind of trajectory, and so on—but the condition of possibility for going on was reassuring myself that I wasn't actually writing a novel" (Loudis). The preparatory stages of the novel come to replace the fantasized literary novel. Making themselves and their writing available to the real rather than complying with codified expectations might correspond to what Zambreno calls "decreation",[12] one of the words she first uses to refer to the distinction between "working" and letting her work "take shape unforced", from her interaction with the real:

> But I am working, taking notes and thinking. Not just laziness, I've decided but what Blanchot calls *désoeuvrement*, translated variously as "inoperativeness", "inertia", "idleness", "unworking", or my favorite, "worklessness." A spiritual stance, more active, like decreation. The state where the writing of the fragment replaces the work (12).

"The state where the writing of the fragment replaces the work" might account for the creative process of the three novels considered. As in Barthes, all three narrators abandon the fantasy of the canonical work to focus instead on an "as-if" novel, and the preparatory stages become the novel. The fiction of the "self-begetting novel" (Kellman) is revisited in an era where the fictional often merges with the autobiographical, where the product resulting from a fictional process strangely extends beyond the fiction to exist in the world.

Conclusion

24 As observers of contemporary fiction have pointed out, the twenty-first century has fostered a "proliferation of novels that shift their foci toward the real, the thing, and presence, and away from the sign, word, and absence upon which postmodern fiction fixated" (Holland,

Succeeding Postmodernism 7). This is a point that this article means to further elucidate by examining three literary objects whose narrators are focused on the act of writing and thinking about the recreation of the grainy texture of our reality within a novelistic structure. What makes this collection of metafictional novels different from the metafiction of the late twentieth century is that unlike the elder practitioners of the genre, Lerner, Zambreno, Heti and other contemporary figures do not despair over the irreducible mediation of the real; the dramatization of a failure to write the real that concerned so many postmodern writers of metafiction appears in these novels as the initial step of the artist's maturation. The failure in their cases becomes generative of a new creative energy that finds its own form towards the rendition of the blurry and illegible real. Unlike Kenneth Goldsmith's unaltered transcription of real-life conversations, the record of the real (diaristic notes, conversations, etc.) is carefully crafted and embedded into the fictional framework so as to produce a new form of reality-effect: the narrator's efforts to make the real look real participate in the artistic maturation of a subjective voice grappling with the blurry real surrounding her. The hybrid form of each of these novels, that include poems, lists, digital forms of writing, integrates the high mediation of the real as a form of our contemporary reality, all the while drawing the reader's attention to the constructedness of the narrative. Because the text is both fictional and self-reflexive, the reader's reception oscillates between the critical response enabled by the metatextual commentaries and the affective response enabled by the fictional framework. This use of self-reflexivity is therefore not turned against itself and corresponds to what Mary K. Holland recently identified as "metafictive realism" (*Contemporary Realism* 55–60). The novels "provoke the *reader* into acts of reflection, less on the status of the text that on how *our ways of reading* the text translate to ways of reading and relating to the world" (*Contemporary Realism* 59). By having their narrators exposing and openly discussing their strategies to transcribe the real into fiction, the three novels capture the complex interaction of the narrator with the real and in turn provoke the reader into addressing her own subjective sense of the real.

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NOTES

1 P. Boxall refers to the English translation of an essay originally published by Sartre in 1939 after Faulkner’s novel was translated into French.

2 “The Private Life” by Henry James is another example. In this story, the novelist explores the divide between the man who creates and the one who socializes. In an early scene, after listening to the mediocre conversation of the author Clare Vawdrey, “the greatest (in the opinion of many) of our literary glories” (58) in the drawing-room of a Swiss Hotel, the narrator climbs to the writer’s room to take a look at the manuscript of a play he is writing for the actress Blanche Adney. What he finds there at the worktable is a double of the author immersed in his work, unresponsive, the private and silent counterpart of the social figure still engaged in table-talk in the drawing-room. “The Private Life” is not one of James’ ghost-stories that dwell in the supernatural, but a philosophical fantasy on the two halves that reside in the mind of creative author.

3 The distinction between the traditional *Künstlerroman* and the kind of artist’s novel we are discussing recalls the distinction made by Arnaud Schmitt in his definition of self-narration between the “life story (classic autobiography) and the self-story [that] requires different narratological tools and can be more inventive, less chronological” (Schmitt 130). All three novels concerned are effectively “self-stories” albeit the stories of creative selves.

4 A phrase borrowed from Brian Teare’s formulation commenting on *Rilke*’s *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (Teare 190) and associated with texts that have a specific form fitting their own occasion.

5 One of the theories quoted and explored further by Peter Vermeulen (2015, 3).

6 See Daniel Katz for an analysis of the title’s exact replication of the title of an Ashbery poem (320–321).

7 As Lerner explains, John Ashbery did not exactly originate the phrase "life's white machine" but borrowed it from a book by the poets Geoffrey G. O'Brien and Jeff Clark and used it as an epigraph to one of his poems (Interview 2013, 233).

8 See occurrences on pages 20, 28, 37, 39, 46, 56, 58, 71, 96, 102, 109, 136, 163, 179.

9 See for instance, Heti interviewed by Hoggart, Liz, 2013.

10 Myra Bloom rightly analyzes the novel's creative exacerbation of the contradiction between "a veneration of beauty and its unmasking", as for instance through the ambivalence of the character herself, "a writer and an intellectual […] incongruously modelled on celebrities like Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan". From such contradictions derives our awareness of the "massive ironic gap between Sheila's vacuous pronouncements and the implied commentary by the author" (Bloom 3).

11 See for instance: "as I sit writing up my notes in a crowded coffee shop" (87–88); "I sit at the bar and write up my notes from my walk into a notebook" (94); "as I am writing this, gathering up my notes", "moving around my notes from the fall" (186) and countless other examples.

12 The word decreation is also the title of a hybrid collection of pieces by Anne Carson, who borrows the word from the French philosopher Simone Weil. For Weil, decreation was a means "to get herself out of way so as to arrive at God" (167). In Carson's volume, decreation is akin to a creative spiritual posture that seeks to displace the self from the center of the work. In *Drift*s, the word reappears in two other instances where it echoes Weil's and Carson's references, meaning for the narrator "a going away from the self, preferring to tell other stories" and in a further example: "This decreation" becomes "This Complete overwriting of the self" (298).

RÉSUMÉS

English

Whether it is in the wake of a "*Return to the Real*" in visual arts" (Foster 1996), of "*Reality Hunger*" (Shields 2010), a number of novelists of the third millennium have shown an ever growing interest in accommodating the forms of the real into their fictions. For a certain category of novels, the fascination for the real translates into considerable changes brought to the novel's inherent relation with time. As shown by Peter Boxall, the speed and instantaneity that are specific to our 21st century seems to be

counterbalanced in a certain number of novels by an infinite attention to the slow passing moments of our everyday reality (2013, 1–18). This article focuses on three novels that revisit the forms of the Künstlerroman in the 21st century (Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, 2011; Sheila Heti, *How Should a Person Be? A Novel from Life*, 2012; Kate Zambreno, *Drifts*, 2020) and looks at the strategies used by their narrators to grasp the elusive nature of the transient real while in the process redefining the novel as a site where to explore formal possibilities rather than as a set of generic constraints.

Français

Que ce soit dans la continuité d'un certain « retour au réel » (Foster 1996) ou du « besoin de réel » (Shields 2010), un certain nombre de romanciers du troisième millénaire montrent un intérêt croissant pour la recherche de nouvelles formes susceptibles d'accueillir le réel dans le roman. Cette fascination pour le réel se traduit bien souvent par de profonds bouleversements de la relation au temps inhérente au genre romanesque. Comme le suggère Peter Boxall, la vitesse et l'instantanéité qui caractérisent notre XXIe siècle, semble chez certains romanciers contrebalancées par une attention infinie pour les instants ténus et insignifiants qui tissent notre existence. Le présent article se penche sur trois romans qui revisitent les formes du *Künstleroman* au XXIe siècle et examine les stratégies qu'il mettent en œuvre pour saisir la nature évanescente du réel, tout en repensant le roman comme un espace d'exploration de formes possibles plutôt qu'un ensemble de contraintes génériques.

INDEX

Mots-clés

le réel dans la fiction, le temps dans le roman, fiction du XXIe siècle, métafiction, Künstlerroman, processus créatif, Lerner (Ben), Zambreno (Kate), Heti (Sheila)

Keywords

the real in fiction, time and the novel, 21st century fiction, Künstlerroman, creative process, Lerner (Ben), Zambreno (Kate), Heti (Sheila)

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Off-Centring the Real in Postcolonial Fiction

Décentrer le réel dans la fiction post-coloniale

Arijana Luburić-Cvijanović

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PLAN

TEXTE

> The ground was right now not the ground, and the sky was not the sky, and lie was truth and truth was a shifting, slithering thing.
> Marlon James, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019)

The colonial and postcolonial real: a fragile balance

1 In her comprehensive study of colonialism, postcolonialism, and textuality, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, Elleke Boehmer reminds us of the close connection between Empire and the text. Empire was “represented by texts” and was itself “a textual exercise” (Boehmer 14). From official reports to personal diaries and travel writing, from scientific and newspaper articles to works of fiction, Empire was “expressed textually” (Boehmer 14). Even if it may appear a little outdated in view

of the current preference in critical and theoretical analyses for the latest theories, Edward Said's 1978 exploration of Empire's textual practices is invaluable here for its unsurpassed explanation of the role of text in the colonial project. Closely related to the cultural aspect of colonialism, "the so-called truthful text" as well as "the avowedly artistic (i.e. openly imaginative) text" (Said 21) served to disseminate colonial ideology by producing and imposing colonial representations of the world. Said elucidates in book-length detail that while ostensibly compiling and transmitting knowledge of the Orient or, by extension, any other colonised space, the colonial text systematically created an inferior phantasmal world, rationalising and justifying colonial rule. The colonial text offered fictional representations of a non-existent world that was constructed by means of "verbal 'image-making'" (Cobley 57) dictated by the existing power relations and the prevailing standards of the centre.
The language of the colonial text was, therefore, designed to articulate Empire's interpretations of subordinate worlds rather than their realities:

> [W]e need not look for correspondence between the language used to depict the Orient and the Orient itself, not so much because the language is inaccurate but because it is not even trying to be accurate. What it is trying to do, as Dante tried to do in the *Inferno*, is… to characterize the Orient as alien… (Said 71–72)

To achieve this, colonial texts, whose production partly coincided with the dominance of realist representations in European literatures, went well beyond the real and were closer to medieval fabulation than to literary and artistic realism or scientific objectivity.

2 Written by both visitors in colonised territories and those who only imagined them, colonial texts were similar in their world-creating strategies to *Imagines mundi*. These encyclopaedias fed into the need for the miraculous by imagining and describing distant lands from frequently uninformed perspectives, confirming the precedence of symbolic representations over empirical ones (Eco). The effect in either case was a blurred boundary between truth and falsehood as realities were overlaid by constructions of the real. From a long historical perspective, Umberto Eco's essay on the power of falsehood considers a tendency throughout human history to

collapse the border between the real and the unreal, and provides numerous examples of false beliefs that were the driving forces of history. Yet, while attempting to highlight the porousness of the truth/lie dichotomy, Eco cites beliefs that were not intended to cause harm. Contrary to them, colonial texts overwhelmed the reader with deliberate misrepresentations that promoted the colonial ideology. Even in the first half of the twentieth century, which witnessed a greater recognition of cultures outside Europe and the emergence of "European expressions of self-doubt", the nineteenth-century world-picture was for the most part undisturbed and "European sovereignty remained largely unquestioned, as did the cultural authority of the West" (Boehmer 133).

3 Because colonial writing admitted of no perspective other than its own—Western, European, white, and predominantly male—from its beginnings, postcolonial literature was driven by an urge to redefine the formerly colonised world by representing it from heterogeneous indigenous points of view. In other words, the oppressive textual practices of Empire, with consequences that reached far beyond matters of textuality, inspired a revisionary tendency that came to define early postcolonial writing. It restored fragments of lost histories, cultures, and voices, and dethroned the colonial real by offering fresh, because formerly unavailable, perspectives on colonised realities. Images of uniformly primitive societies with little or no history, culture, or social and political organisation were replaced by portrayals of rich, long-standing indigenous traditions, social and political hierarchies, and individualised characters. Admittedly, nativist postcolonial writing was at times predisposed to nostalgia and romanticisation, sometimes well before the period of decolonisation, which Solomon Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930) illustrates in its employment of "a nostalgic-romance mode to suggest that an inclusive, supra-tribal form of nationalism should prevail in southern Africa" (Walder 58). However, works by writers like Chinua Achebe assume a realistic approach to society to celebrate African histories and cultures without ignoring inner divisions, patriarchal oppression, or the economic disparity between urban and rural areas. Irrespective of their approach, early postcolonial responses to colonial representations expressed a preference for realism. However, it was not realism of the purely rational and linear kind that

came to dominate European literatures since the Enlightenment. It was a more inclusive brand of realism in which the real encompassed the worlds of myth, legend, and indigenous religions. Revived to assert the existence, value, and richness of precolonial cultures, and positive cultural difference, those traditions and their textual expressions also exposed an inclination towards questioning the strict division into the real and the unreal.

4 Subsequent postcolonial responses gradually developed from those early attempts to describe formerly colonised worlds from indigenous perspectives, yielding insight into other realities through fictional modes and genres that ranged from realism to magical realism, science fiction, and the Gothic. Conditioned in part by postcolonial cultural heterogeneity, the wide variety of approaches to the real has ensured a continued questioning of uniform colonial images of othered worlds. As the works discussed further in the text hope to show, the extraordinary diversity of postcolonial treatments of the real has remained unaffected by the gradual shift in postcolonial writing away from the oppositional strategy of writing back towards less antagonistic, yet equally critical, considerations of the political, economic, demographic, cultural, and other consequences of colonialism in the neocolonial world. The specific concerns of different stages in the development of postcolonial literature, of different postcolonial cultures and authors continue to find expression in both realistic and fantastic narratives. Due to a widespread scholarly interest in fantastic modes and genres, especially magical realism, and perhaps even a certain preference for them, as Sorensen's analysis of postcolonial realism suggests, they may be mistaken as default. Yet, realist postcolonial fiction demonstrates that no single narrative mode or genre should be automatically expected.

5 Postcolonial literature that employs the fantastic describes worlds where the dethronement of the binary real/unreal achieves subversive purposes. Postcolonial magical realism employs its distinctive duality to rewrite reality as one in which the real and the magical merge, mirroring the simultaneously fragmented and plural nature of postcolonial societies and identities. Postcolonial science fiction disrupts at one stroke the conventions of an essentially Western genre and the Western claim to scientific advances. The

postcolonial Gothic uses yet another Western genre to subvert the concepts of the rational and the explicable, and recast (post)colonial oppression as Gothic entrapment. In general, the fantastic in postcolonial writing emphasises cultural peculiarity or pride in cultural origins, particularly when it relies on indigenous traditions, reflects hybrid postcolonial realities and perspectives, and responds to Empire's obsession with rationality, objectivity, and logic.

6 As the following discussion hopes to demonstrate despite its unavoidable limitations in scope, postcolonial fiction in all its manifestations offers novel takes on the real and the logical. To illustrate it, the discussion considers a selection of works that are taken as good examples of different postcolonial approaches to the real, understood in its specific, though not always specified, historical, political, economic, and/or cultural contexts. The list of these approaches is far from exhaustive, but a more comprehensive one, involving allegory or irony, for instance, would require a book-length study. As flawed as any selection must be, this one attempts to be inclusive in its treatments of novels, novellas, and graphic novels as fiction, as well as in its focus on both much-debated authors, like Salman Rushdie, and those, like Shaun Tan, whose work is yet to be thoroughly examined. It also takes a broad view of postcolonial literature as one whose themes, forms, attitudes, and languages have been crucially defined by the experience of colonisation, with a special interest here in literatures written from formerly marginalised positions. The authors' cultural backgrounds—an assortment of African, Caribbean, Indian, British, Chinese, Malay, and Australian roots—is a mere coincidence as the selection is inspired by books rather than authors, whose shared ties with the "bitterly contested field" (Punter 5) of the postcolonial suffice. As a result, the scope of cultural influences is not wide enough to involve all postcolonial literatures, but they would hardly find enough space in a book, let alone an article. The selected works do reflect the heterogeneity of postcolonial cultures, albeit to a certain extent, which indicates the existence of postcolonial literatures within the generalising term postcolonial literature that has been and will be contested on account of its application to various cultural and historical contexts, geographies, and identities. Although culture is an important factor in the considerations that follow, mode or genre

provides the starting point. Since the selected writers and works also belong to various stages in the development of postcolonial literature in English, their aims, strategies, and achievements sometimes significantly vary. The following selection, therefore, intends to illustrate certain tendencies within postcolonial fiction, all the while bearing in mind that it is not, nor can it be, representative of all postcolonial literature(s).

"New angles at which to enter reality"

7 Perhaps the most logical way to begin a discussion of postcolonial approaches to the real would be to briefly outline the realism of early postcolonial writers, a mode, genre, or "aesthetic style" that responded "to the political idea of a normative reality" (Sorensen 16). At the time when postcolonial literatures were being born, Western literatures indulged in inward-looking experimentation with form under the impression that there were no new stories to tell and that experimental forms were adequate for portraying unstable twentieth-century realities. Postcolonial literatures, on the other hand, offered a wealth of new stories, so the need for formal experimentation was less prominent and occurred spontaneously when, for instance, the novel was being reshaped by the rhythms of indigenous oral storytelling. In this initial stage, focus was on literary excavations of precolonial histories and cultures, and native representations of colonisation and its aftermath. Those early works responded to European constructs with their own versions of the real, rarely conforming to the neat division between the material and the spiritual. Put differently, from the outset, postcolonial literature has questioned variants of European realism and what constitutes reality, so the real in fictions like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) incorporates spirits, curses, and punishments by the gods as vital elements of reality: "The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them…" (Achebe 115). Characterised by such boundary crossing, Achebe's deliberately omniscient representation of the real was part of a larger project of exposing colonial narratives about Africa as "crude distortions of the African character" (Gikandi). As a

consequence, the dominant view of Achebe's realism is that it counteracts colonial representations of Africa through "a systematic critique of Africanist discourse" (Gikandi).

8 Within that frame of interpretation, instead of the dark continent of colonial literature, Africa emerges in Achebe's work as a place of history, government, social structures, religion, and culture revived through language, customs, and stories, restoring the dignity of Igbos as individualised human beings capable of the good and the bad. In an attempt to avoid uncritical glorification and show that the past never exists in an untainted form, alongside the values of Igbo culture and peasant life, Achebe also imagines the society's weaknesses and mistakes, at times cruel patriarchal and superstitious practices, and the deepening social divisions that play into the hands of colonialism. In a fiction that characteristically links realism with the national imaginary, hypermasculine Okonkwo is the central symbol of tradition. He and the culture he epitomises are caught between tradition and modernity, the crisis of authority and the need for negotiation being tragically confirmed by Okonkwo's suicide as a result of his inability to engage in a constructive struggle with the disruption of traditional ways of life. If Okonkwo's combative traditionalism represents anticolonial resistance, the end of his life points to the need for dialogue that subsequent postcolonial literature managed to open.

9 According to Morrison, such realism was less inclined towards historical retrieval since "the real commitment of African writers like Achebe was not […] to the redemption of precolonial traditions, but rather to the emergence of an African modernity" (15). Achebe was able to enter "the scene of modern writing and create a space for African self-fashioning" (Gikandi) but, perhaps expectedly, his dedication to African modernity has been criticised as allegiance to the Western ideology of modernity, and so has his employment of modernist rhetoric. Achebe's writing responds to the Eurocentrism of modernist European literature but also establishes a dialogue between realism and modernism, where "modernism's rhetoric of failure and displacement" is used "to expose the anxieties of late empire" (Gikandi). Even though Achebe's much-discussed work is not epitomic of all early postcolonial writing, it exemplifies a dominant trend that emerged in postcolonial literatures across the globe. In

their different ways, some more realist than others, authors like R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai, George Lamming, or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o claimed the authority to narrate their worlds and realities.

10 As an inclusive heterogeneous mode/genre/style that rendered the real from politically charged native perspectives, early postcolonial realism was already a departure from European representations. It was eventually displaced by "[f]antasy, or the mingling of fantasy and naturalism" (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 19), but this gradual process did not suppress realism as a vehicle for portraying (post)colonial realities. Postcolonial realism continues to scrutinise and formally reflect the power relations, political and economic inequalities, and ignored experiences of the globalised neocolonial world. Contemporary novelists employ realism to examine colonial legacies in urban settings of the Western world (Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, 2000), widen the geography to include formerly colonised spaces (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, 2013), or consider postcolonial issues from a long historical perspective (Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*, 1997). Such realism ventures well beyond classical realism and early postcolonial realism, and in its selection of details proves that "realism is a mere convention rather than a close apprehension of the real" (Cobley 106). Particularly when characterised by fractured forms that reflect historical discontinuity, displacement of individuals and communities, and ruptures in one's identity, postcolonial realism refrains from a desire "to depict social realities in detail and with great fidelity" (Cobley 109). Instead, it alternates between fragments focused on specific experiences and gaps, which imbues the real with a sense of ambivalence.

11 Ambivalence is arguably one of the most significant qualities of the real in Caryl Phillips's fiction, and is a defining trait of novels like *A Distant Shore* (2004) and *Crossing the River* (1993). If *Things Fall Apart* is a national allegory, *A Distant Shore* can be read as a state-of-the-nation novel that exposes fissured national identity and the hidden realities of a divided nation. To extend the old argument that the idea of the nation is summoned in times of war, it is summoned in times of any crisis which threatens or disrupts it. In Phillips's novel, threat assumes the shape of an illegal migrant whose presence in England disturbs the comforting but illusory national homogeneity, pointing to faults that result from the nation's

reluctance to accept its own cultural, racial, and ethnic heterogeneity. Layered ambivalence in Phillips's representation of contemporary British reality concerns "ambivalence towards […] Britain, […] the place to which the migrant belongs as an outsider" (Clingman 47), the host country's ambivalence towards the migrant/outsider, and ambivalence ensuing from the migrant's effort to remember details of his supposed crime while suppressing the memory of his tragic past in a war-torn African country. Ambivalence is also a feature of form in the novel, so the pervasive sense of duality and fracture translates into a double or fractured narrative of Gabriel/Solomon, the said migrant, and his neighbour Dorothy.

12 That contemporary postcolonial realism may move away from the nation towards transnationalism is confirmed by novels like Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005) and Phillips's *Crossing the River*, which present the real from a wider cultural, spatial and/or temporal perspective. Structurally dispersed to better convey discontinuity, *Crossing the River* compassionately recasts the history of slavery as interconnected stories of individual suffering across time and space, contradicting a certain tendency that Sorensen finds in postcolonial interpretations of realism. In his view, "postcolonial readings of distinctly anti-realist texts tend to magnify the polyphonic aspects, whereas readings of literary realism often reduce the latter to simple, thematic representations of national homogenization" (44). Phillips's formally and thematically complex polyphonic representation of transnational realities lost in the gaps between official history and unofficial memory imagines the real in the voids of history, and undermines realism's predominantly single/omniscient perspective. With its openness and ambivalence, the novel challenges yet another misassumption, one that sees realist novels as closed, exemplifying at the same time the political implications of postcolonial realism. Loaded with political significance, Phillips's realism casts a certain shadow on Sorensen's claim that realism is a style that "*precedes* the reality of the nation-state, one that gradually disappears the moment the latter comes fully into being" (156). Even if realism appears to have fallen out of favour (Walder 126), it remains, especially in its ruptured varieties, a powerful means of representing disjointedness at the heart of contemporary realities.

13 To call into question the colonial monopolisation of the real and its totalising misconstructions, postcolonial literature has used its own variants of literary realism as a strategy of resistance to the conservative realism of colonial texts, which was itself a mode of fantasy that relied entirely on its authors' interpretations of the world. The above examples are far from a comprehensive list of "[t]he kinds, variations, and degrees of realism emerging within postcolonial contexts" (Sorensen 136) but may serve to illustrate that realism has never been a unified phenomenon in postcolonial fiction and has always been marked by a political agenda. In some instances, the political agenda inspired a preference for realist portrayal at the expense of alternative modes of representation, which is why J. M. Coetzee's allegorical novels were criticised for their apparent lack of engagement with South Africa. However, it would be reductive to think that there is only one correct way to represent the real, and the realist approach to racial oppression and responsibility that was expected of white writing in South Africa in the political climate of atonement does not reflect a worldwide postcolonial trend. Realist representations do not cancel the validity of anti-realist takes on the real, and switching from realism to allegory and back, Coetzee's oeuvre demonstrates that it is possible to problematise the history and reality of South Africa both directly and indirectly while exploring themes like violence, trauma, oppression, domination, or authority that transcend any given context. Despite the occasional need for realism and an extraordinary number of writers who use it, "literary realism constitutes an interesting *blind spot* within postcolonial studies" (Sorensen 5) and is still insufficiently researched as outdated, atavistic, or anachronistic. Non-realist and anti-realist approaches, on the other hand, have attracted more scholarly attention on the grounds of their supposedly wider and more radical palette of strategies to render and question the real. Revealing that all representation is just that, a representation of the real, the fantastic modes and genres have played a pivotal role in resistance and cultural self-representation. In further analysis, I will focus on some of the most common counterweights of realism to determine how they off-centre the real, and to understand the reasons behind scholarly favouritism of non-realist and anti-realist discourses.

14 The indisputable academic preference for modes and genres antithetical to realism can at least in part be attributed to the effectiveness of their representations of the (post)colonial real, for which they are sometimes mistakenly understood as more adequate and more typically postcolonial than realism. They have indeed proved invaluable in articulating political radicalism and communicating the multiplicity and partiality of postcolonial cultures and identities, while responding to the Western notions of the rational, the logical, and the realist(ic). Among them, magical realism stands out as by far the most extensively researched mode, genre, and discourse, as Stephen Slemon defines it, whose essential hybridity mirrors the now thoroughly exhausted concept of postcolonial hybridity. Contrary to Amaryll Chanady's distinction between magical realism and fantastic literature, I see it as a blend of realist and fantastic codes which questions discourses reliant on seemingly unassailable truths. This enables it to achieve multiple purposes: to transcend the binary logic of the rational/irrational or the real/fantastic; to enact the duality, plurality, hybridity, and fragmentation of postcolonial cultures, nations, and identities; to assert the existence of multiple realities and their interpretations; and to depict political, economic, and cultural disorder in postcolonial nations. "As a postcolonial response to colonialism's often brutal enforcing of a selectively conceived modernity" (Warnes 12), driven by the desire to rewrite the processes and outcomes of writing history and reality, magical realism is frequently combined with the equally split or double discourse of historiographic metafiction. With or without historiographic metafiction, magical realism gestures towards classical realism in that it sometimes imagines the troubling process of building/narrating postcolonial nations, perhaps most famously in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), but unlike the more hopeful realism, magical realism narrates the nation as a political failure. Again like realism, it also reaches beyond narratives of the nation to address transnational or international concerns, as in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), a novel of and about our thoroughly globalised world.

15 Its perplexing terminology, signification, definition, and categorisation aside, magical realism has been variously interpreted as a hybrid and liminal, culturally specific or international

phenomenon with extraordinary subversive potential rooted in a play with "assumptions about the nature of what is real and what is not" (Warnes 2). In its in-betweenness, restoration of indigenous cultures, cultural cross-pollination, non-linear spatiotemporality, unstable boundaries, and ex-centric origins, magical realism is particularly appealing to postcolonial literature's strategies of subversion. It favours neither magic nor realism but offers a split and hybrid system of representation that reflects our flawed perception. In its most recent incarnations, it is a mode/genre whose magic "rearranges our sensory capacities opening thresholds to othered presences and forms of knowing that braid reality into dynamic entanglements" (Perez and Chevalier 19). Its incredible capacity for transformation—think only of the variety of cultures, types, purposes, and features at play—precludes a unified definition. The phenomenon is simply too heterogeneous to fit any neatly defined category, so the following example offers a mere glimpse into the contemporary variants of magical realism outside the magical realist mainstream.

16 In his study of postcolonial realism, Sorensen claims that in the narrativisation of civil war in Nigeria it is realist Nigerian fiction that "becomes a way of addressing not simply injustice and cruelty carried out by either party, but also a larger perspective that transcends partisan views and recalls affective sentiments of fellow-feeling, of collective suffering" (108). Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007) shows that a blend of naturalism and fantasy can be equally effective in this respect, without specifying the exact war since Abani's "primary purpose is not to document or historicize the necropolitical conditions of a particular deathworld" (Durrant 187). Because of its lyrical but graphic representation of the horrors of post-independence conflicts, the novella lends itself easily to trauma studies, but to interpret it solely as "a straightforward representation of a necropolitical world risks succumbing to nihilism" (Durrant 180). The narrator has lost hope but his narrative has not: love and beauty survive in all the madness, and the narrator is finally reunited with the ancestral spirit world. Like all the other works mentioned here, *Song for Night* "resist[s] textbook postcolonial approaches" (Tunca) in its exploration of trauma and moral relativism in times of war. As I hope to demonstrate, it also escapes generic pigeonholing since the narrative straddles magical realism and (animist) realism.

17 It is narrated by the imagined voice of the literally muted My Luck, a child soldier who finds himself in "a strange place to be at fifteen, bereft of hope and very nearly of […] humanity" (Abani 19). His post-explosion quest for his lost platoon turns out to be a journey of self-realisation and into afterlife. What at first strikes the reader as a series of unusual occurrences—his unit is nowhere to be found, the river is flanking him, his cigarette pack never runs out, his memories are all jumbled, he keeps shuddering and is haunted by insatiable hunger and thirst, temporal progression seems off, and people seem to be mistaking him for a spirit—become hints about the real nature of My Luck's journey. Caught in the liminal state before his soul has crossed into the other world, he tells a story that is caught between magic and reality. The real in the novella is equally marked by details of war atrocities—murder, rape, cannibalism—and references to ghosts, spirits, and superstitions. Beckoning towards the material reality, the narrator informs us that "after three years of civil war nothing is strange anymore" and "everything is possible" (Abani 31, 109), so his story blends magic and realism to represent a world of blurred boundaries—life/death, right/wrong, friend/enemy, human/spirit—and explore unspeakable trauma. The novella's blurred boundaries facilitate Abani's narrativisation of a child-soldier's experience as morally dubious since the work "refuses the sentimental portrayal of the child-soldier as innocent victim" (Durrant 194), takes a "step back from mimetic realism", and "acts as a safeguard against any 'unchecked identification'" (Tunca). The chosen mode also allows Abani to present "two levels of reality: one is an 'objective', outside realm in which the mute hero and his friends cannot communicate verbally; the other is an inner, imaginary sphere in which My Luck tells his story and can hear his friends' thoughts and feelings" (Tunca). Because they are conditioned by language, the realms evoke the linguistic struggle that took place across postcolonial contexts as a struggle between different systems or codes of expression, representation, and interpretation.

18 Different systems of interpreting the real coexist in the novella, so the variously defined real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, traditional and modern combine to create a hybrid reality whose opposing codes function in such a way that "[o]n the level of the text neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality" (Warnes 3).

My Luck confirms that when he asserts the reality of the spirit world —"the apparitions I have seen are real" (Abani 109)—in a story which constantly "draws attention to its own fictional quality" (Tunca). The result is similar to the effect silence has on My Luck: such a narrative "opens up your view of the world" (Abani 21). The essential ambiguity of magical realism in the novella achieves another goal as it compensates for the failure of conventional means of expression to convey trauma, and potentially distances the reader from it. In Sam Durrant's view, however, the novella's main concern lies beyond relating traumatic experiences for he believes Abani's effort is connected to animism: *Song for Night* centres around one's identification with the world rather than one's representation of it. In that sense, the novella is perhaps closer to animist realism since "the mimesis at work in *Song for Night* has as its fundamental goal its narrator's reabsorption into the (spirit-)world" (Durrant 188).

19 Whether we read it as magical or animist realism, *Song for Night* exhibits contemporary transnational and cosmopolitan sentiments by pointing out the significance of the local in the global and plunging into cultural mongrelisation. Instead of fencing itself within a single culture, the novella narrates a world where old African legends coexist with American popular culture. A hint at the novella's mongrelised nature is provided even before the story begins: the epigraphs taken from Molière and Castaneda manifest that, compared with Achebe's nativist work that describes a particular moment in Igbo history, Abani's novella is transcultural as well as African. If we agree with Durrant's view that "the peculiar, residual 'autonomy' of African literature does not consist in the recovery of a lost cultural tradition, as critics once claimed of novels such as *Things Fall Apart*, but rather in the invention of tradition" (182), then magical, or animist, realism helps *Song for Night* do precisely that. Since it draws on cross-cultural sources, it also avoids one of the pitfalls of magical realism, a possible resurrection of stereotypes about irrationality and re-exoticisation of cultures outside Europe. Dismissing the argument that magical realism has become "a cliché, a titillating narrative trick", *Song for Night* nurtures "counter-forces and counter-realities" and therefore "guarantees that something else exists whose decolonial energies cannot be fully tamed" (Perez and Chevalier 6, 3).

20 Another genre that draws strength from what cannot be tamed, and to that end sometimes joins forces with historiographic metafiction, is the postcolonial Gothic. Although they may at first seems like worlds apart, postcolonial literature and the Gothic evince "a shared interest in challenging post-enlightenment notions of rationality" (Smith and Hughes 1), exploring different forms of otherness, and broadening the outlook on the real. Before they received serious readerly and scholarly attention, postcolonial literature and the Gothic were outside the mainstream, occupying themselves with what mainstream literature deemed neither interesting nor significant. Their origins on the periphery were a starting point for their collaboration. When they intersect, the Gothic becomes a space for literary examinations of the darker and more dangerous aspects of postcolonial realities, while the postcolonial endows the subversive energies of the Gothic with political purpose and anchorage in the material reality. A good illustration of that is when the postcolonial Gothic looks into the postcolonial nation as "the collective fantasy of a stifled people" (Rushdie, *Shame* 263). The transgressive potential of the Gothic is then mobilised to analyse post-independence isolation, corruption, oppression, and disappointment.

21 Set "at a slight angle to reality" (Rushdie, *Shame* 29), Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1995) relies on a number of Gothic conventions to thematise political and gender oppression, violence, and monstrosity in the context of a repressive Peccavistani regime that corrodes itself from the inside. The imaginary country, like the character who symbolises it, represents "the wrong miracle" and belongs in a world where democracy has "never been more than a bird of passage" (Rushdie, *Shame* 89, 204). Its claustrophobic, labyrinthine spaces where characters, especially female, are imprisoned and isolated, represent geographically dislocated Gothic sites of violence and haunting that seem to exist outside time. Spaces like the Nishapur house or the Mohenjo estate thus place "emphasis on enclosure, entrapment and alienation" (Teverson 137), serving the novel's critique of the corrupt, tyrannical regime of fictionalised Pakistan and its oppressive moral code. Suspending the novel between reality and fantasy, Rushdie speaks out about political and moral oppression, and truth confined: "there are things that cannot be permitted to be true" (Rushdie, *Shame* 82).

22 With its amalgam of the real and fantastic, and beginning in a "reclusive mansion … neither material nor spiritual" (Rushdie, *Shame* 30), *Shame* couples magical realist and Gothic revelry in duality to problematise the dichotomies civilisation/barbarism, honour/shame, innocence/monstrosity, and man/woman. By reversing the stereotypical characters of the vulnerable Gothic heroine and her commonly male saviour, *Shame* probes the unresolved issue of male threat and female victimisation in the real world. Modelling his intellectually challenged, and therefore innocent and more vulnerable, heroine Sufiya in unexpected ways on real-world victims and fictional characters from *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), "Beauty and the Beast" (1740), and *Jane Eyre* (1847), Rushdie turns her into a monstrous avenger of social evils who disrupts the image of female submissiveness and passivity, and exposes the unpalatable truth that there *is* "a place for monsters in civilized society" (Rushdie, *Shame* 199). The novel employs yet another Gothic trope, Frankensteinian, to shape Sufyia as a socially created monster with opposing features and a product of the political pathology of post-independence conflicts. By setting against male shamelessness and corruption rebels against female victimisation among whom Sufiya embodies collective shame, the novel traces the connections between colonialism, politics, gender, and sexuality in a mish-mash of naturalism and fantasy because "[r]ealism can break a writer's heart" (Rushdie, *Shame* 70).

23 In his rendering of postcolonial imaginings, Punter defines the literary as inevitably retreating from the real, as

> that which resists pinning down […] that which will always […] produce "other", "unauthorised" meanings; as that which conjures phantoms, which banishes phantoms […] as a phenomenon of lies and truth, of narratives that wind and twist and go nowhere, of history and trauma endlessly and impossibly rewriting each other […] as the distorted mirroring, the per-version, of the worlds in which it functions. (5–6)

Nowhere is this more obvious perhaps than in the postcolonial Gothic. Driven by the conjured twinned ghosts of history and trauma, Rushdie's meandering Gothic narrative per-verts the real, entangling truth and lies beyond recognition. Like magical realism, the Gothic in

postcolonial fiction narrates other, unauthorised realities, rewriting history to reveal trauma, trauma that is caused in *Shame* by a politically corrupt patriarchal regime. Rushdie's per-version of history and reality that exposes political and moral corruption realises the subversive potential of the Gothic most persuasively in its exploration of "the relations between monstrosity and power" (Punter 110). The novel's unlikely monstrous Other is the repository of her people's shame, which empowers her by fuelling her rebellion against the political status quo and its patriarchal oppression, at the same time disempowering the system's figures of authority. The monster here is then "the ultimate metaphor for political and social contamination: in her body emerge all the crimes and violences of her society" (Punter 112) that will bring about its downfall. "At a slight angle to reality", Rushdie's unauthorised narrative thus employs Gothic conventions to thematise the very real social, political, economic, and moral turmoil in post-independence societies.

24 Postcolonial retreats from realism and excursions into fantasy and speculation have also given some prominence to science fiction, which provides postcolonial fiction with another territory in which to examine the uneasy issues of the real. As Raja and Nandi point out,

> [t]he connection between science fiction and postcolonial studies is almost natural: both these fields are deeply concerned with questions of temporality, space, and existence. Central […] to both […] are the questions of the 'other'—human, machine, cyborg—and the nature of multiple narratives of history and utopias and dystopias of the future. (9)

25 At its beginnings, when Mary Shelley's 1818 proto-science fiction *Frankenstein* was published, science fiction was entangled with the history of industrialisation, capitalism, colonialism, and scientific advances, so well before science fiction's definition as a genre in the 1920s, its precursors were inspired by imperial expansion into unknown territories and contact with alien cultures. It is all too easy to draw parallels between invading extraterrestrials and colonisers, or aliens and racial or ethnic Others, but science fiction cannot be reduced to any number of conventions nor can the alien and the unexplored strange land be reduced to a single signification, as Rieder's and Langer's detailed analyses reveal. Despite the genre's

fluid nature, the link with colonialism is clear in the concerns that "range from triumphal fantasies of appropriating land, power, sex, and treasure in tales of exploration and adventure, to nightmarish reversals of the positions of colonizer and colonized in tales of invasion and apocalypse" (Rieder 21). So is its connection with postcolonialism's project of destabilizing binaries, exposing inequalities, and subverting colonial tropes. Postcolonial science fiction sometimes goes a step further to envision future potentialities that are not necessarily "bounded and inflected by history" (Langer 80) but open up to the possibility of tolerant creaturely coexistence in a utopian cosmopolitan world.

26 That possibility is the centrepiece of Shaun Tan's wordless graphic novel *The Arrival* (2007). Although it may seem unusual to shift attention from the more conventional fictions to one that belongs to a long cross-cultural history of graphic narratives, it is chosen here on thematic grounds and "the assumption that the formal, the aesthetic and the political are never separable categories" (Knowles et al. 380). Furthermore, as studies by Daniel Stein, Jan-noel Thon, Simon Grennan, Andrés Romero-Jódar, Michael A. Chaney, and Robert Petersen all show, graphic novels are treated as novels and fictions in scholarly analyses. *The Arrival*, a work that has already been read as a postcolonial science fiction novel in the special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* dedicated to graphic novels, examines what Langer identifies as some of the key themes of postcolonial science fiction: otherness, diaspora, and movement (4). To paint a nuanced picture of the migratory experience, Tan develops a narrative on migration and belonging, otherness and strangeness, interspecies communication, and technological innovation that operates purely on the visual level, highlighting the inadequacy of verbal expression to convey dislocation and possible trauma. Fantastic and naturalistic details of atrocities suffered at home—oppression, colonisation, war, and poverty—establish a dialogue with dreamlike images of life in The New Country. On the way there, isolation and loneliness are visually communicated in chapter two when the panels focus on the migrant behind the ship's porthole and then gradually zoom out to show more and more portholes presumably hiding other migrants, but the page also inevitably imparts a sense of togetherness. Together they experience the

strangeness of the new place as "an alternative universe" (Earle 390) where they are first confronted with unusual birds and statues. They all face difficulties in finding accommodation, learning a new language, and understanding habits and customs as cultural aliens. "What the alien signifies […] varies greatly" (Langer 3) in both postcolonial and science fiction, so Tan's migrant becomes an observer of otherness and strangeness, not merely their epitome. Difference and otherness are rendered interesting rather than problematic (Earle 396), and the strange new appliances, houses, creatures, food, and weather are all designed to reflect the strangeness, novelty, and unhomeliness that arouse the migrant's curiosity. Tan plays with what Langer calls science fiction's corporeal conceptualisation of otherness (82) and fuses the strange with the familiar, so the unusual creatures resemble animals of the real world and the strangely familiar household appliances operate differently from those at home. As the migrant is daily forced to deal with strangeness and otherness, that of the new world and his own, the journey additionally enables a "critical perspective on one's home culture" (Rieder 2), its reassessment from a distance, beckoning towards a cosmopolitan future of truly tolerant postnational coexistence. To that end, The New Country's welcoming quality is suggested upon arrival by the statues of two human figures shaking hands, but the true nature of its cosmopolitanism is revealed only by the fact that the figures are holding animal companions.

27 The "posthuman quality" (Banerjee 403) of Tan's approach to the real lies in his portrayal of a world populated with humans, strange yet familiar creatures, and unusual technology. The images' sepia tones afford a long historical perspective, so the impression is that the story is at the same time age-old, posthuman, and timeless. Its posthuman aspect lies in its representation of "an egalitarianism of species" (Banerjee 400). Interspecies communication and warm, helpful creaturely coexistence evoke the belief that "hope lies in our forgotten connection to (other) animals" (Durrant 179). In his analysis of Abani's *Song for Night*, Durrant makes a claim that may equally apply to *The Arrival*: "human alienation tips over into forms of trans-species relationality, into an awareness of our common creatureliness" (186).

28 What remains to be seen is if this is a utopian representation of reality. Admittedly, Tan's compassionate vision ignores the fact that cosmopolitanism and postnationalism may not always be "in the best interest of those on the periphery of the global division of labor" (Raja and Nandi 9). As if to confirm that, The New Country's resemblance to Ellis Island is not only a reminder of the history of migration to America as a site of cultural encounters but a confirmation that "globalization, instead of creating a two-way hybridization process, also tends to restructure the global cultures mostly in the image of a Western and North-Atlantic norm" (Raja and Nandi 8). This potentially re-establishes the West as the horizon of civilisation where those who flee the less civilised corners of the world congregate. The redeeming quality of Tan's vision of The New Country is that it is not so much a technologically advanced world but one which comes close to the horizon of civilisation as a harmonious coexistence of cultures and species "with incommensurable difference" (Banerjee 402). The belief in progress that characterises science fiction here finds expression in a progress of humaneness and tolerance.

The postcolonial real and the contentious issue of representation

29 As Sorensen reminds us in his insightful, albeit theoretically overburdened and at times overgeneralising study, the question of representation has always been crucial to postcolonial studies. It has been posited as a problem since the field's conception, which has resulted in a pervasive struggle against representation (12–13). How we represent the real, in all its diversity, using what means and from what perspectives, continues to spark off debates while postcolonial treatments of the real, formally and generically experimental or not, continue to vary. In its search for the best way to approach the real, postcolonial studies has favoured the view that "a radical postcolonial text had to be A) cosmopolitan, or at least explicitly antinationalist, and B) modernist/postmodernist, or at least anti-realist" (Sorensen 37), dismissing on at least one ground a very large and

diverse body of realist postcolonial fiction. Yet, recent critical studies by Sorensen, Robinette, and others point to an awakening interest in, and a critical reappraisal of, the politically charged tradition of postcolonial realism. Despite postcolonial studies' dismissal of literary realism as anachronistic and wedded to nationalist ideologies, postcolonial literature continues to use both realist and anti-realist modes and genres, all of them effective in their peculiar ways in the representation of the real. Postcolonial studies' reluctance to engage with literary realism may also be attributed to the common perception that "magical realism and other forms of antirealism" are "more representative of postcolonialism" (Sorensen 5). Their hybrid and fragmented nature reflects the postcolonial condition and provides fertile ground for radically subversive critique of totalising discourses, but to claim that they are more rather than differently representative of postcolonialism is largely unfounded.

30 The idea behind this discussion was to examine different postcolonial approaches to the real and demonstrate their continued relevance. In the early stages of postcolonial fiction, realism helped revive buried traditions and, unlike European realisms, presupposed the existence of magic and spirit worlds. Achebe's masterful interweaving of Igbo storytelling traditions into the novel's narrative, his introduction of Igbo words and sayings in an English text whose sentences settle into the rhythm of Igbo, and his depiction of a precolonial society in Africa in all its richness and vulnerability, all use realism to contest the colonial notion of Africa as the Dark Continent. In its contemporary varieties, realism may assume a more traditional form (Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* (2017)) or a scattered one (Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* (1997)) to depict the peculiarly postcolonial aspects of disjointedness and discontinuity. Phillips's double-voiced *A Distant Shore* formally reflects the geographical, cultural, and emotional discontinuity of migration, the mental and emotional disjointedness caused by the joint forces of gender oppression and ageism, as well as the disjuncture at the heart of the contemporary British identity. As it is placed between memory and factuality, between official and unofficial accounts, such realism is very far from a straightforward representation of reality and is characterised by a degree of ambivalence that brings it close to non-realist or anti-

realist representations. Among these, magical realism still takes precedence as a "global genre" that now ventures "beyond the concrete architecture of postcolonial" in the technologically advanced globalised world of more frequent cultural encounters since "contemporary magical realism engages […] the density of experience where even the most quotidian boundaries of the self are crossed by strange and dynamic encounters" (Perez and Chevalier 2). Often mistakenly seen as the exclusive property of certain cultures, magical realism wishes "to expand existing categories of the real" or indeed "rupture them altogether", which equally applies to all postcolonial approaches to the real that emerge as "a response to the 'othering' that accompanies Western colonialism" (Warnes 151–2). Abani's *Song for Night* illustrates that it is impossible to provide an all-encompassing definition of magical realism, just as it is to confine it to any single cultural context. In its culturally hybrid amalgamation of the spirit world and the real world, the novella can be read as representative of both magical and animist realism whose cross-cultural references suggest that magical realism exists in a variety of contexts where it serves different subversive purposes. Subversion also characterises the postcolonial Gothic and science fiction, where the real is approached "at a slight angle" that per-verts the world of fact to expose hidden layers of reality. With its peculiar rendering of Gothic conventions, such as labyrinthine mansions, monsters, entrapment, violence, and death, Rushdie's claustrophobic *Shame* protests against post-independence corruption, and oppression, while Tan's dreamlike visual narrative joins the old and the new, the real and the fantastic, to share the painful nuances of underprivileged migratory experiences that are left out of dominant narratives. As all the genres and modes analysed here confirm, postcolonial approaches to the real are driven by the need for self-representation and subversion of dominant narratives, but more importantly, postcolonial realism, magical realism, the Gothic, and science fiction account for the historical trauma of colonialism and offer important insights into "what it means to be human" (Smith and Hughes 2).

31 Of all the fictions discussed in this article, Tan's posthuman, postnational, and cosmopolitan novel most persuasively argues for representations of the real that reach beyond the verbal to benefit

from the immediacy of the visual, and beyond the human to involve all life forms. Whether they thematise colonisation, migration, war, post-independence corruption and oppression, or the necessity of interspecies communication, postcolonial approaches to the real are generally inclusive in appreciating the connections with the magical, the irrational, the spiritual, and the creaturely. They do not follow the "either/or" logic but instead assume a more fluid one that off-centres any monolithic representation of the real. Achebe's realism asserts the humanity and traditions of Igbo Africans, and their connection with the spirit world. Phillips's more ambivalent and fragmented approach formally reflects historical discontinuity in the contexts of past and present persecutions and migrations. Abani's magical or animist realism allows graphic details of a brutal civil war to play in counterpoint with My Luck's reconnection with his ancestors. Rushdie's generically unwieldy novel that combines the Gothic, magical realism, tragedy, political satire, and dystopia, playfully critiques political corruption, gender oppression, and misconceptions about civilisation and barbarism. Finally, Tan's graphic novel offers a purely visual take on the real to redefine science fiction's "confrontations with enigmatic others" (Rieder 61), examine the universal features of migration, and present diaspora "not [as] transplantation but negotiation" (Langer 80). Each one of these heterogeneous approaches to the real addresses postcolonial issues in the context of larger-scale dialogues, redefining "mimesis as a dynamic, transformatory engagement with the world, rather than a static attempt to capture the world" (Durrant 182), and showing that "[c]ulture, nature, family, belief, work, play language […] are flexible realities" (Earle 388).

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RÉSUMÉS

English

Postcolonial literature primarily emerged as a response to colonial representations of reality, so it comes as no surprise that a persistent dialogue with the real is one of its defining features. Since its initial attempt to question colonial constructions of the real and engage in self-representation, postcolonial literature has found "new angles at which to enter reality". By exploring some of the commonly employed modes and genres in both early and contemporary postcolonial fiction, ranging from realism, magic(al) realism, historiographic metafiction, and science fiction to the Gothic, each illustrated by representative authors and works, this article intends to give a brief overview of postcolonial approaches to reality.

Français

La littérature post-coloniale a d'abord émergé comme réaction aux représentations coloniales de la réalité, aussi n'est-il pas surprenant qu'un perpétuel dialogue avec le réel soit au nombre de ses principaux traits. Depuis son entreprise initiale de mise en question des constructions

coloniales du réel pour s'engager dans la représentation d'elle-même, la littérature postcoloniale a trouvé des « moyens d'entrer dans la réalité sous de nouveaux angles ». À travers l'exploration de certains des modes et genres communément employés dans la littérature postcoloniale depuis ses débuts jusqu'à la période contemporaine, incluant le réalisme, le réalisme magique, la métafiction historiographique, la science-fiction et le gothique, chacun se voyant illustré par des auteurs et des œuvres représentatifs, cet article vise à offrir un bref aperçu des approches postcoloniales de la réalité.

INDEX

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The Dark Side of Branding: Language and the Real in Colson Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006)

La marque obscure : le langage et le réel dans Apex Hides the Hurt, *de Colson Whitehead (2006)*

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PLAN

TEXTE

1 The academic world is no stranger to branding: every few years new literary trends and movements are identified. Early 21st century American literature has thus often been defined as "post-postmodernist", a tendency largely marked by a resurgence of realism. Mary K. Holland has identified no less than twenty new brands of "realism" since the 1990s—from "dirty realism" to "traumatic realism" to "metafictive realism" (Holland 31–32). She suggests integrating the study of these new realisms in a wider exploration of the manners in which literature has attempted to account for the changing conceptions of reality, encompassing and confronting both canonic 19th century Realism and contemporary "poststructuralist realisms" (Holland 256). Such an approach would be especially useful in a perusal of Colson Whitehead's oeuvre. While his characteristic "genre-hopping", or revisiting of different literary conventions like the slave narrative (*The Underground Railroad*, 2016) or the zombie story (*Zone One*, 2011) often has a strong satirical dimension, *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006) can be considered as a full-fledged satire. This

genre, however fanciful it might be, is a comment on social reality and remains ununderstandable without some knowledge of that reality. Moreover, *Apex* is a satire of language use in contemporary corporate America: it therefore specifically interrogates the entanglements between language and the real.

2 The protagonist, an unnamed African American nomenclature consultant, has been a victim of his own trade: his stroke of genius, the name for an adhesive bandage that fits the many skin tones of multicultural America—hence the slogan "Apex Hides the Hurt"—has ironically cost him an amputated toe and a subsequent breakdown. He merely covered the wound with the colored strip instead of having it treated. This storyline, developed in a series of flashbacks, may be symptomatic of the character's compromise with corporate culture at the expense of his physical and mental integrity as a black man. When he is asked, as part of a possible comeback, to arbitrate the rebranding of the town of Winthrop—an allusion, among other references, to John Winthrop, one of the Puritan Founding Fathers—the ad man faces both an onomastic and an existential challenge. The descendants of the former slaves who founded the town want the restoration of its original name, Freedom, while the last scion of the Winthrop family pleads for the *status quo ante*, and the new economic strongman, software millionaire Lucky Aberdeen, lobbies for New Prospera.

3 Naming, as it shapes and advertises identity, is a performative speech act of the utmost importance in both African American culture and, for totally different reasons, in the field of marketing. As such, it tends to contradict the Saussurian law of the arbitrariness of the sign, tipping the scales on the side of motivation, historical or mimetic. The final *nomen in machina* the protagonist comes up with both prolongs and questions established naming practices in their dual veiling and unveiling of reality.

4 After analyzing the satirical dimension of the novel and its confrontation with American corporate culture, this paper will draw on specific aspects of the philosophy of language to discuss the motivation of signs in relation to naming strategies and analyze the performatives, performances, and diverse conditions of felicity that naming implies. The former will be indebted in part to the legacy

of Plato's *Cratylus* and branding manuals—strange bedfellows indeed; the latter will draw from J. L. Austin's speech act theory, as revisited by philosophers Sandra Laugier and Judith Butler. In both conceptions the real comes to dwell in language, either as a determining factor or as the product of a world-shaping activity. Since *Apex* is a fiction of naming, it provides an imaginary "actual" context for this verbal act. It can also describe the failed encounters between language and the real, the attempts at euphemizing or repressing reality, as well as the shattering irruptions of the real within discourse. The text may feature different takes on the real, different brands of "realism" that may or may not be totalized into a coherent whole. This cannot but have a bearing on the conception of literature, and more specifically of African American literature, that is enacted in the novel's language.

Satirical realism

5 Satire, broadly defined as a humorous or ironic criticism of the vices and follies of mankind, has a special relationship with extratextual reality. According to Derek Maus, satire, especially in the form of Menippean satire, has known a particular fortune under postmodernism, to the point that what used to be a genre in classical Antiquity, has become a "mode", i.e. an attitude to the world and the text, in the modern and postmodern age. Contrary to traditional satire, which is often underwritten by a normative viewpoint, the Menippean brand is characterized by its Harlequin-like variety of literary forms and genres, attacks on various philosophical ideas and attitudes to life, and strong hints at the limitations of human understanding (*Jesting* 54). The former genre belongs to the "generative" model of satire, while the latter often illustrates the "degenerative" model, ridiculing all hegemonies through the use of exaggeration or the grotesque (Dickson-Carr 17). An analysis of the satirical dimension of *Apex* can therefore be set within a long tradition that encompasses both postmodernism and its own potential "post". The novel also prolongs another rich tradition, that of African American satire, which Dickson-Carr places under the sign of the degenerative model, in its "unremitting iconoclasm, criticism of the current status of African American political and cultural trends, and indictment of specifically American forms of racism" (16). Some of

the rhetorical strategies of black satire that pervade *Apex* are irony, *reductio ad absurdum*, and "Signifying", a vernacular language of masking and indirection developed as a survival strategy during slavery, which can be used in a variety of situations (28).

6 The satirical effect is based on the recognition of the extratextual elements that are the butt of criticism or ridicule, which in turn implies a shared social or ideological world. If satire essentially hollows out a space for the real within its linguistic utterance, its mode of insertion, especially if it has recourse to the deformations of caricature, tends to be allusive: it points to the outside world rather than describes it. A related strategy for the positing of "reality" in a satirical or parodic text is the criticism or debunking of "illusion", whether that illusion is embodied in attitudes, systems of thought or "unrealistic" literary genres. This is what we might call "contrastive realism". The sense of actuality of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* may originate more in its comic demystification of chivalric romance than in the true-to-life dimension of its world of highways, inns, and embedded fireside storytelling. In *Apex Hides the Hurt* a sense of reality accrues from the questioning of an inauthentic use of language.

7 The social practices and ideology that are ironized upon in *Apex* include a debasement of language in contemporary American corporate culture (Maus, *Understanding* 64). The job of a nomenclature consultant consists in finding names for products, to make them trustworthy and desirable in order to better sell them to the public.

> I name things like new detergents and medicines and stuff so that they sound catchy. […] You have some kind of pill to put people to sleep or make them less depressed so they can accept the world. Well you need a reassuring name that will make them believe in the pill. Or you have a new diaper. Now who would want to buy a brand of diaper called Barnacle? No one would buy that. So I think up good names for things. (*Apex* 22)

This wordmongering may seem futile. The black barman to whom he presents his line of work asks, incredulously: "People pay you for that shit?" (22). Yet the importance of nomenclature is revealed by its

failures, which can cost companies millions of dollars. The novel mentions a cross-cultural misfire that killed the sales of a luxury car in one country, because "in the local patois, the name they'd given the vehicle was slang for—excrement!" (136). On the other hand, successful names can translate into market shares and tangible profits. A good name is worth money, which also means that names, and by extension language, have become commodified.

8 Brand fetishism is not limited to the realm of advertising, but pervades the whole social fabric. There are many examples of the protagonist and others finding reassurance in the standardization of consumer culture exemplified by logos and advertising slogans, as for example the avatar of Starbucks in the novel's parallel universe, Admiral Java: "It was not the first time he had been saved by the recognizable logo of an international food franchise, its emanations and intimacies" (37). These food, clothing, or home decoration franchises are "[a]ffirmations of a recognizable kind of prosperity and growth" (39). In a feedback loop the commercial categorizations of brand identities become instrumental in a semiotics of self-presentation and self-advertising that identifies the subject with the goods they consume.

9 This dysfunctional semiotics takes on its most extreme visage for the protagonist in a moment of infected-toe-induced delirium, tellingly taking place at the "Identity Awards" ceremony where he has been nominated for the Apex contract. Guests are "reduced to white name tags levitating in the air before they became people again" (*Apex* 168). Wordmongers become reified into their names, which place them on the board game of social positions, as representatives of an advertising or consulting firm. This "paranoïa-critique" phase expands into an indictment of the lies perpetrated by advertising, and by naming in general: "Of course it began at birth—by giving their children names, parents did their offspring the favor of teaching them how to lie with their very first breath. Because what we go by is rarely what makes us go. GRIFTER. SINNER. DOOMED" (170). The notion that names obfuscate reality births a fantasied emergence of "real" names, culminating in the protagonist being tagged "FUGITIVE" as he flees the room (171). Breaking out into Times Square (like a Mad Man), he is assaulted by the posters and neon lights clamoring brand logos:

> The names here were magnificent, gigantic, powered by a million volts and blinking in malevolent dynamism. Off the chart. The most powerful names of all lived here and it was all he could do to stare. He had entered the Apex. […]
> In front of a newsstand, looking up at the sky as if it were a vast eternal mirror, he saw all the logos and names, and saw himself as some brand of mite lost in the pages of the musty encyclopedia of the world. Galanta and Apex, Percept and Rigitol. (181–82)

This passage is rife with satirical irony. The word Apex, which has led him to the acme of success, becomes a symbol of alienation, the culmination of a system of linguistic misrule that entraps him. Concurrently, the larger-than-life words floating over Times Square almost appear as Platonic Ideas, the eternal prototypes of countless products disseminated throughout the land that define not only the material but also the spiritual culture of a globalized America. The individual and his name become infinitesimal, some "brand of mite" in the dual sense of a type and a (puny) trademark. Such logo-centrism is a far cry from the Platonic Logocentrism which, in spite of its essentialist flaws, was accountable to reason and attempted to convey some truths about reality. This nightmarish logo-sphere reads like a cross between Jean Baudrillard's vision of the loss of reality in the realm of postmodern simulation, and Frederick Jameson's identification of postmodernism as the logic of Late Capitalism.

10 As already mentioned, one of the key satirical strategies in *Apex* is the African American trope of Signifying. H. L. Gates, Jr. defines its literary use as critical parody, or "repetition and revision, repetition with a signal difference" (Gates xxiv). This highly self-conscious rhetorical scheme is both a means to revise the black tradition from the inside, and a way to talk b(l)ack to mainstream discourses. It often entails the rewriting of narratives that either suppress or rationalize racial discrimination, in a process of renaming that points to the blind spots of American ideology. Part of the pleasure of reading the novel stems from the creation of a parallel universe of different yet recognizable brand names like Unycom (Viacom – 169) or Ekho (Lego – 123), or characters' names, coined for their evocative qualities, which encapsulate in parodic form whole creeds, like Regina Goode (a black queen), Albie Winthrop (Albus means white in

Latin) and Lucky Aberdeen (luck as a symbol of ease and election, yet hardly consistent with the work ethic of the old economy). Even though it can be highly metafictional, Signifying points to a whole world of actual social practices and ideological equivocations that it revises and renames.

11 This satire of the debasement of language in the commercial culture of postmodern America is further problematized by an uncanny entanglement between corporate names and the body, as made visible by the story of the Apex rebranding. The firm of Ogilvy and Myrtle, the makers of a low-quality bandage strip, wanted to become number two, behind the inaccessible Band-Aid—a name which has also come to connote a makeshift solution that does not go to the root of a problem. The marketing strategy followed three stages: targeted marketing, in the invention of "multicultural adhesive bandages" (87), distributed along a colorimetric scale of twenty hues grossly corresponding to the range of skin tones in the country; the finding of a name, Apex (99); the coining of a slogan, "Apex Hides the Hurt" (100). Our protagonist is answerable only for the naming: in spite of his claims of agency and responsibility, he was a mere cog in a symbolic supply chain. The success of the product is proof that it corresponds to a deep-rooted social desire: "We come in colors. We come in many colors. And we want to see ourselves when we look down at ourselves, our arms and legs" (88). The racialized body comes center-stage, which may appear as a progressive move towards the recognition and appreciation of diversity. Yet the phrase alludes more to a form of individual narcissism than real social change: skin tones become a superficial somatic/semiotic system flaunting equality by erasing power differentials.

> In the advertising, multicultural children skinned knees, revealing the blood beneath, the commonality of wound, they were all brothers now, and multicultural bandages were affixed to red boo-boos. United in polychromatic harmony, in injury, with our individual differences respected, eventually all healed beneath Apex. (*Apex Hides the Hurt* 109)

12 The parodic take on the motto *E Pluribus Unum* suggests that advertising has taken over from politics, and virtual equality replaced attempts to promote real equality. There is a tension in the passage

between healing and hiding the hurt; the function of a Band-Aid is actually neither. The jump from individual "gashes" to "the deep psychic wounds of history" (90) points to the presence of ideology, whose function is to gloss over the traumas of American racial history and their unwelcome persistence in the present. Whitehead declared in an interview: "Certain forms of multicultural cheerleading are as susceptible to corruption as capitalist boosterism and frontier idealism, two other systems I talk about in *Apex*. Every -ism has its weakness […] Apex isn't the only Band-Aid in the book" (Selzer 399). Trademark, stigma, trauma: in *Apex* one brand conceals another: "the work of branding is a work of repression" (Cohn 18); in this sense it is an act of historical and ideological erasure.

The real is when you stub your toe

13 The novel stages the return of the repressed through the body, in the repetitive stubbing of the protagonist's toe. It is as if Whitehead had purposely illustrated the quip attributed to Jacques Lacan, "*le réel c'est quand on se cogne*" ("the real is when you bang against something"), which could be translated for our purposes: "the real is encountered when you stub your toe".[1] The toe is the polar opposite of the Apex, as low is to high, or the body to an abstraction. The festering infection beneath the adhesive strip morphs into the grotesque, illustrating another form of contrastive realism, "grotesque realism", which Mikhail Bakhtin defines as "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin 19–20). It is a comical reminder of the physical substratum to our linguistic or social constructions.

14 The protagonist's repeated stubbing of his foot takes on symptomatologic value, like a Freudian slip.

> One day he stubbed his toe. In retrospect there was some inevitability tied up in said stubbing, so he came to believe that his toe wanted to be stubbed for reasons unknowable. Unnameable. (129) He decided his toe had developed an abuse pathology, and kept

> returning to the hurt as if one day it would place the pain in context, explain it. Give it a name. (139)

This repetition compulsion resembles a key symptom of posttraumatic reaction. Yet it is not merely the body (or the unconscious rooted in the body) asserting its opposition to the character's immersion in an alienating logo-sphere. The consultant is aware that in his naming activity, "[m]uch of the work went on in the subconscious level. He was making connections between things without thinking and then, *bam* on the subway scratching a nose, or *bam bam* while stubbing a toe on a curb" (4). The irony of describing the process of inspiration in terms of his later toe-stubbing nemesis indicates that there is no mind-body dichotomy at work, in which reality or realism would only be tied to the material term. Conversely, the body's symptoms are part of a semiosis: the hurt signifies in itself.

15 Going back to the witticism, "*le réel c'est quand on se cogne*", it may be another way to express one of the early Lacanian formulations of the relation between the real and the symbolic. Since we have access to outside reality only through our psychic apparatus, unavoidably shaped by language, we may be said to be alienated from the real, except in those occasions when chance—or apparently haphazard—encounters derail our automatic responses and give us a glimpse of said real. The real is when the symbolic reels, often in the irruption of some trauma.

> In his seminar *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1978), Lacan took up Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and approached the real in terms of compulsion and repetition. He proposed distinguishing between two different aspects of repetition: a symbolic aspect that depends on the compulsion of signifiers (*automaton*) and a real aspect that he called *tuché*, the interruption of the automaton by trauma or a bad encounter that the subject is unable to avoid. (Lerude)

The scenario of *Apex* grossly corresponds to this view: "Later he decided the specifics were not important, that the true lesson of accidents is not the how or the why, but the taken-for-granted world they exile you from. In all probability he stumbled over something small and insignificant, as only appropriate for such a shriveled,

gargoyle world like *stub*" (*Apex* 130–31). The chance traumatic encounter, or *Tuché*, questions ideology without necessarily being able to replace it with an articulated counter-discourse. The Real may be a mere stub but it can be quite stubborn.

16 This crude, stub-like reformulation of Lacanian psychoanalysis [2] may illustrate one way of understanding the relations between language and reality after the "linguistic turn" of the 1960s, namely that language and, by extension, literature are enclosed in a discursive bubble and are exiled from the real. In Richard Rorty's words, we should renounce "the claim that we find out about non-linguistic phenomena by knowing more about linguistic phenomena" (Rorty 31). In a sense, not only ideology but all language is a Band-Aid that hides the world in an epistemic cloud of unknowing, which can only be breached indirectly and by chance if at all.

17 Moreover, the painful symptom in the text is modelled on the Freudian theory of neuroses, which presupposes some psychical reality independent from, or opposed to, external reality (Laplanche and Pontalis 391). In *Apex*, critics have identified the psychical reality behind the foot-stubbing as the protagonist's overwhelming feeling of guilt for betraying his racial heritage. Even though we hardly have any backstory for him, we know of his having benefited from a diversity program at elite Quincy University (70). He is thereafter recognized as a Quincy man, and treated as an equal by powerful people. "Some names are keys and open doors. Quincy was one" (69). This is presumably why he bought so eagerly into the Apex promise of skin-deep equality, to the point of amnesia about his very real toe wound. The amnesia and complicity cover up "the historical harm of slavery" (Cohn 18), as well as the divisions within the African American group, between the inheritors of the "Talented Tenth" such as himself, and the struggling black working class like the Winthrop Hotel bartender and his wife, the hotel's cleaning woman (Leise 292). The character's symptoms are both psychological and allegorical, evincing the difficulties to toe the color line. The satire is rooted in a double form of realism, psychological and social, yet the articulation of these two realms may be uneasy and stretched.

18 As perceptively noted by Jesse Cohn, the consultant's guilt and self-loathing is intimately linked with the Oedipus myth. The plot is even

more closely modelled on Sophocles' tragedy of *King Oedipus* than on Freud's reappropriation of the myth. Oedipus means "swollen foot", a physical scar of his being exposed as a baby after the Pythia's prophecy that he would kill his own father Laius. Our swollen-toed consultant's naming proficiency can be compared to the solving of the Riddle of the Sphinx, and his success in the corporate world to Oedipus' ascent to the throne of Thebes (Cohn 17–18). Here the mock-tragic dimension of the text comes into play, as classical tragedy represents the fall of a great man, at the apex of his power, through hubris, or excess. Tragic irony is also present in the polysemy of the Band-Aid's brand name. Apex is not a name that naturally fits an adhesive strip: a praise of the product's top quality, it also voices an autobiographical statement—"He landed Apex because he was at the top of his game" (*Apex* 36)—and a patriotic statement, in which America is "the summit, human achievement, the best of civilization, and of course something you could tumble off of, fast fall" (99). This whole passage is star-spangled with multiple ironies. The smooth slippage of "the eye on the top of the pyramid" from a symbol of mystic power to the dollar bill reveals the ambiguities of the American Dream and its debasement into materialism. Besides their hubris, the tragic flaw of the character and his culture is the desire to "hide the hurt" to bask in their glory. The tragic arc is made grotesquely visible when he decides to climb on a table in Winthrop to announce that he will support the proposed rebranding into New Prospera, "when something in him gave way, and his bad leg jackknifed with such speed that he was on the floor in an ugly mess before anyone could catch him" (179). The abrupt rise and fall stem from the same cause as his delirious flight at the Identity Awards: the conflict between a desire to belong and repress the "real" and a slip of the leg that expresses the feelings of guilt and inauthenticity that accrue from a debased use of language.

19 In this satirical novel, the debased language of advertising is seen as real in its own right and as a shaping force on the contemporary reality of a superficial, commercial society. In an evocative parallel between words and the body, language and ideology are compared to sterile strips that hide and repress unpalatable realities, yet both realms are vulnerable to the subversive workings of the unconscious. Brand names themselves are depicted both as hollow and full of

hidden meanings, some of which ironically debunk the very ethos of the logo-sphere. The mock-tragic reference to fate and self-fulfilling prophecies may induce us to connect with more earthy realities, a lucid social gaze and a preoccupation with the materiality of the world.

Branding as poetry and performance

20 During his crisis of conscience at the identity Awards the consultant finds himself facing abstract yet urgent questions about language:

> What he had given to all those things had been the right name, but never the true name. For things had true natures, and they hid behind fake names, beneath the skin we gave them. […] What is the word, he asked himself, for that elusive thing? It was on the tip of his tongue. What was the name for that which is always beyond our grasp? What do you call that which escapes?" (182–83)

The social satire is supplemented by a deeper, more philosophical exploration of the interconnections between language and reality. Since the novel takes as the object of its criticism the very act of naming, it must probe the possibility of finding the right name for things, and that of the elusive quality of a reality that might escape nomination. Of course, the fact that he articulates these issues while in the throes of a toe-induced delirium casts doubt on the validity of the questions and the possibility of obtaining satisfactory answers. We might still wish to assail these windmills, through a consideration of the act of naming as a poetic act on the one hand, and on the other as a performative speech act. The former approach interrogates the possible motivation of the sign, whereas the latter probes the social effectiveness and consequences of the act of naming.

21 Gestures of naming and unnaming have been of primordial importance in African American history and literature since slavery. The obliteration of African names and their replacement with those of plantation owners can be seen as one of the initial traumas of bondage. Black subjects have historically resorted to a reverse form of unnaming and renaming, by either erasing the former master's

name, as in the case of the Nation of Islam's "X" sign, or more commonly by choosing a different patronym, as did Frederick Douglass after Emancipation. Name-calling and Racial slurs are also brands that purport to impress the power of the majority over minorities: the N-word performs "reification by slander" (Benston 5), which may be countered through various strategies of resistance, self-affirmation, legal redress or resignification.

22 The protagonist's presence at the heart or apex of the corporate naming machine can therefore be seen as subversive; it turns the tables on a power structure that often leaves black people more named (or nameless) than naming—except of course if you buy into the multicultural boosterism advertised through Apex, and believe that subversion is no longer needed. In his early days in the nomenclature business, the consultant discovered that the names evoked "a magnificent and secret landscape. His interior. […] He had a territory within himself and he would bring back specimens to the old world. These most excellent dispatches. His names" (34–35). Not only did this fantastic landscape, reminiscent of science-fiction or Western exploration, impose its existence on the advertiser; it also defined his identity. The coiner is also a poet, and the discussion of corporate naming becomes a self-reflexive, albeit ironic, meditation on literature. One common point between poetry and nomenclature is that they try to find proper names for things.

23 At this juncture one is reminded of one of the key myths of the philosophy of language, Cratylism, or the belief in the motivation of names discussed—and dismissed—in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*. Socrates is asked to arbitrate between Hermogenes, who stands for total linguistic conventionalism, and Cratylus, who advocates the "correctness of names". After refuting the relativism of Hermogenes' nominalism, which would according to him render it impossible for a name to have a fixed meaning, he proposes the fiction of a nomenclaturist, a demiurgic maker of names or lawmaker (Plato 389d). The motivation of names can derive from etymology—Zeus is "the God through whom all creatures always have life" (*di on zen* – 396b)—or mimetic sound patterns—the *rh* sound materialized by the letter *rho* (ρ) conveys the idea of flux and motion (426e).

24 The professional breakdown of the moniker New Prospera reads both like a poetic comment and a Cratylic elucidation, as it revolves on etymology and sound-patterns:

> Had that romance-language armature, he was pretty sure it was a Spanish or Italian word for something. What it meant in those languages, that was unimportant, what was important was how it resonated here. The lilting *a* at the end like a rung up to wealth and affluence, take a step. A glamorous Old World cape draped over the bony shoulders of prosaic prosperity. (*Apex* 52)

In Plato's dialogue, Socrates finally dismisses Cratylism, arguing that the hypothetical motivations of signifiers point to contradictory views of reality, and are not to be trusted. Knowledge must start from the things themselves in order to test the truth value of names and propositions (Plato 439a). In *Apex*, the relation between word and thing is less an attempt at elucidation than a harnessing of cultural connotations that tries to give the illusion of *quidditas*, the nature of the object. The meaning of the Latinate word Prospera is immaterial, compared to its evocative power in the target culture; the interpretation of the feminine final *a* seems arbitrary, and the branding industry is full of recipes and fashions that preclude any motivated relation between the signifier and the signified (*Apex* 51).

25 Cratylism is both an ideal and a temptation for poets and nomenclaturists, the desire to find the proper, or "true" name. The veiled references to some of the key debates in the philosophy of language, like the opposition between realism (according to which words express realities) and nominalism or conventionalism, broaden the scope of the satire, without altering its fundamental course. What could be an honest mistake, a belief in the motivation of certain words, ultimately reads like a rather opportunistic form of self-justification, a demiurgic impulse meant to provide an illusion of usefulness and power. The nominalist motto "a rose by any other name is still a rose" is interpreted in the light of self-interest: "Some might say a rose by any other name but he didn't go in for that kind of crap. That was crazy talk. Bad for business, bad for morale" (*Apex* 5).

26 One episode provides an ironic disclaimer to the belief in sign motivation and the resulting existence of one true name for each

product. The consultant is asked to come up with a rebranding for a children's building game that is the equivalent of Lego. The Ekho firm has decided to put on the market a more politically-correct version its early success, Ekho Village, the prototype of a small town that had been popular in the Fifties. The wordsmith's suggestion is to keep the old name, since "Ekho Village was a reverberation of America that did not grow faint with time. It was always there to play with us" (123). The pun on *echo* does reverberate throughout the text. Ekho is a recognizable take on an existing brand, evoking the pleasures and ingenuity of parody. The newly "integrated" version of small-town America also duplicates the multicultural pieties of Apex, with the same superficial result. The rebranding operation also ironizes on the main plot of the novel, the renaming of the town of Winthrop. Finally, it evokes a conception of language in which repetition replaces substance, and meaning is constructed through synchronic and diachronic echoes. In a word, a Saussurian structure activated by networks of semantic differences. Should we then conclude that realism, literary and philosophical, implies renouncing the dreams of an intimate entanglement between language and the real? Yet if names cannot be said to reflect or express outside reality, we have been made aware that the performance of naming does have worldly effects and consequences, which might pave the way for another conception of the relation between name and thing, beyond the opposition between pure conventionalism and hardline Cratylism.

How to do things with names

27 British philosopher J. L. Austin broadened the scope of the philosophy of language when he expanded his inquiry from the truth value of statements to the multiple ways in which language can shape reality. He described performative utterances as actions effecting a change in the real world, as when exchanging marriage vows, or bequeathing an inheritance in a testament (Austin 5). He later distinguished other effects of language, the "illocutory" force of an utterance being its intentional purpose, like warning or supplication, whereas the "perlocutory" force represents its effective impact on the addressee, such as persuasion, fright, or seduction (101). One of the examples that Austin gives of the performative is an act of naming, *viz.* baptizing a ship (5). The success, or "felicity"—as opposed to the truth

of descriptive propositions—depends on social and linguistic conventions, including institutional positions. A marriage is valid only if the official has a valid license, and if none of the newlyweds is already married. The branding game is such a speech act: its utterances derive from institutionalized marketing agencies and are approved by the clients; their illocutionary intent is to seduce the public by appealing to its fantasies and desires; and their success depends on the public's welcome in the marketplace of corporate identities. The "right" name is therefore the name that sticks because it encounters the public's expectations about the brand and its own ideological makeup—the commercial equivalent of reception theory in literature. "Felicity" rather than truth is of the issue. This sheds a new light on the opposition between the "right" name and the "true" name that we encountered earlier (*Apex* 182). So when the wordmonger states that "New Prospera-ness stirred them and agitated them in a fundamental way. In that deep-down place where true names reside" (158), it may just prove that he has lapsed into his old ways and has not learnt from his former demise. Or it may point out that since names are the products of conventional speech acts, the only truth that they can reflect is that of desire, the emotional and ideological investments of their targets. Do the "right" name and "true" name really overlap? This is the intellectual and existential challenge the protagonist is confronted to when he is asked to become the arbiter of toponyms for the town of Winthrop.

28 In her own take on Austin's work, Judith Butler replaces the conventional situations of speech acts within a broader power network: the institutional framework of performatives is never divorced from state or economic power, while linguistic conventions draw attention to the fact that the subject never initiates their *parole*, but inherits it. Specific occurrences of hate speech and name-calling actually bring to the fore any subject's "linguistic vulnerability" (Butler 1) to "the power of the name":

> One is, as it were, brought into social location and time through being named. And one is dependent upon another for one's name, for the designation that is supposed to confer singularity. […] This suggests that such a subject in language is positioned as both addressed and addressing, and that the very possibility of naming another requires that one be first named. (30)

The ironies of our protagonist's namelessness become all the more significant. The latter might point to the generality of satire, a collective rather than individual indictment; it might correspond to a form of hiding and dissimulation, in keeping with the theme of inauthenticity encapsulated in the Apex strip; there might be an intertextual filiation with the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) who, after renouncing "his vain desire to achieve an empowering name" (Benston 6) claims "the impossibility of naming or arresting meaning" (9); but the figure of the unnamed namer might also allude to a demiurgic fantasy encased in the reference to the Tetragrammaton of the Hebrew God, "I Am That I Am", a form of transcendental namelessness (4). This dream of the subject's sovereignty is also achieved through the erasure of a patronym that would connect him to his family, ethnic origins, and linguistic vulnerability—of which the wounded toe is a reminder.

29 One of the interesting forms of "realism" in the novel is that, without exiting the realm of language, it lays emphasis, in a metafictional manner, on the constraints and power struggles that bear on the act of naming. The illocutory and perlocutory forces that names mobilize within the novel duplicate those at work in the extratextual world, and between world and text. The initial situation looks more like a procedural model than a likely occurrence, even though it is not devoid of plausibility. The deadlock in the rebranding of the town stems from the legal peculiarity in its charter that the choice of the city name is decided by a city council composed of three members, rather than a democratic vote of all the inhabitants. This special provision was introduced in the statutes in an identical situation in the historical past, to ensure that the two black founders of the town could have a majority vote over the white industrialist whose power was on the rise. The present deadlock allows giving a representation to the three worldviews encapsulated by the three names. As the bartender reminds the consultant, "This is my home" (*Apex* 23), not a simple commercial product. The identity of the town partially defines the identity of its people, so the choice has consequences. The three names are motivated, not by mere cultural or "poetic" connotations but by history: each represents a different take on the local and American past, and a different allocation of onomastic power.

30 The town was founded after the Civil War by a group of freed slaves, under the leadership of two men, Abraham Goode and William Field, and was called Freedom. Even though at first the wordsmith denigrates the name for its naïveté (76), he later recognizes its affirmative potential. “What did a slave know that we didn’t? To give yourself a name is power. They will try to give you a name and tell you who you are and try to make you into something else, and that is slavery. And to say, I Am This—that was freedom” (206). The name of the settlement implied an act of sovereignty, as it encapsulated the former slaves’ new-found dignity and mastery, the freedom to name themselves and to name their community. Like all Frontier toponyms, it was also an unnaming, not only of the Native place names but also of their former bondage.

31 Then came Sterling Winthrop, who made his fortune “in barbed wire, not too bad a gig at the end of the nineteenth century. Land Grants, land grabs, you needed something cheap to keep everything in, and keep everything out” (60). The move to rename the city corresponds to a common American topological habit of naming places after a settler or industrialist, a man who has the power to print his mark on the land, to put the city “on the map” (25). The name, like a brand name, is ludicrously disseminated everywhere, in a hubristic claim of dominance.

> He was in the Winthrop suite of the Hotel Winthrop on Winthrop Street in Winthrop square in the Town of Winthrop in Winthrop County. He didn’t have a map of the area, but he told himself that if he ever got lost he should look for the next level of Winthrop, Winthrop to the next power, and he would find his way. (13–14)

Such naming power establishes a form of aristocracy in a supposedly egalitarian society, and is linked to a history of colonization and land usurpation. While the name of Winthrop is associated in the novel with nineteenth-century capitalistic boosterism and the ideology of Manifest Destiny, its historical connotation reaches back to the Puritan past, and the famous sermon “Model of Christian Charity” pronounced on the ship Arbella by Founding Father John Winthrop. It featured the classic image of American exceptionalism, “the city upon the hill”. This country branding constitutes an ironic counterpoint to the text’s preoccupation with city naming, as well as

a Signifying act on American history, through a figure whose vaunted advocacy of religious freedom was counterbalanced by a rather intolerant, inegalitarian, authoritarian worldview (Leise 295). What is more, the trademark of Winthrop wire was a W-shaped barb that amounted to a signature, as it was used to fence land and "draw a line" (73). Apportioning land and apportioning language are similar operations, entailing a limitation of *Freedom*. The two black men on the city council had the means to resist the rebranding; yet one of them, Goode, sided with Winthrop, presumably because the safety and prosperity of the town were better assured under the aegis of a powerful white man.

32 New Prospera follows two other American onomastic trends: the addition of "New" to Old World locations, to assert both a connection with the past and an almost messianic elevation, on the model of the New Jerusalem; and the projection of religious or material wishful thinking onto the place that might become the theater of such prosperity. Software magnate Lucky Aberdeen's power as a new Prospero is also sneakily suggested, with its magic might, its illusory nature, and its colonization of Caliban's land. The new name born of marketing agents' skills is expected to prevail by all, even the consultant himself. It seems to follow the trend of history and fit the new digital economy like a glove. "From a clinical nomenclature perspective, this was a no-brainer. These people were already living in New Prospera whether they knew it or not" (174). Even Mayor Goode was about to follow this lead at the ambush meeting that was supposed to rename Winthrop before changing her mind and going it alone with a bid to reinstate Freedom (73). She later comments to the consultant: "Well, I have a choice. And I choose the truth" (116). We are faced again with this notion of the truth of names, which becomes even more elusive since each of the three versions of history and reality is accurate in some way and has a constituency in town.

33 The wordmonger is actually going to propose an unexpected fourth name—impose, we might say, since his contract stipulates that his choice shall stand for one year before any change can be effected: he has created the legal framework to enforce the felicity of his illocutionary act. The impulse to suggest a different name came from his delving into the lesser-known parts of town history: he

discovered a rift in outlook between the two founders, Goode and Field, also nicknamed the Light and the Dark, one the "optimist-prophet type", the other "the downer-realist figure" (141). Here realism is contrasted with idealism: "You understood deep down that what Field had to say was the world's truth, but you were going to pick Goode every time. It was easier that way" (197). The specific African American tonality of this contrast is conveyed by the characters' patronyms, harking back to the difference between house and field slaves, with the latter bearing the brunt of oppression and therefore having a "truer" knowledge of the peculiar institution (Leise 288). In the literary field, this anti-idealism often characterized realist and naturalist literature, from Zola to Dreiser and Crane. In a sense, the consultant's final choice, a revival of Field's own proposal for the city's name, represents an advocacy of both a vision of America and the literature that conveys it best: "Struggle". "Freedom was what they sought. Struggle was what they had lived through" (*Apex* 210). One may only guess the perlocutory influence of such gloomy reminder on the city dwellers. As Mayor Goode tells the consultant: "Can you imagine thinking that would be a good name for a place where people live?" (207). The protagonist's rationale for this unpalatable branding might not be as disinterested as he claims. Imagining Field's motivations, he seems to unveil his own motive and the figure he unconsciously wants to cut: "Let lesser men try to tame the world by giving it a name that might cover the wound, or camouflage it. Hide the badness from view. The prophet's work was of a different sort" (210).

34 "Struggle" cuts three ways. By insisting on an ongoing process it spells out a refusal of all fixed identities and denominations; moreover the agonistic nature of the process precludes any irenic reading of American history, that would gloss over class and race conflicts (Leise 297). It is the "anti-Apex" (*Apex* 210) in more ways than one: an antidote to national self-congratulation and the ideology of progress, it also has a biographical dimension for the character, as a compensatory move to his former hubris and cooptation into corporate America. Stepping in Field's shoes, he chooses the contrarian field slave's ethos over the Goode house slave's gradualist compromises. Yet in so doing, the unnamed namer surreptitiously calls himself a "prophet", with the attendant overtones of preachiness

and moralizing. This is possibly why a text that seems to advocate social realism is not written in that mode; even the well-intentioned denunciatory move in literature and social criticism is the butt of satire. After all, idealism and optimism, together with the urge to sugarcoat reality, are also part of reality; they can be debunked as illusions but the dream of absolute realism might itself be illusory. The protagonist is not cured in the end, as "his foot hurt more than ever" (212). He is still struggling with the nature of reality, as we all are.

35 According to philosopher Sandra Laugier, the philosophies of ordinary language, in the wake of J. L. Austin, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, have paved the way for a new form of consideration of the entanglements between language and reality. Even though the positivist "correspondence theory" that supposed the transparency of language to reality is no longer acceptable, due to the fact that both the speaking subject and their experience are shaped by language as much as they shape it, our ordinary language remains attuned to the real in practical and ethical ways. We learn words in certain contexts and expect ourselves and others to project them in other contexts. Even though nothing guarantees this, the fact that it happens most of the time within a given culture, or what Wittgenstein called a "form of life", allows us to share a world and agree on some common ground of "reality", even though no final consensus need arise and visions of the real must be accepted as always provisional (Laugier 114–15). Since discussing language is also to a large extent to discuss the real it points to, as well as, *per* Judith Butler, the powers and forces that pervade it, we do not need to step out of language to address reality. The fact that fiction usually has recourse to ordinary language, as opposed to the rarefied idioms of science and philosophy, may therefore not constitute such a handicap to its probing our relation to the real. According to M. K. Holland, "today's realisms offer multiple, contradictory possibilities of partial truths, and confounding evidence of the quantum world we may theorize but cannot experience" (Holland 255). The two main avenues of exploration she identifies in contemporary realist moves are a metafictional bend, and "sustained and multifaceted efforts to construct an unprecedented intimacy, even continuity, between language and the material world" (257).

36 Even though Colson Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt* evinces some skepticism as to our ability to know the "true" behind the "right" names, the novel shows a preoccupation with the real and puts forward various forms of realities and realism, which do not necessarily coalesce into a coherent picture or attitude, but point to the ethical imperative of striving for a correct vision. The satirical impulse of the novel humorously debunks the humbug culture of commercialism and branding: by deriding the fake it points towards the social and ideological culture of contemporary America, especially its materialism. This "contrastive realism" works hand in hand with Signifying, the form of critical parody that is rooted in the black vernacular and draws attention to the persisting racial exclusions at the heart even of contemporary multiculturalism. The metafictional dimension of the novel could be identified especially in parodic inroads into the philosophy of language, like the opposition between Cratylism and conventionalism, the former option representing a temptation in both poetry and advertising to search for motivated signs, which is another type of "realism". The institutional context of the naming activity allows probing the performative dimension of language, and the very real power relations that condition its deployment. The irony surrounding the consultant's final choice of "realism" (Struggle) against the illusions of idealism (Freedom, New Prospera) implies that any claim to "tell it like it is" in fiction may be a naïve throwback to nineteenth-century literary variants of the "correspondence theory", but that the imperative remains to sift through the signs, under the guidance of the body, in a form of "embodied knowledge". The racialized body, being the stake behind the erasure of Apex, becomes a touchstone of the real. But there is no dichotomy between body and language, since the symptom is both physical and signifying—as is fit for a fictional toe.

37 Several critics have identified an additional metafictional level in the novel: a meditation on the "postsoul" aesthetics with which Whitehead has often been associated. "The postsoul aesthetic […] centers on a conscious effort to alter the semiotic codes of race that are prevalent both within and outside the African American community" (Maus, *Understanding* 67). It eschews the rigid, quite essentialist definitions of blackness enacted by the Civil Rights and

Black Power movements in the 1960s in reaction to the negative stereotypes extant in majority culture. Both toponyms of Freedom and Struggle could be interpreted as the two city fathers' widely different bids for self-definition in response to the ordeal and dehumanization of slavery: anachronistically speaking, they were "soul" gestures. Cohn connects Oedipal guilt in *Apex* with the fact that since African American cultural symbols have now been coopted and commodified by mainstream capitalistic culture, the postsoul ethos may be marked by a sense of inauthenticity and betrayal.

38 His criticism is two-pronged. On the one hand, it addresses aspects of the "postsoul condition" in popular culture that are susceptible to the sirens of corporate culture and a facile multiculturalism, which are also the target of the novel's satirical darts. On the other hand, it detects in Whitehead's works "Oedipal anxieties" about "African-American literary and cultural ancestry" (21). On this point one may beg to differ: the literary familiars that the novel evokes are more Ralph Ellison and Percival Everett than the Black Arts movement, so the postulation of guilt or haunting concerning the author appears as a useless hypothesis. As for the protagonist, it is his cynicism that makes him a perfect vehicle for satire. Were it not for his melancholy disposition, his self-interested social mimicry and linguistic virtuosity would make him the ideal embodiment of the rhetoric of critical parody that is Signifying, the trickster-like Signifying Monkey. In Apex hides Ape-X.

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NOTES

1 The actual quote is much more complex: “There is no other possible definition of the real than: it is the impossible; when something finds itself characterized as impossible, it is only there that is the real; when one bangs into it, the real, it is the impossible to penetrate (*quand on se cogne, le réel, c’est l’impossible à pénétrer*)” (*Conferences in North American Universities*: 2 December 1975 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, published in *Scilicet*, 1975, no. 6–7, pp. 53–63. Tr. Jack W. Stone, p. 2). The Real that is met in the consultant’s toe-stubbing is not the materiality of the world, but the unconscious dimension of his own desire and anguish. I wish to thank Pr. Claudine Raynaud for her assistance with the arcana of Lacanian theory.

2 The Lacanian conception of the Real is much more complex and radical than this approximation. The Real is originally produced through the repression of the mother’s primal, incestuous demand and its outward projection, later elaborated upon by the Oedipus complex. The Real therefore belongs to the world of primal drives, trauma and anguish whereas our perception of the material world out there can only be apprehended as a projection. “The real of measurable nature is therefore coextensive to the real of sexual trauma—the subject of the Unconscious and the subject of science are one”, but the latter’s function is to cloak the former (Pommier 124).

RÉSUMÉS

English

The protagonist, an unnamed African American nomenclature consultant, has been a victim of his own trade: his stroke of genius, the name and

advertising slogan for a band-aid that fits the many skin tones of multicultural America, “Apex Hides the Hurt”, has ironically cost him an infected toe that he merely covered with the adhesive bandage instead of having it treated. When he is asked to arbitrate the rebranding of the town of Winthrop, the ad man faces both an onomastic and an existential challenge.
This paper draws on specific aspects of the philosophy of language to discuss the motivation of signs in relation to naming strategies and analyzes the performatives, performances, and diverse conditions of felicity that naming implies. The former is indebted in part to the legacy of Plato’s *Cratylus* and branding manuals—strange bedfellows; the latter draws from J. L. Austin’s speech act theory, as revisited by Barbara Cassin and Judith Butler. In both conceptions the real comes to dwell in language, either as a determining factor or as a product of a world-shaping activity. Since *Apex* is a fiction of naming, it provides an imaginary “actual” context for this verbal act. It can also describe the failed encounters between language and the real, the attempts at euphemizing or repressing reality, as well as the shattering irruptions of the real within discourse. As a satire of corporate culture and its bearing on “race”, it also generates an interface with the reality of contemporary American culture.

Français
Un nomenclaturiste afro-américain anonyme, dont le titre de gloire est d’avoir nommé un sparadrap aux couleurs multiculturelles de l’Amérique — « *Apex Hides the Hurt* » — a laissé se développer une infection de l’orteil, cachée sous le pansement, qui aboutit à une amputation. Sa tâche suivante, arbitrer une dispute toponymique dans une ville fondée par des esclaves émancipés, renommée par un riche manufacturier blanc, et en passe d’acquérir une nouvelle désignation postindustrielle, le confrontera à un défi onomastique et existentiel. Nous tentons d’explorer les diverses relations à la réalité et les diverses formes de réalisme représentées dans *Apex*. Nous examinons la dimension satirique du roman et sa critique de la culture commerciale étasunienne, avant de débusquer le retour du « réel » refoulé, sous les espèces du corps racialisé et de l’Inconscient. L’intrication du langage et du réel est l’objet de notre dernier mouvement, divisé en un examen de la question cratylique de la motivation du signe, et en une reconnaissance sur le terrain de la performativité des pratiques nominatives. L’enjeu est celui de la possibilité d’une écriture afro-américaine « *post-soul* ».

INDEX

Mots-clés
Whitehead (Colson), satire, réalisme(s), nomenclature, cratylisme, speech act theory, le réel

Keywords
Whitehead (Colson), satire, realism(s), nomenclature, cratylism, speech act theory, the real

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Kind One by Laird Hunt, or a Tale of a Real Twice Lost: Writing the Individual and Collective Memory of Slavery

Kind One *de Laird Hunt, ou le conte d'un réel par deux fois perdu : écrire la mémoire individuelle et collective de l'esclavage*

Anne-Julie Debare

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PLAN

TEXTE

1 What the real is to literature, so memory seems to be to History. Indeed both the real[1] and memory seem to eschew representation, separated as they are from the instrument of investigation that is language. Indeed, the real as perceptual experience can only incompletely be seized by language, which by essence is metaphorical —in that it refers to the real by means of a substitutio[2] and is thus marked by lack. In Lacanian terminology, the Real is the state from which the subject is taken from when accessing language or, in other words, and on another level, it corresponds to the impossibility for

the signifier to fully evoke the signified and for language to represent the subject itself. This failure of meaning or aporia in the face of the real is formally speaking similar to the failure of language in front of trauma. As for memory writing, be it collective or individual, it raises a second difficulty, since it seeks to invoke a real that is no longer present. Only tenuous traces (archives, such as pictures, testimonies and documents) allow the past to emerge from what seems a barely translucent mist.

2 Literature can provide a partial and dynamic solution to the problems proper to trauma and memory. First, the mimetic operation of telling structures and configures both the real and time, making them more habitable and graspable by the subject. [3] Moreover, poetic strategies such as symbolization, indirection and obliquity, in the shape of metaphors and plays on echoes, also attempt at circumscribing an ever-elusive real, at least partially.

3 Contemporary historical fiction for example—informed as it is by the notion of presentism and shaped by the evidential paradigm [4]—has increasingly resorted to documents and archives, and woven them into a main narrative, giving way to a spectral, yet expressive, representation of memory. For instance, novels such as Paul Auster's, W. G. Sebald's, Claude Simon's, or Laird Hunt's fiction inspired by History [5] have turned away from chronological representation, historical verisimilitude, as well as binary linguistic signification and explanatory types of discourse, oftentimes indirectly questioning the epistemological tools of historiography, [6] thus trying to negotiate the double hurdle of memory writing.

4 Moreover, these innovative forms of fiction strive to address the vexed question of the elusiveness of the real. Indeed, they attempt to edge nearer to human experience by confronting themselves to the real—a confrontation that echoes that of the reader. In Hunt's recent work, for instance, mimesis is largely tempered by poetic strategies, as those novels strive to create experiences (affects and impressions, or the absolute absence thereof) that are not likely to be seized by language directly. As Philippe Forest argues in an article about contemporary historical fiction, this dimension in a literary text makes it "more faithful to the truth of life" [7] in comparison with more explanatory and linear historical novels.

5 Lastly, these poetic strategies have a subsidiary virtue as they seem to provide a partial answer to two major ethical problems raised by memory writing: that of the necessary softening of the violence inherent in History through its representation and of the peril for fiction to alter and distort crucial historical facts. The end of the "Era of the Witness" and the death of the last survivors of the last midcentury disasters have led novelists to reinvent ways of continuing or echoing the witnesses' voices and memories through fiction. Some works have sparked controversies about the legitimacy of fiction in assuming these voices, [8] which led authors to further reflect on the type of writing, poetic license, and reader response the death of the witness could possibly allow. Laird Hunt's novel *Kind One* grapples with this question, favoring an indirect representation of violence, mediated by imagination, metaphors and fragmented, sinuous narratives. Moreover, while leaning on a former slave's authentic account, the text constantly points out its fictional quality [9] by multiplying references from written and oral literary traditions.

6 *Kind One* weaves together personal destinies in times of slavery, and confronts the experiences of three young women in separate retrospective narratives. First, that of Ginestra, [10] called Ginny in the novel, who is still a teenager when she is seduced by her mother's distant cousin, Linus Lancaster, an unsuccessful stage actor now owner of a pig farm. As Ginny settles on her new husband's property, which proves to be a small derelict farm far from the "Paradise" he initially depicted, she soon becomes the victim of unceasing humiliations, acts of violence and sexual abuse inflicted by Linus, who proves to be a monster of selfishness and resentment. Ginny can nonetheless rely on Linus' slaves, two younger girls named Cleome and Zinnia, who support and comfort her. When Linus decides to reject Ginny and starts sexually abusing the girls, she turns her violence against them out of a harrowing sense of betrayal and despair. When Linus is found dead one morning, Zinnia and Cleome, who had earlier turned out to be Linus' daughters, take their revenge on Ginny before running away to the north. Haunted and ashamed by the memories of her time on Linus' farm, Ginny spends the rest of her life at Lucious Wilson's, a farmer who rescued her and strives to help her mend her wounds.

7 Ginny's circumlocutory and biased narrative is followed by Zinnia's fragmented account of the events, which offers a counterpoint to the first version of the story. The latter intertwines two narrative threads interspersed with misty, oftentimes overexposed, landscape photographs. The first thread allusively portrays Zinnia and Cleome's early life with their father, until he murdered their mother, his former slave and wife. It depicts the years spent on the farm with Ginny until their nightly escape, in the course of which Cleome dies as she gives birth to Linus' son, Prosper. The second thread recounts a later episode, when an ageing Zinnia and her orphaned nephew set on to find Ginny and gather the different protagonists' testimonies.

8 Two short narratives, Prosper's and Lucious', conclude the collection of personal stories, recontextualizing them and giving them a form of unity. The opening of the novel, a short introductory parable on loss and grief which deals with the death of a child in a well, several decades before the story, seems to invite the reader to carefully listen to the discreet echoes between seemingly dissimilar narratives and to speculate on how they may actually be linked.

9 This article purposes to examine the specific resources of fiction to overcome the resistance of the real, here the brutal experience of slavery, to convey the extreme character of this experience and to arouse the collective memory of it against the risks of denial or forgetfulness. We will first examine how the novel draws upon history while ostensibly rejecting its chronological markers and its explanatory discourse, to favor the mediation of story-telling and its dynamics of symbolization. Indeed, Hunt invents a hybrid form of fictional historical testimony in which the expressive power of tales and myths stimulates the reader's imagination while composing a transitional object for the memory of slavery to be evoked and passed on. We will then go on to study specific aspects of the poetics of indirection in the novel, showing how Hunt resorts to allegories, metaphors and the structural mechanisms of trauma to convey the characters' experience of "the real", as they have witnessed the veil of language [11] being torn asunder by traumatic violence.

Tales and myths memory is made of

10 If the novel draws upon archives, documents and tangible traces of the past, of which they borrow the forms and codes, the reflexivity of the novel as well as its fictional nature seem to relegate historical referentiality. Instead, the novel seems to favor story-telling, symbolization, and fictional representations, to which the text resorts while never ceasing to question and revitalize them.

Entering fiction: the initial *mise en abyme* of the novel

11 The novel is partly inspired from a piece of archive, the testimony of a direct witness, that of Harriet Jacobs, a slave herself who recorded her experience in an autobiography entitled *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.*[12] In the acknowledgements of the novel, Laird Hunt also mentions a History seminar about slavery and the Haitian Revolution which informed his writing. The novel engages in playful exploration of various forms of historical archives. The sections of the novel offer all the characteristics of a set of testimonies, bearing the dates and names of its authors, moreover several metaleptic passages point out the materiality of these documents, mentioning, for instance, “the stack of sheets” written and gathered by Ginny, or the big envelope enclosing several characters’ accounts.

12 Nonetheless, the fictional dimension of the novel is immediately emphasized by the initial *mise en abyme* of the novel. Invoking a childhood memory of story time, the epigraph of the novel indeed anchors the narrative in the realm of imagination and, while formal elements of the fairytale, such as linguistic, thematic or narrative stereotypes of folktales, are everywhere woven into the texture of the novel, acting as counterpoints to the mimesis, the epigraph is particularly evocative of the genre.

> In the evening she would tell it. In the dusk light, when the candles were lit and the fire was low, she would clear her throat. When the windows were closed and the curtains drawn and the children

> tucked, she would set in to speak. When we had all gathered close, when our shoulders had touched, when we had taken her hands, when we had drawn in our breath. When we had shut tight our eyes, when we had thought of our days, the years of our suffering, our joy in the sunshine, that time by the water, cool drops on our foreheads, warm bread in our mouths. When we had all been spared, when our crops had come in, when the storm had stepped past, when we had said all our prayers. When the night stretched before us, she would open her tale. (9)

The grammatical structure of the paragraph—several protases in "when" followed by a short apodosis—the regular rhythm created by the anaphora, as well as the archaic quality of the prose are evocative of the fairy tale. This scene depicts a past story-telling scene, but its very form simultaneously invokes a second scene of story-telling, in which the narrator recalling his past, describes it while himself adopting and assuming the codes of story-telling.

13 Several interpretations can be made of this *mise en abyme*, especially in relation to the fact it introduces a story essentially inspired by historical facts. It first suggests that, just like the story time scene described, the story underway is a tale to be told, shared and transmitted again to future generations. It also points out the act of invention and recreation inherent in storytelling; the reader should thus expect the story, which he may *believe* he already knows, to be distorted, altered or expanded. Not only does the epigraph highlight, in its very form, the fact that the novel will be an imaginary-tinted evocation of memory, but it also points out the fictional portion of any attempt at conveying memory under a narrative form. [13]

14 The discreet allusions to the Yoruba tradition throughout the novel assign another function to the epigraph. Indeed, tales told by a young slave named Alcofibras—himself an occurrence of the figure of the trickster, mischievously named after the pseudonym of a renowned storyteller, François Rabelais, also known as Alcofibras Niser—are used as distant metaphorical echoes of the violence that his master Linus Lancaster inflicted upon him, his sisters and their mother. These tales offer an oblique access to what cannot bluntly be told in narrative form nor conveyed by the logic of explanation and signification (in the linguistic sense of the term). Those stories seem directly related to folktales of the Yoruba tradition, as they were

transmitted to Alcofibras by his grandmother, a first-generation slave who was removed from Africa. From these traditional tales, which were passed on among slaves and marked by the supernatural, symbols and a rhythm that eased the memorization process, the novel borrows another generic trait: their typical opening and closing sections, whose functions were to make the listener step into an imaginary world, where the usual values and notions of time and space are set aside. [14] In *Kind One*, the epigraph and foreword, which are both well separated from the main narrative and appear in italics, seem to bear the same function, and bring the reader to consider the novel itself as a fictional recreation of collective memory, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as a literary transitional space for the community of readers, a mediating space that is susceptible to help integrate, at a collective level, what has been collectively repressed or forgotten, that is, here, the violence of slavery.

History blended in fiction

15 Other narratives such as European folktales and Greek myths both reinforce the imaginary texture of the novel and tend to blur the boundary between historical reality and fictional space, allowing the reader to become fully immersed in the narrative.

16 Ginny's narrative is endowed with imaginary landmarks borrowed from fairytales that seem to structure her world and representations, references that will prove deceitful. Linus Lancaster's pig farm is named by Ginny, first literally then sarcastically "four-square Kingdom" (87), "his piece of heaven" (56), "his piece of paradise" (77). Those references hint at the tales she cherished as a child and that she nostalgically keeps reading at Wilson's, romances that she calls "my happy stories" [15] and that seems to screen, rather than mediate her painful memories. The action in Ginny's narrative is not set in any referential space, which is also a generic stereotype of the tale, and takes place "ninety miles from nowhere" (17) in Charlotte County which is not actually located in Kentucky State but in Virginia, thus thwarting the reader's reflexes to instinctively anchor fictional places in referential space. However, through the voice of Ginny's father, the text seems to warn the reader against the illusory sense of control offered by instruments of stable representation such as maps: "They

make maps so we think we can understand the size of [the world] but we can't" (143).

17 Mythical references also permeate the evocation of the American space, to which they award a metaphorical depth. For instance, the Ohio River, which figures the border line between Indiana and Kentucky, between the territories of Ginny's childhood and adulthood, but also between the two sides of the Civil War, takes on a shifting mythical connotation. The passage in which the two young slaves, Zinnia and Cleome, run away from Linus' pig farm to seek shelter in Unionist territory with the help of a ferryman, echoes back to the Styx, the river of death and hate in Greek mythology. But the association shifts as Ginny crosses it in her turn, haunted as by a harrowing feeling of guilt over the violence she inflicted. The river is then here associated to the Acheron, the river of pain. The Ohio appears one last time as Zinnia's nephew, Prosper, sails up the river in an effort to record the testimony of the ferrymen who helped the slaves, in order to transmit it to future generations. This travel up the Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, appears as a telling metaphor of the memory work undertaken by the characters. [16]

Subjective immersion rather than historical retrospection

18 This blurring of spatial referentiality and the anchoring of the plot in imaginary space are coupled with an effort to dim the presence of historical references. Indeed, if the dates of the fictional testimonies do inscribe insert the plot in the timeline of historical reality, setting it before the Civil War and the following Abolition of slavery in 1865, the plot only occasionally and discretely alludes to the related events. For example, when Zinnia and Cleome escape the farm to momentarily join Horace and Ulysses, Linus' former slaves, in Louisville, the latter let them know about political unrest in Louisville.

> Horace and Ulysses said there was a war coming, that the whole world would be swept away, that we would all be struck down, but we hardly heard them. Our ears where either sill back in Paradise or on up the roes, but not there. (170)

Such vague, generic reference to the beginning of the Civil War, while eschewing historical referentiality, encourages the reader to focus on the characters' actions and immerse in their experiences, thus leading her to partially sympathize with them.

19 However, if historical landmarks remain mostly hidden, the accurate chronology enables the reader to lean on such implicit historical referential background to appreciate the representation of the characters grappling with a very unpredictable future—which reinforces the reader's sense of the characters' immense vulnerability in the face of the violence of History.

20 Similarly, the terms "slave" or "slavery" are barely mentioned in the novel, the slaves are referred to as "boys "and "girls". The text uses the paternalistic language of slavery, which also indirectly alludes to the incestual climate which reigns in Linus' home—where everybody including Linus must be considered as Ginny's children. This narrative device emphasizes the perception of the violence of slavery, since the text does not clearly designate it, thus facilitating the reader's identification with the characters. The only occurrence of the word "slave"[17] is finally uttered by Prosper, in a context where the end of the war and the official abolition of slavery have made it possible for him to utter it. This will later on allow him to engrave his mother's name on a nameless tomb, next to the ones of many other slaves who died trying to cross the Ohio to join the North.

The ethical space of the text: destabilizing fictional representations of heroism

21 *Kind One* seems to offer a sidestep from representations of heroism with the character of Ginny. If Linus' male slaves, and Horace, are flat characters with no particular function in the plot, Ginny embodies anti-heroic values since she is the one who does not revolt early enough against her monstrous husband, and twice fails to run away from the farm in a timely manner. Worse, she turns against her own companions of misery, Zinnia and Cleome, when Linus realizes Ginny cannot give him a child and starts abusing them. Interestingly, the text strives to bring a partial answer to the enigma of her behavior, by

explaining why she turns against the two young women instead of heroically punishing her husband in an exemplary fashion, as myths and tales have generally led the reader to expect. Along with those structural elements, the very notion of willpower is deconstructed in the novel.

22 The title of the novel, which brings to mind a moral tale, is particularly telling of the ethics the novel. The "kind one" here seems to refer to the positive hero of the tale. However, the characters' roles seem interchangeable and shift as the narrative turns the tables, thus questioning and thwarting the binary morals of a tale, and encouraging the readers to question their own values as they identifiy, in turn, to the victim and the aggressor. The figure of the circulation of rocks in the pockets and mouths of various characters in the novel, bringing to mind Beckett's *Molloy*—in which a similar motif was analysed by Barthes as hinting at the circulation of meaning in a stable structure [18]—also puts forth this fruitful instability of the characters' identity. [19]

23 Thus the narrative structure of the novel provides an ethical space, which also enables the reader to take the full measure of Ginny's responsibility. Similarly, the change of point of view from that of Ginny to Zinnia's makes their suffering incomparable and Ginny's guilt unquestionable. In parallel, the novel also somehow allows understanding the causes of Ginny's violence, which are rooted in a traumatic childhood. Ginny's words to her protector Lucious Wilson —who offered her a house and work after she fled Kentucky—seem to directly address the reader: "if you had found me, it might not have been me you chose to help" (131). The reader is thus left with a feeling of discomfort that will persist throughout the novel, as the fragmented and biased quality of Ginny's narrative keeps them from prematurely judging her, and enables them to distantly [20] identify with Ginny, just quite enough to understand her. The reader's sympathy is carefully mediated again by the narrative as Ginny feels the need to hammer home that she "helped" the girls (25). This revealing disavowal [21] of the guilt that she feels for having turned against the two young slaves makes her sound sincere in the eye of the reader.

Writing and reparation?

24 Alluding to the violence she witnessed and took part in, Ginny quotes her father's words: "The land is the land and the land washes itself clean." Forgetfulness seems thus a natural course and the stain of violence or fault eventually fades away, giving way to symptom. Equally, it also implies that memories that have been buried and covered by time can be dug out and re-reinscribed in memory. The dynamics of the plot of *Kind One* tend to suggest so. Indeed, the character of Prosper, born of the incestual union between Linus and Cleome, is the one who digs up the memories and breaks away from the repetition of violence and hate, already initiated by his Zinnia's memory work. Directly preceding Ginny's narrative, the story of the "Deep Well" offers another variation on the theme of excavation. In this parable about grief set in the wilderness, a father digs a well in which his baby daughter falls and loses her life. The reiterated act of digging thus opens the novel, placing it under the sign of loss, a loss that writing seeks to recover.

25 Prosper's name is quite evocative of his function in the novel since it suggests the one who strives, whose future is enlightened. It is also derived from the latin "*propice*", which refers to someone that manifests active benevolence or kindness. The "benevolent one" as the novel suggests, is the one who cares for the future and transcribes the memories of the witnesses (he pretends to be a "*reporter*" to accomplish this perilous task) and records it for future generations. When finally Prosper engraves his mother's tombstone he honors the memory of his mother and gives her back her identity and a human face that had been denied to her by the slavery.

26 Doing so, Prosper breaks up the logic of repetition of violence and trauma, and reopens the gates of time and the possibility for change:[22] the plot can then escape from the circularity of the formula "Hates returns hate", against which he warned Zinnia when she let him know she wanted to look for Ginny. The phrase brings to mind Martin Luther King's sermon "Returning hate for hate multiplies hate" which aimed at peaceful progressive attitude in the struggle to obtain Civil Rights. The novel seems to inscribe the

memory of violence into this wider political dynamic at which it discreetly hints through Prosper's ideology.

27 The ethical dimension of *Kind One* lies in its ability to eschew direct and teleological representation of a historical period of time in favor of a looser representation that informs and addresses our conceptions of the present, in order to "reroute all the past towards the future", as Philippe Forest puts it. If literature is not *meant* to heal memorial wounds, for it cannot be reduced to a sole political function, nonetheless the tale-like quality of *Kind One* lets one wonder whether such a literary object could contribute to mend the holes in the collective memory of slavery as the latter continues to haunt American memory and to generate a violence which appears to be symptomatic of it.

A poetics of indirection

28 In *Kind One*, historical violence is evoked in its most intimate degree —that of dehumanizing experiences—and in an effort to find the appropriate distance, a vivid and expressive representation of violence is offered while both sensationalism and the aestheticization of violence are avoided. This is achieved through the combination of the form of the tale with the animalization of characters, so as to obliquely tackle incest and slavery.

29 Moreover, the text offers a representation of the experience of extreme violence, in which the veil of language is torn apart by the irruption of the real. Ginny's childhood trauma, for which the text provides an extended metaphor through the figure of the well, illustrates the logics of traumatic violence. While offering a dynamic tableau of trauma, the novel seems to also resort to it as a dramatic force as well as a structuring form.

A tale of 'undifferentiation': telling the intimate experience of slavery

30 The text represents the violence of slavery as an intentional destruction of the slave's subjectivity, that is to say as the deregulation of human relations, thus allowing the absolute negation of the Other as subject. Indeed, the slave's own desire is denied in

favor of the master's. This annihilation of the desiring capacities of the Other is here conveyed through the motive of incest and the extended metaphor of cannibalism.

31 Hinted at with references to ogre stories, such as Hop-O'-My-Thumb or Hansel and Gretel, incest is first alluded to through the theme of the pigs. The excessive consumption of pork, a metaphorical shift that allows the text to tackles the issue while allowing suspense—as the reader does not know straight away that Cleome and Zinnia are Linus' daughters. Pigs are first presented as the others of humans, as intelligent and sensitive creatures that seem to empathize with their siblings as the latter are slaughtered at Wilson's and then at Linus' farm. [23] The text highlights the similarities between the pigs and the inhabitants of the farm, and plays with them to emphasize the transgressive quality of this abnormal consumption of pig meat at Linus'. Indeed, its occupants, slaves included, consume pork at every meal, in all forms, the text picturing the variations of this unrestrained consumption as characters wear pig skin and have pockets full of skin cracklings.

32 This consumption viewed as a symbolic variant of cannibalism by numerous cultures suggests a monstrous devoration that hints at incest, which is here mediatized by the animalization process and the metaphorical shift to ingestion.

33 Linus' name is also enlightening, for the "line" conjures up the image of a *levelling* of generations occurring on the farm, where Ginny must be called the "Mother" of all, husband included, as Linus turns to his own daughters.

The well as an emblem and extended metaphor of trauma

34 The figure of the well is a recurring one in Laird Hunt's work, and always has to do with trauma, indeed is a metaphor for it, in keeping with usual traumatic backgrounds. The image of the well is all the more effective and telling as it keeps an evocative similarity with its usual presentation as a hole, or a stain. But far from being a mere symbol, the figure works as extended metaphor of trauma, which dictates and organizes the whole structure of the narrative.

35 In *Kind One*, the well is both the place where slaves take shelter from the master's terrible outbursts of anger and a cold and dark place that they fear. It also haunts Ginny's narrative and memory as it is the only view from the shed where she is in her turn held prisoner by Zinnia and Cleome. The haunting image of well keeps coming back in her life, even years after she finally runs away from the farm. The well is tightly linked to her guilt for having contributed to deprive Alcofibras of a proper burial, a fault for which she was made to dig holes in the ground by the two sisters. Indeed, just as she dug holes to sleep in in the shed where she was held prisoner, she continues to look for holes to curl into as she flees to the north. Once a maid for Lucious Wilson, she starts *digging* her own flesh, picking at the scar left by the shackle she was attached with. Here Ginny's compulsive and repeated reenactment of her trauma is evocative of the "positive" expressions of trauma, [24] a notion coined by Freud to refer to a repetition of trauma, of which the well is the allegory.

A logic of revelation and obliquity

36 A closer investigation of the novel shows that the text is also swarming with discreet, barely visible, traces of trauma—what Freud refers to as "negative" expressions of trauma. The well appearing in the first section of the book, seems to be the echo of a muted trauma, whose traces will have to be found in the details of the text, the associative links of its chapters, or the conspicuous omissions. The story "The Deep Well" which opens the novel, and seems to bear no direct relation with the main plot, ends with a scene where the man, having lost his child, fills the cavity and refuses to ever drink again from any well he dug. Ginny's narrative immediately follows this parable of loss and grief, [25] and in the first description she gives of Linus' farm, a well is mentioned. In the text, which depicts life on the farm, language itself seems all too literal:

> It was a pretty country. Greens were greens. There was snow for Christmas and holly bushes to make sure it looked white. Breezes and flowers for the summer. Trees in autumntime stuffed with red and yellow leaves. Bulbs to crack open the earth when it came up on spring. It has been my whole excuse for a life since I held my breath

> and pointed my back at that place, but my mind has never learned to hold what transpired there against it. (18)

The vagueness of the description (“pretty”, 18), the practical quality of it (“varied as to elevation, with good drainage”, 17), and the fact that this world is tightly bound together by a necessity which seems artificial (“to make sure”, “for”) convey a general sense of incongruity. The tautologies also seem to point out the fact that language here is failing: everything happens as if Ginny was describing a simplified world where words could directly and perfectly match the real, the impossible dream of a real that would be transparent to language. Thus, from the beginning of the novel on, something seems to have been kept secret and begs to be revealed, as the image of the piercing bulbs points out. Ginny’s narrative and the novel itself, as suggested by the “Overture” and the variations on the excavation motive, eventually and indirectly shed light on it.

37 In this passage, the truth that is alluded to by the narrative obviously refers to Linus’ abuse of the three girls, and to Ginny’s active participation in those acts of violence, as she became jealous of Linus’ “attention”. But to this preposterous and unfathomable reaction, that she herself “cannot account for”, the structure of Ginny’s narrative, and the chain of her associations will also offer an indirect telling answer.

38 Indeed, the absence of a father gone to war and who, hardened by the violence of it, regularly beat her (“My father, the same who had been through battles, had a wooden foot and a cane to club on us with”, 18) seems to have shaped Ginny’s taste for a violent masculine figure, reminiscent of her father, a figure embodied by the knights of the tales she reads, and of whom she pictures herself as bride, as she writes in a tale of her own making, “the princess in the clouds”. However, as Alcofibras rightly notes, “clouds were a cold place to live” (28) and finding Linus (a distant figure of Blue Beard, with “blue sheen” in his hair, 90) will offer no solace, even though, as her own mother’s suitor, he seems to represent for Ginny a very much longed-for eligible bachelor.

39 A childhood memory, in which Ginny jumps into a dark hole in the ice to get her father’s attention, and for which she was beaten up to the

point of nearly losing consciousness, closes her long narrative. By the violence of it, and its very situation in the novel, this memory seems to underline its own crucial role in Ginny's psychological organization. Ginny's renewed experience of violence, inflicted in turn by Linus then by the girls, seems to have sent her back into early trauma.

40 The motif of darkness and night pervades the entire plot: many scenes take place in the moonlight, one section is called "The Candle Story" and the story-time scene of the epigraph happens at nighttime. This obscurity, which sometimes also affects the clarity of language, points out both the dark nature of the events and the fact that they are partly hidden in the folds and meanderings of Ginny's narrative, whose guilt brings her to partly cover her active role in the girls' ordeal. If Ginny progressively admits her wrongs, only Zinnia's narrative really sheds light on the full extent of Ginny's violence. As the novel shifts from a nocturnal to a more diurnal and solar setting, the text also slowly reveals the enigma of Ginny's brutality, which is partly accounted for—but never justified or discharged—by her own experience of suffering violence, which, as the text seems to suggest, brings about more violence.

The role of literature

41 Ginny describes her quest for a name to be put upon her traumatic experience, in which she struggles, as her words shows. Also, she starts looking for a way to voice it in Lucious Wilson's rich library.

> In the big house […] there is the big shelf of books that is the mother to the little shelf I have here. It isn't just my happy books on that big shelf. It is other things. It is the shallow and the deep parts of the pocket both. […] on that shelf I searched every day for the word to say what it was that befell us in that house in Kentucky. I looked in every book for that word, but I did not see it. It wasn't until a Sunday at the church that I learned what that word was and saw that I had looked at it many times in those books and heard it said every day. (23)

She cannot pin down these "things" she experienced on Linus' farm, as illustrated by her use of the structure "what it was" where "it",

usually replacing a noun, here does not seem to refer to anything. The story of discovery of the word “darkness”, as a convenient label for the blank left in her consciousness, is in its form quite revealing of traumatic “belatedness”[26] as she says she had looked at and heard this word many times in her books but was only able to recognize it now, after a revelation brought to her by the enlightening figure of Lucious.

42 Alcofibras’ numerous stories are also revealing in the way they somehow speak to Ginny’s trauma in a way that she herself cannot understand, as her comment shows:

> You hear something like that and it walks out the door with you. It follows you out the door to your work or your rest then jumps into your head and runs around inside it like a spider. You think there isn’t much to a story like that and you think you’ve forgotten it, and a week later it is there. A year later it is there. Half a whole lifetime later it is there. Something like that gets in you and gets started and it doesn’t stop. (67)

43 The story of the dough that drinks a woman’s endless tears indirectly echoes Ginny’s bottomless guilt, as she is herself bound to forever eat her own daily tear-fed bitter bread. Further away, the story of the black bark, a persistent passenger in a man’s pocket, hints at Ginny’s haunting feeling. The story of the onion is also reminiscent of Ginny’s self-inflicted doom and self-fulfilling prophecies: having run away from a violent master, an onion is granted human appearance for several years by a stranger, however, as he worries that the spell may be coming to its end and sets out to look for the stranger, he immediately breaks the spell. The significance of those tales does not immediately nor directly show, rather, their meaning fluctuates according to the narrative, just like the moving red rope in Alcofibras’ story,[27] which both speaks of the mythical red thread of Fate, but also, on a metatextual level, of the red thread of desire and its linking property.

44 These tales also seem to deal with the ability of literature to speak of and to the reader’s subconscious. While the literal surface of the text offers a clarifying and revealing image of the real, it also seems, by means of playful effects of reflection and shifts of meaning, to

address what in the reader's consciousness is not directly accessible. [28]

Conclusion

45 *Kind One* literally and figuratively unravels the stuff our representations of the real is made of, by exhibiting the fictional dimension necessarily embedded in any type of discourse and playing with it. Facing the irrepresentable real that is the intimate experience of slavery, the text offers an aesthetic experience of it through an innovative poetics of indirection. What the novel seems to suggests, both poetically and thematically, is that the propensity of violence and trauma to generate their own repetition actually requires a response, demands to be understood and to have their dynamics deciphered, in order to break away from the circle of hate and revenge. *Kind One* finally creates the space that allows for the suspension of the reader's judgement as it strives to circumscribe the very dynamics of violence while questioning and subverting the representations that enable its outburst or its repetition.

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NOTES

1 Understood as a perceptual experience, and thus considered as irreducible to language. It was also coined as the "impossible" by Bataille and Lacan.

2 "It is this way with all of us concerning language; we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities. In the same way that the sound appears as a sand figure, so the mysterious X of the thing in itself first appears as a nerve stimulus, then as an image, and finally as a sound" (Nietzche 24).

3 As Paul Ricœur points: “Le temps devient temps humain dans la mesure où il est articulé de manière narrative ; en retour le récit est significatif dans la mesure où il dessine les traits de l’expérience temporelle » (Ricœur 1983, 17).

4 The notion of presentism is developed in Hartog (2003). The notion of evidential paradigm, or the idea that the modern historian’s relation to History is evidential, appears in Ginzburg (1980).

5 *Kind One* (2012), *Neverhome* (2014), *The Evening Road* (2017) and *In the House in the Dark of the Woods* (2018) directly deals with American memory and its mythical and fictional texture, *The Exquisite* (2006) explores America’s relation to its own past and *Zorrie* (2021) tackles the interweaving of individual and collective memories.

6 For instance, by subverting and playing with the very form of micro-history.

7 “C’est à quoi s’emploie, je crois, la vraie littérature vivante d’aujourd’hui, […] rompant la linéarité de l’intrigue forcément solidaire d’une conception téléologique du temps pour lui substituer l’ordre d’une autre composition qui convoque les moments de l’Histoire, les rapproche et les assemble sans souci de la chronologie, mais dans le dessein de produire une représentation concurrente qui soit plus fidèle à la vérité de la vie” (Forest, 2011).

8 *Le Débat*, vol. 165, no. 3, 2011. Debates addressed the blurring of the boundary between historiography and fiction and its ethical implications.

9 Hunt uses a somehow similar device in *The Evening Road*, which deals, indirectly again, with a lynching in early 20th century Indiana, and in which the whites and the blacks, are named “cornsilks” and “cornflowers” thus defamiliarizing the context and allowing the readers to consider the narrated events in a new light and in their complexity.

10 The reader can see here a reference to the poem “La Ginestra” (1836) by the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi’ which offers a description of the meditation on the precarious and vulnerable life of human beings, in the metaphor of the will broom (ginestra) which grows on the slope of the Vesuvio. It suggests that, just like this “collective” and “slow” flower, humans can find in themselves, and as a community, the power to regrow and thrive.

11 An image used by Jacques Lacan to refer to the fundamental illusion of language. “What can materialise for us, as it were, in the sharpest way this relationship of interposition, which means that what is aimed at lies beyond what presents itself? Well, something that is truly one of the most fundamental images of the human relationship with the world, namely the veil, the curtain. The veil or curtain that hangs in front of something is still what best affords an image of this fundamental situation of love. One can even say that with the presence of the curtain, what lies beyond as a lack tends to be actualised as an image. The absence is painted onto the veil. This is nothing less than a curtain’s function per se, whichever it may be. The curtain assumes its value, its being and its consistence from being precisely that onto which absence is projected and imagined. The curtain is, so to speak, the idol of absence” (Lacan, Seminar IV, 2020, 147).

12 H. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, New York: Dover Publications, 1862.

13 According to Paul Ricœur (1983, 127), narrative structures itself following narrative codes which are internal to discourse. “Mimésis II” refers to the mediation of fictional narrative, with its multiplicity of imaginative variations, in the process of story-telling.

14 “Chez les Yorubas, les contes obéissent à des lois précises et leur oralisation est toujours encadrée par une formule d’entrée et une formule de sortie. […] L’amorce annonce le commencement du conte, la sortie sa fin. La formule d’entrée sert souvent à mettre en avant le caractère fictif du conte. Ce préambule manifeste la volonté du conteur d’introduire son auditoire dans un monde imaginaire en rupture avec le quotidien. C’est aussi une invitation ‘au voyage dans un monde surnaturel’. C’est donc le moment où l’auditoire est uni et cette intégration à l’espace psychique du récit favorise une prise de conscience d’un destin commun” (Laditan).

15 “Books in which they die by the cheerful dozen and the knight comes to rescue off the damsel and the good lord of hosts lets it pour down happy ever afters like there wasn’t anything else in his skies. Like he didn’t have any other eventualities squirreled away up there” (Hunt 19).

16 See Ricœur’s image of forgetfulness. “L’oubli est ainsi désigné obliquement comme cela contre quoi l’effort de rappel est dirigé. C’est à contre-courant du fleuve Léthé que l’anamnèse fait son œuvre” (Ricœur, *Mémoire* 33).

17 "I am writing an article on places where slaves were given help" (Hunt 199).

18 For a longer development on the question, see Roland Barthes' comment in the section entitled Argo, in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, 1975.

19 Moreover reversal and circulation of roles and identities are a recurring pattern in Laird Hunt's novel. See, for example, *In the House in the Dark of the Woods* (2018), or *Neverhome* (2014).

20 Ginny's constant need to underline the irony of her choice, her self-directed sarcasms, and the almost excessive presence of her guilt tend to limit the reader's sympathy.

21 "Si le terme *Verneinung* désigne tout simplement une négation, on est justifié à en renforcer la traduction en 'dénégation' pour en signifier la spécificité inconsciente, il s'agit de l'acte verbal par lequel un sujet, notamment un patient pendant l'analyse, énonce et récuse un état de fait qui s'avère effectif, ce qui révèle une dénégation inconsciente du refoulé" (Assoun 30). Ginny's seems to oscillate between conscious and harrowing guilt of her fault and a complete denial of it in the face of its unbearable quality.

22 The novel does not so much integrate temporality in a teleological conception of historical progress, but rather suggests that the repetition of violence, inherent in History, demands a constant work of analysis and understanding that allows for its causes to be addressed.

23 Here subtly echoing scenes where Zinnia is held captive in the shed by Linus and where her soft and erratic humming reach the ears of the narrator and the other slaves.

24 "Les effets du traumatisme sont de deux sortes, positifs et négatifs. Les premiers sont des efforts pour remettre en œuvre le traumatisme, donc pour remémorer l'expérience oubliée ou mieux encore, pour la rendre réelle, pour en vivre à nouveau une répétition. […] Les réactions négatives tendent au but opposé : à ce qu'aucun élément des traumatismes oubliés ne puisse être remémoré ni répété" (Freud 163). Or, further down: "l'oublié n'est pas effacé, mais seulement 'refoulé' : ses traces mnésiques existent dans toute leur fraicheur mais sont isolées […] elles ne peuvent entrer en relation […] elles sont inconscientes, inaccessibles à la conscience. Il se peut aussi que certaines parties du refoulé soient soustraites au processus, qu'elles restent accessibles au souvenir, qu'elles surgissent à l'occasion dans la

conscience, mais même alors, elles sont isolées, comme des corps étrangers sans lien avec le reste" (Freud 163).

25 The figure of the well in the opening parable of *Kind One* is also quite evocative of a metaphor of the human psyche: the excavation and the building of the layers of colored pebbles, which the water is meant to rise through, do not fail to evoke the image of the subject as a filtered surging desiring energy. It is reminiscent of Freud's second topic, yet the modelling is represented in the making, since the future parents are included, as they lovingly and cautiously pick each pebble (Hunt 4–7).

26 "The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. And thus the traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished" (Caruth 4–5).

27 "There wasn't much to it. It was about a piece of red rope. The whole of the story was that sometimes that piece of red rope lying there without anybody to touch it would move" (Hunt 76).

28 "[R]ésoudre l'énigme de l'œuvre d'art demande à prendre en compte non seulement le créateur mais aussi son destinataire. Qu'est-ce qui, d'une œuvre, vient toucher le public ? Les grandes œuvres, atteignant les 'points névralgiques' (Green, 1980, p. 153) de l'inconscient du destinataire, sollicitant affects et représentations inconscients, ont un effet qui opère quelle que soit l'époque de sa (*sic*) production" (Emmanuelli 43).

RÉSUMÉS

English
This article purposes to examine the specific resources of fiction to overcome the resistance of the real, here the brutal experience of slavery, to convey the extreme character of this experience and to animate the collective memory of it against the risks of denial or forgetfulness.
We first examine how the novel draws upon history while ostensibly rejecting its chronological markers and its explanatory discourse, to favor the mediation of story-telling and its dynamics of symbolization. Indeed, Hunt invents a hybrid form of fictional historical testimony in which the expressive power of tales and myths arouses the reader's imagination while composing a transitional object for the memory of slavery to be evoked and

passed on.
We then go on to study specific aspects of the novel's poetics of indirection showing how Hunt resorts to allegories, metaphors and the structural mechanisms of trauma to convey the characters' experience of "the real", as they have witnessed the veil of language being torn asunder by traumatic violence.

Français
Cet article se propose d'analyser les outils et stratégies mises en œuvre par la fiction, en particulier par le roman *Kind One* de Laird Hunt (2012), pour tenter de surmonter la résistance du réel, ici l'expérience brutale de l'esclavage aux États-Unis, pour tenter de ranimer le souvenir collectif de l'esclavage face aux risques du déni et de l'oubli.
Nous montrons d'abord que le roman, tout en s'appuyant sur des faits historiques et des témoignages, rejette ouvertement la temporalité linéaire et le discours explicatif du discours de l'histoire, pour ancrer le récit dans l'imaginaire et leur préférer la médiatisation de la fiction. Hunt invente ainsi une forme hybride mêlant fiction historique et témoignage qui s'appuie sur le pouvoir expressif des mythes et contes de traditions orales africaines et occidentales pour évoquer de manière saisissante la mémoire de l'esclavage. Nous étudions ensuite les spécificités poétiques de l'écriture de Laird Hunt, notamment le recours à l'allégorie, à la métaphore, et à des formes relevant des logiques du trauma, comme autant de tentatives visant à traduire l'expérience des personnages face à l'effraction du réel traumatique dans leur expérience deshumanisante de l'esclavage.

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Mots-clés
fiction historique, mémoire, esclavage, trauma, réel, conte, littérature orale

Keywords
historical fiction, memory, slavery, trauma, real, tale, oral literature

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“Missing people never make sense”: Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega* or, Addressing the Terroristic Real to Oneself

Point Omega *de Don DeLillo : adresser la terreur du réel à soi-même*

Karim Daanoune

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PLAN

TEXTE

The War on Terror is something of a palimpsest, drawing on new meanings and memories to cover over the ruins of past violence. Yet, as with all palimpsests, the past is never fully concealed or subjugated, and it frequently emerges in the US War on Terror as something of a haunting.
Alex Lubin, *Never-Ending War on Terror*

We also have to work, though, sort of the *dark side*

, if you will.
We've got to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world.
A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion.
Vice-president Dick Cheney [1]

1 In Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* (2010), 73-year-old Richard Elster is a fervent advocate of the war against Iraq and one of its architects, a man who "still believes in the righteousness of the war" (54). He spent two years working with the "tight minds that made the war" (18) at the Pentagon, quite at a distance from the theatre of operations where atrocities were being committed. He has now retired to the Mojave Desert of Anza-Borrego in Southern California, a desert which right from the start accommodates, in a ghostly manner, other deserts and, among them, no doubt, its Iraqi counterpart: "somewhere south of nowhere in the Sonoran Desert or maybe it was the Mojave or another desert altogether" (20). The old man is being courted by a filmmaker named James Finley who wants to make a documentary about him that immediately recalls Errol Morris' *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003) and its opening words uttered by McNamara himself: "Any military commander who is honest with himself, or with those he's speaking to, will admit that he has made mistakes in the application of military power. He's killed people unnecessarily" (Morris, *Fog*). As Elster tells the young man: "What you want, my friend, whether you know it or not, is a public confession" (53). [2] Despite a propensity for philosophizing, Elster is unable to acknowledge his acquiescence in the face of the American use of terror in counterterrorist policies. The third character is Elster's daughter, Jessie, who pays her father a visit. But a few days after she arrives, she vanishes without explanation. I would like to argue that Jessie's disappearance is nothing but the translation of the possible abduction that recalls the "extraordinary renditions" also known as "irregular renditions". [3] Jessie is obviously no terrorist, but neither were most of the people [4] who were captured, thrown to jail

and tortured illegally by the Bush administration.[5] A potential culprit is "the time obsessive art lover and creepy museum lurker" (Herren 151) present in the novel's short prologue and epilogue respectively called "Anonymity 1" and "Anonymity 2". The action takes place in MoMa in New York where this anonymous man watches the 1993 artwork "24 Hour-Psycho" by contemporary Scottish artist Douglas Gordon which features Hitchcock's 1961 movie *Psycho* slowed to a 24-hour running time. The claustrophobic aspect of these sections, in addition to the atemporal duration they expose, conjure up the temporality of torture and of indefinite detention.

2 *Point Omega* prolongs the terror that 9/11 established by bringing home and harboring in the homeland the counterterrorist response carried out abroad. Indeed, DeLillo's novel performs the terror of counterterrorist actions launched by the George W. Bush administration, but it does so surreptitiously, thus mimicking the illegal politics of counterterrorism. That is why I propound the idea that the novel is both overtly and covertly about a historical reality, that of the Global War on Terror and one of its tragic consequences, the Iraq War. This contradiction stems from the very nature of the uncommon war that was waged after 9/11. Indeed, the novel's conspicuous reference to the war is, or rather, cannot but be insufficient because that war relied on a shadowy implementation of itself as the Abu Ghraib torture scandal shamefully demonstrated. This paradoxical simultaneity is efficiently achieved thanks to a haunting poetics that is meant to signal a presence of the terroristic real. First of all, the War on Terror did not target an enemy embodied by a nation state. In fact, the war that the President declared—"as if terror were a state and not a technique" (Didion 8)—may thus be understood as a war against a state that does not exist. Rather than stating its non-existence, I would like to posit that its enemy is of a ghostly state, and perhaps even, that its enemy is a ghostly nation-state. In addition to that first spectral layer, it seems more than fair to argue that, on the case of the Global War on Terror, the United States operated in the shadow as the quote from Vice President Cheney shows. Dwelling on those two ideas of the ghostly presence of an unidentifiable inimical entity and ghostly performances understood as secret and illegal exactions perpetrated in the shadow, in "black sites" (34), I contend that in staging the repression of the real—the

messy and ugly real—the novel enacts not only a return of the real which refuses to be both inhibited and unembodied but that it does so according to an autoimmune principle that ultimately betrays the fact that the ghost was not a ghost and the enemy was no one else but the United States itself. I will first focus on how the real is repressed and blanked out. I will then analyze how such repression ineluctably favors the return of the real under the guise of a haunting ghost before pinpointing the ways in which the US becomes in a self-reflexive manner the recipient of the terroristic real it had purported to deliver to the Other as a way to protect itself from said Other.

Repressing the real

3 Jessie's unexplained vanishing (75) defines the arbitrariness of an event in all its surprise and mystery. It is so excessive that it almost answers Elster's call in the following dialogue with Finley:

> What idea?
> What idea. Paroxysm. Either a sublime transformation of mind and soul or some worldly convulsion. We want it to happen.
> You think we want it to happen.
> We want it to happen. Some paroxysm. (72–73)

It is both ironic and paradoxical that what Elster heartily desires is what has already happened. His mistake has to do with time, or rather tense as David Cowart explains: "The nation really did, after 9/11, desire '[s]ome paroxysm', as Elster remarks. When he adds, 'we want it to happen' (73), one faults only the present-tense construction" (Cowart 46). The awaited paroxysm is nothing but the Global War on Terror and its tragic aftermath. The lack he wishes to compensate for, in the future, already belongs to the past, or at least to his present. This blindness is itself derived from a revengeful stance, one clearly identified by Elster in his essay on the word *rendition*: "a revenge play that reflects the mass will and interprets the shadowy need of an entire nation, ours" (34). The mistake at the level of tense cancels, so to speak, the experiential grounding of the Global War on Terror as if the latter, in the traumatic mode, had passed through the filter of memory, had therefore not been

registered, or, and it is even worse, had not actually happened. It simply vanished into historical oblivion. DeLillo identifies the erasure of history as it is taking place and its denial by Richard Elster. For Jim Finley, Elster's essay is filled with abstractions that do not do justice to the reality it was supposed to analyze: "But no specific mention of black sites, third-party states or international treaties and conventions" (34). Finley primarily reproaches Elster for writing an essay "where crime and guilt don't get mentioned" (34) while "find[ing] mystery and romance in a word that was being used as an instrument of state security, a word redesigned to be synthetic, concealing the shameful subject it embraced" (35).

4 What Elster does with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan recalls what Joan Didion's words denounced about the effects of 9/11:

> we began to hear what would become in the year that followed an entrenched preference for ignoring the meaning of the event in favor of an impenetrably flattening celebration of its victims, and troublingly belligerent idealization of historical ignorance. "Taste" and "sensitivity", it was repeatedly suggested, *demanded that we not examine what happened.* (Didion 9, my emphasis)

Her dissent from the collective response to 9/11 lies in the fact that Didion honestly attempted to historicize the attacks so as to prevent the event from being interpreted as a mere accident. Judith Butler wrote in 2004 that "we can say, and ought to, that US imperialism is a necessary condition for the attacks on the United States, that these attacks would be impossible without the horizon of imperialism within which they occur" (Butler 11). Both Didion and Butler's words are unequivocal. They suggest that history can be bended and manipulated through the instrumentalization of its memory, but also of its forgetting. There are at this stage some possible parallels to be drawn with what Ricœur called "manipulated memory" [6] through the process of *emplotment*. The narrativization process at stake here is the counterterrorism narrative prompted by the George W. Bush administration. The event consists in the repetition of the erasure and obliteration of history, in "the exercise of forgetting" taking place within a "pragmatics of forgetting" (Ricœur 418). It all seems coherent with Elster's reflection on time that DeLillo sums up in an interview: "This is the vast meditative time of the desert, geologic time, making

Elster think about evolution and extinction" (DePietro np). The idea of forgetting is also broached in the prologue when the narrator explains that for the art lover in the museum "[t]here was an element of forgetting involved in this experience. He wanted to forget the original movie or at least limit the memory to a distant reference, unintrusive" (11). Ricœur wrote that "the art of forgetting rest[s] on a rhetoric of extinction: writing to extinguish—the contrary of making an archive" (Ricœur 504). This "rhetoric of extinction" is grounded in an enterprise of eradication of history enabling the latter to repeat itself but under the guise of an original experience insofar as its iterative quality has been nullified. "There is, in the words of Moroccan American writer Laila Lalami, nothing more American than forgetting the past" (Lalami 28). Mitchell relates this form of amnesia to the concept of immunity:

> Immunity is a form of cellular memory; the body learns by experience how to fight measles, and it doesn't forget. The most dangerous threat to the immune system, then, is amnesia, the forgetting of what it has learned: forgetting, for instance, that today's terrorists (al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden) were yesterday's allies, trained as antibodies against Soviet military power in Afghanistan; forgetting, even more dangerously, that yesterday's terrorists are almost invariably tomorrow's heroes of national liberation and that moral absolutes are not just useless but positively dangerous in any counterterrorist strategy. (Mitchell 284)

It all explains why the history of American violent neo-imperialism repeats itself with the War on Terror. The war George W. Bush started is nothing but a pale copy of the one started in the 1980s, the "decades of the state terror" (Chomsky, *Power* 58) as historians called it. It may even be regarded not simply as a copy but as a model according to Noam Chomsky:

> [The authors of the December 2002 issue of *Current History*] suggest that the war against Nicaragua [i.e. the first phase of the "War on Terror"] for which the United States was condemned at the World Court, is a good model for future acts against terror. Specifically two authors point out that the "contra" war against Nicaragua is *a good model* for the U.S. support for the Northern Alliance in

> Afghanistan [i.e. the current phase of the "War on Terror"]. (Chomsky, *Power* 58)[7]

The repetition is even corroborated, and this partakes in making it all the more obscene by the political actors chosen in those two "Wars on Terror", namely Donald Rumsfeld and John Negroponte. There is a certain cynical efficiency in the cyclical effacement of history. Yet, history happened and the traces of its reality hover like a phantom in the novel.

The specter of the real[8]

5 Framing the main plot of the novel, the sections "Anonymity 1" and "Anonymity 2" evoke in an oblique manner the Global War on Terror as they contain all the ingredients for a torture scene to unfold: "The bare setting, and the darkness, and the chill air, and the guard motionless at the door" (102). Everything about the presentation of Gordon's video art installation functions like an ambiguous innuendo, enacting on the sly the shadowy historical context, with its secretive criminal exactions carried out in the name of counterterrorism. The general atmosphere of those sections suggest the discomfort of the interrogation room to say the least, recalling those "salvaged videotapes of caged men being subjected to severe physical pain" (33) that Elster mentions in the scholarly essay he wrote about the word "rendition".

6 On the very first line of the prologue, the anonymous museumgoer is introduced: "There was a man standing against the north wall, barely visible" (3). The sense of imprisonment derives from the multiple references to the "wall"—itself blended with the screen: "It was like bricks in a wall clearly countable" (5)—but also of the guards. The fact that DeLillo begins with the position of the body summons up images of "[f]orced standing" (Rejali 316–334) or "stress positions" (McCoy 124–125, 141) and, notably, of the disgraceful photograph of the Abu Ghraib torture scenes, perhaps hinted at in the following quote: "Standing was part of the art, the standing man participates" (102). Such detail of the incipit is further verified by the fact that the gallery precludes any kind of sitting: "There were no seats in the gallery" (3). The lack of seat partakes in sketching a space

characterized by deprivation, [9] a decisive feature of torture, also conveyed with words such as "barely", "hardly", "lighted only" (3). The fact that "[t]he film ran without dialogue or music, no soundtrack at all" (4) testifies to that. [10] On numerous occasions, in the in the prologue and in the epilogue, the narrative insists upon the "darkness" (3, 4) of the room, its peculiar light, its temperature: "The gallery was cold and lighted only by the faint gray shimmer on the screen" (3). This "cold dark space" (10) anticipates and corroborates Elster's analysis in his essay:

> From this he asked the reader to consider a walled enclosure in an unnamed country and a method of questioning, using what he called enhanced interrogation techniques, that was meant to induce a surrender (one of the meanings of rendition—a giving up or giving back) in the person being interrogated. (33)

It is therefore not surprising that the narrator associates the act of watching the screen with the idea of "punishment" (104) and wonders: "Who would survive physically or otherwise?" (12). DeLillo's masterful signature here resides in the fact that we are objectively reading a scene occurring at the museum which is simultaneously doubled with one suggestive of torture. In other words, two realities happen at the same time and overlap, one devoid of terror and the other, saturated with it: "It felt real, the pace was paradoxically real, bodies moving musically, cause and effect so drastically drawn a part that it seemed real to him, the way all the things in the physical world that we don't understand are said to be real" (14). That is the reason why there is almost a double-entendre in everything that is being narrated: "This was history he was watching in a way, a movie known to people everywhere" (12). Likewise, it is history that readers are reading "in a way".

The return of the real

7 The conversation between Elster and Finley on the notion of paroxysm [11] quoted above adequately translates the US blindness towards its own history, and more specifically, towards the terror of its own terrorism, be it labeled counterterrorism or not. Even though the paroxysmal event, so heartily wished for, has already occurred

and is thus irretrievable, Elster will nevertheless be subjected to a form of paroxysm by proxy, a return of the paroxysm, if I may say, which signifies nothing but the return of the real under a new form, namely the disappearance of his daughter Jessie. In other words, Elster is at the mercy of an event to come that will repeat the past trauma and that will surpass it. Thus understood, Derrida's comment comes to mind:

> There is traumatism with no possible work of mourning when the evil comes from the possibility to come of the worst, from the repetition to come – though worse. Traumatism is produced by the *future*, by the *to come*, by the threat of the worst *to come*, rather than by an aggression that is "over and done with". (Derrida 97) [12]

Elster is the synecdochic figure of America and one can say that he represents America's narcissistic and hegemonic stance, a topic introduced in *Falling Man* by Martin Ridnour and crystallized in the formula, "the narcissistic heart of the West" (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 113). Elster rather egoistically—the war that the US was waging was, after all, "his war" (54)—declares: "We are a living history and I thought I would be in the middle of it" (30).

8 It is worth adding that Elster's wish for a paroxysm is imbued with suicidal undertones. His search for the general good at all costs in this "total extrapolation of Good" (Baudrillard 14) leads to a proportionate Evil: "Ultimately, Good could thwart Evil only by ceasing to be Good since, by seizing for itself a global monopoly of power, it gives rise, by that very act, to a blowback of a proportionate violence" (Baudrillard 13–14). [13] The war on terror has significantly increased the spreading of terrorist actions. [14]

9 Elster is thus destined, so to speak, to *direct suffering towards* himself, or rather, *against* himself in an autoimmune process that Derrida defines as "that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, 'itself' works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its 'own' immunity" (Derrida 94). However, this urge for a death *to come* recognizable only through its past—"We want to be the dead matter we used to be" (50), Elster solemnly and indecently muses—before the coming of the paroxysmal event, is

concretized in Jessie's disappearance. Because this event will thrust Elster into the severe melancholy of an indefinite mourning, as Jessie's body will remain obstinately missing, hence haunting, chances are that he will face *visitations of the disappeared* and *invitations to disappear*. Indeed, people who are "disappeared" preclude any work of mourning: "By definition, the missing resist the work of mourning, like the future, just like the most recalcitrant of ghosts. The missing of the archive, the ghost, the phantom—that's the future—*JD*" (Derrida 189).

10 "What is a traumatic event?" asks Jacques Derrida:

> For the wound remains open by our terror before the future and not only the past. […] The ordeal of the event has as its tragic correlate not what is presently happening or what has happened in the past but the precursory signs of what threatens to happen. It is the future that determines the unappropriability of the event, not the present or the past. Or at least, if it is the present or the past, it is insofar as it bears on its body the terrible sign of what might or perhaps will take place, which will be *worse than anything that has ever taken place*. (Derrida 96)

It is a traumatic future which is at stake when Elster bitterly exclaims: "*I still want a war.* A great power has to act. We were struck hard" (30) [my emphasis]. It is once again quite significant that what Elster wants has already happened. Wanting a war means that Elster minimizes, or rather denies the wars that are currently being fought in Afghanistan and in Iraq at the very moment he utters those words. Those wars do not seem to count, as if the US could not be held accountable for them: "We do not, however, take the sign of destroyed life and decimated peoples as something for which we are responsible, or indeed understand how that decimation works to confirm the United States as performing atrocities" (Butler 6). They do not seem to deserve the name *war* as if they were not worthy of such a name. No, they are, at best, muffled murmurs against the roars of wars: "Iraq is a whisper" (50). By raising the question of which wars count as wars, DeLillo echoes, to a certain extent, Judith Butler's crucial and plain ethical question: "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life*?" (Butler 20).

Addressing the real to oneself

11 Throughout the novel, Elster abundantly quotes French paleontologist and Jesuit philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) who coined the concept of "Point Oméga" in his 1955 posthumous essay *The Phenomenon of Man*. Teilhard de Chardin understood the universe in terms of expansion like most of his peers but he also believed in a form of internal expansion:

> [the Universe] […] presents itself to us, physico-chemically, as in process of organic *involution* upon itself (from the extremely simple to the extremely complex)—and, moreover, this particular involution "of complexity" is experimentally bound up with a correlative increase in interiorisation, that is to say in the psyche or consciousness. (Teilhard de Chardin 301)

Elster knows of Teilhard de Chardin's theory obviously but he fails to render it faithfully, perhaps because he succumbs—surrenders indeed—to the charm of its aesthetic dimension. Instead of focusing upon the quasi-divine perfection of consciousness, that is to say *hyper-consciousness*, Elster believes that "[c]onsciousness is exhausted" (53). He cannot properly translate Teilhard de Chardin's theory as its transcendent value seems to have been removed; on the contrary he reformulates it as a regression towards an infra-consciousness of Matter. The reversal appears in the title that David Cowart analyses thus:

> Therein lies the chief irony of DeLillo's title. Elster, the character who introduces the Teilhard phrase, always does so with the English word order, "omega point" (52, 72). Only Jim Finley, late in the text, shifts from "omega point" to "point omega" (98) and so christens DeLillo's novel. The unfamiliar syntax, which duplicates that of the original French (*point oméga*), enacts the *bouleversement*—the reversal—of Teilhard de Chardin's most well-known concept. (Cowart 47)

What is paramount here is that, thanks to the English language, this reversal discloses the Americanization of the concept that suggests in turn the appropriation process at the heart of American neo-imperialism. The Other laid bare here in the shape of the foreign

language is assimilated into proper American, is being made into a property of the American language. The movement going from "Point Omega" to the "omega point" unveils "an imperialism of the same" (Levinas 87), a return of the same, to what is proper. It is a phenomenon that only produces terror, in response to terror in the manner of a *closed circuit*, the latter being underscored by the structure of the novel and its two-enclosing claustrophobic "Anonymity" sections.

12 What was meant theoretically to initiate an opening onto a mystical and transcendent experience bestowing a "thinking layer" (Teilhard de Chardin 182, 225, 244) to Earth has eventually contracted into a personal wound so deeply inscribed within Elster's consciousness that it has turned into a wound in the flesh: "A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body" (98). The reader remembers Elster's arrogant and cynical question: "Do we have to be human forever?" (53). From the moment his daughter vanishes, Elster will never be more human than he was, than he has always been: "Look at him, frail and beaten. Look at him, inconsolably human" (96). Vulnerable as he is now, he has just stepped into the realm of the victims he has so persistently ignored: "Elster, too, meets his fate in the desert. Implicated in deadly political folly, he retreats in chagrin to his own personal Iraq" (Cowart 45). The Iraq that was a "whisper" is now simply him: "[i]t was hard for him to lift his voice above a whisper" (82). If his reference to Teilhard de Chardin was meant to suggest a tension towards the future, [15] to Elster, this future is blocked in a *hyper-personal wound* that dwells and expands in a resolutely melancholic present that the slow pace of the narrative betrays.

13 Jessie's disappearance conflates both national and personal traumas, the event of a double vulnerability. Her disappearance on a national level questions the validity of the American government response to 9/11. Far from solving the question of terror and terrorism, the national responses (*USA Patriot Act*) and the international responses (the war in Afghanistan launched as early as October 2001, and in Iraq in March 2003 but also the scandals of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo) clearly display the limits of the American counterterrorism policy—for some, another form of terrorism, one stemming from the "West". [16] In their wish to eradicate terrorism, it seems that

the US have inexorably directed it towards themselves. The author of an essay written from the torturer's perspective, Elster has been converted into the tortured, "barely able to move, either from medication or lack of sleep" (82). In that sense, the American that he is ceases to be and becomes instead a foreigner, that Other. When at a loss, after Jessie's disappearance he calls his wife and speaks Rusian to her, "every word a plea, the response of an accused man [speaking] in awkward English" (82–83). The onomastics tends also to indicate a paragon of alienness if "Elster" is to be read as a sort of neologized superlative of "else". We may then argue syllogistically that if the American which is hurt is thus an Other, therefore the Other which is hurt is an American. In a quest for the general good, the United-States have *rendered* themselves vulnerable in a suicidal manner by the very system they were trying to undo: "Tragically, it seems that the US seeks to preempt violence against itself by waging violence first, but the violence it fears is the violence it engenders" (Butler 149). On a personal level, Elster's overwhelming grief resonates with the national grief of a country still mourning and, like his Iraqi counterparts, Elster as a father mourns the unforeseen and unexplained loss of a relative.

14 Elster returns to New York without any clue about Jessie. The personal grief of this war partisan works like the archive of mourning that was done away with too quickly by the Bush administration:

> President Bush announced on September 21 that we have finished grieving and that now it is time for resolute action to take the place of grief. When grieving is something to be feared, our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order, or to invigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly. (Butler 29–30)

15 But Elster's grief and pain point also implicitly more grief and pain, that of others, those anonymous victims of the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, the "ghost detainees" of Abu Ghraib. As it is stated about the video art, "Everybody remembers the killer's name, Norman Bates, but nobody remembers the victim's name" (6). It may be also added that those victims announce more victims to come: "people here in Europe who will be victims of the escalating cycle of

violence" (Chomsky, 9-11 66). It is precisely in that sense that *counterterrorism-as-terrorism* only deepened that which it was meant to withstand, in the first place, namely, loss and mourning.

The real is a mess

16 At the end of the day, nobody knows what happened to Elster's daughter therefore "her precise fate remains uncertain" (Herren 155).[17] It would simply be inaccurate to state that she is dead or that she has been kidnapped and murdered by her former boyfriend Dennis (Banash 7). It is indeed tempting to incriminate Dennis (the Menace?): "I thought of him as Dennis X. Was there legal cause to trace the phone calls? Did the mother remember the man's name correctly?" (93). DeLillo induces us to rely upon an act of "deeming" akin to the one encouraged by the generalized atmosphere of suspicion inaugurated by the USA Patriot Act and, more generally, by the Global War on Terror. In doing so, readers are invited to reflect upon the uses of the tools of the state of exception so as to better condemn them: "[The] act of "deeming" takes place in the context of a declared state of emergency in which the state exercises prerogatory power that involves the suspension of law" (Butler 59). A parallel with the detainees in Guantánamo appears inevitable: "They have to be "deemed dangerous", but the "deeming" is not […] a judgment for which there are rules of evidence" (Butler 71). We may note in passing that Guantánamo is also alluded to when it to comes to Elster himself who is "beginning to resemble an X-ray, all eye and socket" (96), "Camp X-Ray" being the other name of Guantánamo (Worthington xii). Dennis gradually and, almost unconsciously, becomes the psychopath likely to be equated with the terrorist *in potentia*.[18]

17 The uncertainty around Jessie's disappearance ought to be fully acknowledged as it forces Elster to confront the arbitrariness of a violence that he has not hesitated to allow being inflicted upon others in an equally arbitrary manner. The pain he experiences echoes the pain of the Arab families, for like him, they had to cope with the mysterious disappearances of members of their families, and like him "Nothing happened that was not marked by her absence" (86). The disappearance of Jessie understood as an event

embodies, potentially, the indefinite event of an indefinite detention in an indefinite locus. The Abu Ghraib scandal and the illegal detentions in Guantánamo reverberate through her. Similarly, DeLillo displaces the war on terror on the American soil according to an autoimmune principle that is also at stake in the figure of Dennis who is relegated to the rank of the homegrown or the domestic terrorist. Unable to make "the differentiation of self and non-self" (Anderson and Mackay 140), America fails to look *at* itself and determine what is *of* itself, and in that failure runs the risk of hurting itself. The state of exception that unleashed and authorized state terrorism may lead to a confusion as to whom the enemy might be:

> The administration has now claimed the right to round up people here, including American citizens, place them in confinement indefinitely without access to families and lawyers, and to hold them without charges until the president decides that the "war against terror", or what he wants to call, is over. It's astonishing. The government is claiming the right to strip people of their fundamental right of citizenship if the attorney general merely *infers*—he doesn't have to have any evidence that the person is involved somehow in actions that might be harmful to the United States. (Chomsky, *Imperial* 37)

18 *Point Omega* is a political fiction that stages the ghostly inner workings of counterterrorism and that uncovers its "dark side", itself denoted by "the reverse side" (4) of the screen of Douglas Gordon's art installation. The "dark side" enunciated by Dick Cheney directly echoes the words uttered on February 2002 by Donald Rumsfeld who was then Secretary of Defense:

> Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are *known knowns*; there are things that we know that we know. We also know there are *known unknowns*; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also *unknown unknowns*, the ones we don't know we don't know. (Morris, *Rumsfeld*)

Although the message seems confusing, the rationale behind is implacable. Yet, the logical demonstration is incomplete according to Slavoj Žižek:

> If Rumsfeld thinks that the main dangers in the confrontation with Iraq were the "unknown unknowns", that is, the threats from Saddam whose nature we cannot even suspect, then the Abu Ghraib scandal shows that the main dangers lie in the "unknown knowns"—the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values. (Žižek 85)

19 Right before the epilogue, the phantomatic presence of the real manifests itself, notwithstanding Elster's attempts to quell it. It is the ugly truth that Elster keeps inside of him and that the novel helps maieutically expel from his body in the form of a secretion which is also a *secret* that forces itself out in the open, a secret which is an unbearably unaesthetic truth for a man who was concerned with what he labelled a "haiku war" (29):

> he started coughing and gasping, struggling to bring up phlegm.
> I thought he might choke. The road was tight and steep, guardrail at the edge, and there was nothing for me to do but keep going. He ejected the mess finally, hawked it up and spewed it into his open hand. Then he looked at it wobbling there and so did I, briefly, a thick stringy pulsing thing, pearly green. There was no place to put it.
> I managed to yank a handkerchief out of my pocket and toss it over.
> I didn't know what he saw in that handful of mucus but he kept looking. (97)

It is the real that he disgorges, "the thing that's not the movies" (15), and what he stares at so intently signals both a *rendition* of sort, a "giving back" (33) and a form of "giving up" (33) too, a *surrender*. What is thus discharged is *of* himself—his mess—which coincides with a greater mess—the mess of America.

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NOTES

1 Reprinted in Alex Lubin on page 48.

2 The mention of the term "confession" immediately connects the plot to the subtext of torture (see Rejali 35)

3 The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines it as "the practice of sending a foreign criminal or terrorist suspect covertly to be interrogated in a country with less rigorous regulations for the humane treatment of prisoners".

4 "Certain [Coalition Forces] military intelligence officers told the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] that in their estimate *between*

70 percent and 90 percent of the persons deprived of their liberty in Iraq had been arrested by mistake" (Danner 3, emphasis added).

5 Here is a telling example of such practice: "the *New York Times* reported, in February 2005, that an Australian national, Mamdouh Habib, had been taken off a bus in Pakistan right after 9/11 and beaten by local interrogators, with Americans present, before being shipped to Cairo as part of the CIA's rendition program. There, Egyptian interrogators subjected him to a mix of psychological and physical torture, threatening his family and beating him with sticks while suspending him from the ceiling. He made several confessions, which he later claimed were false. After six months in Egypt, he was shipped to Bagram for a week of interrogation with sexual harassment and electric shock. Then he was flown to Guantánamo for more brutal questioning. When the *Washington Post* published an article about his agony, he was quickly released, without charges or explanation, and in January 2005 rejoined his family in Australia after three years of detention" (McCoy 194).

6 "[O]ne can always recount differently, by eliminating, by shifting the emphasis, by recasting the protagonists of the action in a different light along with the outlines of the action. For anyone who has crossed through all the layers of configuration and of narrative refiguration from the constitution of personal identity up to that of the identities of the communities that structure our ties of belonging, the prime danger, at the end of this path, lies in the handling of authorized, imposed, celebrated, commemorated history—of official history. The resource of narrative then becomes the trap, when higher powers take over this emplotment and impose a canonical narrative by means of intimidation or seduction, fear or flattery. A devious form of forgetting is at work here, resulting from stripping the social actors of their original power to recount their actions themselves" (Ricœur 448).

7 See also Chomsky, *9-11* 99.

8 This section does not address the figure of Jessie but it should be noted that she too may be perceived as a ghost: "otherworldly" (36), Jessie "moved through places in a soft glide" (49), "kept appearing in some inner field of vision, indistinct, like something I'd forgotten to say or do" (76) or "Passing into air, it seemed this is what she was meant to do" (81).

9 It also recalls the "deprivation of sensory stimuli": "The more completely the place of confinement eliminates sensory stimuli, the more rapidly and deeply will the interrogatee be affected. Results produced only after weeks

or months of imprisonment in an ordinary cell can be duplicated in hours or days in a cell which has no light (or weak artificial light which never varies), which is sound-proofed, in which odors are eliminated, etc.)" (CIA, *Kubark* 90).

10 "Low-tech noise, then, is common, and there is generally a marked preference among modern torturers for low-tech procedures. However, this is not what captures modern imagination. What captivates modern minds is high-tech noise. This includes placing subjects in boxes or rooms where they are bombarded with noise of all sorts from machines, or subjecting them to scientifically engineered noise that only machines can produce ("white noise"). It also includes noise that may not be heard by the human ear, but can cause serious bodily damage, what is called "high-intensity sound" or "infrasound". This is what known about high-technology noise in the twentieth century" (Rejali 363).

11 For Teilhard de Chardin, the omega point is a paroxysm that cannot not be for it is irreversible: "The only universe capable of containing the human person is an irreversibly 'personalising' universe" (Teilhard de Chardin 290).

12 What Derrida writes uncannily echoes what Chomsky characterizes as "preventive war": "*preventive war* [t]hat is, the United States will rule the world by force, and if there is any challenge to its domination—whether it is perceived in the distance, invented, imagined or whatever—then the United States will have the right to destroy that challenge before it becomes a threat. That's preventive war, not preemptive war" (Chomsky, *Imperial* 2).

13 It recalls former lieutenant colonel Robert Bowman's statement on the terrorist bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania: "That hatred we have sown has come back to haunt us in the form of terrorism" (Zinn 682).

14 For the United States and its war on terror, there is a contradiction between stopping terror plots in motion versus stopping terrorism. By pursuing the chimera of halting conspiracies in progress, Washington has used extreme methods, contributing to a larger political climate that fosters terrorism. In effect, the use of torture to stop terrorism has, paradoxically, created more terrorists (McCoy 200–201).

15 "The Future-Universal could not be anything else but the Hyper Personal —at the Omega Point" (Teilhard de Chardin 260).

16 "There are many terrorist states in the world, but the United States is unusual in that it is officially committed to international terrorism, and on a

scale that puts its rival to shame" (Chomsky, "International" 15). See also: "We should not forget that the U.S. itself is a terrorist state" (Chomsky, 9-11 72). And also: "If we want to consider this question [i.e. *Is the nation's so-called war on terrorism winnable?*] seriously, we should recognize that in much of the world the U.S. is regarded as a leading terrorist state, and with good reason" (Chomsky, 9-11 55).

17 Eve explains that "the reader is never given enough evidence to uncover what has happened to Jessie or what has caused her disappearance, only strongly suggestive clues and forking paths" (Eve 580) while Sammarcelli states that "no clue is actually provided in spite of the focalizer's effort to come to terms with the brutal fact of disappearance" (Sammarcelli np).

18 "The terrorists are *like* the mentally ill because their mind-set is unfathomable, because they are outside of reason, because they are outside of 'civilization', if we understand that term to be the catchword of a self-defined Western perspective that considers itself bound to certain versions of rationality and the claims that arise from them" (Butler 72).

RÉSUMÉS

English

Point Omega, Don DeLillo's fifteenth novel, is both overtly and covertly about a historical reality, that of the Global War on Terror and some of its tragic consequences, the Iraq War and the Abu Ghraib scandals. Centered on the figure of Richard Elster, a retired architect of the GWOT, the novel enacts a counterterrorist politics of terror thanks to a haunting poetics. Indeed, everything about DeLillo's opus seems to convey the general atmosphere of counterterrorist terror that characterized the US abroad and that is now surreptitiously and spectrally performed on national ground. Considering that the plot takes place in the US and that the main victims—whether direct for Elster's daughter Jessie who disappears or, indirect for Elster himself in the face of that loss—are American citizens, I argue that the shadowy implementations of the GWOT have, so to speak, contaminated the US itself due to an autoimmune principle. I examine how DeLillo suggests that the terroristic real returns to the sender and afflicts those it was designed to protect in the first place.

Français

Quinzième roman de Don DeLillo, *Point Omega* aborde à la fois ouvertement et secrètement la réalité historique de la guerre mondiale contre le terrorisme et de certaines de ses conséquences tragiques, à savoir la guerre en Irak et le scandale d'Abu Ghraib. Centré sur la figure de Richard Elster, une des têtes pensantes de la guerre contre le terrorisme, désormais à la

retraite, le roman met en scène le terrorisme d'État et sa politique aveugle de contre-terreur grâce à une poétique de la hantise. En effet, tout dans ce roman tend à trahir l'atmosphère générale de terreur qui a caractérisé la politique antiterroriste des États-Unis à l'étranger et qui se voit ainsi déployée, de manière subreptice et fantomatique sur le sol national. Étant donné que l'intrigue se déroule aux États-Unis et que les deux principales victimes — Jessie, la fille d'Elster, qui disparaît du jour au lendemain sans explication et Elster lui-même face à son chagrin incommensurable — sont des citoyens américains, je défends l'idée suivante : la mise en œuvre dans l'ombre de la guerre contre le terrorisme a, pour ainsi dire, frappé les États-Unis eux-mêmes en raison d'un principe auto-immun. Je montre notamment comment le réel caractérisé par la terreur, ou la terreur *comme* réel permet à DeLillo de suggérer que ce réel retourne à son expéditeur et afflige ceux et celles qu'il était censé protéger.

INDEX

Mots-clés
DeLillo (Don), terrorisme, réel, guerre d'Irak, guerre mondiale contre le terrorisme, spectre, auto-immunités

Keywords
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Character, by Paul Heintz: Introduction

Character *de Paul Heintz : introduction*

Florian Beauvallet

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TEXTE

1 One part of a multimedia project that also includes a video installation, *Character* is a book conceived and developed at the crossroads of fiction, documentation, and investigative *journal*ism. Envisioned by its author, French artist Paul Heintz, as the record of a literary quest overstepping the boundary that divides the real from the imaginary, this journal proposes to unravel the many strands that connect us to the world, fictional or not. Similar to the book, the quest here undertaken is as nebulous as it is straightforward: "meeting a character from a novel". This desire gives the artist the impetus to go out into the world looking for an answer to the central question that he can't wave aside: "what do people in a novel do when they're not animated by the fact of being read"? After a quick run-down of potential candidates including Kafka's Gregor Samsa and Flaubert's Frédéric Moreau, Heintz finally settles on Winston Smith, Orwell's inconspicuous hero from 1984.

2 In many regards, *Character* is a hall of mirrors where real life people and events are reflected and refracted into their fictional counterparts and vice versa. For instance, Heintz chooses to go looking for Smith "because he reflects back the solitude and the impossibility of a common struggle, one that could topple fascist power of former and current oppressors" but it could also be said that Heintz's own undertaking in turn reflects Smith's quest for his own self in a world deprived of privacy, as symbolized by his journal—an exercise in mirror writing that strives to articulate the creative encounter of our personal selves with the world as mediated through language. A game of doubles is at play throughout *Character*, as perfectly shown by the English version of the text abutted to the

original one in French. The side by side presentation of the texts running on parallel lines grants *Character* a strong visual identity that borrows from the free-form style of diary-writing, where notes, narrative parts, observational inserts, books extracts augmented with further notes, memos, documents and other miscellany collide to form a repository of one's own experience and temporal existence. A graduate of the National Superior School of Art and Design of Nancy and of the National Superior School of Decorative Arts in Paris, Paul Heintz shows a sensibility for visual arts which is on full display in *Character*, a book-as-object whose physicality is explored to the fullest thanks to the insertion of images, photographs of objects and documents, all coalescing into various assemblages often leaning on factitiousness and trompe-l'oeil effects. The end result is a book that is conceived as an artefact, a book that draws attention to its materiality and artificiality.

3 Indeed in a manner that reflects the inner-logic of the artist's search, *Character*'s visual organization is rich and sprawling, suggesting, at first glance, that the end product could be the 1:1 reproduction of the artist's personal journal. However, the montage-like quality of the overall design highlights its deliberateness and craftiness, thus implying that this book is less a journal than a meditation on what journal-writing entails: a *mise-en-scène* of the investigation treated as both a narrative and visual object. As it stands, *Character* is the outcome of a two-year inquiry that led artist Paul Heintz to go looking for Winston Smith's homonyms nowadays living in the London area. From Soho to Camden, the journal recounts Heintz's encounter with six of them which *de facto* makes this journal as much a recollection of the artist's experience as a repertory of multiple Winston Smiths, letting us catch a glimpse of the vertigo of inauthenticity that such a common surname implies—one of the many instances of doubling used by Heintz to prod out the multifarious realities of our given names.

4 Much like the exact existential location of Orwell's Winston Smith is undetermined, *Character* occupies and explores an uncertain space between the real and fiction—as if the many real-life documents attributed to the name Winston Smith (borrowed from the real Winston Smiths he met) had the effect of a wedge inserted into our daily experience of reality. The plastic properties of the book cannot

be stressed enough since the journal provides a way to not only experiment with the multimodal possibilities of the physical book format but also with a way to question the foundations of our sense of reality, the better to bend, warp and displace the usual frontier between facts and fiction, between texts and images, between documentation and story-making—hence begging the question raised from the very title: what is a character?

5 Over the course of 15 chapters, *Character* takes the personal journal to the ontological limits of the genre since its author exploits its specificities to reify both the conceptual nature of his quest and the fictional reality of characters we meet in novels. While the actual investigation embodies a process of revisiting a textual genre, the journal exhibits a natural ability to bridge the divide between what is lived and what is read. Thus the artist is able to chart the psychological effects and existential repercussions found at the confluence of the real and the fictive. As a result, the reader is offered a glimpse into what the real world shares with fiction according to an ample motion reaching outwards in multiple directions, in the hope of connecting people, real or imaginary, in space and time. The following extract here provided offers a preview of the first half of the journal. Made up of parts taken from Chapter I "The Rules of the Game," Chapter II "The Phonebooks" and Chapter IV "Winston Smith, Camden," this combination aims to provide the reader with a miniature illustration of the journal, at once encapsulating the inherent qualities of the work and the unbridled nature of its format, though not anything goes here, where each piece is carefully chosen and adjusted to others to create this balanced, dynamic, total work, vibrant with internal and external ramifications.

6 Following the collage logics animating multifaceted *Character* as a whole, this extract splices together seemingly self-excluding elements and considerations so as to both challenge and convey the tenuous distinction separating the fictional from the fictive, while also featuring front and centre an experience that cannot be fully contained—so much so that the overflowing pages of the journal can stand as a fitting metaphor for the way fiction oversteps into our daily lives as much as we into the worlds of the novels we read.

AUTEUR

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Florian Beauvallet teaches at the University of Rouen (Normandy, France) and is a member of the ERIAC (EA 4705) research group. His research revolves around the art and the history of the novel. In his Ph.D. dissertation, entitled *The Art of the Novel of Adam Thirlwell: towards an aesthetics of flippancy?*, he developed a reflection on the specificities and singularities of the art of the novel, viewed from an international perspective. As such, his work covers a range of writers and literary heritage (North American novel, Irish novel, English novel, European novel) in a way that strives to bring out the constitutive irreverence lying at the heart of the modern novel. He has also published papers exploring the close relation between the novel and philosophy ("Philip Roth's Counter-Philosophy"; "The Truthful Inauthenticity of the Art of the Novel: Exploring History and Identity in Leonhard Praeg's Imitation") while his interests also gravitate toward humor studies and the art of translation.
IDREF : https://www.idref.fr/242421512

Character (excerpts)

Character (*extraits*)

Paul Heintz

DOI : 10.35562/rma.493

TEXTE

1 Our warmest thanks go to artist Paul Heintz and the Extensibles publishing house for having generously allowed the reproduction of excerpts from *Character*. To view the excerpts, click on the PDF icon above.

AUTEUR

Paul Heintz
Paul Heintz was born in 1989 in Saint-Avold (France), a Fine Arts graduate at Beaux-Arts de Nancy, Arts Décoratifs de Paris and Le Fresnoy, studio national des arts contemporains. He is currently living and working between Paris and the Lorraine region. His work, including object, sound, film and installation has been presented at contemporary art events and film festivals such as FID Marseille, IFFR Rotterdam, Paris Nuit Blanche, Circulation(s). In 2019, he won the contemporary art price Révélation Emerige and Artist book of the year Adagp 2021.
Paul Heintz's field of action is a bizarre set of cases where what is real is largely imbued with fiction, and where social normativity also makes its weight entirely felt. There is an inherent toxicity to imagination and fiction when they combine their approval of the social norm, as is the case with storytelling for example. From there, Paul Heintz enters the logic of fiction, takes it further and lets through a redeeming breath of fresh air.
IDREF : https://www.idref.fr/257129391

The Realism of Speculative Fiction: Planetary Polyphony and Scale in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*

Réalisme de la science-fiction : jeux d'échelle et polyphonie planétaire dans The Ministry for the Future *de Kim Stanley Robinson*

Pierre-Louis Patoine

DOI : 10.35562/rma.437

PLAN

TEXTE

My thanks go to Giulia Loi for translating this article from its original French version, to Derek Woods and Liliane Campos for inviting me to think in terms of scale, and to Katherine Hayles for inspiring this work on Kim Stanley Robinson's The Ministry for the Future.

1 In the opening of his book *Facing Gaia* (2017), Bruno Latour explains what he means by the "New Climate Regime" (an expression he derives from the work of Aykut and Dahan 2015), noting from the outset that because of it, "everything changes in the way stories are told":

> I use this term [New Climate Regime] to summarize the present situation, in which the physical framework that the Moderns had taken for granted, the ground on which their history had always been played out, has become unstable. As if the décor had gotten up on

> stage to share the drama with the actors. From this moment on, everything changes in the way stories are told, so much so that the political order now includes everything that previously belonged to nature […]. (3)

2 At stake here is the status of nature, of the "physical framework"—essential, but conceived as inanimate—of modern scientific and political culture, but also of modern artistic and literary culture, which crucially includes what has been called "realism". In literature and the arts, realism has indeed constituted a dominant mode of representation and narrative, from the nineteenth century onward. It has accompanied the coming to maturity of a certain industrial and positivist modernity, in Europe and North America. Even today, realism remains the norm in "serious" literature (no longer in its narrow definition, which would restrict it to the historical moment of Balzac and Hardy, but more broadly understood as the Other of the mythic, epic, fantasy or science fiction modes). A glance at the list of 2020 nominees for the Goncourt, Booker and Pulitzer prizes is enough to convince us of this (the cries of astonishment uttered that year, when *L'Anomalie* won the 2020 Goncourt—a science fiction novel! published by Gallimard!—show the persistent relevance of this norm, at least in the French-speaking world). But if the great "actors"—the politicians, entrepreneurs, and scientists that have been playing out the drama of modernity—suddenly see their "stage" coming to life, if Gaia becomes an agent of this drama, everything indeed changes in the way we tell stories. For it is then necessary to take a new category of characters seriously: climatic and geophysical planetary forces. Admittedly, those have never been totally absent from the novelistic scene—as the recent collection *Le temps qu'il fait* (Naugrette and Lanone 2020) demonstrates, tracing the role of weather in English literature from Chaucer to Dickens. But climatic and geophysical actors have, most of the time, been turned into mere décor by a literary modernity that has deployed most of its narratives on the scales of individual inner life, of family or community relations, or, to a lesser extent, of the city, region or nation.

3 In this article, I will try to elucidate how *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), the most recent novel by American science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson, responds to the demands formulated by the new climate regime: how to tell stories in which geophysical

entities act on a planetary scale? What techniques can a novel use to "face Gaia"?

Realists for a larger reality

4 To begin answering these questions, I would like to return briefly to that of realism. In 2014, receiving the lifetime achievement award from the American National Book Foundation, Ursula K. Le Guin gave a committed speech—abundantly cited since then, notably by Isabelle Stengers in her essay "Thinking in SF Mode" (2021), some of whose arguments I will take up here. Le Guin then declared, about this prize:

> And I rejoice in accepting it for, and sharing it with, all the writers who've been excluded from literature for so long—my fellow authors of fantasy and science fiction, writers of the imagination, who for fifty years have watched the beautiful rewards go to the so-called realists.
> Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom—poets, visionaries—*realists of a larger reality*. (113, emphasis mine)

Robinson appears as one of those "realists of a larger reality". Instead of striving to represent "reality" as a given state of affairs, his fictions illuminate how it is perpetually produced by negotiations and experimentations, in workshops and laboratories, parliaments and schools, streets and fields, or on social networks. Thus refusing the description of a reality that would have been established once and for all, Robinson summons the natural and social sciences, with the debates and controversies animating them, to imagine this "larger reality" of which Le Guin speaks.

5 Before going further, however, I would like to maybe state the obvious in noting that traditional literary realism, when invested in social critique, can also participate in the production of a "larger reality". This is explicit when we read in full Stendhal's famous formula—often used as slogan for realism—describing the novel as "a mirror carried along a high road". The narrator of *The Red and*

the Black (1830) then continues: “His mirror shows the [muddy] mire, and you accuse the mirror! Rather accuse the main road where the mud is, or rather the inspector of roads who allows the water to accumulate and the mud to form” (chapter XLIX). Stendhal’s realism might not be especially well equipped to “see alternatives to how we live now”, but it can prepare the ground for such visions by showing how the present is produced (here by the inspector’s socio-technical agency). Realist critique may thus constitute a first step toward the speculative imagining of “other ways of being”. But what kind of mirror does it need to envision those hyperobjects (Morton) that are climate change, the sixth extinction, or the Anthropocene or Chtulucene (Haraway)? When the “ground” of the high road comes alive under our feet, and the “muddy mire” takes on a planetary scale, narratives have to embrace new scales, and widen their scope beyond individual, family and regional histories.

6 *The Ministry for the Future* attempts such upscaling, telling a story of the Earth from 2025 to about 2055; from the creation of a UN agency charged with defending the rights of future generations—dubbed the “Ministry for the Future” (16)—to the celebration of “Gaia Day” (545), which marks a relative restoration of our planet’s climatic and ecosystemic balance. Robinson thus works to remedy what Timothy Clark calls, following Hannes Bergthaller, the failure of the imagination in the face of the ecological crisis (Clark 2015, 18). Locating himself in the moralistic vein of the Stendhalian narrator, he claims to have written a “low bar utopia”:

> And I write as a utopian science fiction writer, which at the moment we’re at right now in world history means that I have to set a pretty low bar for utopia. If we dodge a mass extinction event in this century, that’s utopian writing. (McKibbens 2021, unpaginated)

Indeed, the utopian breath carrying *The Ministry for the Future* does not push it away from realism, but on the contrary towards an archipelago of actual scientific works and technical experiments within political economy, finance, cognitive psychology, glaciology and ecology. While mobilizing those fields, Robinson’s science fiction fully plays the role that Isabelle Stengers attributes to the genre, that of keeping open the doors of the imagination, a “*keeping* open [that] does not involve the passivity of *leaving* open” (2021, 124). This

writerly practice of speculation allows us to "resist the temptation to subscribe to the reasons we might give for accepting the order of things and maintaining that it could not be otherwise" (124, see also the notion of "otherwise" developed by Crawley 2016). "Thinking in SF mode", as Stengers puts it following Haraway, is to recognize "SF" as a way of going beyond a literary realism limited to the description of reality as it has been *so far*: "*So Far* is the very cry of resistance against the normality claimed by states of affairs" (126).

7 When composing *The Ministry for the Future*, Robinson had to resist the hegemonic "normality claimed by states of affairs": "Another thing that kept coming back to me when I was writing the book was how these ideas sound utopian crazy. We have that hegemonic response in our heads—an imitation of common sense—that says, 'Well, that couldn't happen'" (Gordon 2020, unpaginated). Refusing this "imitation of common sense", Robison's novel sharply contrasts with the resignation running through the dystopias (Moylan 2020, 164), post-apocalyptic fictions and other eschatologies and collapsologies that have swarmed since the beginning of the 21st century (here is a sample, in literature: *Oryx and Crake*, *The Road*, *Station Eleven*; in cinema: *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Melancholia*; in video games: *The Last of Us*).

8 Helping us to "imagine real grounds for hope", *The Ministry for the Future* deploys its reasonable utopia on a planetary scale, and makes it possible to envision a globalization that would no longer be placed under the colonial/imperial sign of appropriation and extraction, of the conquest of territories and markets, but under that of a community of destiny uniting earthlings, whether they are human or non-human, biological or geophysical.

Polyphony

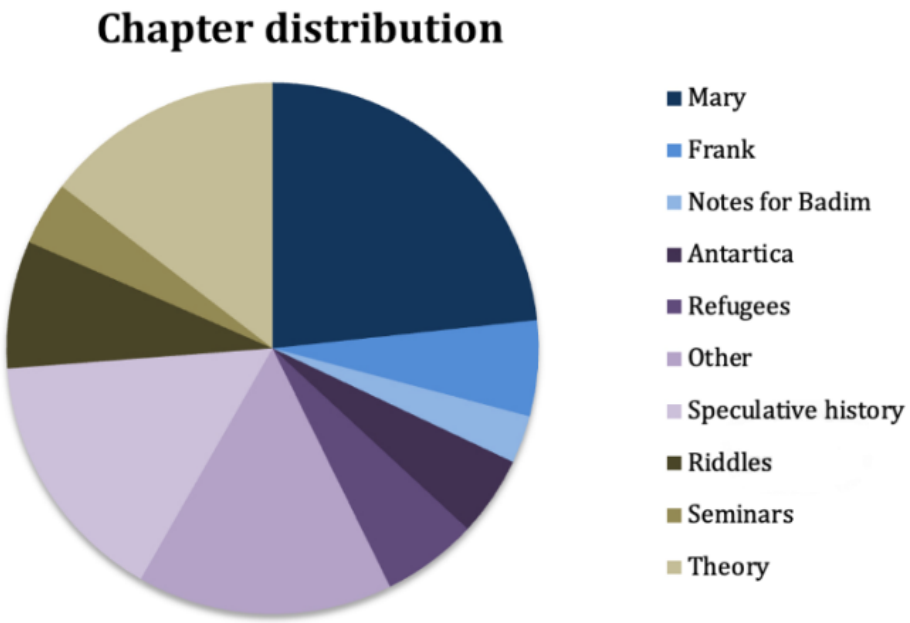
9 It has become commonplace, following Bakhtin's essays on "Dostoyevsky's Poetics" and "Discourse in the Novel", to define the modern novel as constitutively (though not systematically) an assemblage of voices and points of view. Harmonious or contradictory, expressing themselves in direct discourse or through narration, these voices and points of view are weaved into a textual matrix that Bakhtin situates at the crossroads of linguistic and social

dynamics (we should add: of ecological dynamics, since not only does the novel models aspects of *life*, but its very existence depends on solar energy flowing into paper making trees, and into the plants feeding the writers' and readers' metabolism). It is in Dostoevsky that Bakhtin first finds this dialogical polyphony, internal plurilingualism or heteroglossia, following Otto Kaus's reading of the nineteenth century Russian novelist in the light of an emerging capitalist consciousness that "broke down the seclusion and inner ideological self-sufficiency of […] social spheres" (Bakhtin 1984, 19). Although Bakhtin is essentially interested in its "structural peculiarities", he agrees that "[t]he polyphonic novel could indeed have been realized only in the capitalist era" (19–20), a view that partially anticipates Jacques Rancière's identification of its affinity for democracy (2014, 34). In seems in any case probable that, despite the universality that its defenders have wanted to allocate it (see for example Léon Daudet's 1922 eulogy for Proust), the modern novel belongs to a specific phase of our civilization: relatively democratic (as far as the internal politics of Western states are concerned) and capitalist, but also: nationalist, individualist and humanist (or rather: anthropocentric). However, and as we have seen above, the traditional scales of its narratives seem unsuited to the realistic description of a drama whose spatial, but also temporal scope exceeds that of individual human consciousness and experience. Can we adapt polyphony to the larger reality of the new climate regime? Is the democratic agora of the novel hospitable to collective, technical or non-human voices? What happens when we extend the polyphonic novel to the planetary scale? We will now explore these questions, keeping in mind Anna Tsing's critique of scalar operations, which she associates with the modern episteme (2015, 38–39) and its "triumph of precision design, not just in computers [with their "effortless zoom"] but in business, development, the 'conquest' of nature, and, more generally, world making" (2012, 505). Tsing warns us that scalar logics can block "our ability to notice the heterogeneity of the world" (505) and we should accordingly remain attentive to what changes, when we attempt to scale the novel up to the Gaian level.

10 Planetary polyphony appears in any case as a strategy favored by Robinson's novel to achieve a portrait (obviously partial) of the

struggle against climate change in the central decades of the twenty-first century. *The Ministry for the Future* is thus presented as a patchwork of voices and points of view, weaving together political and techno-scientific actors, identified protagonists and anonymous characters, individual and collective voices, human, animal and geophysical actants. These voices and points of view are arranged in 106 chapters, which we could classify into three main families:

- the "classic" chapters, that follow Frank (a humanitarian doctor, traumatized by his experience of a heat wave that kills twenty million Indians in 2025, and who will become a sort of independent eco-terrorist agent), Mary (the director of the "Ministry for the Future"), or the members of her team (these chapters are represented by the three blue areas on the following graph);
- the chapters, of an equally narrative nature, but staging the voices of anonymous individuals, emblematic of a certain group (scientists in Antarctica, refugees in Switzerland, slaves freed from a ship or a mine), or the voices of a community, speaking in the first-person plural (eco-terrorists, citizens of India, inhabitants of a flooded or dried-up city), or a third-person objective narration of events in Earth's history (these chapters are in purple on the graph);
- the non-narrative chapters, that give voice to non-human entities (riddles formulated by the sun, the Earth, a photon, CO_2, history, the market, herd animals, code), or that explain (directly, or through debates in the form of anonymous dialogues) different theories from the humanities and social sciences (Gross Domestic Product, ideology, cognitive or psychopathological errors in relation to the climate crisis, financial and banking history, the philosophy of technique; these are in brown on the graph).



11 The distribution of chapters on this graph clearly shows that those that focus on recurring and evolving characters (in blue), and that present a more familiar narratological profile, occupy only one-third of the novel. Even among these, the three chapters classified as “Notes for Badim” present minutes of ministry meetings, written by an anonymous assistant, which essentially describe debates and decision-making around this or that measure supposed to fight climate change (carbon currency, quantitative easing, a new user-owned social network…). The novel is thus largely dominated by collective and/or anonymous voices (in purple on the graph), and by non-narrative discourses of knowledge (in brown), leaving comparatively little room for the everyday life or heroic actions of individuals, for their emotions, ruminations and discussions, that have occupied a large part of the modern novel.

Collective voices

12 Through this assembly, we participate in a series of political, scientific and technical controversies, not in detail (they are too numerous), but through vignettes showing how they unfold over several decades. The reader thus follows experiments that fail or succeed, ideas that are put into action, a world being (re)constituted —on a relatively long time scale, albeit one that remains within the

limits of a human life (and so one that does not extend into the geological, like for example in Gillian Clark's "stone poems" studied by Sophie Laniel-Musitelli 2022). One of those experiments is the implementation of an international program to drain the watery carpet on which the glaciers of Antarctica slide towards the ocean, from its genesis during a simple discussion between glaciologists, at a conference (chapter 22), to a fairly advanced state of the project: "So, at the end of the season, we were flown into the middle of the Recovery Glacier, where we had drilled a double line of wells five years before. One of the lines was reporting that all its pumps had stopped" (472). This trivial-sounding passage interestingly departs from what we find in most realist fiction. Instead of focusing on individual and/or human affairs, it features a collective voice ("we") responding to a technical actant ("one of the lines was reporting"), within a temporal framework defined both by natural cycles ("end of the season") and by those of an engineering project ("five years before"). Its spatial framework is constituted by a geophysical entity (the "Recovery Glacier"), and its action is conditioned, not by biographical reference points, but by those of a collective enterprise that holds planetary stakes.

13 It should be noted in passing that the planetary "ground" or "décor" (to use Latour's terms) is not particularly animated in these geoengineering Antarctic chapters, nor in the one describing the temperature-reducing program of spraying sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere, devised by India after the catastrophic heat wave it endures (chapter 10). Robinson's reasonable, polyphonic utopia thus includes terraforming endeavors that prolong the technicist hubris typical of industrial modernity (a hubris that becomes strangely recursive, contrasting with the modern view of progress as linear: "terraforming"—a term first used in science fiction to designate efforts to make a planet more Earth-like—here implies we use all our scientific power to reshape the Earth in… its own form; a paradox unpacked by Woods 2020). These projects do not, however, impose on their executants an entirely dominant view of nature, since even the voice that passionately recounts glacier-breaking operations proposes to speak of "GEO-BEGGING" rather than "geoengineering" (265). In the face of climate change, technical action

is imagined as a supplication to the planet, and not the exercise of an instrumental will disconnected from Gaia.

14 The novel thus stages collective actions and voices, taking place on a planetary scale, but also on the smaller level of relations between cities/nations, for example when an individual speaks on behalf of Hong Kong: “What did we teach Beijing, you ask? We taught them a police state doesn’t work!” (513). As is often the case in *The Ministry for the Future*, the dialogic form here reflects a polyphonic controversy that, by being juxtaposed with the debates that animate technoscientific collectives, shows how reality is continuously produced, at the distinct but intertwined geophysical and political, planetary and international scales.

Speculative history

15 In addition to these collective or anonymous voices, the novel includes chapters of speculative world history under the new climate regime. Take, for example, this excerpt from chapter 51 (we are halfway through the novel):

> The thirties were zombie years. Civilization had been killed but it kept walking the Earth, staggering toward some fate even worse than death.
> Everyone felt it. The culture of the time was rife with fear and anger, denial and guilt, shame and regret, repression and the return of the repressed. They went through the motions, always in a state of suspended dread, always aware of their wounded status, wondering what massive stroke would fall next, and how they would manage to ignore that one too, when it was already such a huge effort to ignore the ones that had happened so far, a string of them going all the way back to 2020. […]
> So it was not really a surprise when a day came that sixty passenger jets crashed in a matter of hours. All over the world, flights of all kinds, although when the analyses were done it became clear that a disproportionate number of these flights had been private or business jets […] But people, innocent people, flying for all kinds of reasons: all dead. […]
> The War for the Earth is often said to have begun on Crash Day. And it was later that same year when container ships began to sink, almost always close to land. (227–229)

16 Here again, the temporal scale of events extends beyond that of everyday realism: the time unit is the decade ("the thirties", "all the way back to 2020"). The spatial scale also goes beyond that of most modern novels, as the summary encompasses the whole planet ("the Earth", "all over the world"). The subjects and objects of the action are collective, both human and technical ("civilization", "everyone", "the culture", "they", "sixty passenger jets", "innocent people", "container ships"). Considered from such distance, events appear caught in a complex mesh of causes and consequences that prevents straightforward moral judgement (that private jet owners are killed is "not really a surprise", but they remain "innocent people"). Finally, the capitalization of two events ("War for the Earth", "Crash Day"), historicizes them, implying a retrospective look at a planetary history that appears as already constituted—in contrast with the world-making negotiations and experimentations we follow in most of the novel.

17 This historicization is however itself destabilized by a historiographic discourse, formulated in one of the "theoretical" chapters. This one reveals the arbitrary and provisional, but also potentially subversive character of any periodization:

> Of course attempts are always made to divide the past into periods. This is always an act of imagination, which fixes on matter geological (ice ages and extinction events, etc.), technological (the stone age, the bronze age, the agricultural revolution […]. They are dubiously illuminative, perhaps, but as someone once wrote, "we cannot not periodize" […]. Perhaps periodization makes it easier to remember that no matter how massively entrenched the order of things seems in your time, there is no chance at all that they are going to be the same as they are now after a century has passed, or even ten years. […] Raymond Williams called this cultural shaping a "structure of feeling", and this is a very useful concept for trying to comprehend differences in cultures through time. (123–124)

Along with speculative history, the novel calls upon historiography to keep the doors of our imagination open, and to remind us that the order of things, the "normality claimed by states of affairs" (to reemploy Stengers's formula), are always only temporary: historical periods follow one another, and worldviews with them. *The Ministry*

for the Future thus train us once again to "think in SF mode": by taking up the codes of academic writing (the reference Raymond Williams, a father of British cultural studies), it integrates science in fiction, in a speculation that puts "states of affairs" to the test of a dense, polyphonic world of intertwined agency. Collective voices, anonymous perspectives and scientific discourse are thus interwoven to make us experience a larger reality, that of a possible future for our planet. But Robinson also invites us to experience this future through the individual, embodied perspective of two protagonists: Mary and Frank.

Sensationalism

18 It is in Frank's skin that we enter the novel, plunging in a terrible scene of eco-horror (see Rust and Soles 2014 about this sub-genre). An American humanitarian doctor, Frank is on a mission in Uttar Pradesh (a province in northern India, west of New Delhi), when a wet heat wave hits and kills, in three days, about twenty million humans. The horror of the situation, for the readers, lies in the feeling that such hecatomb is indeed possible. As climatologists Raymond, Matthews and Horton (2020) write, the occurrence of extreme wet heat has doubled on Earth since 1979; a worrying tendency, because the human body can no longer regulate its internal temperature when the outside temperature reaches 35° Celsius with 80% humidity (wet bulb temperature). This is what happens in *The Ministry for the Future*'s first chapter: as the local electrical network and the air conditioning fail, most of the city's inhabitants find themselves "steamed" or, as in the case of Frank and of the citizens who take refuge in the lake, poached in hot water.

19 For ten intense pages, we share Frank's point of view, or rather "point of feeling", to borrow the more apt expression coined by neurologist Alain Berthoz (2004, 266). Indeed, the text foregrounds sensations of unbearable heat:

> It was getting hotter.
> Frank May got off his mat and padded over to look out the window. Umber stucco walls and tiles, the color of the local clay. […] Sky the color of the buildings, mixed with white where the sun would soon rise. Frank took a deep breath. It reminded him of the air in a sauna.

> This the coolest part of the day. In his entire life he had spent less than five minutes in saunas, he didn't like the sensation. (1)

The initial sentence here functions as a potential synecdoche: designating the local weather, the first "It" can also refer to the planet —both are "getting hotter". It loops the local and the global, a cross-scale recursion that runs through and structures the entire novel. The text then takes us into Frank's point of feeling, moving from a familiar action (easy to imagine with our muscular and motor body: "got off his mat and padded over to look"), to vision (the color palette: "Umber stucco walls", "Sky the color of the buildings"), and then to respiration ("Frank took a deep breath"), which we are invited to experience through his memory of being in a sauna, a memory most readers can reactivate. This sensorimotor imagery, and the affects attached to it ("he didn't like the sensation") are vivified by the use of a minimalist free indirect style ("This the coolest part of the day"), aligning the reader's inner voice with that of Frank, and thus facilitating the embodied sharing of his bodily state.

20 This initial situation deteriorates rapidly, and the following dawn reveals a macabre picture:

> Four more people died that night. In the morning the sun again rose like the blazing furnace of heat that it was, blasting the rooftop and its sad cargo of wrapped bodies. Every rooftop and, looking down at the town, every sidewalk too was now a morgue. The town was a morgue, and it was as hot as ever, maybe hotter. The thermometer now said 42 degrees, humidity 60 percent. (8)

The passage from the figurative ("like the blazing furnace of heat") to the literal ("that it was") materializes a situation that should have remained imaginary (eco-horrific). Repetition and variation ("Every rooftop… every sidewalk too was now a morgue. The town was a morgue") follow Frank's progressive realization of the extent of the disaster. As in the previous sentence, this realization oscillates between the metaphorical and the literal: the town is both *like* a morgue, and truly a morgue. This difficulty in fixing reality also translates into a sensory uncertainty ("maybe hotter"), which the narrative, still in internal focus, tries to overcome by an objective measure ("42 degrees, humidity 60 percent").

21 The chapter closes the following night, as Frank and other citizens have taken refuge in the lake, from which they cannot help but drink the corpse-infused hot water. By giving us, from the start, the embodied experience of this nightmarish climatic event, *The Ministry for the Future* forces us to share the trauma that will motivate the eco-terrorist actions of survivors (like Frank, and the members of an organization called the "Children of Kali"), but also the unilateral diffusion, by the Indian government, of aerosols in the Earth's atmosphere, to create a cooling comparable to the one caused by the explosion of the volcano Pinatubo. Exploiting the scale and terrain of individual feelings, this sensationalist episode makes tangible the intensity of the catastrophe, an intensity against which readers will measure the interventions of the novel's various actors (activists, refugees, scientists, bankers; individuals, nations, chemical elements, technical devices…). These interventions, spread over some thirty years, will finally allow the climate to stabilize, and are described with great sobriety, if we compare with the opening scene (and this in spite of the dramatic nature of the events that will affect Frank, Mary and certain members of her team: assassination, cancer, divorce, terrorist bombings, a flight on foot across the Alps…).

22 We can consider this initial episode, filled with eco-horrific energy and playing powerfully on the reader's empathic and sensory-motor imagination, as a seed-situation, the core around which the world imagined by Robinson grows. As Isabelle Stengers writes about another science fiction writer:

> Le Guin tells us that it is often the imagination of a situation that provides her with the starting point for a fiction, yet this situation must have the ability to call forth a world to which it would belong. This world is fictional but must have consistency: it must make its creation, and the exploration of what it demands, inseparable. (2021, 125).

In *The Ministry for the Future*, this consistency is in part produced by the heat wave scene, which calls forth the novel's polyphony of human and non-human, individual and systemic, organic and geophysical voices, each charged with its own interests. It is through this assembly of voices and points of feeling that the world of the novel manifests itself. Responding to the demands of the new climatic

regime—demands made clear during the sensational, initial situation—this consistent, polyphonic world scales up to the planetary level. Zooming out, it shows how the fate of individuals is inextricably linked to that of the planet. It is because Frank suffers from climate trauma that he will briefly take Mary hostage, in the hope that she will take more radical action against climate change, which she will indeed do, authorizing clandestine sabotage operations to be led from within her own organization, and thus contributing in the long run to stabilize the climate. The traumatic seed-situation thus produces a narrative matrix, a world where collectives interact across (political, ecological…) scales, as Katherine Hayles (2021) underlined during a recent oral intervention.

Non-human actants

23 One of the consequences of scaling up the polyphonic novel to the planetary level, in *The Ministry for the Future*, is its inclusion of non-human voices. Robinson cleverly invokes these voices in a series of chapters in the form of riddles, posed in the first person. For example, the second chapter, which we approach still in shock from the heat wave scene, lets us guess that the voice we are hearing is the sun's:

> I am a god and I am not a god. Either way, you are my creatures.
> I keep you alive.
> Inside I am hot beyond all telling, and yet my outside is even hotter.
> At my touch you burn, though I spin outside the sky. As I breathe my big slow breaths, you freeze and burn, freeze and burn.
> Someday I will eat you. For now, I feed you. Beware my regard. Never look at me. (13)

This cosmic "I"—by stating the titanic power of life and death it holds over us, and by voicing an imperative constitutive of the human condition ("Never look at me")—makes visible the sun's divine dimension. This dimension implies a subjection to nature that a certain Modernity, in its hubris, has tried to ignore. It is consequently unsurprising that the non-human here speaks in a format that recalls the medieval (hence pre-modern) Anglo-Saxon tradition of riddles. As is the case in Tolkien's works (see Curry 1997)—another piece of

speculative fiction that played a major role in the emergence of the late twentieth century ecological, posthumanist consciousness and culture—through these riddles, the medieval serves to remedy Modernity, providing a format through which the novel rehabilitates that "physical framework that the Moderns had taken for granted" (Latour). But if the sun is "a [pre-modern] god", it is also "not a god": its divine qualities are articulated through its physical qualities, as defined by science (solar cycle, temperature, ecological role). Scientific knowledge thus feeds an eco-religious, neo-pagan respect for planetary, non-human actants, a feeling that finds fertile ground in the heat wave trauma the reader has just experienced.

24 The possibility of a spiritual response to the new climate regime becomes explicit at the very end of the novel, during the simultaneous, planet wide celebration of "Gaia Day", which gives us a glimpse of the tremendous joy and spiritual awakening accompanying humanity's reconciliation with its environment. But the polyphonic novel remains a "reasonable utopia", and Gaia Day is also the occasion of this exchange between Mary and her new friend Art:

> Did you feel the moment?
> No. It was too cold.
> Me neither. But people seemed to like it. (546)

By zooming in on this sober reaction, weaved in with other voices (including the awe-inspiring non-human riddles), Robinson provides us with a variety of cognitive and affective tools to re-imagine our attachment to the Earth and to try to extend, to the planetary scale, the Heideggerian injunction of relearning to dwell, to "be of the land" (in "Building, Dwelling, Thinking").

A reasonable utopia?

25 Among these various tools is the (parsimonious) use of lists, as in chapter 85, which enumerates, in alphabetical order (from Argentina to Zimbabwe), the associations participating in an international summit on climate change:

> Hi, I am here to tell you about Argentina's Shamballa Permaculture Project. We are representatives of Armenia's ARK Armenia, happy to

> be here. Down in Australia we've connected up our Aboriginal Wetland Burning, Shoalwater Culture, Gawula, Greening Australia, How Aboriginals Made Australia, Kachana Land Restoration [… … …] I am from Zambia to tell you of the Betterworld Mine Regeneration. I am from Zimbabwe to speak for the Africa Centre for Holistic Management, and the Chikukwa Ecological Land Use Community Trust. (425–428)

Like the evocation of the heat wave, or of the "sun god", this dense list, stretching over four pages, makes us feel almost physically the scope of the climate stakes. Utopian but reasonable, speculative but pragmatic, it carries the dream of a humanity capable of uniting in a single community of interest and destiny.

26 This utopian breath is central Robinson's literary endeavor, helping us to "imagine real reasons to hope" (Le Guin), and to envision the new pleasures possibly offered by the ecological transition. The novel thus describes the replacement of airliners by airships, trains and boats, perhaps with a certain naivety (but isn't that a judgement based on a deceptive common sense? On a false "normality claimed by states of affairs" (Stengers):

> Mary took a train to Lisbon and got on one of these new ships. […] They sailed Southwest far enough to catch the trades south of the horse latitudes, and in that age-old pattern came to the Americas by the way of the Antilles and then up the great chain of islands to Florida. The passage took eight days.
> The whole experience struck Mary as marvelous. She had thought she would get seasick: she didn't. She had a cabin of her own, tiny, shipshape, with a comfortable bed. Every morning she woke at dawn and got breakfast and coffee in the galley, then took her coffee out to a deck chair in the shade and worked on her screen. […] She stopped working for birds planning by, and dolphins leaping to keep up. (418)

Such "marvelous", pastoral crossing sounds like a dream for many of us traveling for professional reasons: there are worst things than being "stuck" for eight days on a sailboat between Lisbon and the West Indies, drinking coffee on a deck chair in the shade, working while dolphins jump around the merry ship!

27 This scene participates in *The Ministry for the Future*'s reasonable utopia, drawing, through the ecological catastrophe, hope for new ways of life. The novel thus responds to the demands of the new climate regime. By scaling up its narrative to the planetary level, by integrating non-human and collective voices in its polyphony, by canalizing the sensational energy of a situation to power up its fictional world and speculative history, and by caring for the politics and technics necessary to build a reality beyond what we have known so far, Robinson's speculative fiction might just be an example of that realism of a larger reality that Ursula K. Le Guin deemed to be called for by the hard times that are coming.

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RÉSUMÉS

English

In "Thinking in SF Mode" (2021), Isabelle Stengers distinguishes between philosophical thought experiments (such as Maxwell's demon [1867] or Searle's Chinese room) and the ability of speculative fiction to test hypothesizes in fully developed storyworlds, arguing for the heuristic power of fictional density and immersion. We push this hypothesis further by examining what embodied reading brings to the political and ecological exploration of terraforming (geoengineering) in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy* (1992–1996).

Français

Cet article cherche à élucider la manière dont *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), le plus récent roman de l'écrivain américain de science-fiction Kim Stanley Robinson, répond à l'exigence formulée par ce que Bruno Latour nomme le « nouveau régime climatique » : comment raconter des histoires où s'invitent des entités géophysiques, des institutions, des actants individuels et collectifs agissant à l'échelle planétaire ? Quelles techniques Robinson mobilise-t-il pour faire « face à Gaïa » ? Peut-on considérer la fiction spéculative comme une forme de réalisme adaptée aux enjeux écologiques auxquels les terriens sont confrontés ?

INDEX

Mots-clés

science-fiction, changements climatiques, réalisme, Robinson (Kim Stanley), polyphonie, échelles, utopie

Keywords

science fiction, climate change, realism, Robinson (Kim Stanley), polyphony, scales, utopia

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Reception and the Real in 20th and 21st Century American Short Fiction: Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" (1969), Ben Marcus's "Cold Little Bird" (2018) and Brian Evenson's "Born Stillborn" (2019)

Réel et re-médiation, lecture de fictions courtes de la littérature américaine des XX*e et* XXI*e siècles :* The Babysitter *de Robert Coover (1969),* Cold Little Bird *de Ben Marcus (2018) et* Born Stillborn *de Brian Evenson (2019)*

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PLAN

TEXTE

1 What the concept of the real is and whether it should or should not be equated to that of reality, particularly in relation to fiction, is at the root of a debate among both philosophers and critics. The multiplicity of interpretations of the concepts offers the reader the opportunity to constantly reevaluate their significance within the reading experience of contemporary experimental American fiction. Be it understood as a notion neighboring that of reality, or as referring to a widely different space than that of what is commonly called "real", the real as encountered in the three short stories under study sets off a specific reading experience that calls upon the reader to actively participate in the elaboration of their contents through a process of re-mediation that doubles the initial mediation they operate when reading the text.

2 Questioning the real and its representations has been a crucial component of literary reception since the birth of American fiction but has become even more of a key element in the past fifty years, with the emergence of texts using modes of experimenting with narratives that test the boundaries between fiction and reality. Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" (1969), Ben Marcus's "Cold Little Bird" (2018) and Brian Evenson's "Born Stillborn" (2019) all belong to that category. They all integrate metafictional aspects [1] that produce forms of "uncertainty", a term used by Patricia Waugh in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. Indeed, Coover's "The Babysitter" is a hectic but controlled exploration of different storylines, most of which are mutually exclusive, following the arrival of a teenage babysitter at the Tuckers' house to take care of their three children. Marcus's "Cold Little Bird" features a young father completely baffled by his ten-year-old son's admission that he doesn't love his parents. The father tries to make sense of this seemingly ludicrous situation, offering the reader a piece of short fiction that questions the direction taken by an apparently unremarkable narrative when the characters are confronted with an unexpected burst of absurdity. Finally, Evenson's "Born Stillborn" presents a protagonist who has alternating conversations with his therapist and the latter's double, an elusive and mildly threatening figure that appears only at night, leaving the reader to wonder about the reliability of the narrative they are reading. The uncertainty that arises from these narratives both inscribes them in the American tradition of unsettling fiction that challenges the reader's perspective and in a movement of authors experimenting with what the real is and how its representations of reality may be questioned and renewed.

3 In many seminal texts from the still relatively young American literature—compared to European and non-English speaking corpuses—the reader has been regularly challenged in their conception and understanding of what *is* real. Reality may be distorted in fiction through the way it is (re)presented. Examples of this abound, dating as far as Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) and its protagonist Clara's confusion facing the so-called divine voices heard by her murderous brother—which turned out to be the creation of a ventriloquist trickster, Carwin. Often this questioning

stemmed from literary devices that astute readers are now very aware of, such as unreliable narrators—whose very unreliability is sometimes unbeknownst to them—who may be found in long and short fiction from Edgar Allan Poe to Chuck Palahniuk. The proliferation of such narrators throughout centuries of American fiction however calls their effectiveness into question for modern readers.

4 If such devices are still efficiently used today, including by the authors whose short stories are the focus of the present reflection, they are just one facet of the reader's complicated relationship with the real in 20th and 21st century experimental American fiction. Rather than prompting the reader to figure out what is and isn't real, the short stories under study invite them to question their relationship to reality both in the context of fiction and more generally in the concrete world. The concepts of fiction and reality and the dichotomy they seem to establish are central to the exploration of the reader's relationship with the text and to the definition of the real as it appears in literature. The real is a complex notion whose meaning has been the object of controversies among philosophers. Some even merge it with that of reality while others clearly separate the terms. The exploration of the real requires a strict analysis of the way "something invented by the imagination or feigned" is set to interact with "the true situation that exists". [2] This is particularly true in Coover's, Marcus's and Evenson's short stories since these authors resolutely tend to play with the confrontation of the concepts of fiction and reality, both literally and metaphorically.

5 These authors and their contemporaries, owing to the followers of Lyotard's postmodernism and its evacuation of the grand narratives of the past which questioned the nature of fiction and the relevance of traditional forms, have had the opportunity to free themselves from the shackles of structure in the wake of modernist writers. They have also worked toward blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality as much as possible. According to Philippe Forest in his article "L'autofiction", a striking example of this type of literary practice is what he defines as "a fiction of strictly true events", [3] that is to say autofiction, a genre invented by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977.

6 However, going a step further, "post-postmodernist" writers, to borrow the term used by Mary K. Holland in her book *Succeeding Postmodernism*,[4] resort to structural and narrative devices while acknowledging that their reader is aware of them. They play on this awareness, coupling it with a return to more classic forms of fiction which have been ceaselessly challenged by postmodernists, particularly in the short story form. Coover, Evenson and Marcus's fictions testify to their author's versatile work with different formats and metafictional practices, thus creating fiction that, at times, mimics traditional patterns and blueprints to better reinvent the reader's relationship to linearity. For example, Coover's "The Brother" from *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969) is a one sentence story beginning and ending *in medias res*; Evenson's stories in *Altmann's Tongue* (1994) and *Contagion* (2000) tirelessly bend the limits of the English language; finally, Marcus challenges the post-apocalyptic narrative in his novel *The Flame Alphabet* (2012), a worthy descendant of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985). These stories all disquiet the reader, making them question their relationship to a (potentially future) disturbing reality. They use devices of derealization that shake the boundaries of genre, form and language, thus driving the reader to a stronger and deeper involvement in their reading experience. However, the primary concern of these stories is not strictly their relationship to reality,[5] and the suspension of disbelief is only momentarily achieved for the reader due to the somewhat extreme aspects donned by elements of these pieces of fiction, be they post-apocalyptic disasters or catastrophes of biblical proportions. On the contrary, they seem to focus, among other things, on the materiality of language that emerges from these extremely unusual situations.

7 The stories under study in this article are crafted so that the reader is purposefully put in a familiar though derealized territory pervaded by an unsettling and potentially terrifying sensation of disruption what is considered as real. This is obviously not a new practice, Freud's uncanny having accompanied the birth of American literature before the latter even carried that name. However, I will argue that the familiar space—in all of its significances—as it is used and described in these stories, acts as a catalyst of the reader's specific involvement in the reading process and of their experience of the real in fiction,

the two being inextricably linked. Indeed, Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" and Ben Marcus's "Cold Little Bird" are both set in nondescript American homes and involve the most common of all groups of characters: a family. The additions to that cast of regulars vary from one short story to the next as the unfamiliar creeps in. Brian Evenson's "Born Stillborn" features a lone protagonist seemingly imprisoned in a world that seems bare insomuch as it is completely dematerialized because of the absence of description from the narrator. In all three stories, the initial lack of individualizing details about the character and the setting, by making them simultaneously recognizable and nondescript, creates a metaphorically blank canvas onto which the reader may project their interpretation of the story. The apparent "normality" [6] of the environment, this quasi-neutrality that is echoed in the writing and the detachment of the narrative voice, contribute to the conditions of emergence of the real in fiction, thus making the boundaries that had initially been set between the two vibrate. I would like to show that what takes place in these stories requires a form of intervention by the reader. Indeed, what they encounter in these pieces of fiction, both formally and thematically, is simultaneously stemming from the real and calling upon it. Thus, the first part of this analysis will highlight the conditions of the reader's encounter with reality in the three short stories under study, leading to the emergence of the sometimes elusive notion of "the real". The second part will refine the terminology, notably by elaborating on Clément Rosset's and Philippe Forest's diverging theories of the real and reality in regard to literature and philosophy. The third part will focus on the reader's active role when confronted with the real. Indeed, the reader seems to be called upon to handle the text in a process which is second to the reading experience, or an extension of it. I would like to argue that this process is an act of mediation, readers being invited to actively interpret the text and to elaborate on the (absence of) meaning with which they are faced.

Encounter

8 Making the emergence of the real possible in unconventional places has become the specialty of these authors. Experimental practices often include fictionalized versions of reality, as demonstrated by

Brian Evenson both in his autofictional writings (*Reports*, 2018) and in his short stories using and transforming historical figures in fictional storylines: for instance *Altmann's Tongue* (1994) and *The Din of Celestial Birds* (1997) both feature fictionalized versions of Altmann, the name borrowed by the Nazi "Butcher of Lyon", Klaus Barbie. Despite subscribing to postmodernist aesthetics advocating for a shattering of thematic and formal conventions, some of Coover's, Evenson's and Marcus's work may be considered as inching toward "post-postmodernism", that Mary K. Holland describes in *Succeeding Postmodernism* as coming back to more traditional forms of fiction. According to her, "post-postmodernist" writers have been keen on exploring the fictional opportunities offered by the world they share with their readers through more conventional forms than their postmodern elders. This is accompanied by a "vehement demand to be read and understood differently" (Holland 1) and a shift "toward the real, the thing, and presence, and away from the sign, word, and absence upon which earlier postmodern fiction fixated" (7). In this regard, Coover, Evenson and Marcus may be considered as hybrid writers, navigating a large part of the formal spectrum [7] evoked by Holland. Indeed, if the post-structural approach is still fit to analyze their respective works, especially in terms of Holland's "absence", [8] the short stories which are the focus of this article lend themselves to a study that takes into account their concern with "presence" and "the real". What is the babysitter if not omnipresent in Coover's eponymous story? And what about the father's obsession with his son's behavior in Marcus's "Cold Little Bird", easily brushed away by Rachel—the level-headed mother—but continually rehashed by Martin? What, then, of the "stillborn" twin from Evenson's story, that is, precisely, *still born*, born without cease, infinitely re-actualized in the daily and nightly therapy sessions the protagonist goes through? In all three stories the real peers through a breach opened by an absence, thus demonstrating the shift in focus operated by the authors and by the reader as well. Indeed, the reader is instrumental to their own encounter of the real; their reaction, be it affective [9] or intellectual, shapes the product of their reading experience in the sense that throughout these stories they are ceaselessly invited not just to understand or to interpret what they are reading, but to choose which story—or stories—they are reading. Is Coover's babysitter the protagonist or the antagonist? Is she even

real? What about the string of male characters who come and go in the story, alternatively and sometimes exclusively introduced as powerful and powerless, prompting the reader to reflect on the status of dominance through sexual violence in American society? Whose mind do their misdeeds and twisted fantasies populate: the father's? the boyfriend's? none of the above? Just like in Coover's rewritings of fairy tales, [10] this piece of fiction challenges the reader to determine, however fleetingly, how the story begins, unfolds and ends, since the narrator refuses to deliver those pieces of information to them. The real thus emerges every time the reader makes one of the tenfold choices presented to them by the narration.

9 The choice of these three specific short stories stems from both the formal, thematic and interpretative similarities they share and the different ways in which they lead the reader to an exploration of the relationship between reality and fiction by featuring micro- or macro-disruptions that encourage them to reflect on the confrontation of reality and fiction through the prism of their own reading experience. Even though Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" opens on a quite traditional scene in what seems to be a commonplace American home sparsely described by a third-person extradiegetic narrator, things go wrong quite fast, both in the plot and in the forms of the story. A babysitter arrives in the suburban house of the Tucker family to take care of their baby and two young children. From then on, several scenarios play out that the narrator presents "as if they were reality" even though "many are mutually exclusive" (91) as Brian Evenson points out in his monography *Understanding Robert Coover*. Evenson thus offers the following chronology for the events taking place in the story:

10 In the first twenty minutes or so, the babysitter shows up and the Tuckers leave for the party, the babysitter feeds the children, her friends Mark and Jack awkwardly contemplate rape as they play pinball, and the children wrestle with the babysitter. In the next hour, the children make up reasons why they should not have to go to bed, Mr. Tucker imagines himself making love to the babysitter, Mrs. Tucker is not certain that she trusts the babysitter, the babysitter refuses to let Jack and Mark come over after telling them they can, Jack and Mark rape the babysitter, Jack saves the babysitter from being raped by Mark, Mr. Tucker fantasizes about seducing the

babysitter, the babysitter fails to get Jimmy Tucker to take a bath but allows him to wash her back while she bathes, Jack and Mark call the babysitter on the phone and watch through a window as she gets in and out of a tub. Mr. Tucker catches Jack making love to the babysitter then rapes her himself, catches the boys raping the babysitter outside, sends Jack home without any clothing, sings "I dream of Jeannie with the light brown pubic hair". From nine to ten, most of what has happened before all happens again, with new variations, the chronology confusing itself and events seeming to occur out of place. The party the Tuckers are attending becomes an attempt to get Mrs. Dolly Tucker back into her girdle by greasing her with butter. The babysitter drowns and suffocates the baby. Jack and Mark drown the babysitter. The babysitter does the dishes and falls asleep (92–93).

11 In this short story the babysitter goes from victim to perpetrator, the storylines being placed on top of each other and disrupting the reader's attempt at making sense of the story. As Evenson puts it, here Coover displays his interest in the "gap between the real events and how those events are interpreted" (10) by "present[ing] readers with what appears to be a relatively stable, solid reality and then a few sentences or a few pages later tak[ing] it apart, call[ing] it into question, modif[ying] it. What may seem to be a reality at one moment may be revealed later as something imagined or misinterpreted" (41).

12 This latter comment on Brian Evenson's part applies to many of his own short stories, particularly "Born Stillborn" published fifty years after Coover's "The Babysitter". Here, however, the reader's unsettlement is instantaneous, as in the very first sentence the third-person narrator states:

> Haupt's therapist had started coming to him at night as well, and even though Haupt knew, or at least suspected, that the man wasn't really there, wasn't really standing beside his bed, with pencil in hand, listening to him and writing notes on the wall about what he said, he seemed real. (3)

With such an opening to the piece, the relationship of the reader to what is "real" within the story is successively upset and restored.

They are made to understand that some aspects will seem unbelievable—namely Haupt having conversations with a nighttime version of his therapist who looks "identical" (4) to what he calls the daytime version—, but which are simultaneously explained away and left to the reader's interpretation—Haupt is mad, clairvoyant or has been temporarily deluded. By thus seemingly defusing the reader's questioning on this odd nightly apparition, Evenson offers them a way to reflect on the effect of misinterpretation and their own imagination within their reading experience. The end of this opening paragraph reinforces this interpretation: "Their nighttime sessions felt, when he was honest with himself, just as real as his daytime sessions felt. Maybe even more real" (3). Thus, what might have been interpreted as an initial rejection of reality for the duration of the story in the first sentence may be analyzed as a way to encourage the reader to question what *seems* real rather than what doesn't. During one of their sessions, it is revealed that the day therapist had a twin who was, in his own words, "born stillborn" (4) a phrase which confuses and fascinates Haupt. The alternating day and night sessions portray the protagonist as a man prone to association of ideas and a worrying distrust of the world around him: "But what, wondered Haupt, was the whole world? What did that even mean? If you were to draw a circle that contained the world, what else would belong within that circle? And where would you even draw it?" (7). On the next page, Haupt's relationship to the world—and by extension to reality—appears even more tenuous: "*The world is a strange place*, thought Haupt, alone in the dark, *almost unbearably so. And yet, it is the only place I have. And I'm not even entirely sure I have it*" (8). In a game of mirrors and endless reflections that proves to be a multi-layered exploration of the workings of the psychoanalytic process, the reader's perception of reality as it is represented in the text is ceaselessly challenged alongside Haupt's. The violent climax of the short story, in which the protagonist attacks the night therapist who at once bleeds and seems unscathed, purposefully fails to solve the issue, even though some scattered clues suggest that the whole ordeal might have originated from Haupt's sick mind. [11]

13 The gruesome aspects of the two aforementioned stories which fuel the reader's questioning of their relationship to reality are not to be found in the third piece of the corpus, Ben Marcus's "Cold Little Bird",

published the year after Evenson's story. However, it shares with them an attachment to the exploration of the (psychologically) violent irruption of the unbelievable, of the surreptitiously appalling within a traditional structure, in the present case what might be considered as a 21st century version of Coover's Tucker family:

> It started with bedtime. A coldness. A formality.
> Martin and Rachel tucked the boy in, as was their habit, then stooped to kiss him good night.
> "Please don't do that", he said, turning to face the wall. […]
> "We love you so much. You know?" Martin said. "So we like to show it. It feels good."
> "No, not to me. I don't feel that way."
> "What way? What do you mean?" […]
> "I don't love you", Jonah said. (3–4)

The third-person narrator adopts the point of view of a distraught father, Martin, who ceaselessly looks for explanations and, hopefully, a remedy to the unnerving behavior of his ten-year-old child. What troubles Martin is Jonah's ability to express himself with devastating honesty on his lack of love for his parents, as well as his attempt to placate the puzzled adults by pretending that he lied before and that he actually loves them:

> "I know he can pretend." Martin says, "But this seems different.
> I mean, to have to pretend that he's happy to see us. First of all, what the fuck is he so upset about? And, second, it just seems so kind of… grown-up. In the worst possible way. A fake smile. It's a tool one uses with strangers." (5)

14 As the story progresses, Martin becomes more and more frustrated, trying to rationalize Jonah's behavior to no avail, to the point of adopting an irrational behavior himself, putting his already fragile marriage in jeopardy. He even starts to question, metaphysically rather than literally, the *reality* of his son when he starts hugging him without Jonah moving an inch:

> Jonah gave nothing back. He went limp, and the hug didn't work the way Martin had hoped. You couldn't do it alone. The person being hugged had to do something, to be something. The person being

> hugged had to fucking exist. And whoever this was, whoever he was holding, felt like nothing. (10)

15 However, Jonah's existence and realistic albeit extreme portrayal cannot but strike the reader. As the child puts it on the next page, he is merely asking for his parents to stop touching him, a request he feels entitled to make—something Martin reluctantly agrees to when Jonah threatens to report his parents to the school for "touching [him] when [he doesn't] want to" (12). Things go awry when Jonah is caught reading an antisemitic conspiracy book about 9/11 and prompts his father to reevaluate his own Jewishness. The ending doesn't solve anything, leaving Martin's life irreversibly altered by his son's mature, ironic and distant attitude. What is revealed to the reader throughout the story is Martin's ever-growing anger toward his child, a concrete reality that is meant to replace his constant wondering: "He's not sick, he's just an asshole" (23). In this short story, just like in Coover's and Evenson's, the reader is disconcerted by the distinct possibility that the outrageous already lives within reality, and that the latter might give birth to the former at any given moment without warning. The specificities of Martin's life, his friendlessness, his poorly veiled resentment toward his wife and his general dissatisfaction with his existence represent tears that were made long ago in the fabric of his reality that is slowing wearing itself out. The sudden announcement of Jonah's indifference is just the last snip of the scissors that unravels it all. The experience offered to the reader in this short story is just as disturbing as in Coover's and Evenson's pieces in the sense that in each narrative the polished surface of reality is shaken to lead them to reassess their sense of the real in its relationship to fiction.

The real, fiction, reality

16 Philosophers Philippe Forest and Clément Rosset's sometimes diverging theories of the real in its relation to fiction, and of the distinction that exists between the real and reality allow us to better understand the realm and fictional implications of this central concept. Both give different meanings to these notions, with consequences on our understanding of them and the way we may be able to handle them. In an interview with Laurent Zimmerman,

Philippe Forest explains the difference he makes between the real and reality: "In some way, every story—even lived—is invented as soon as it is told. What matters, is that it leads to this remote place where the author and the reader experience the impossible together."[12] Like Jacques Lacan before him, Philippe Forest thus associates the real to the concept of the "impossible", theorized by Georges Bataille in his writings as a negative space, a mirrored image of reality, the place where one experiences the existence of a remainder which escapes it (*Roman* 49). This definition of the real/impossible may lead to the assumption that the real emerges from rifts in the text that call on the reader to be filled, and that it constitutes an *over-presence* that might however not be readily recognizable. For Forest, fiction is substituted to reality—supposing such a thing, that he defines below as "an objective state of the world", exists—to give us access to the real, without us ever being able to reach it:

> If the novel forgets that the real is the impossible, it falls victim to the trap of mimesis, supposing an objective state of the world exists (a "reality") that it needs only to copy, to mimic, to reflect while the "real" is precisely what representation, language, fiction come close to only to discover it is the place of a fault, of an absence, of a tear which arouses them but that they cannot report. (54)

Forest thus associates fictional creation,[13] and the reader's experience of it, with the real. The fictional story is not a representation of the real—such a representation is considered as impossible—, but instead creates this "negative space" in which the real may emerge (59). Setting reality aside as a form of simulacrum, already a fictional construction (34), Forest paves the way for the experimentations and experiences offered by 20th and 21st century experimental American literature. He describes the "novel" as the place of the only possible experience of the real (the impossible) (19). He sees this experience as a "confrontation" with the dimension of the real, both for the author and the reader, and thus the "novel", as Forest theorizes it, may exist only in the way that it "answers the astounding call of the real" (29). This last phrase echoes the reader's experience of the stories studied here: they are thrown off balance not by the breaches in the realism of the pieces, but by the irruption of the real and its spreading throughout the rifts in the text—whether

they were created by the aforementioned breaches in realism or by faults emerging in the diegesis or in language.

17 Forms of experimental writing have long entertained a special relationship with the real and have also been known to challenge the reader's relationship to reality by effectively challenging them to navigate the aforementioned rifts in the text. Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" relies on the narrator following different, non-hierarchized storylines to give a scattered but nonetheless narratively sound retelling of that night gone awry. By using a wholesome American setting—a babysitter is hired to take care of Jimmy, Bitsy and baby Tucker, the young children of Dolly and Harry Tucker, a couple living in a two-story house in suburban America gone to a little gathering at a certain Mark's home—Coover challenges the reader's relationship to a reality that has already become fiction, the simulacrum of all simulacra, to refer to Forest's aforementioned understanding of reality. The metaphorically Rockwellian nature of the setting chosen by Coover is in itself, in all its literary quaintness, a first challenge offered to the reader on the nature of their relationship to reality. It is only because the reader recognizes the environment and identifies it as a reflection or representation of a version of the wholesome American experience that the thematic and formal turn taken by the short story has a specific effect on them. This stereotypically frozen America is also signified by the description of the TV broadcasting of a western in the background of the night's events (211). The constant rewriting of the piece as well as the horrific events described—namely the rape of the protagonist, as well as a few horrific deaths—contribute to the reader's questioning how they understand the concept of reality. They lead them to recognize it as an artificial construct which emerges here as the poor parent of the real.

18 Contrary to Philippe Forest, philosopher Clément Rosset doesn't make such a distinction between the real and reality: he uses both terms indiscriminately. In *Le Réel. Traité de l'idiotie*, he warns his reader against the pitfalls created by the use of the term "real":

> Therefore, the word "real" is confusing as long as one doesn't clearly distinguish between the words and phrases of pure representation and the same words or phrases which only refer to an external

> reality; between the real things, that is to say everything indifferently, and what is real in things [...]. There are real things which don't contain or signal a single reality. (143)[14]

Rosset thus encourages his reader to experience the real insofar as it "contain[s]" and "signal[s]" something outside of itself. According to Rosset, glimpsing the real is made possible by a lack of precision in description, making a sparse representation the key to its presence (151). In Evenson's "Born Stillborn", the description of the protagonist's environment is reduced to "a wall" (3, 4, 5) on which he writes, "[the therapist's] office" furnished with "chairs arranged as if for a staring contest" (5), his "bed" brought closer to a "window" through which a "streetlamp" glows (5), and finally a "door" (9). What transpires from these settings, as well as from the characters who inhabit them, is a form of indeterminacy. Thus, in all three stories, the women, men and children seem to be archetypes whose specificities remain blurry.

19 Accompanying Rosset's analysis of the concept of the real is that of "illusion" which he calls a "useless perception" (*Double* 11) that "shelters" consciousness from any "unwanted sight" (8). The "Illusioned" either can't perceive the real or perceives it incorrectly because they're solely focused on the fantasies of their imagination and their desire (11). The real is present within the illusion but is somehow bypassed by the Illusioned. It would be easy to establish a nomenclature where the real corresponds to reality and the illusion to fiction, however, it does not seem to have been Rosset's intent. Indeed, the illusion corresponds to a refusal of acknowledging the reality of the real, not because the Illusioned refuses to experience the real—they do, whether they want to or not—but because they refuse to see it unfurling in front of their eyes.

20 The real thus unfolds in fiction as well as outside of it. However, as Rosset demonstrates in *Le Réel. Traité de l'idiotie* (67), some types of fiction, particularly experimental, may be considered as illustrations of the illusionism of meaning. This practice occurs when language is used in a way that heavily and often irremediably shifts the relationship between signified and signifiers. He gives the example of Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1928) whose "metonymical shifts"

create a linguistic erotically charged relationship between the subject and the object of desire (Rosset, *Idiotie* 67–68).

21 Even though some pieces by Coover, Marcus and Evenson may illustrate this illusionist practice of language and experimentation on artificiality, the focus of this article is on elements of short fiction that demonstrate an even more tenuous relationship with the real than that the experimental illusionist practice allows. Indeed, the return to more traditional forms of narrative, experimented by all three authors, favors the reader's encounter with the real. Indeed, in *Succeeding Postmodernism*, Mary K. Holland links her theory of "post-postmodern" literature to a return to the real, seemingly associating it to the earlier-mentioned "thingness" (141):

> literature of the twenty-first century seeks to salvage much-missed portions of humanism, such as affect, meaning and investment in the real world and relationships between people, while holding on to postmodern and poststructural ideas about how language and representation function and characterize our human experiences of this world. (8)

22 This analysis is particularly true of short stories. Indeed, short fiction, while being a rather pliable form, allows writers to explore the intricacies of human relationships and psyches in a setting that is instantly recognizable by the reader. Thus, a suburban family home, a town hospital or a nondescript city office are the typical environments where these experimental authors' stories are set. These places function as the privileged environments where the author may experiment with storylines and situations that mirror this superficial ordinariness, while giving the reader access to the added value of comment. This is the case, for example, when Marcus's narrator mentions typical parental behavior. It might almost be considered as a metatextual comment, as it resembles a reflection on the apparent mundaneness of the characters of the parent in a seemingly generalizing paragraph:

> This happened. Kids tested their attachments. They tried to push you away to see just how much it would take to really lose you. As a parent, you took the blow, even sharpened the knife yourself before handing it to the little fiends, who stepped right up and plunged. (4)

Here, the generalization functions as an extension of the almost blankness of the setting. It leaves space for the reader to intervene by attributing meanings to the narrator's comments well beyond the situation described, thus generating multiple layers of meaning from just Jonah's initial refusal of a kiss from his father.

23 The fact that the places often escape description and are reduced to their bare specifics, leads to a difficult spatialization for the reader. This lack of detail is easily justified by the short form: the description might impede the efficiency of the text—in other words the strength of its effect on the reader—precisely because the accuracy of the setting is not the main focus of the story. However, this argument has already proven to be moot by quite striking examples of short fiction that have managed to convey the depth and specificities of their settings and characters in a limited number of words. The detachment in the prose and the lack of details given to the reader in experimental contemporary American short fiction might at first glance be considered as keeping them at a safe distance from the story and limiting their intervention. Notwithstanding, I would like to argue that, on the contrary, the indetermination to be found in the stories under study calls upon the reader to play an even more crucial part in the elaboration of the meaning of the text.

24 The increase of the reader's role in their reception of fiction is potentiated by a literary practice that doesn't just take the real into account but puts its ambiguity and its "impossibility"[15] at the center of the textual experience. The real, while being absorbed by the story, seeps through the rifts in the text only seemingly covered by an *over-presence* that is not merely an omnipresence of matter, but an accumulation of it—be it textual, formal, significant; the tightly-woven fabric of the text does not create a barrier between the reader and the real: on the contrary, it encourages the emergence of the latter through an active enticement of the former in the form of an accumulation of words, details and storylines. Thus, the reader does not just encounter the real in a fictional context; they experience the real in all its complexity, both formally and thematically. They are not as much confronted to the real as they are invited to experience its protean wealth.

25 The short stories under analysis were chosen specifically because they could initially be construed as more traditional pieces than the formally experimental works of their authors, albeit in different ways. They all feature third-person extradiegetic narrators and use a classic blend of narration and dialogue separated in short sections of only a few paragraphs. They all present their initial setup as real or rather realistic, offering a portrayal of situations that will seem familiar to the reader of the contemporary American corpus in a detached, sometimes almost clinical manner, and thus bypass the pitfalls of the illusionist practice of language Rosset warns us against.

26 In *Le Réel. Traité de l'idiotie*, Clément Rosset considers two possible encounters with the real in the form of a "contact":

> [...] the rugged contact, which stumbles into things and doesn't get anything from them beyond the feeling of their quiet presence, and the smooth, polished, mirrored contact which replaces the presence of things by their apparition into images. The rugged contact is without a double; the smooth contact only exists with the addition of the double. (51–52)

Coover's, Evenson's and Marcus's works testify to this dual potential access to the real: their ability to wield language, form and narratives that entertain an ambivalent—and sometimes ambiguous—relationship with postmodernism and "post-postmodernism" gives their reader multiple access points to an experience of the real. However, what is at the center of Rosset's analysis here is what he calls the "idiocy" of things as opposed to images: while the latter "perspire and radiate meaning", things don't do anything, they just are (52). This theory echoes the modified position of the reader in the reception process in (ultra-)contemporary American literature. The addition of the double to the reader's contact with the text, and ultimately with the real, by authorizing the emergence of the added value of meaning, puts them in a particularly active position, thus making a processes of *re*-mediation possible.

(Re-)mediation

27 20th and 21st century experimental American fiction calls on the reader to act as a mediator between the text and the world. As a

result, the real that emerges from the text is mediated by the reader as well, seemingly closing the gap between fiction and the world. In his article entitled "La déliaison", André Green argues that readers operate connections in the text in order to have access to a primary content, which had been covered by the author's writing—considered as a form of secondary content. This process born from Green's practice of psychoanalysis suggests the existence of several layers of content—not necessarily of meaning, though—in what would be a collection of eternally palimpsestic texts. This new connection is a form of *re-connection*, a term which underlines the doubling of the text inherent to the process.

28 The function of the double or of the image, introduced in the previous section is, according to Rosset, to "sideline" the real (*Idiotie* 55). Thus, the reader's *experiment* on the text in reception should engage them in a process that would drive them away from the real, and so postpone their *experience* of it. In that sense, the reader's experience of the real would be one of deferment close to Derrida's concept of "differance": the access to the real is postponed inasmuch as it may be grasped only through traces, remainders left here and there that are bound to be erased (Derrida 334). Effectively, Rosset uses Derrida's concept to remind us that as long as something is mediated, the real is bound to be deferred. Consequently, the act of reading, the reader's intervention *in* the text, that is to say its ultimate mediation, should inevitably and indefinitely put off their experience of the real.

29 I would like to argue, however, that the reader of 20th and 21st century experimental American fiction effectively bypasses this impossibility through a secondary or doubled mediation I chose to call re-mediation of the text. Rosset does theorize a possible passage from the presence of meaning in the tangible to its relegation to an elsewhere, to absence (*Idiotie* 70), yet it doesn't seem to account for a potential accessibility of the real. Even so, the meaning attributed by the reader to the signs found in the text—though considered by Rosset as a way of disguising the real (78–79)—is never definite in the context of contemporary American fiction whose experimental authors produce works which are often difficult to circumscribe and locate within the boundaries of a certain genre. The potential multidirectional readings embedded in the fabric of fiction itself

constitute an essential aspect of the experience of the reader. It appears more clearly in Coover's "The Babysitter" but is just as important in the two other stories. For instance, in Evenson's "Born Stillborn", further confusion is added in the narrative as the reading progresses since the day therapist starts to contradict himself, first stating that he "had a twin. He was born stillborn" (4) and then reacting with surprise when Haupt mentions this supposed brother to him later: "What twin brother? I was an only child" (7). Further bewilderment ensues for the reader when the narrator describes Haupt's evaluation of the situation when confronted with his night therapist:

> *The therapist can't possibly be there at night*, Haupt thought near dawn, finding himself alone. *It doesn't make any sense. And besides, I didn't give him a key.* And yet the man looked exactly like his therapist. He spoke in a cadence exactly like his therapist's. If it wasn't his therapist, who else could he be? (6)

The reader isn't prompted to consider if the apparition is real or not, but just how wide the spectrum of what is presented to them as real is, and to what degree they can explore it.

30 Moreover, the apparent linguistic restraint exercised by these authors is the sign of a refusal of what Rosset calls "grandiloquent writing", a type of writing which tries to "talk the real" but eventually just ends up "missing it" (*Idiotie* 101). This "verbal excess" (101) that Rosset calls a "swelling" may also be found in the subject matter, that then compensates in grandiloquence for the simplicity of the writing itself (104). Here, as I have previously mentioned, our authors avoid this hazard, effectively putting the reader, then left to their own devices, in the position to build up on the surface of the text and language. They thus keep away from the risk of an indifference to the real Rosset warns us against and that is at the center of the mechanism of grandiloquence (121). The reader is encouraged to discard representation in aid of the real and to reassess their relationship to the text, language, and more generally to the world around them. Their act of re-mediation then reduces the gap between the real and representation required by the act of fictional creation. Indeed, Rosset calls on us to seize the real through fiction, and this by going beyond the layer of "brilliance":

> The seizure of the real, in most cases, will be translated by a pure and simple removal of the brilliance one wished to fix, to which a setting and a false light are substituted: one has indeed seized something, but that something is not at all what one planned to seize. (150)

The role of fiction is to make the real appear to the eyes of the reader. According to Rosset, any refusal to see or to acknowledge the real can lead to madness which is the only way for the self to be "sheltered" from the real (*Double* 9). Rosset also warns that any attempt of annihilating the real would be a form of suicide, an obliteration of reality leading always to the death of the self (8). The situation of the protagonist in Brian Evenson's "Born Stillborn" echoes Rosset's analysis. Haupt's madness, implied by his fictional elaboration of the unsettling nightly visits of his therapist, may protect him from a more direct and potentially harmful confrontation to the real that only the reader can determine.

31 Clément Rosset addresses our need to attribute meaning to the real and thus add value to it, as we do with all things surrounding us. Giving the real "added value through a projection of imaginary meaning" (*Idiotie* 40–41) is a process started both by Martin in Marcus's "Cold Little Bird" and by the protagonist of Evenson's "Born Stillborn". Marcus's narrator, internally focalized on Martin, echoes his worries which are the product of an added value he gives to his son's behavior in order to make sense of it: "When Martin or Rachel caught Jonah's eye, the boy forced a smile at them. But it was so obviously fake. Could a boy his age do that?" (5). The reader, in turn, by elaborating on the insight offered by the third-person narrators, produces their own added value to the short stories, which effectively "*changes*" them, as Mary K. Holland suggested in *Succeeding Postmodernism.*[16]

Conclusion and perspectives: reading and affect

32 The work of these experimental authors suggests that the reader's response to the text is vital to the durability, or to the fulfillment even

of the piece of fiction, something that may seem self-evident, the act of reading being necessary for any written piece to endure. However, in the cases here discussed the particularly active reading experience seems inextricably linked to a certain conception of these author's work in their relationship to the real.

33 Approaching the real in 20th and 21st century short fiction requires the reader to experience the text, as Susan Sontag encouraged the latter as well as critics to do in her essay entitled "Against Interpretation": "The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means" (14). However, Clément Rosset tells us that to approach the real one must try to catch sight of it obliquely, askew and unintentionally because its perception is always fortuitous (*Idiotie* 152). Thus, the uncertain and unpredictable aspect of the reading experience is preserved. Similarly, Jean-Marie Schaffer analyzes the need for the reader to subjectively simulate identification by adopting a subjective perspective—often that of the protagonist—to understand a narrative (31). I would like to propose that this demand for a slightly oblique perspective on the real paired with a process of identification encourages an affective reading of the text.

34 Mary K. Holland indeed argues that "post-postmodern fiction" also operates "a shift in terms of a return to affect, created by an author for a reader" (8). The role of affect [17] in shaping the reader's relationship to the real—and by extension to their own world—cannot be denied, especially in this perspective offered by Holland which suggests that such a response is, to a certain extent, tailored by the authors for their reader. Since, according to Brian Massumi, language interferes with the effect of images, and thus of representations, it seems that the bareness of language practiced by the "post-postmodern" authors we have mentioned, as well as others, and which echoes Rosset's previously mentioned "grandiloquent writing", might contribute to a potential affective reading experience, in the sense that it does creates a gap to be filled by the reader seemingly without setting a specific direction for their response. Thus, as Massumi further states, affect has to do with what is encountered

and not, like emotions, with something that is purely internal to the human being (93). The elements of an affective reading of fiction are thus already embedded in the fabric of the text and are waiting for the reader's encounter of the latter. After all, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer reminds us, the mental processes involved in production and reception are roughly the same (25), thus further explaining the dual role of the reader in the reception of the text. Holland's reflection on embodied reading practices and the importance of "thingness" in "post-postmodernism" (141) goes even further by encouraging the reader and the critic to "approach the text as a material object, with all our senses […] experiencing it as a thing in the world that affects our embodied selves, quite apart from any interpretations we might press upon it" (145). If taking into account the theory of affect, the levels involved in the act of reading might be multiplied. Indeed, Massumi identifies the following "resonating levels" in addition to those of body and mind that emerge from the theory of affect:

> […] volition and cognition, at least two orders of language, expectation and suspense, body depth and epidermis, past and future, action and reaction, happiness and sadness, quiescence and arousal, passivity and activity… (94)

35 One might then say that 20th and 21st century experimental American fiction encourages an affective practice of reading by allowing the source of the affective process to pervade the texts produced by its authors. The detachment of the prose—in the quasi-mechanical account of the babysitter in Coover's story—, the distance established with the protagonist—in Marcus's narrator's uncompromising account of Martin's marital life and mental state—and the total lack of judgement—from Evenson's narrator of their obviously deranged main character—by letting the real seep through, would then leave more space to be filled by the reader's affective experience of the text. It might then be through the specific prism of affect that the constant reevaluation of the reader's relationship to the world through re-mediation takes place.

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NOTES

1 The term “metafiction” here is to be understood as “reflexive literature” according to Linda Hutcheon’s definition in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980).

2 These respective definitions of the terms “fiction” and “reality” are taken from the Merriam-Webster online dictionary.

3 P. Forest, “L’autofiction et après”, 2016. Since the works by Philippe Forest mentioned in this article have not been translated into English at the time of writing this article, the offered translations are mine.

4 According to Mary K. Holland, “post-postmodernists” writers are still indebted to postmodernist practices like “multiplicity and indeterminacy” (14) but they also operate a return to “paying attention to things and thingness” (141) among other things. This leads to a “return to an understanding of reading that privileges one’s embodied experience of the text and of the text in the material world” (141).

5 There is room here for nuance on the concern of these short stories with reality and the real, of course. Yet such is not the center of my analysis here.

6 The quotation marks are purposely used here to denote a fictionalized and very specific Western and hetero-centric form of what could be termed "normality".

7 The choice of the word "spectrum" denotes here the absence of opposition in Holland's theory between postmodernism and "post-postmodernism": one is the continuation of the other; "post-postmodernism" isn't a reaction to but rather a continuation of postmodernism, and the former is composed of different shades of the latter.

8 This subject has been studied in my Ph.D. dissertation; its first chapter is dedicated to the study of absence (M. Bougerol, *The Aesthetics of Reticence in Brian Evenson's work*, defended at the Université de Rouen, 22 November 2018).

9 "Affective, as opposed to emotional", according to Brian Massumi's distinction in "The Authority of Affect" (102).

10 For example, *Pinocchio in Venice* (1991), which is a modernized retelling of the Italian tale that "becomes a complex and intriguing philosophical discussion of issues such as the nature of being, the relation of being to memory, and the relation of one's writing to one's self", to quote Brian Evenson in *Understanding Robert Coover* (8).

11 Brian Evenson, "Born Stillborn", 9: "*Shouldn't I have been given a safe word?* another part of [Haupt] wondered. 'A safe word?' said the therapist, though Haupt was certain he hadn't vocalized the thought."

12 This distinction may remind one of Jean-Marie Schaeffer's analysis of the conversational and mental narrativizations we produce and experience willingly or not (11).

13 The fictional creation of what he calls the "novel" but which escapes the usual constraints traditionally associated with the term. As a result, I'll continue to use it with quotation marks in the context of Philippe Forest's theory of the real in literature. Here is what he says of the "novel" in *Le roman, le réel*: "It is by questioning itself and the world that it asserts itself, only accepting a definition of what it is not to let itself completely confined inside of it" (26–27). For Forest, the "novel" is "what constructs the fiction of that fiction that is 'reality'" (34), but also the product of "everything the social discourse […] drops beyond the limits of where everything the words cannot name reigns and creates this residual space one looks away from and which sets off the fictional urge".

14 The translations into English of Clément Rosset's essays are mine.

15 Here the term is borrowed from Philippe Forest's previously mentioned definition of the real as an echo to Bataille's literary and philosophical work.

16 "Any other approach that aims primarily at interpretation or excavation of meaning actually changes the text" (145).

17 In "The Autonomy of Affect", Brian Massumi defines affect and its primacy in terms of response as: "a gap between content and effect: it would appear that the strength or duration of an image's effect is not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way" (84).

RÉSUMÉS

English

The reader of contemporary post-(post-)modern American fiction is in the process of giving up on her impossible quest for a simple dialectic of information, meaning and representation. Today, the literary form, especially when experimental, calls on its reader not just to make the experience of the real as it is mediatized by fiction, but to take part in its extension beyond the written word. Indeed, I would like to argue that in the process of reception, the reader is invited to grasp the text in a way that makes her, more than an interpreter or an analyst, a manufacturer of sorts. Thus, she draws from her reading experience—both intellectual and somesthesic, as proposed by Pierre-Louis Patoine in *Corps/texte. Pour une théorie de la lecture empathique (Cooper, Danielewski, Frey, Palahniuk)*, Lyon, ENS Éditions, 2015—a new "text" that translates a novel perception and understanding of the real.

Already mediated on the page by the vanishing author, the real in contemporary fiction thus calls for a re-mediation from the reader, which might originate in some type of "reliaison", to quote André Green's concept (« La déliaison », *Littératures*, no. 3, October 1971, 33–52). This redoubled operation, during which the reader's relationship to literary history and philosophy intervenes, makes her an architect of the product of her reading experience, namely her renewed connection to the real, both mediated by fiction and unmediated in her own experience of the world.

A potentially limitless mirror effect is thus created, the real being (un)faithfully reflected in a play on representation and reaction. I would like to argue that the origin of these processes is—potentially among others—what I chose to call "the margins of affect", a negative place that serves as an echo chamber for the reader's (ap)prehension of the text.

Français
Le lecteur des œuvres littéraires américaines expérimentales et post-(post-)modernes des XXe et XXIe siècles abandonne peu à peu son impossible quête, celle d'une dialectique de l'information, du sens et de la représentation. De nos jours, la forme littéraire, particulièrement lorsqu'elle est expérimentale, invite le lecteur non seulement à faire l'expérience du réel tel qu'il apparaît dans le cadre fictionnel, mais aussi à se saisir du texte et de devenir ainsi un artisan de ce dernier. Il est alors amené à produire un autre "texte", issu de son expérience de lecture — à la fois intellectuelle et somesthésique, comme le propose Pierre-Louis Patoine, mais aussi affective — qui en propose une perception nouvelle et lui donne accès au réel.
Une première médiation ayant été opérée au niveau textuel par l'auteur, le réel, dans le cadre de la fiction américaine expérimentale, appelle dans un second temps une re-médiation de la part du lecteur, qui pourrait trouver sa source dans une certaine "reliaison", pour reprendre le concept d'André Green. Cette opération double, lors de laquelle la relation du lecteur à l'histoire littéraire et à la philosophie est convoquée, fait de ce dernier un architecte du produit de son expérience de lecture. Ce dernier donne lieu à une relation renouvelée au réel permise par l'intervention de la fiction. Un effet de miroirs potentiellement illimité est ainsi créé, le réel étant (in)fidèlement reflété dans un jeu infini entre représentation et réaction.

INDEX

Mots-clés
réception, expérience de lecture, littérature américaine contemporaine, XXe siècle, XXIe siècle, postmodernisme, post-postmodernisme, réel, réalité, affect

Keywords
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Wargames as Realistic Tabletop Simulations of Fictional Events: The Case of Warhammer Games

Les wargames *comme simulations réalistes d'événements fictionnels : le cas des jeux* Warhammer

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PLAN

TEXTE

Introduction

1 Up to today, scholars have mainly looked at literature and stories when they wanted to speak about fiction, and how fiction can represent or mirror what we consider as real. Yet literature is not the only field that allows developing a reflection about fictional elements. Academic debates are currently exploring other kinds of mediums and phenomena, such as movies, mathematical axioms or games, to get a better understanding of what fiction is and how it may be

defined (Caïra 25). Videogames, in particular, provide a new and fascinating perspective on fiction and its effects upon what can be called real.[1] If videogames may be designed to represent some aspects of reality—many first-person shooter videogames take place in a historical setup, WWII for instance, and usually try to be as accurate and "realistic" as possible—, they may also offer something more than literature, or at least different from it, especially as the interactive nature of videogaming is all about creating an impression of immersion[2] into a fictional world. For instance, a reader cannot interact with the characters in a book, speak to them nor prevent them from dying when they are in a bad spot. A videogame player, on the contrary, has some powers over the fictional world although limited by the possibilities offered by the game. This fictional world feels more real since the player can interact with it. "Traditional games" or non-digital games, for that matter, do not often have realistic ambitions, but still offer a way of transposing fictional elements into reality. A dragon toy is not a real dragon since it is a fictional creature, but surely can feel like a real dragon to the kid playing with it. A simple stick can become a magic broom to a player endowed with enough imagination. In the case of videogames however, the major difference lies in that the player can actually see a photorealistic living dragon or ride a magic broom.

2 Hence, videogames, especially in the fields of game studies and literary theory, have been more and more analysed to question the links between fiction and reality. Schaeffer, notably, argued that videogames should be considered as proper works of fiction, since they share something characteristic of any type of fiction, which is the creation of a fictional universe implying an "aesthetic attention"[3] from the player (315). According to Schaeffer, the genesis of fiction can be found in play and roleplay, through what he calls "feintise ludique" ("ludic feint"). Such mechanisms invite us to enter an imaginative universe (11) by "suspending reality" (176), without making us believe that this universe is actually real (156). Thus the analysis of videogames should be fruitful when trying to understand how fiction works and how the fictional may be distinguished from the real. Videogames could offer a new and "hybrid" form of fiction, between traditional games (which imply a competitive and agonistic spirit) and works of fiction, which according to Schaeffer are usually separated.

3 If Schaeffer elaborated the valuable idea according to which fictional behaviour starts first and foremost with the act of playing, most his work engaged with videogames only and gave very little if any attention to other types of games. As will be explained below, such exclusive focus on videogames shows some limitations so far as the understanding of the connections between fiction and reality is concerned, especially as it tends to contribute to the "digital fallacy" observed in game studies, that is, to the dominance of digital games in this field of research (Stenros and Waern). Besides, this approach tends to nurture the dominant yet wrong idea that only videogames, compared to more traditional games, truly invite us to enter a fictional world. Yet, while a player may not feel immersed in a fictional world when playing chess, nor would he or she, probably, when playing *Pac-Man* or *Tetris*.

4 In this paper, I argue that, on the contrary, all types of games should be taken into account, with their specificities and differences, when examining questions related to the duality between fiction and reality. At least three reasons allow supporting this idea. First, videogames are not only composed of real and fictional elements, but also involve virtual elements, which even further complicate the ontological enquiry on this topic. In fact, as explained by Aarseth, even if videogames are made of these three ontological layers, "the category of fiction is problematic" ("Doors and Perception" 36) when applied to videogame contents. In that sense, a simulated dragon with which a player can interact in a videogame is not real, but is not fictional either. This dragon is simulated, that is to say, virtual, which makes even more difficult to think about the relation between what is fictional and what is real. Conversely, traditional games allow putting aside the question of the virtual, so as to focus only on the relation between reality and fiction.

5 Secondly, defining what exactly can be considered as "real" in a videogame is a hard task. A labyrinth in a videogame can be virtual in a "physical sense" and real in a "conceptual sense" (42). However, associating physicality with virtuality and conceptuality with reality challenges our common conception of what is real. A virtual labyrinth in a videogame is obviously a real labyrinth, as real as a labyrinth drawn on paper or a labyrinth made of vegetation. Yet the virtual/real dichotomy complicates the research on game ontology, [4]

a difficulty that fails to come up in the study of traditional games. When playing chess in the "real world", the board and pieces are real both in the physical sense and in the conceptual sense. Their tangibility, the fact that they can be touched or broken, is what makes them real, at least according to the common meaning of the term. A chess piece may represent, symbolize or stand for a fictional entity, like a king or a queen, but a chess piece is in itself a real entity. And although some traditional games do not necessarily require physical or tangible game elements—even chess can sometimes be played without them—, this only implies that the digital fallacy often leads us to build a game ontology which does not fully account for the diversity of games nor for how, more specifically, each type of game orchestrates the relation between real and fiction.

6 Finally, videogames differ from traditional games because their rules are mandatory (nomologic statements), whereas the rules of the latter are more flexible (deontic statements) since they are not programmed (Leconte 16). Hence, coming back to the dragon mentioned earlier in the document, while it is possible to interact with such fictional creature in a videogame, interactive options often remain limited by the program. In general, the player can only either talk to him or fight against him and take his loot. On the contrary, in a roleplaying game such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, the interactions with a fictional dragon may seem "poorer" at first glance, yet players have usually more freedom; they can choose to fight with him, surely, but they can also choose to be friends with him, to recruit him, to fly on his back, among countless other options. Those choices will have consequences on the progression of the game (as opposed to roleplaying in a videogame) and the interactions with the fictional world will only be bounded by the players' imagination.

7 Thus, while I acknowledge the value of looking at videogames to define fiction in an innovative way, I however suggest here that more traditional games—or non-digital games—also involve a strong fictional behaviour and can be seen as fictional representations. Although often overlooked in favour of videogames, traditional games are worth studying insofar as they may provide promising contributions to the definition of fiction. Moreover, we still lack more in-depth research on the topic to fully grasp how exactly fiction and rules interact with one another to form a game, or in other words,

how the game's fictional world influences the way it is played, and vice-versa, outside the context of videogames.

8 To address this gap, I propose a different way of looking at the ontology of game elements, and in particular, at the distinction between what is real and what is fictional in games. For that purpose, I will discuss a specific type of games, one that has mainly been neglected by game studies (Carter et al. 3–8) even though it has been highly popular for the past thirty years: the tabletop wargames, Warhammer's franchise. On the one hand, Warhammer games, and more generally wargames, use real game elements (in the sense of physical and tangible) such as miniatures (usually dozens of them in a single game) and "terrain pieces" to reproduce a battle between two or more armies. On the other hand, and this time unlike traditional wargames which are usually set in a faithful historic background, Warhammer games take place in fictional worlds built by an extremely rich and abundant fantasy and science-fiction literature constituted of hundreds of different novels, novellas, and stories. As a consequence, the relation between real game elements (both in the physical and conceptual sense) and fictional entities should be studied more easily in this game, even though its specificities still need to be thoroughly examined so as to avoid any excessive generalization.

9 Through the case of Warhammer, I will address the following questions: how can a fictional battle become a real one? What are the mechanisms of translation between the fictional universe and what is really happening on the table? To what extent can this relation between fictional and real elements in wargames be also found in other types of games? To answer these questions, I will mainly build my argument on Juul's game ontology framework**.** While the literature on traditional games (Huizinga or Caillois for instance) may provide valuable insights into the case presented here, this scholarship, for the most part, does not engage with the notions of real, fictional and realism, so many concepts which are at the core of my argument. Besides, the purpose of Juul's framework is precisely to analyse how the emergence of videogames modifies the classic game model in many ways (53), thereby serving the study of some specificities of non-traditional games such as miniature wargames.

10 This paper will first briefly present what wargaming is and how such games can represent or simulate fictional events, before attempting to characterize more precisely which elements can be called fictional or real within those games, according to Juul's lens. Lastly, I will explain how the physicality and tangibility of game elements allow players to feel immersed inside a fictional world and how in that sense, those games can be described as realistic.

Wargames as a simulation of a fictional world

A brief history of wargames

11 Although some wargames can now also be played on computers, [5] tabletop games remain common in the practices of players' communities. For the purpose of this paper, I will only focus on such games not only because the experience is quite different, but also because this gaming practice is favoured by most Warhammer players (Carter et al. 21–23). Today, wargames are still considered as "traditional games", a relatively vague expression referring to the fact that they are non-digital and follow a lasting tradition of military simulation games. Overall, it is fair to say that many games, digital or non-digital, have to do with war or battle. [6] Chess or Go for instance could be viewed as wargames to some extent, in the sense that they simulate a military battle. However, these simulations are only abstract, and even though chess stands as a direct ancestor of wargames, I chose to follow Dunningan's definition and define wargames by their need to offer a realistic simulation: "in some cases, they are extremely realistic, realistic to the point where some of the wargames are actually used for professional purposes (primarily the military, but also business and teaching)" (Dunningan 13). To achieve these realistic simulations of a military conflict, most of wargames use a map, terrain elements, playing pieces to represent military units and a set of rules which indicate how the game is played and how units should behave on the battlefield. Realism, understood here as an attempt to "preserve the laws of nature of the real world and describing a fictional setting in detail" (Garthoff 1), indeed constitutes a central feature of these simulations, and yet, for obvious reasons,

can never be fully achieved. While wargames put a great emphasis on realism, the playability and simplicity of the game can sometimes be favoured over the proper, detailed simulation of historical or fictional settings (Schuurman 447). Moreover, wargames can be used as communication tools (Goria 141) and convey a specific vision, thesis or dogma; the latter in turn may end-up producing a biased representation of reality, especially when those games are portraying historical or military events.

12 If wargames can be defined as a realistic simulation of a military conflict, their purpose evolved significantly since their creation. Wargame as a form of military training was born in Prussia in the end of the 18th century and then widely adopted by officers, but the first non-military wargaming club was not founded before 1873, with the emergence of the University Kriegspiel Club, at Oxford University in England (Peterson 255). Around the same time, in 1881, the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson started to use toy soldiers to represent military units in a wargame. For this reason, he is now considered as the inventor of miniature wargaming (269), a specific subgenre of wargames on which I will later focus my analysis. In 1913, the English writer H. G. Wells published *Little Wars*, the first rulebook for miniature wargaming. While wargaming was still mainly a tool to train officers for real military events, the goal of Wells, who was notorious for being pacifist, was on the contrary to channel military impulses through play. If wargaming at the time had to be as realistic and historically accurate as possible in order to properly prepare troops for future military events, writers such as Stevenson and Wells started to introduce some elements of fictionalization into wargaming. For instance, Stevenson staged the battles he played in imaginary countries, while Wells also narrated the imaginary "Battle of Hook's Farm" in his book, as illustrated in the following excerpt: "suddenly your author changes. He changes into what perhaps he might have been—under different circumstances. […] Now for a while you listen to General H. G. W., of the Blue army" (22–23). In that sense, although their miniatures and associated rules were still models for the military units and warfare of this times (infantry, cavalry, artillery for instance), wargaming, from its designers' perspective, was no longer an attempt to simulate a historical battle

such as those from the Napoleonic wars or the Franco-Prussian war of 1870.

The fictional worlds of Warhammer

13 Almost a century later, wargaming faced a second turning point, in 1983, when a British company named Games Workshop released a miniature wargame called *Warhammer* (also known as *Warhammer Fantasy*). Up until this point, players would use almost any model for any game. A wargame was only a set of rules, and a player could use the same models across wargames, even though rules could change drastically from one game to another. Yet, the introduction on the market of *Warhammer* in 1983 did not match such playing habits as the miniatures were commercialised using proprietary models. Consequently, a player had to use models manufactured by Games Workshop in order to play *Warhammer*, and no other company was allowed to reproduce these models without facing a lawsuit. Furthermore, and more importantly for the understanding of the specificities of this new game at the time, *Warhammer* was set in a medieval fantasy background. Though inspired by obvious historical and cultural influences as relayed by Tolkien's books or *Dungeons and Dragons* for instance, *Warhammer* developed a unique and original fictional world where battles could rage between dozens of different factions. The models and units necessary to play the game belonged to the fictional world of *Warhammer*, and depicted fictional characters and armies. Furthermore, Games Workshop later introduced a new fictional world with their new wargame called *Warhammer* 40,000 (in 1987) set in a dystopian and science-fiction background and using a different game system. *Warhammer* 40,000 and *Warhammer Fantasy* (replaced in 2015 by *Warhammer Age of Sigmar*) used two different game systems and were set in two distinct fictional worlds: a player owning an army of Space marines could not play against an army of Wood Elves, both because of rules and from a fictional point of view, because they did not belong to the same universe.

14 In spite of their differences, these two games among other things have in common the fact that their respective settings, the history and events happening in the fictional world and the characters which

shape it, are built out of a rich and vast fictional literature. Warhammer [7] fiction has indeed been described in hundreds of novels, novellas, short stories and comic books. Since 1983, the official and affiliated publishing company of Games Workshop, Black Library, published more than 150 novels for *Warhammer Fantasy* and more than 500 novels and anthologies of short stories for *Warhammer* 40,000. [8] Those books provide and develop canonical information about the geography and history of Warhammer worlds, their societies and their inhabitants' ways of life, or the stories of their battles, factions and heroes. When a new miniature or army is released for the game, new books are usually published at the same time to explain how those new protagonists are related to the fictional world to which they belong. This means that instead of simulating a real and historical battle of our world, Warhammer players have the opportunity to simulate fictional events that happened according to the history of these fictional worlds. The Battle of Terra, which took place in 014.M31 between the forces of Horus and the Imperium of Man, is for instance one of the most known event which happened in the world of *Warhammer* 40,000. Thus, from the perspective of the game system of rules and how a game is actually played, Warhammer games are very similar to historic or more traditional miniature wargames. However, instead of looking at history books to compose the background of their battles, Warhammer players look at works of fiction with the objective of simulating or reproducing events that happened in those specific fictional worlds.

Simulating a fictional world

15 As previously indicated, wargames involve realistic simulations, most of the time of a military conflict. One may wonder how such realistic simulations translate to a fictional universe and what it actually means to realistically simulate something fictional, something that, by definition, did not really happen. One element to answer this question lies in the fact that a realistic simulation does not exclude fictional behaviour. This statement clearly departs from what Caillois (41) said about fiction and the sentiment of "as if" in games, which to him cannot coexist with rules. For instance, according to Caillois, children could only play chess "for real", or act "as if" they

were playing chess, but not both. Yet, as Juul (13) pointed out, this division is "contradicted by most modern board games and video games". In fact, any kind of wargame, whether set in a historical or fantasy background, involves a fictional behaviour, in the sense that wargames invite the players to ask themselves what would have happened if things had not gone the way they did. According to Schaeffer, the fundamental mechanism underlying fiction is indeed the "ludic feint", in which readers or players "do-as-if" (11) they were immersed in a fictional universe. Following Dunningan, wargames may even go further, in the sense that, as much as all kind of simulation games, they allow players to both "experience history" and non-historical events. Playing a wargame therefore not only requires to do "as if" the rules of reality were suspended (Schaeffer 175–176) for a moment, but also supposes to raise the "what if" question: what would be the consequences if one event occurred slightly differently? This is for instance what Dunningan discusses in the following extract as he wonders what would have happened if General Custer had taken his Gatling guns at the battle of Little Big Horn in 1876:

> This experience consists of the gamer being able to massage information in order to see what different shapes the information is capable of taking. The essence of a simulation game is that it allows, within well-defined limits, a great deal of variety in an otherwise strictly predetermined historical event. This is the popular "what if?" element in the games.

As highlighted in the quotation above, the essence of a simulation game lies not only in the experience *per se* of the historical or fictional events but also in the experimentation within these worlds. This experimentation is led by the players within the boundaries of realism, i.e. keeping some degree of accuracy and consistency with the sources depicting those events.

16 While more historically-driven wargames are experimenting with something that really happened—the battle of Little Big Horn for instance in the above-mentioned case—, wargames like Warhammer built on a fantasy or science-fiction world are experimenting with fictional events. Warhammer players are hence experimenting within fictional worlds; at the same time, these worlds are themselves already an experimentation of something real. The fictional world of

Warhammer 40,000, for instance, is first and foremost an answer to the question: *what if* humanity lived up until the "grim and dark" future of the 42nd millennium and under the constant threat of hostile aliens? This answer is detailed at length in the five hundred or more *Warhammer* 40,000 novels. Yet, in spite of abundant and consistent details across those books, this world remains fictional and can only be imagined by reading the Warhammer literature. On the other hand, playing provides a different experience or feeling of immersion in those worlds than through reading alone. It often "feels" more real because players are allowed to experiment with the fictional content and (re)create alternative stories, characters or events that do not originally belong to those fictional worlds. In the following section, I will try to explain how Warhammer games can provide this feeling of immersion and show how those fictional worlds can be represented on a table.

How to realistically simulate fictional events

Rules as an immersive tool into a fictional world

17 I previously argued that Warhammer games are both a way to experience (the process of living through an event) and a way to experiment (the process of trying new ways of doing something) with fiction. If fictions "differ in the way in which they allow accessing the universe, and in that sense by the aspectuality of the represented universe" (Schaeffer 243), Warhammer games thus 1) differ from traditional wargames in the sense that they simulate and experiment with a fictional world and 2) do not operate a movement from something real to something fictional (as literature would for instance), but from something fictional (the canonical story of Warhammer universes) to something real (the game elements on the table). In the case of Warhammer, the realism of the simulation hence does not rely on the ability of fictional components to represent something real, but on the ability of real components to represent

something fictional. How can this be achieved and what does realism mean in a game like Warhammer?

18 In order to play a miniature wargame, players first need to know the rules of the game. While knowledge of the historical or fictional theme of the game is usually not required to be able to play, a basic understanding of the rules is obviously necessary. Juul (55–197) even stated that rules are what determines any specific game, whereas its fictional world is only an optional background:

> […] rules are designed to be objective, obligatory, unambiguous, and generally above discussion. With fictions in games, we find the opposite to be true: a strong part of the attraction of fiction in games is that it is highly subjective, optional, ambiguous, and generally evocative and subject to discussion. Rules and fiction are attractive for opposite reasons. (121)

Even though specifically referring to videogames, Juul's statement seems, at first glance, to also hold for any kind of games. Rules of chess, for instance, are obligatory and unambiguous. If those rules are changed, then players are no longer playing chess, but another game. Besides, the "background" of chess is completely optional or subjective. According to Juul (57), the "representation fiction of chess", that is to say theirs shapes and colours, has indeed no consequence on the way the game is played. Chess pieces can represent a large variety of abstract or iconic items, without any impact on the game itself as long as the rules are followed. In the case of Warhammer games, this statement remains true to some extent. In a competitive game of Warhammer, such as those held at tournaments or in more casual settings, referring to the fictional world is in fact not really important. For instance, a player using an army of "Eldars" in *Warhammer* 40,000 is not forbidden to play against another player using the same army, even though those two armies are, according to the fictional world, supposed to belong to the same faction and thus be allies. Players are free to imagine any rationale to justify the conflict between two allied armies, as long as they do not break the rules. They are allowed to "fill in any gaps in the fictional world" (121), but not to change the rules.

19 Yet rules are also what makes a fictional world feel real, and highly contribute to the feeling of realism provided by a simulation game like Warhammer. Firstly, rules are not fictional but real game components. According to Juul (196), this allows explaining why videogames can be called "half-real", that is, made of real rules and fictional worlds. Rules in videogames are indeed more stable than rules in traditional games since players cannot change or circumvent them easily. However, they remain "objective, obligatory, unambiguous, and generally above discussion" (121) in competitive games of Warhammer, as only Games Workshop edicts rules for their games, publishes and regularly updates them if necessary. These rules remain as real as videogame rules in spite the fact that they are written in books and not encoded into a computer program.

20 Secondly, rules are what allows "transposing" fictional elements on the table. Instead of simply imagining, for instance, that a hero slayed a unit of skeletons ready to attack him, a player has to follow the rules on how a melee encounter happens in *Age of Sigmar*. The player will compare the respective characteristics of those units according to the rules (number of wounds, number of attacks, ability to prevent an attack, movement, bravery, etc.), will throw dices and will carry on different actions accordingly to determine the outcome of the fight. In this scenario, rules allow transforming a fictional encounter into a real sequence of actions on the table. In that sense, they are not only something real, but they also allow something fictional to be simulated in the real world, and hence contribute to the realism of the simulation.

Faithfulness to the fictional world

21 Juul's framework provides valuable insights as to what contributes to the realism of a simulation, in the sense of experiencing a fictional world and being immersed in it. At the same time, while rules are indeed what defines a specific game, the fictional worlds of Warhammer games cannot be reduced to subjective and ambiguous features of the game, and even less so to an optional background. As previously described, the fictional worlds of Warhammer games are indeed mostly narrated in novels. [9] Players usually refer to this fictional content as the "lore" or the "fluff" of these universes, the

background or context in which those games are taking place. Even though detailed knowledge about the lore is not necessary to play the game, the example of the previously mentioned encounter seems nonetheless to indicate that rules must remain coherent with what the players know of the fictional world. Let us take the example of Teclis, a fictional character pictured as a mighty wizard, to illustrate this point. This character is one of the most powerful wizards that ever lived in the *Age of Sigmar* universe, since he is the god of Light. The game designers gave him some rules accordingly: he is for instance able to "autocast" up to four spells, it is to say without rolling dices, while other wizards in the game can usually only cast one or two spells. After the introduction of Teclis as a playable miniature, many players complained that he was "game-breaking" due to this ability, in other words too powerful to allow a balanced game. At the same time, Teclis' rules were written so that they remained coherent with the fictional lore of the *Age of Sigmar* universe. In this case, the rule-fiction consistency also contributes to the realism of the simulation, or in other words to the alignment of the simulation with the sources providing information on the fictional world, even though this world is set in a fantastic or science-fiction background.

22 Furthermore, outside competitive games, some Warhammer players might choose to remain as consistent as possible with the lore, to the point where rules do not matter all that much after all. In fact, competitive games are only a specific way of playing Warhammer, or for that matter miniature wargames, and while some players may enjoy a balanced and competitive setting without being constrained by what is or should be true according to the fictional background, others prefer to simulate fictional events without being excessively constrained by the rules. Games Workshop refers to the first type as the "matched play" and to the second one as the "narrative play". In *Age of Sigmar*, the narrative play is described as followed in the 2020 *General's Handbook* published by the game designers:

> Narrative play games can be based on a story from a Warhammer Age of Sigmar publication or something you have devised yourself after reading about the Mortal Realms. There are endless ways to then build that story into your games. Armies might be modified to better reflect the plot, specific scenery might play a part in

> recreating the landscape, 'house rules' might be invented, and paint schemes might be developed to reflect the forces involved. (45)

23 In a narrative play game, the realism of the simulation lies in the consistency with the fictional source over a strict respect of the official rules of the game. For instance, although the rules stipulate that both players need to have an army of the same power (calculated by a system of points) in order to balance the game, nothing prevents players of a narrative play game of Warhammer from using two armies of different sizes and power if this helps to better reflect the fictional battle they want to simulate or the balance of power in the battlefield as described in a novel. Ultimately, the result of the battle will be decided by choices made by the players and dice throws, but to immerse themselves and "experience" a fictional world, players will put aside the competitive aspect of the game and attempt to stay as close as possible to the events as described in the lore. Thus, like for many traditional games, the experience of playing Warhammer games is usually not entirely based on competitive play or narrative play, but a mix of both, depending on what the players want to achieve. And even though they are not videogames, they still appear to have the same hybrid status described by Schaeffer (315), at the intersection of the competitive spirit specific to games and the aesthetic attention specific to works of fiction.

Playing in a real environment

Realism in a game of Warhammer

24 The realistic aspect of wargames simulations lies in the balance between consistency with the rules and consistency with the fictional world. Juul's framework—which sets videogames in between real rules and fictional world—and Schaeffer's framework—which describes videogames as being inbetween games and works of fiction—are therefore useful when applied to Warhammer games to discuss how those games manage to realistically simulate a fictional universe. Yet both these frameworks, in spite of their effectiveness, first refer to videogames or games which take place in a virtual environment. In such context, the term "simulation" often describes computer programs, either used for ludic or for scientific purposes. The

videogame ontology developed by Aarseth even use “simulated” and “virtual” as synonyms (“Doors and Perception” 42). Nonetheless, wargames, including Warhammer games, follow a lasting tradition of military simulations happening in a real environment instead of a “virtual” one, as explained above. As a result, the battle or conflict being simulated by a wargame is not real, but not virtual either, at least in the sense of something simulated by a computer. And yet, the game elements or pieces used in Warhammer games (miniatures, terrains, dices, etc.) are real components used to simulate fictional entities. For instance, if players decide to put a labyrinth on the table —to take up the example used by Aarseth (“Doors and Perception” 42) —, this labyrinth will be real in a conceptual sense and in a physical sense, even though its purpose is to represent a fictional labyrinth such as the “Noctis Labyrinth” of planet Mars in *Warhammer* 40,000.

25 While all games seem to involve rules, and optionally a fictional world, the use of real game pieces is the true distinctive element of Warhammer games, especially as the miniatures play a predominant part in the realism of the simulation. The fact that Warhammers models are painted (most of the time by the players themselves) is indeed at the core of the “miniaturing hobby” (Meriläinen et al. 8). Players usually try to achieve a realistic result, either by remaining consistent with the iconographic canon of those fictional worlds (“Orks” should have a green skin, for instance) or by accurately reproducing lights, shadows and details on a 3D physical miniature model. While the painting of the models is usually a way to improve the overall realism of the battle unfolding on the table, I will not here discuss the realism of these miniatures from an aesthetic perspective but will rather focus on how the use of physical and tangible elements contributes to realism, alongside the faithfulness to the rules and to the fictional world.

The tangibility and the physicality of representation

26 From a physical point of view, wargames and Warhammer games differ from other types of board games also using non-virtual game models. Chess, for instance, is also a game using different kinds of real pieces. Each type of pieces has specific rules and thus needs to

be easily recognizable on the board: as long as players know that a specific piece is a tower and not another piece, the game can be played. The fact that the tower piece does not really look like a real tower, or that it is taller than the king is only secondary as long as each piece remains recognizable. Likewise, in a game of *Monopoly*, what the token (a battleship, a race car, etc.) of each player represents does not matter *per se* as long as everyone knows which token represents which player. Along these lines, the goal of chess is not to realistically simulate a battle, nor is the goal of *Monopoly* to realistically simulate real-estate trading. This allows those games to be played with almost any kind of pieces or tokens. Warhammer games, on the opposite, need to be played with specific models in most cases. From a competitive point of view, a specific height and a specific base size is attributed to each model by the rules. The height of the miniature allows players to determine its "line of sight", i.e. what the figurine can see and shoot on the battlefield, and the base size (25 mm or 32 mm for instance) is used to determine if the figurine can engage against another unit and the reach of its weapons. While some aspects of the miniature are purely ornamental and do not impact how the game is played, the physical size of the miniature has relevance and players are not allowed to use any miniature they want to represent a specific unit in the game. Furthermore, from a narrative point of view, players usually will try to play with an army as visually accurate and consistent as possible with the fictional world. Paradoxically, players won't use a figurine "as if" it was another one, to replace or stand for it. Even though some miniatures can be "converted" and customized by players (Meriläinen et al. 13), the goal remains in most cases to create a "mimetic fandom" replica of a specific character to pursue an ontological bridging of fiction and reality (Hills). Even though small adjustments are often allowed, the physical aspect of each figurine is therefore of great importance to perform as realist a simulation as possible while remaining consistent with the rules and with the fictional world.

27 Theoretically a virtual simulation could be able to render the physical and visual aspect of any real miniature, yet the very tangible manipulation of the figurines highly contributes to the feeling of reality experienced by the players and allows them to transpose

fictional entities into the real world, which explains why Warhammer games are still mainly played on a table. Carter and his colleagues for instance looked at the role of physical dices used in a game to determine the outcome of a fight between two units and showed that Warhammer players are looking for a specific experience that computational tools cannot provide:

> The physicality of the loudness and chaoticness of rolling large numbers of dice simulates the chaos of war in a tangible way, an effect pronounced by the tangibility of the dice, the imagined representation of dice as being embodiments of fictional undertakings and the situational representation of dice as occurring next to these events. As a physical tool, they do this in a fashion difficult to emulate with a virtual application. (21)

28 Following their analysis, I argued in this paper that the tangibility of the elements in the game, the physical dimension of playing, and the ability to manipulate dices as well as the terrain pieces or the miniatures themselves, greatly reduce the ontological barrier between players and the fictional world and therefore contribute to the players' feeling of immersion and the realism of the simulation. The miniatures are obviously not shooting real bullets nor casting real fireballs, but their materiality allows them to be moved or removed, grabbed, and arranged on the battlefield "as if" the players were actually acting upon the fictional events at their will.

Conclusion

29 This paper aimed at contributing to the ontology of games by specifying the relation between real and fictional elements in games. Whereas the academic field of game studies usually looks at videogames, I considered non-digital games, and specifically wargames, to address this question. Wargames indeed offer something unique to this study, as they were initially explicitly built and played to realistically simulate military conflicts. If nowadays wargames are mainly played for recreational purposes, games such as those belonging to the Warhammer franchise have kept the intention of realistically simulating military events, even though those events are entirely fictional. I thus tried to determine how those fictional

events are transposed into a real environment, and how this simulation can be considered as realistic. To do so, I first built on the theoretical framework proposed by Juul and looked at how rules contribute to this realism, especially by giving instructions to the players to help the transposition of fictional entities and actions on the table. At the same time, I showed that these rules alone do not allow for the realism of the simulation in the cases of games such as Warhammer and must remain coherent with the associated fictional world of the game to create an impression of reality. In the case studied here, I showed in particular that this experience is mediated by the consistency with the lore or the original and canonical fictional source. The realism of the simulation therefore relies as much on the consistency with the rules than on the consistency with the fictional world in which the simulated events are taking place. Contrarily to Caillois' argument, my analysis therefore demonstrated that rules and fiction surely can coexist in a game such as Warhammer. In the same line, unlike what Juul's work suggested, the essential/optional and the objective/subjective dichotomies are not adapted to properly characterize rules and fiction, as traditional games also involve a strong fictional behaviour and setting. In the case of Warhammer, rules and fiction are not "attractive for opposite reasons" (121), but on the contrary, for a same reason which is to allow players to simulate in more detail a battle on the tabletop.

30 What truly makes a simulation realistic, and what distinguishes simulations happening in a real environment from simulations taking place in virtual environments such as videogames, is however the use of real game elements, and the interactions allowed by physical, tangible and handleable pieces. But unlike chess for instance, the consistency of visual and physical properties of Warhammer miniatures with the rules and fictional world of the game directly supports the building and sustaining of a sense of realism associated with the simulation. The entanglement between tangible miniatures, the rules and the lore shapes a specific relation between what is real and what is fictional in a game. Such entanglement allows players to both transpose and experience a fictional event in the real world, as well as to interact and experiment with the fictional material through the use of real game components. The analysis of the case study presented in this paper therefore aligns with recent efforts to

develop a game ontology but also calls for the consideration of other types of games to better understand what the concept of realism truly means in such settings. In fact, although videogames constitute particularly intriguing forms of games, this does not mean that they are necessarily better suited to immerse players into a specific fictional world. While videogames use specific game design, tools and mechanisms to create a sense of immersion and allow for a different game experience, so do other types of games such as pen and paper role-playing games, or miniatures wargames. All the more, this article suggests that studying games such as Warhammer is a fruitful avenue to better grasp how fiction and reality can be bridged through games, and even more so when those last are built out of a vast and rich literature. If it is indeed not unusual for a fictional world originally depicted in literature to constitute a basis for a game, further research, both in game studies and in literacy theory, could uncover the specificities of a fictional material, such as novels for instance, written with the implicit purpose of being adapted in games and adopted by players.

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NOTES

1 Surprisingly, although the term real is often used by game studies scholars, it is rarely extensively defined and, most of the time, only refers to what belongs to the real world. For instance, Aarseth ("Doors and Perception" 36) simply quoted Phillip K. Dick's definition: "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away" (1–26). While I will provide different examples of what can be qualified as real in games, the purpose of this paper is not to work on a proper definition of the concept. To improve readability, I will however use Peirce's distinction between fiction and reality as a working definition: "A fiction is something whose character depends upon what we think about it; a reality is what it is whatever we may think about it" (46). In the context of a wargame, a miniature therefore both can represent a fictional entity and constitutes something real, as most of its properties do not depend on what we may think about it (shape, colours, size, etc.) and thus can be publicly observed and collectively agreed upon by players.

2 The term "immersion" is also difficult to define, especially as it can be physical, sensorial, psychological, or emotional depending on what game designers intend to achieve, and on the type of game. As McMahan (67) pointed out, this concept remains "excessively vague" and may refer to very different things, as will be seen in this paper. However, as the author highlights, one of the most accepted definitions of immersion up to now is still the one from Murray. For the purpose of this article which also deals with the concepts of real and of simulation—two concepts Murray also builds on—, I will therefore follow her definition of immersion as "the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place [...], the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus" (99), which heavily relies on "a careful regulation of the boundaries between the imaginary and the real" (119). For a more detailed account on immersion in literature and electronic media, see Ryan (89–175).

3 All translations by the author, unless otherwise noted.

4 According to Aarseth ("Define Real" 56) game ontologies are "ontologies in the 3rd, computer-science sense: They describe what games are (and what they are made of): the fundamental building blocks and their relations.

[…] a game ontology can also address the philosophical questions of being and existence, such as the relationship between, real, virtual and fictional phenomena in games". This paper follows the author's recommendation according to which the task of game ontologies is "to model game differences, to show how the things we call games can be different from each other in a number of different ways" (53).

5 Most tabletop games, from chess to Warhammer, can be played on computer through the use of simulators such as *Tabletop Simulator*.

6 From a cultural point of view, Huizinga (150–175) was the first to notice the long-lasting connection between games and war. As pointed out in this article, a game can be related to war without necessarily being a wargame. At the same time, a wargame does not necessarily always simulate a military conflict or event since it can represent other types of war, such as an economic conflict between companies.

7 I will from now on use the term "Warhammer" to refer to the two main game systems and universes created by Games Workshop, *Warhammer Fantasy* (or *Age of Sigmar*) and *Warhammer* 40,000, unless specifically indicated.

8 Source: Black Library catalog.

9 This content can also be accessed through paper or online articles produced by Games Workshop, fan-made encyclopaedias, animations or videos. The web encyclopaedia <https://wh40k.lexicanum.com> for instance, currently contains more than 31000 articles on the fictional world of Warhammer 40,000.

RÉSUMÉS

English

For the past twenty years, games studies and research in literacy theory have discussed the connections between games and fiction, and have tried to better grasp how games build fictional worlds and the mechanisms which allow players to be immersed in such universes. In particular, this academic conversation has engaged with the ontology of games, with the objective of understanding what exactly is at stake in games and how fictional elements and real or virtual elements interact in such context. Yet most of these analyses mainly focused on videogames, both due to their recent emergence, and because they could supposedly provide richer and more detailed fictional worlds in which players could interact. In this paper, I instead expand the reflection on the ontology of games by looking at some

specific non-digital games, and more specifically wargames, through the case of the Warhammer games franchise. To do so, I address how exactly such games give players the opportunity to simulate fictional events, or in other words how they allow for a realistic representation of fictional battles depicted by Warhammer novels. To answer this question, I argue that the entanglement between fictional elements, rules, and miniatures in wargames allows players to create a realistic simulation of a military conflict, and that this relation provides a fruitful avenue to consider how fiction and reality can be bridged through games.

Français

Ces vingt dernières années le champ des sciences du jeu et de la théorie littéraire ont posé la question du rapport entre les jeux et la fiction, de façon à savoir comment les jeux construisent des mondes fictionnels et offrent aux joueurs la possibilité d'y accéder. Cette production académique s'est en particulier intéressée à l'ontologie des jeux, afin de mieux comprendre de quelle nature sont les éléments qui composent les jeux, et comment les éléments fictionnels peuvent interagir avec des éléments réels ou virtuels dans ce cadre. Toutefois, de telles analyses se sont souvent limitées au cas des jeux vidéo, car il s'agit de médiums encore récents, mais également dans la mesure où les jeux vidéo auraient la particularité d'offrir des univers fictionnels plus riches et détaillés avec lesquels les joueurs pourraient interagir. Cet article cherche au contraire à discuter l'ontologie des jeux à partir d'un type spécifique de jeux dits traditionnels, les jeux de guerre, et plus spécifiquement les jeux appartenant à la franchise Warhammer. Il s'agit de comprendre comment ces jeux offrent aux joueurs l'opportunité de simuler des événements fictionnels, c'est-à-dire comment ils permettent de représenter de façon réaliste des conflits décrits par la littérature Warhammer. Je développe l'idée d'après laquelle la relation entre les éléments fictionnels, les règles du jeu et les figurines dans les jeux de guerre permettent aux joueurs de simuler de façon réaliste un conflit militaire, et offre ainsi un regard nouveau sur la façon certains jeux construisent des ponts entre la fiction et le réel.

INDEX

Mots-clés

fiction, jeu de guerre, réalisme, simulation, ontologie des jeux

Keywords

fiction, wargames, realism, simulation, game ontology

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