"The texture of et cetera" – synchronizing with the blurry real in 21st century artists' novels (Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Kate Zambreno)

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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?

This question encompasses another notion: the rise of the nonfictional in postmillennial novels. As early as 2003, Ben Marcus praises writers like John

[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.

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*

[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.

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).[3] 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*.

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.[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

[4] 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.

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[5] spiraling out from the record of real-life moments spent in conversation with fellow artists.

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).[6]

"Life's white machine"

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).

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

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).

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,[7] from John Ashbery, the narrator's favorite poet. It somehow translates in our context into the mechanical and unqualifiable substance

[7] See Daniel Katz for an analysis of the title's exact replication of the title of an Ashbery poem (320-321).

of everydayness.[8] 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.[9] 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.

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

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

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.

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[10], 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

[10] See for instance, Heti interviewed by Hoggart, Liz, 2013.

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).[11] 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).

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)

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

[11] 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).

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.

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.

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).

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"

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*).

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.

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*.

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).

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).

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 *Drift*s, she is constantly writing up, gathering, arranging, composing her notes into a notebook.[12]

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,"[13] 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

[12] 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.

[13] 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).

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

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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