Alain-Philippe Durand
Naomi Mandel

Novels of the Contemporary extreme

CONTINUUM LITERARY STUDIES

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edited by

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Introduction

Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel

This book investigates an element that is currently emerging in contemporary literature across the globe, an element that we call *the contemporary extreme*.[1] Novels of the contemporary extreme – from North and South America, from Europe and the Middle East – are set in a world both similar to and different from our own: a hyper real, often apocalyptic world progressively invaded by popular culture, permeated with technology and dominated by destruction. The "female rippers" of the Québécoise writer Josée Yvon's *La Cobaye*, the affectless brutality of Bret Easton Ellis's notorious *American Psycho*, Orly Castel-Bloom's radical dissections of Israel's body politic in *Human Parts* and Frédéric Beigbeder's daring recreation of the events of 9/11 in *Windows on the World* all have this in common: they do not merely reflect on violence, they seek it out, engage it, and, in a variety of imaginative ways, perform it. Thus, contemporary extreme novels enact an aesthetic that does not strive for harmony or unity but, instead, forces the confrontation between irreconcilable differences, most notably the difference between reality and art. From this forced confrontation emerges the alchemy of critical controversy and popular interest that characterizes the contemporary extreme, an alchemy that surrounds these authors and their work, and that makes this literature attractive to a global audience. While their writing is commonly classified as "hip" or "underground" literature, authors of contemporary extreme novels have often been the center of public controversy and scandal; they, and their work, become international bestsellers. Orly Castel-Bloom, for example, who writes in Hebrew, has been translated into Chinese, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portugese and Swedish; Michel Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles* (1998), published in French, is available in 20 languages. The objective of this book is to identify and describe this international phenomenon, investigating the appeal of these novels' styles and themes, the reasons behind their success, and the fierce debates they have provoked.

Contemporary extreme literature does not, of course, emerge from nowhere: it has origins in narrative theory, in literary tradition, in politics and in philosophy. Much of this literature's popularity and notoriety is connected to the deliberate erasure of the distinction between the fictional and the autobiographical that occurs in many of these novels. This narrative technique is

commonly associated with Serge Doubrovsky's concept of *autofiction* (the term first appeared on the back cover of his 1977 book *Fils*). Scholars of narrative like Bruno Blanckeman, Vincent Colonna, Philippe Gasparini and Philippe Vilain have explored autofiction's contemporary manifestations (Blanckeman suggests the term *autofabulation* which, like Jean-Pierre Boulé's term *roman faux*, implies an intention to deliberately deceive readers). These studies have focused primarily on contemporary French fiction, most prominently that of Michel Houellebecq. However, Québécois author Nelly Arcan, as well as Amélie Nothomb (Belgium), Lucía Etxebarria (Spain) and Alberto Fuguet (Chile) indicate that we are in the presence of an international phenomenon.

Stylistically, extreme literature is rooted in the literary tradition of the "brat pack", a term commonly associated with Jay McInerney, Bret Easton Ellis, Tama Janowitz (all successful, photogenic, New York metropolitan authors whose work, characterized by stark descriptions of sex, drugs and conspicuous consumption, rose to prominence in the 1980s) and practitioners of "dirty realism" (American authors like Kathy Acker or David Wojnarowicz, whose explicitly experimental prose enacts a more overt social critique). In their study of urban US fiction of the 1980s, *Shopping in Space*, Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney draw both groups together under the name, "blank generation," a term which evokes these novelists' punk ethos while conveying something of their flat, affectless tone (ii–iii). *Shopping in Space* acknowledges the blank generation's international appeal, arguing for the relevance of these American authors to British literature. *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme* expands on this movement, however, by linking these US authors to the emergence of extreme literature across the globe.

Our term *extreme* was deliberately chosen for its connotations with political extremity and a fascination with transgression. In *Crimes of Art + Terror*, Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe note a "disturbing adjacency of literary creativity with violence and even political terror," which they identify as an "inheritance of a romantic extremity" that combines terrorism and art (2). But in addition to its transgressive political connotations and its connotations with terrorism (now so obviously, and painfully, an international phenomenon), the extreme has philosophical and aesthetic roots for which we, with James E. Swearingen and Joanne Cutting-Gray in *Extreme Beauty*, find Mario Perniola's essay "Feeling the Difference" a fruitful resource. Perniola's essay, which initiates a movement towards "the 'extreme beautiful' " (12) conjoins the aesthetic tradition of *feeling* with the contemporary philosophic trend towards difference. If aesthetics strives towards harmony, difference promotes conflict that cannot be dialectically resolved. For Perniola, "feeling the difference" injects philosophy with materiality, an important manifestation of which is "psychotic realism": "trying to eliminate the boundaries . . . between the self and the not-self" (9). Perniola's concept of psychotic realism informs art's engagement with the world, an engagement with important

implications for reality, subjectivity and affect: in a manner similar to the "flat, stunned quality of much of the writing" of Young and Caveney's "blank generation" (iii), with psychotic realism "[a]esthetic experience fades away" (Perniola 10). Perniola's codification of "psychotic realism" as part of a movement towards the "extreme beautiful" lends a philosophic dimension to the inclination towards *autofiction*: the deliberate erasure of the distinction between their biographical and fictional selves lends crucial weight to the critical controversies that accrue to contemporary extreme authors and their works.

Novels of the Contemporary Extreme gathers an array of essays on this new worldwide literary phenomenon. Contributors to this volume live and teach in Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, the United States and Israel, and they hail from an even wider range of countries, offering multinational perspectives on novels emerging from their own and other cultures. While the chapters in this book are arranged according to geographic region (beginning with the Americas and ending in the Middle East), a number of common threads draw together otherwise disparate texts. The description of this book's content that follows is designed to illuminate some of these many connections.

Naomi Mandel starts off the book by investigating the relation of violence and ethics in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, arguing that the novel stages a confrontation of the discourses of sadism and masochism to open up a space of ethical critique that effectively answers the challenges that violence poses to representation. Ralph Schoolcraft's investigation into the corporal and epidermic figures that dominate French author Richard Morgiève's works reveals a similar vision of sado-masochism as a response to, or creative engagement with, psychic and social violence. In these texts the space of fiction becomes an effective site on which to stage progressively transgressive corporealities, a point that Paula Ruth Gilbert and Colleen Lester explore in their chapter, discussing Québécois author Josée Yvon.

Alain-Philippe Durand investigates the ethics of this space of fiction in his chapter, examining French author Frédéric Beigbeder's imaginative recreation of the collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. In the face of what is commonly assumed to be unrepresentable, Beigbeder, Durand argues, employs a narrative strategy of the double in order to ethically engage with the challenge that extreme violence poses to representation. Henrik Skov Nielsen makes a similar point in a very different context, as he investigates the ethical implications of the double-voiced narrative in American author Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama*, a novel that, Nielsen persuasively argues, demands a unique kind of "literal-minded" reading. Indeed, Jean-Michel Ganteau's discussion of British author Martin Amis's novel *Yellow Dog* turns on such a reading, as it is through this (literally) yellow dog that Amis's rhetoric of violence turns into an ethics of the other.

Given the deliberate erasure between author and text that is characteristic

of so many contemporary extreme novels, the prevalence of the double in these texts is not surprising. But when we take into account the role of technology in this world, and the corresponding implication that technology can "double" not only self but world, a number of interesting and important issues arise. Mikko Keskinen's investigation into whether American author Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* describes a literal or a virtual "ghost in the machine" focuses on the challenge that technology poses to the distinction between presence and absence, life and death. Martine Delvaux covers similar ground in her chapter, exploring Québécois author Nelly Arcan, whose *Folle* deals with the Internet's impact on life and love. Kathryn Everly focuses on the ability of television to create or deform reality and reconfigure such entrenched concepts as beauty and death in her chapter, on Spanish author Ray Loriga; Jason Summers discusses writing and print media as vehicles for destruction and creation in *Tinta roja* by Chilean author Alberto Fuguet. For Lawrence Schehr, the French author Maurice G. Dantec offers a profoundly apocalyptic world reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno* that both reimagines mimesis as a replicating virus and reconfigures subjectivity as the product of network computing and the World Wide Web. For Schehr, Dantec's vision of the world heralds and confirms the political reality of international terrorism today.

The potential of extreme literature to enact or instigate political change is the focus of Adia Mendelson-Maoz's chapter, on Israeli author Orly Castel-Bloom, whose novels deliberately undermine the ideological foundations of contemporary Israeli society. Catherine Bourland Ross provides a similar contextualization for Spanish author Lucía Etxebarria. Taking a broader view, Sabine van Wesemael situates the novels of French author Michel Houellebecq in the context of *fin de siècle* literature, delineating the similarities and differences between the end of the nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth,[2] and Martine Guyot-Bender explores the evocation and manipulation of Manichaean dualisms by Belgian author Amélie Nothomb.

Novels of the Contemporary Extreme is the first collection of its kind to deal with the global manifestations of this contemporary literary movement. As such, it both names and defines a heretofore unacknowledged stylistic and philosophic engagement with an increasingly global reality, a reality in which time and space are zones to be inhabited, not obstacles to be overcome, and in which the subject is composed of fragments, dissected by difference, and evacuated by affect. Both an aspect of and a response to this reality, novels of the contemporary extreme perform immediacy and proximity, forcing a rethinking, or dissolution, of traditional causal relations, specifically the relation between reality and art. Process gives way to performance as the simulacrum becomes real, reflecting, as Lentricchia and McAuliffe put it, "[a] wish to communicate not about the real but to communicate the real itself, thrust it bodily through the space separating performer and viewer" (13). The chapters in this book explore the stylistic and thematic implications of this

literal and literary reality, and the international array of scholars represented here offer a productive and multi-valenced view on these unique and timely novels, where violence – often the only stable element – operates as ethos.

NOTES

1 The term "l'extrême contemporain" (the contemporary extreme), coined by French author Michel Chaillou, refers primarily to a group of upcoming French poets. The term first appeared in a special issue of the journal *Poésie* in 1987.

2 A version of this chapter was published in French in *Michel Houellebecq, le plaisir du texte*. The editors thank L'Harmattan publishers for their permission to reprint parts of it in translation.

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Part I

The Americas

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1 *"Right Here in Nowheres":* American Psycho *and Violence's Critique*

Naomi Mandel

BLOOD/RED: CRITICAL ENCOUNTERS OF THE VIOLENT KIND

"ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE IS SCRAWLED IN BLOOD" (3) – *American Psycho*, Bret Easton Ellis's controversial novel of 1991, opens with this image of words (the quote is from Dante's *Inferno*) written in blood. For a novel notorious for extensive descriptions of racism, sexism, rape, torture, murder, mutilation and cannibalism this image is especially apt. But as the reader's eyes move to the second line of the text, "red letters on the side of the Chemical Bank near the corner" (3), this blood is revealed as a literal and literary *trompe l'oeil*: the words are written in *blood-red letters*, not actual blood. This split-section confusion, too, is apt, as the extent to which much of the violence in the novel actually happens or is merely hallucinated is never entirely clear. In this moment – significant enough to merit translation into Mary Harron's film adaptation of *American Psycho* (2000), where the ominous red drops of the opening credits resolve into raspberry sauce – the literal constitution of the blood in which the opening text seems to be "scrawled" forces us to consider the distinction between fact and fiction, literal and literary, the world and how it is represented in art. Further, it forces us to question how violence, that notoriously elusive entity, informs these distinctions and our relation to them.

American Psycho has been described as "one of the most shockingly violent novels ever published" (Baldwin 36), but the novel is especially valuable as a site where the relation between violence and representation can be addressed. This is not merely because of the violent acts described in the novel itself but because of the response the novel has generated, a response that has been described as, itself, violent, but a violence of a nature, if not a degree, significantly different from what the novel itself depicts. Thus the novel is posited as a violent agent – perpetrating or facilitating acts of violence – and as victim of the violence perpetrated against it by its critics. Marco Abel, discussing "the level of violence launched against Ellis's novel," focuses on "the inevitability of violence that criticism does to that which it encounters" and finally

deplores "the inevitable violence [cultural criticism] does to a (violent) text" (138). In the movement from noun to adjective to the space between parentheses, "violence" comes to signify a veritable constellation of acts, attitudes, assumptions and methods of engagement, and its disappearance into so wide a range of manifestations constitutes the crucial challenge violence poses to any attempt to examine it. As Walter Benjamin famously noted in his 1921 "Critique of Violence", violence consistently eludes the critical gaze, relocating itself in the means for the attainment of certain ends; to put it bluntly, the question of how to critique violence becomes a question of judging whether the ends justify the means for which violence is employed.

But this work of judgement that Benjamin outlines is, itself, predicated on underlying assumptions about ethics. Violence tempts us to evoke and apply moral distinctions; there seems, after all, little point in judging without some sense that one's judgment will, ultimately, be "right." Much of the publication scandal surrounding *American Psycho* was informed by the assumption that the novel itself is capable of perpetrating, or facilitating the perpetration of, violence, and the arguments against publishing the novel take the form of identifying that violence and denouncing it. Roger Rosenblatt's review, for example, is titled "Snuff this Book," a title that simultaneously aligns the novel with a snuff film and wishes upon the novel the same violent death that the novel's narrator and protagonist inflicts upon many of the women he encounters. Tara Baxter, of course, goes further, and while we may be skeptical towards her suggestions regarding how to "take care of" Ellis, she is certainly sincere in her exhortation that victimized women should meet violence with violence. Reflecting on the controversy, Fay Weldon takes pains to emphasize the distinction between society and its reflection in the novel's cruelly accurate mirror, but concludes, in a bizarre move, with "I don't want you to actually read BEE's book" ("An Honest American Psycho").

In these responses to *American Psycho*, the critical violence that Abel identified as leveled against the novel takes the form of a vehement denunciation of violence per se, one that evokes and applies clear dichotomies and distinctions. Rosenblatt's disgust, Weldon's harangue and Baxter's call to arms all dissociate violence's agent from its victim, a distinction that enables other, equally significant distinctions: between the object of representation (the world) and the representation of the object (the novel), producer (Ellis and/or Random House) and product (*American Psycho*), literal (blood) and literary (blood red). From the moral comfort these binaries imply emerges what commonly passes as an ethical response to violence: identifying its origin, condemning its perpetrator, and thus controlling and managing a potentially disruptive and chaotic force. In order to respond thus – and this may be the explanation for Weldon's stunning lapse of logic – one must believe, or pretend to believe, that the violence in the novel, like the blood of its opening phrase, is real.

Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Young and Marco Abel offer more sophisticated

explorations of *American Psycho*, focusing on the aesthetic impact that the novel performs, and treating the novel like an aesthetic object rather than a perpetrator who needs to be identified, apprehended, and quickly brought to justice. For these critics, the violence in the novel is not real, it merely *appears* real, and thus evokes, or performs, a different kind of reality. Freccero views Ellis's refusal to incorporate a moral standard into the novel as an act of fidelity to a violent history, one that catapults the novel's readers out of a communal state of denial: "Ellis refuses us a consoling fantasy, a fetish for our disavowals; instead he returns us to that history, to the violence of historicity and to the historicity of violence" (56). Such an emphasis on violence's effect resurrects the question of its reality, (re)locating violence in its affective effect, and catapults these critics into the paradoxical situation of maintaining the violence's reality while denying its truth. Abel, who dismisses "the question of truth" to focus on the affective quality of the novel's violent effect on the reader's "assailed" body (145), reinstates the distinction between victim and perpetrator, aligning the reader with the former, and the novel with the latter, imbuing affect and body with a literal quality which he contrasts with the novel's "representation": "Readers are more likely to deal with getting sick of the book – *literally* – than with contemplating its representational quality" (145, my emphasis). Similarly, Young stresses that the violence, while not itself real, has very real effects: "What difference does it make whether we believe Patrick committed some, any, or all of the murders, or not?" she asks, "We still have to read all the detailed descriptions of the killings *and the effect on us is exactly the same*" (116, my emphasis). As these more sophisticated analyses reveal, to separate truth (whether or not the violence occurs) from reality (of violence itself) does not disarm, control, or even effectively confront violence – it merely relocates violence, and it is significant that violence is relocated into the reader's *body*, where affect manifests itself in the most literal way.

Try as they might, critical responses to *American Psycho* seem unable to avoid the distinction between literal and literary, fact and fiction, the world and the words that depict it. But it is precisely this distinction that the novel works to efface: the opening lines implicate the reader in the work of representation, as our materiality is evoked and wielded to resolve the material constitution of the novel's opening text: "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE is written in blood," we read, "red letters on the side of the Chemical Bank near the corner," we realize (our eyes moving from the end of one line to the beginning of the next). As the text continues, it becomes clear that our own eyes are the eyes of a character in the novel, our gaze aligned with his – a crucial dissolution of the fundamental distinction between the reader's body and the novel's text: "and just as Timothy Price notices the words a bus pulls up, the advertisement for *Les Misérables* on its side blocking his view" (3).

With this opening gesture, *American Psycho* works to dismantle the

distinctions that critics – consciously or unconsciously – evoke in their close encounters with a violent text: the distinction between agent and victim, actor and acted-upon, representation and its object, that inform the moral coherence from which we must, the assumption goes, judge. Underlying and informing these distinctions is the urge to control violence, to tame it, to redirect it to (ultimately) ethical ends. But we need to keep in mind that this initial act of reading, which so effectively conjures up the reader's materiality (blood/red), then catapults that materiality back into the text: it is Timothy Price (not, significantly, Patrick Bateman, "psycho" of the title, narrator of the text, and author of the novel's controversial violent acts) who is reading the Dante quote. Thus the novel, which begins with the imperative to "abandon all hope" and ends with the bleak statement, "this is not an exit," effectively traps its reader within the confines of the text – not only by forcing us to share Patrick's point of view but by identifying our reading with Timothy's. Given that both men wear an Armani overcoat, receive exactly the same greeting, and appear interchangeable to Patrick's fiancée (8–9), the distinction between these characters is fragile as well. In this manner, the novel invites an active engagement with violence, one that is not predicated on distinctions between agent and victim, one not invested in evoking dichotomies for violence's dispersal, one that does not value any judgement that critics – under the economy of ethical ends justifying violent means – might pass on it. In a text where there is no outside to which violence can be consigned, no safe space to which it can be banished, no comfortable "real" to which the reader can retreat and from which she might praise or denigrate the novel's representational quality, a different approach to violence's critique is required. It makes sense to begin such a critique from the site of the body and the violence it inflicts or receives.

"RIGHT HERE IN NOWHERES": FROM COMPULSION TO COMPASSION

"What are the uses of literature?" asks Gilles Deleuze, as a preface to his discussion of the novels of Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, the literary originators of the concepts of sadism and masochism respectively. For Sade and Masoch, "the function of literature is not to describe the world, since this has already been done, but to define a counterpart of the world capable of containing its violence and excesses" (37). Writing not of the actions represented in their novels, but of the language that Sade and Masoch employ to generate and demonstrate the complex inter-relation of violence, agency and the body, "words," writes Deleuze, "are at their most powerful when they compel the body to repeat the movements they suggest" (18).

Deleuze's observations, always useful, become even more so when we

consider the different meanings of "compel." "To compel" presupposes an agent and a victim, the former employing some degree of force onto the latter. But "to compel" also implies some degree of seduction – a work of art, for example, may be described as "compelling," irresistible, drawing us to consume it again and again. Jean Baudrillard responds to this combination of force and seduction (the seduction by force, the force of seduction) by identifying seduction's weakness as its strength: "To seduce is to weaken. To seduce is to falter. We seduce with weakness, never with strong powers and strong signs. In seduction we enact this weakness, and through it seduction derives its power" (162). It is precisely this collapse of these two meanings of "compel," of the agent and the victim, of the forceful and the weak, that the juxtaposition of sadism and masochism reveals.

In reading *American Psycho* through the literary discourses of sadism and masochism, I follow Freccero and Abel, each of whom has approached the controversy surrounding the text via Deleuze's concept of "symptomology" (Freccero 53, Abel 139). Freccero employs sadism psychoanalytically, focusing on strategies of identification and projection (53–4), while Abel concludes "Judgment is not an exit" with some tantalizing suggestions about "[m]asochism and its economy of boredom and contractual violence" (149). My reading differs from theirs in two ways. Firstly, I am less interested in reading the novel symptomatically and more interested in tracing the operations of sadism and masochism in the novel itself. Secondly, I argue that *American Psycho* stages a confrontation of sadism with masochism, a confrontation that generates a space of ethical engagement with violence but avoids the resurrection of dichotomies that current responses to the novel inevitably perform. By staging this confrontation – or collision – of these two discourses, *American Psycho* offers a unique view on the role that agency plays in subjection, offering the assumption of agency as, itself, a violent practice that works as an ethical engagement with, and productive response to, formations of power in a violent world.

Both stylistically and thematically, *American Psycho* locates itself in the world of Sade. The mini-expositions on Whitney Houston and personal grooming that, like the philosophical essays that pepper Sade's novels, interrupt the clinical and affectless descriptions of sex acts is only one aspect of the stylistic similarity of the two; another is the sheer explicitness of its sex scenes, which Vartan Messier likens to those of the Marquis (77). But perhaps most notable is how both worlds are informed by tension between excess and those systems that presume to control it. The sadist, as Deleuze puts it, "is in need of institutions . . . [and] thinks in terms of institutionalized possession" (20), and institutions, from the corporate structure of Pierce & Pierce to the esoteric enigmas of video-store rentals, form Patrick and inform his world: he works, not to earn a living, but in order to "fit . . . in" (237), and repeatedly exits social situations with the mantra, "I have to return some videotapes" (160, 398). Hence, too, the infinite detail of positions, acts and postures which can be

enumerated, inventoried and otherwise subjected to ordering procedures, detailed by *American Psycho*'s notoriously dispassionate narrative voice that stands in stark contrast to the excesses of violence or pleasure that it supposedly represents. What is compelling, philosophically, about Sade is not the contrast between order and excess, but rather how the principle of excess extends to order and to systems which are, themselves, excessive, ruled, as Roland Barthes tells us in *Sade Fourier Loyola* (1971), by the principles of saturation and exhaustion. The system and order of the Sadean universe does not, therefore, *control* excess, it does not *represent* excess; it *produces* excess. This is the key to understanding the interminable minutiae of style, furnishing, products and appliances in *American Psycho*, the purpose of which is not to describe an excessive lifestyle but to evoke excess and to saturate the reader with this excessive evocation; the purpose of these descriptions is not to represent objects but to reproduce their identity as (an excess of) material *products*.

Reading *American Psycho* as a Sadean text, then, enables an account of its violence that does not turn on whether that violence represents or illustrates the "real" excesses of violence (as per Weldon) or liberal capitalism (Messier 81). It enables an approach to the novel as social satire without instating the moral standard on which satire's ethical coherence depends. Rather, these principles of saturation and excess permeate *American Psycho*'s content and its prose, structuring that prose as a space of social critique that the novel does not represent or mirror, but produces. The language of Sade, writes Barthes, is not referential:

> Sade always chooses the discourse over the referent; he always sides with semiosis rather than mimesis: what he "represents" is constantly being deformed by the meaning, and it is on the level of the meaning, not of the referent, that we should read him. (Barthes 37)

Ellis seems to echo Barthes when he has Patrick articulate what many critics have identified as the novel's aesthetic credo: "Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in" (375). This identification of meaning as referent, semiosis as mimesis, locates meaning in form not content – specifically, in a form that de-forms what it is presumed to re-present. This move is lost on many of Ellis's critics, whose censure derives from the assumption of a basic discrepancy between representation and its object (rather than, as per Ellis and, according to Barthes, Sade, representation and its form). As Sheppard puts it, "To write superficially about superficiality and disgustingly about the disgusting and call it, as Ellis does, a challenge to his readers' complacency, does violence to his audience and to the fundamental nature of his craft" (100). The society that bans Sade – or, we might add, condemns Ellis – sees in their work

> only the summoning forth of the referent; for [this society], the word is nothing

> but a window looking out onto the real; the creative process it envisions and upon which it bases its laws has only two terms: the real and its expression. (Barthes 37)

What happens when a masochistic agency enters this explicitly Sadean text? Recall how the opening imperative to "abandon all hope" is immediately obscured by an advertisement for *Les Misérables* in the novel's opening lines: the visual interplay of these two texts traces masochism's entrance into and interruption of the novel's Sadean world. Timothy, Patrick's alter-ego, echoes this interplay in his rant:

> . . . when you've come to the point when your reaction to the times is one of total and sheer acceptance, when your body has become somehow *tuned* into the insanity and you reach that point where it all makes sense, when it clicks, we get some crazy fucking homeless nigger who actually *wants* – listen to me, Bateman – *wants* to be out on the streets this, *those* streets, see, *those* . . . (5–6)

Significantly, it is not the victim's (in this case, the homeless woman's) *acceptance* of her victimhood that so confounds Timothy. Rather, her assertion of agency ("actually *wants* . . . *wants*") interrupts Timothy's Sadean world (an interruption performatively inscribed in the address to Patrick with which Timothy interrupts his own tirade). In these opening pages of *American Psycho*, what disturbs Timothy is *not* the fact of the victim's acceptance of her victimization, but her assumption of agency over it. This agency takes the form of a masochistic irruption into the Sadean universe which forces a radical dissolution of Timothy's identity, leaving him "back where [he] started, confused, fucked" (6) (Timothy will subsequently disappear from the novel and return only in its final pages).

Timothy's tirade in the opening pages of *American Psycho* works on a microcosmic level to trace the encounter of sadism with masochism, both – to return to Barthes' terms – on the level of semiosis (the graffiti and the ad) and on the level of mimesis (the account of the homeless woman). We could also think of these levels as the literal and the literary of the opening line's *trompe l'oeil*. True to Deleuze's assertion that a sadist cannot have a masochist as a victim, in *American Psycho* the encounter of sadism with masochism, the oppressor with the oppressed, occurs *not* in the experience of violence as pleasure but in (and as) an explicitly *textual* space where the inter-relation of reality and its representation, the literal and the literary, is very much at stake.

If this encounter first took place on a microcosmic level in the opening pages of the book, it emerges explicitly towards the end, as Patrick sits with Jean, his secretary, at a café called "Nowheres." The café's name is significant, with its dual assertion of placelessness ("nowhere") and specificity ("now here"), both (or each) complicated by the plural. More significantly,

its combination of indeterminacy and urgency evokes Jacques Derrida's emphasis on urgency and the undecidability which is "the condition or the opening of a space for an ethical or political decision" (298). In Nowheres, Jean confesses her love for Patrick. As Jean begins to speak (it is quite obvious what she is going to say), Patrick responds with an (internal) reflection on his world, one that could equally have been articulated by a Sadean libertine:

> Nothing was affirmative . . . Sex is mathematics. Individuality no longer an issue. What does intelligence signify? Define reason. Desire – meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead . . . Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. (375)

But this world is not impermeable to Jean's intervention, because as she continues to speak Patrick feels that "things [are] unraveling" (375). And indeed, Jean's confession takes the form of an assumption of agency that mobilizes Patrick to function in her alternate, masochistic world, a world in which, she repeatedly says, "I'll do whatever you want" (372). "She weakens me," Patrick admits,

> it's almost as if she's making the decision about who I am . . . and before I can stop it I find myself almost dazzled and moved that I might have the capacity to accept, though not return, her love. I wonder if even now, right here in Nowheres, she can see the darkening clouds behind my eyes lifting. (379)

I want to stress here that Patrick has *not* been converted from sadism to masochism; this novel does not trace the transformation of one discourse into another, but rather stages the confrontation of the two. But this scene does mark a turning-point in the novel, for it is only after this conversation in Nowheres that Patrick's psychic reality begins to fray: a Cheerio is interviewed on *The Patty Winters Show*, Timothy Price returns from an inexplicable absence with a smudge on his forehead that no one but Patrick can see, Paul Owen rises from the dead (or does he?), the automated teller urges Patrick to "feed [it] a stray cat" and Patrick is, incredibly, identified as a murderer and made, literally, to pay (392–3). Indeed, almost all of the evidence for the argument that much of the violence in the novel is fantasized by Patrick comes from the few pages that separate this meeting in Nowheres and the end of the book.

The encounter of sadism with masochism, then, in the impossible space(s) of Nowheres, does more than challenge the distinction between, as Patrick puts it to Jean, "appearance – what you see – and reality – what you don't" (378). Jean insists that appearances are not deceiving, dismissing the distinction between the two that Patrick's world is predicated on and producing, in Patrick, "a flood of reality" (378). While this image hints at the excess that

Barthes identifies as the ruling principle of Sade's prose, this "flood" is aligned with reality that Barthes says Sade's prose does *not* represent. In a discussion of masochism in the film *Fight Club* (1999), Slavoj Žižek hints at a similar blurring when he identifies self-destruction as the erasure of a gap between reality and fantasy, an erasure that is, Žižek says, "the necessary first step towards liberation" (118). It is at the moment of this blurring, this potential liberation, in the ethical space(s) of Nowheres, that Patrick has a vision of suffering and famine. In this singular moment in the novel, a panoramic vision of "thousands upon thousands of men, women, children . . . desperately seeking food," focuses in on "a child with a face like a black moon . . . covered with sand, almost dead, eyes unblinking . . . and somewhere else, above that, in space, a spirit rises, a door opens, it asks '*Why?*' " (380).

Can this be our American psycho? In the inane dialogue at Harry's bar that concludes the novel, the question, "*why*?" resurfaces and receives a reply from none other than the psycho himself:

> [s]omeone asks, simply, not in relation to anything, "*Why*?" and though I'm very proud that I have cold blood and that I can keep my nerve and do what I'm supposed to do, I catch something, then realize it: *Why*? And automatically answering, out of the blue, for no reason, just opening my mouth, words coming out, summarizing for the idiots: "Well, though I know I should have done *that* instead of not doing it, I'm twenty-seven for Christ sakes and this is, uh, how life presents itself in a bar or in a club in New York, maybe *anywhere*, at the end of the century and how people, you know, *me*, behave, and this is what being *Pat*rick means to me, I guess, so, well, yup, uh . . ." and this is followed by a sigh, then a slight shrug and another sigh, and above one of the doors covered by red velvet drapes in Harry's is a sign and on the sign in letters that match the drapes' color are the words THIS IS NOT AN EXIT. (399)

When "the fundamental stake," writes Žižek of masochism, "is to reach out and re-establish the connection with the real Other," violence enables a productive contrast to "the humanitarian compassion that enables us to retain our distance toward the other." It does so in "a risk-taking gesture of directly reaching towards the suffering other – a gesture that, since it shatters the very kernel of our [own] identity, cannot but appear as extremely violent" (116). Patrick is hardly reaching out, but he does "realize something" in the double sense of both apprehending and making real. As a result, his identity is shattered ("people, you know, *me*"), his coherence disintegrates ("so, well, yup, uh . . .") and as his voice dies out, so does his autonomy over his body ("this is followed by a sigh, then a slight shrug and another sigh") as his narrative voice fades into, and is replaced by, the words of the sign.

AMERICAN PSYCHO AND VIOLENCE'S CRITIQUE

This chapter opened with an investigation into the relation of violence and representation, focusing specifically on the challenges this relation poses to the ethical judgement it invites. Noting that critical responses to *American Psycho* situate the novel both as violence's perpetrator and its victim, I focused on the collapse of dichotomies that such situation implies, arguing that in a text where there is no outside to which violence can be consigned, no safe space to which it can be banished, no comfortable "real" to which the reader can retreat and from which she might praise or denigrate the novel's representational quality, a different approach to violence's critique is required. Tracing the confrontation of two discourses of violence – sadism and masochism – that the novel stages in the ethical space(s) of Nowheres reveals a vision of alterity that literally renders Patrick answerable to the question, "*why?*". Much like the homeless woman's assertion of agency that, in the beginning of the book, left Timothy "confused" and "fucked" (6), this vision of alterity shatters Patrick, Timothy's alter-ego. In a move that reflects Žižek's description of masochism's liberating potential, Patrick literally fades into the novel's prose in the final pages of the book – the "literal dissemination" that, Barthes says, informs Sadean text, a text that neither communicates nor represents (7). Become pure text, Patrick (whose multiple ejaculations, a different kind of dissemination, dominate tableaux of both sex and murder throughout the novel) *is American Psycho* – not just the title's referent but the novel's text. As agent, as perpetrator, he has disappeared – the culmination of "a slow, purposeful erasure" (282). If *American Psycho* demands a different approach to violence's critique, it may be because the novel posits violence *as* critique, as adjudicating agent and not just the object of discussion. Born in violence, formed by text, reforming the real by de-forming it, *American Psycho*'s critique of violence offers violence *as* critique, confronting sadism with masochism, discourse with practice, literal with literary, word with violent world.

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2 *Telling Doubles and Literal-Minded Reading in Bret Easton Ellis's* Glamorama

Henrik Skov Nielsen

While media and reader interest in Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama* (1999) has been considerable, literary critics have paid little attention to the book. This is at once understandable and odd. Understandable because *Glamorama* is so monstrous, strange and fascinating that it is difficult to give even a rough account of the plot and action alone. Odd because the book's structure makes it difficult to grasp in a single reading, and because a myopic but thorough consideration of such mundane elements as the book's title, the first and last pages, and basic elements of its plot reveals what appears to be an unprecedented form of double-voiced first-person narrative.

In its graphic descriptions of violence, in its evocation of a society dominated by popular culture and in its blurring of the distinction between reality and fiction (Ellis places literally hundreds of real people in *Glamorama*, including Tammy Bruce, one of his most vehement critics, whose violent death he depicts in this novel [383]), *Glamorama* displays many characteristics of the contemporary extreme. But it adds to this genre two related and interconnected features: firstly, a great interest in the surface and the superficial and secondly, a doubling of the narrative voice. The first of these features is surely common to many contemporary works of extreme fiction and the last to a few, including Ellis's own novel *American Psycho* with its shift into third-person narration towards the end. In *Glamorama*, these features operate at the thematic level, with important implications for the way in which the story is told and read.

This chapter will explore the consequences, for the reader, of these two features and of the kind of narration that results. Rather than a thematic analysis of *Glamorama*, I focus on the reader and her engagement with the work. For the reader to understand the narrative, her reading must reflect the features of the world described. To understand the superficial world, her reading must, in a certain sense, itself be superficial.

Accordingly I will, to borrow an expression from the book, read "literal minded" (80). If one reads the countless dialogues and listings literally, and not just as idiomatic phrases and clichés, parts of a surprising story appear,

not under the surface, but on it. If the reading that follows remains on the surface level, there is, literally, a world of difference between superficial meaninglessness on the one hand, and the veritable exploration of the surface on the other. Both worlds appear in *Glamorama*, producing a profound superficiality.

In some aspects a reading like this echoes the famous statement towards the end of *American Psycho*: "Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in" (375).[1] This statement seems to simultaneously say that everything is surface *and* that there is a meaning to be found in the surface. *Glamorama*, read thus, can be said to offer both an emphatic critique of American culture and a strategy for reading that culture and the critique. In *Glamorama* the necessity of reading literally and finding meaning in the surface is taken to the level where – as we will see – it becomes a matter of survival. The literal reading is a strategy necessary for surviving in the narrated world, and a strategic necessity for the reader to understand the narrative.

THE OPENING

The title of the book provides the reader with guidelines for reading. It is formed as a neologism, a condensation of a number of words, including "glamour" and "horama." "Horama," a Greek term meaning "vision," "sight" or "view," invites the reader to assume the position of spectator, while the character of the spectacle is suggested by "glamour." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "glamour" as "a corrupt form of GRAMMAR for the sense cf. GRAMARYE." If one investigates what "glamour" is, one is led in a double sense to "grammar." The title thus guides the reader by suggesting the advantage of reading literally, of looking for grammar in glamour – this, however, provided that one reads the title literally.

At the beginning of the book the protagonist, Victor Ward, is going to open a new club the next day. He is indignant over some spots on a panel:

> Specks – specks all over the third panel, see? – no, *that* one – the second one up from the floor and I wanted to point this out to someone yesterday but a photo shoot intervened and Yaki Nakamari or whatever the hell the designer's name is – a master craftsman *not* – mistook me for someone else so I couldn't register the complaint, but, gentlemen – and ladies – there they are: *specks*, annoying, tiny specks, and they *don't* look accidental but like they were somehow done by a machine – so I don't want a lot of description, just the story, streamlined, no frills, the lowdown: who, what, where, when and don't leave out why, though I'm getting the distinct impression by the looks on your sorry faces that *why* won't get answered – now, come on, goddamnit, what's the *story*? (Ellis, *Glamorama* 5)

These rather basic questions – who, what, where, when, why – for which Victor, in the opening page of the novel, demands answers, are also questions that he anticipates will remain unanswered. Victor poses entirely traditional demands on the plot development here; his irritation, shared by many of Ellis's readers, with "a lot of description" evokes Ellis's tendency to provide extensive renditions of chatter, mix-ups, banalities, lists of brands and products, and so on, with the result that it is often difficult to find "the story" and especially to find an answer to "why?". *Glamorama* thus opens in a typical way, with a banal situation (the first several pages devoted to the possible existence of some diminutive "specks") but also with – within the redundant, digressive form – an emphatic criticism of the same. Or from the opposite angle: *Glamorama* begins by framing a (self-) critical voice in a context that becomes ironic both through the form of Victor's own digressive speech, which strikingly contradicts the demand for simplicity, and, on another level, because the apparently inconsequential dialogues and lists anticipate later answers to the questions of "who?" and "why?". After Victor has anticipated the novel's theme of the double, by telling how the designer confused him with someone else, and has put forward his demands for the unity, purity and simplicity of the *plot*, the dialogue turns, logically enough, to the unity of *character*:

> "*Yoki* Naka*muri* was approved for this floor," Peyton says.
> "Oh yeah?" I ask. "Approved by *who*?"
> "Approved by, well, moi," Peyton says.
> A pause. Glares targeted at Peyton and JD.
> "Who the fuck is Moi?" I ask. "I have no fucking idea who this Moi is, baby," I exclaim. "Because I'm, like, shvitzing."
> "Moi is Peyton, Victor," JD says quietly.
> "I'm Moi," Peyton says, nodding. "Moi is, um, French." (5 – original emphasis)

The novel's first page, then, humorously thematizes its own first-person narration. The first question from Victor's opening tirade is answered, but in a manner that changes the character of the question itself. The answer to "who?" is Peyton's "moi," but Victor doesn't understand the French "moi" and therefore unwittingly proceeds to ask who he, himself is, not in the form "who am I?," but rather with a Rimbaudian agrammaticality, "who is Moi." In this manner, the reader, anticipating disunity in the plot, is confronted with a prophecy of another disunity in the character: "I" is another.

The many long descriptions are therefore not just filler that the reader can skim through. On the contrary, *Glamorama* establishes a way of reading that requires total concentration. As one more forewarning of the fate that is going to befall Victor, one of his favorite phrases, which we repeatedly encounter in the novel, is "spare me." However, this is precisely what does

not happen, at least not in the sense that Victor means it. Victor is not spared anything in the course of the book, and as a result a "spare me," a surplus "I" emerges. There is a "me" too many, a spare "I." This will become more obvious as we move on from the first page to the motif of the double.

THE MOTIF OF THE DOUBLE

It is not necessary to search long in *Glamorama* to find the motif of the double, as this motif appears with almost exaggerated distinctness and frequency throughout the book. Victor is to meet with Chloe at "Doppelgangers" (6 *et passim*), his band is called "Impersonators," The Who's "Substitute" is mentioned (303), and so on. The protagonist's very name enacts this motif in two ways: because he has changed his name, he is known as both Victor Johnson and Victor Ward; his new surname, like Poe's William Wilson, begins with the letter W, "the double you." As the book progresses, the fact that Victor has a double becomes increasingly clear. There are indications that this double was produced by terrorists, that Victor is replaced by this double in the final section of the book, and, more specifically, that Bobby is Victor's double.

But in the first section of the book, before the possibility of his doubling becomes manifest, Victor and his father have a telling exchange:

> "I'm a loser, baby," I sigh, slumping back into the booth. "So why don't you kill me?"
> "You're not a loser, Victor," Dad sighs back. "You just need to, er, find yourself." He sighs again. "Find – I don't know – a new you?" (79)

In the same conversation Victor asks his father, "Why are you so literal-minded?" (80), and at this very place reading literally can uncover some important narrative threads. The father, a presidential candidate, wants a more presentable son. He may, indeed, read "literal-minded," combining Victor's Beck quotation with his own wish for "a new [Victor]." Victor himself tells his father, "I'm replaceable" (79). Towards the end of *Glamorama*, Victor will be told, by the dying Jamie, that his father "wanted [him] gone," and that Bobby "needed a new face": " 'Palakon' – she swallows thickly – 'had promised Bobby . . . a new face. Bobby wanted a man . . . so Palakon sent you. It fit perfectly. Your father wanted you gone . . . and Bobby needed a new face' " (423). A perfect fit, then, but the passage remains ambiguous, which in turn depends on "a new face" being read literally. At the end of Part Four, Bobby's head is shot off: "I look back and where Bobby's head was there is now just a slanted pile of bone and brain and tissue" (436). The literal-minded reading of this passage would be that Bobby, who "needed a new face," now has room for one. And in fact, Part Five of the novel opens with an

entirely transformed Victor, a Victor who no longer parties, who is enjoying law school, is in a long-term relationship, and who describes himself as "changed . . . a different person now" (445). This Victor is not only reading, but rereading Dostoevsky (446), author of *The Double*. Part Five offers plenty of indications that this Victor is no longer the same person, but the reader is provided with no evidence with which to establish this fact. In a characteristic passage, told, "it's hard to be yourself," the narrator "[starts] smiling secretly, thinking secret things" (451). With the woman referred to as Eva his identity remains ambiguous ("Eva giggles, says my name, lets me squeeze her thigh harder" [461]). But this Eva is referred to, on the following page, as Lauren, suggesting that the two have been switched, and that the narrator must learn to recognize not names but faces. " 'You have to check those photo books that were given to you,' Eva says. 'You need to memorize the faces' " (462). Bearing in mind the considerable evidence indicating that Bobby and his group are capable of creating doubles, of providing "a new face," it is clear that the reader is also in danger of falling for the double's illusion if she assumes that only Victor's behavior has "changed." In any case, the first-person narrator we follow in Part Five is not the Victor that we have followed throughout most of the book. Regardless of who this "Victor" who narrates Part Five is, there is an extra first person, a "spare me," and we follow this person in Part Six, with which *Glamorama* concludes. A substitution has taken place, and this fact is a precondition for grasping the plot. But more important, perhaps, is the narrative structure that allows this substitution to emerge, and which will be the focus of the following section.

THE DEATH OF THE NARRATOR

In *Recent Theories of Narrative*, Wallace Martin identifies "[o]ne telltale sign of omniscience" "as comments on what a character did not think" (146). Several times in the first-person narrative of *Glamorama* we are explicitly told what the protagonist Victor does not perceive, things that no personal narrator would normally be able to relate. Among the most striking examples are the rendering of the passengers' last thoughts in the exploding airplane (438) and of the sleeping Chloe's dream (43). Further, the reader is presented with passages like this: " 'Disarm' by the Smashing Pumpkins starts playing on the soundtrack and the music overlaps a shot of the club I was going to open in TriBeCa and I walk into that frame, *not noticing* the black limousine parked across the street" (168, my emphasis). Such passages present the reader with a paradoxical narrator, one both omniscient and ignorant; there are two voices present in this sentence. This fact has important implications for the theme of the double in *Glamorama*, producing a peculiar effect: the double takes over not just the identity and

life of Victor Ward but the narration of the narrative, which itself becomes doubled and double-voiced.

In the remainder of this chapter I will examine the peculiar possibility of a double voice regarding first-person narrative in general, and *Glamorama* in particular. I will argue that the novel creates a new kind of narrative with protagonist and double struggling for mastery all the way down to the enunciation of the personal pronoun. The effect of this new kind of narrative is to produce, in the reader, the effect of a fundamental alterity within the most familiar and personal pronoun, the "I."

The very feature of a voice that does not unambiguously belong to Victor referring to Victor in the first person is one of the many elements in the book that causes the narrative's words, and even the words "I," "me" and "my," to be open for the intrusion of the double and for double-voiced discourse. The words "Who the fuck is Moi?" on the novel's first page become the starting signal for a game of hide and seek, where the reader is invited to guess: "Who is 'I' now? Who is now saying 'I'?" As readers, we are unable to refrain from equating "I" with "I," but in the novel this "I," both for the reader and for Victor, is constantly in danger of being revealed as an other. *Glamorama* is a narrative about replaceability rather than replacement, the destruction of a narrator rather than a narrative of destruction.

Towards the end of his influential *A Theory of Narrative*, Franz Karl Stanzel addresses the problem constituted by the death of the narrator in first-person narrative. Stanzel calls the chapter "Sterben in der Ich-form" (Dying in the First-Person Form) (290) and inserts as a preamble the last words from Arthur Schnitzler's *Fräulein Else*. Here is the passage in context:

> What song is it? They're all singing. The forests, too, and the mountains, and the stars. . . . I've never seen such a clear night. . . . I'm dreaming and flying. . . . I'm flying . . . I'm dreaming . . . I'm asleep . . . I'm drea . . . drea–I'm . . . fly . . . (158)

Stanzel describes how the moment of death is an ultimate problem for the first-person narrator, and to Stanzel's account one might add that representing the first-person narrator's death is particularly incompatible with the retrospective conception of first-person narrative as a subject's narrative about previous occurrences and experiences. In the concluding lines of *Glamorama*, Victor looks at a mural with a mountain. The final words of the book read:

> . . . behind that mountain is a highway and along that highway are billboards with answers on them – who, what, where, when, why – and I'm falling forward but also moving up toward the mountain, my shadow looming against its jagged peaks, and I'm surging forward, ascending, sailing through dark clouds, rising up,

> a fiery wind propelling me, and soon it's night and stars hang in the sky above the mountain, revolving as they burn.
> The stars are real.
> The future is that mountain. (482)

This passage is not only strikingly reminiscent of Schnitzler; it evokes the opening page as well. Here, on the last page of the book, the very questions that Victor asked on the first page are repeated: "who, what, where, when, why." Victor sees these questions answered in the painting. Yet for the reader the answers appear merely as a repetition of the questions.

"The stars are real" is obviously an extremely ironic conclusion to *Glamorama*'s description of the life of the stars, but it is worth noting that the last lines in Ellis's and Schnitzler's texts are remarkably similar regarding structure and the descriptions of the night, stars and mountains. Given Stanzel's situation of the Schnitzler text as a preamble to a discussion of the problems posed to narrative by the death of the first-person narrator, it is easy to imagine that the Uzi described in a previous chapter has now been put to use, and that the words "falling forward but also moving up" (482) express Victor's thoughts at the moment of death. One Victor Ward – and everything seems to indicate that he is the one we have followed throughout the majority of the book – dies in Italy while the other Victor, his double, enjoys life in New York.

The remaining first person, "the spare me," has been eliminated and the double has finally triumphed and overtaken the identity of the first person. Given the conventions for narratives of doubling, this is not unusual. The odd thing about *Glamorama* is that not only does the double overtake the identity of the first person on the thematic level and in the narrated universe, but that it does so even as the enunciator of "I." The doubling in *Glamorama* affects the enunciation of the narrative in a way previously unheard of for first-person narrative, in that the take-over of identity also occurs on the pronominal level.

The question is, then, how it is possible for a narrative related in the first person, present tense, to be polyphonic in this way? What it is about the "I" sign that allows its reference to shift throughout the book? When Victor tells Palakon about his plans to go to Paris, Palakon warns, "That would be self-destructive" (205), to which Victor answers, "that's what my character is all about" (206). Victor may be correct in the banal sense that the role of Victor Ward in *Glamorama* is a self-destructive one (Victor is in fact destroyed as a result of this decision). But in a more subtle, and also more literal, sense "my character" in this context can also refer to "I." "I," which is the sign, "the character" that refers to every first person, is self-destructive in a very special way, and this is why the reader of *Glamorama* can never be sure that "I" is not another. At the end Victor makes a desperate call to his sister:

"It's me," I gasp. "It's Victor."
"Uh-huh," she says dubiously. "I'd really prefer it – whoever this is – if you would stop calling."
"Sally, it's really me, please –" I gasp. . . .
A click.
I'm disconnected. (476)

All the assurances in the world that "it's really me" cannot create a necessary connection between person and word. "I'm disconnected" forms a kind of poetics for the book, where the first person on all levels is "disconnected:" the word "I" is not connected to a person or any stable enunciating element. Victor is cut off, not only from the telephone conversation, but from any mastery over the "I."

GLAMORAMA AND THE OTHER

I will conclude this chapter and reading of *Glamorama* by arguing that the truly extreme and original aspects of *Glamorama* are to be found not in the violence or the very detailed sexual descriptions, nor in the social indignation or cultural critique, but in the character of the voice that brings all of these forward. In this chapter I hope to have shown that first-person narrative can go beyond a framework in which "the consciousness of an individual" is the "source" of the narrative. *Glamorama* is simultaneously innovative and paradigmatic as a first-person narrative because it makes clear to the attentive reader that words are put into the first person's mouth that cannot come from there and because it shows that the reader of literature can encounter an entirely different voice. This voice cannot be separated from the "I" but will always separate it, or, as it says in the book over and over again with an elliptic anaphor, "I split" (167 *et passim*). First-person narrative fiction does not produce a coherent, individualized voice that speaks to the reader; instead, it provides an opportunity to transgress the limits of the personal voice, to transcend the limits that voice posits to knowledge, vocabulary, memory, and so on.[2]

Deconstructively oriented thinkers like Nicholas Royle[3] (in *The Uncanny* and *Telepathy and Literature*) and Jonathan Culler (in his 2004 essay "Omniscience") have long, and with increasing frequency, attempted to formulate alternatives to what they see as the tendency of a predominant narratological vocabulary to naturalize literature. Culler warns against naturalizing narratives by "making the consciousness of an individual their source" ("Omniscience" 32), referring to Royle's concept of telepathy. Culler's objective is to problematize the intimacy with which much traditional narratology endows the narrator.[4] The great majority of these discussions have, like Culler's, concerned the third-person narrator.

In *Glamorama*'s first-person narration, the reader is caught in the peculiar illusion of this sign, "I," even though the narrative clearly demonstrates that its sentences do not stand in an existential indexical relation to the first person. As readers we cannot form a conception of "I" without allowing "I" to be the one who, besides having experienced what is told, also relates the story. Otherwise the "I" sign remains empty, without reference, without object. In response to this unprecedented narration, the reader involuntarily *invents* a subject that the "I" sign is assumed to have as indexical object and as enunciator. It is thus not, simply, a narrator who produces the narrative; the reader is a participant in this process: in her encounter with the narrative, she invents a narrator and institutes a double production whereby the "I" is at once the creator and creation of the sentence. The innovation does not take place in either reader or (read) text, but in the interplay between both. As Victor puts it, in a motto that distributes its meanings on predicates about both subject and object, "The better you look, the more you see" (27 *et passim*).

In recent years, deconstructive and narratological thinkers alike have also participated in what can be described as a veritable "ethical turn." Despite the difference between how deconstruction and narratology engage in ethical thinking (in a catchphrase, narratology considers the book as a friend, deconstruction considers the friend as a book) both schools of thought are greatly invested in an ethics of reading.[5] In "Deconstruction and Ethics," Geoffrey Bennington convincingly argues that in order to depart fully from the equation of reading with deciphering, one must be *inventive*:

> Being inventive means not being merely *dutiful*. A dutiful . . . reading never *begins* to fulfill its duty, in so far as it tends to close down the opening that makes reading possible and necessary in the first place: and indeed this logic can be extended to the concept of duty in general. . . . In this sense an ethical act worthy of its name is always *inventive* . . . in response and responsibility to the other (here the text being read). (Bennington 278–9)

Bennington thus makes the ethics of reading the question of ethics par excellence. The encounter with the text is also an encounter with the other. In *Glamorama*, this encounter does not occur in the form of a calm meeting between two first persons. The first-person narration of this novel does not proffer the voice of a friend and companion. The question is not merely *what* the story is about, but, rather, *how* the story is told, and *Glamorama* presents us with a certain way of telling that demands a certain way of reading.[6] To sum up, one might say that *Glamorama* makes the demand for a creative invention *literal*, work which becomes more difficult and necessary when the alterity produced by an encounter with the literary work is not merely that of, as Attridge puts it, "the singularity of the work in a new time and place"

("Innovation" 333), but a voice that is not only another's but another's other voice – another('s) voice in the other. To engage in an encounter with *Glamorama* the reader has to expose herself to the risk of telling doubles.

NOTES

1 I wish to thank Naomi Mandel for reminding me about this point.
2 In a recent article ("The Impersonal Voice") I have shown how similar circumstances are evident in as dissimilar works as, for instance, *Moby Dick (1851)*, *The Golden Ass (1999)* and *The Lady in the Car with Glasses and a Gun (1966)*.
3 I wish to thank Nicholas Royle for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.
4 See Royle for instance. See also the discussions within narratology, for example Phelan and Fludernik.
5 See Phelan and Attridge.
6 See Attridge ("Innovation" 333) on the literary work as a stranger as opposed to or as a supplement to Booth's descriptions of books as friends in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*.

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3 *Posthumous Voice and Residual Presence in Don DeLillo's* The Body Artist

Mikko Keskinen

What could be more extreme, in actual or fictional life, than death? Perhaps posthumous life, the residual presence of the irrevocably absent. All fiction conjures absent characters, gives them life and voice, preserving, in the residue of writing, what would not be otherwise present either on account of death or primordial non-existence. Ghost stories perform these literary conjuring tricks explicitly, but the house of fiction is always, implicitly, haunted. The nature of fiction as make-believe is thus profoundly supernatural, and the reader's willing suspension of disbelief amounts to belief in literature's ghost world. The commonplaces of (reading) fiction are hence "extremist" from the outset. The contemporary extreme features new emanations from beyond the grave that are informed by hi-tech innovations and philosophers of the postmodern alike.

Don DeLillo's novella *The Body Artist* (2001) can be seen as dramatizing the technological, spiritual, spiritualistic, and fictional significations of specters. Violence, one of the tokens of the contemporary extreme, is not as overtly present in *The Body Artist* as in DeLillo's *Names*, *Libra*, or *Underworld*, but death as the liminal phenomenon certainly is. In hearkening to the haunted aspects of *The Body Artist*, I pay special attention to the representation of voice in its live, recorded, and posthumous forms, since they closely relate to the novella's central concerns of presence, residue, memory and perception. These ghostly, epistemological, and vocal characteristics are channeled by various media and spiritualistic mediums in the novella, and I examine the interface between the technological and the mediumistic in detail.

The body artist that the novella's title refers to is Lauren Hartke, who is living with her much older husband, Rey Robles, in a rented house somewhere on the New England coast. After the opening breakfast scene, the depressive Rey drives to his ex-wife, and shoots himself dead in her Manhattan apartment. Lauren stays in the house and soon finds a curious small man in one of its remotest rooms. He appears to be a physically deformed and mentally retarded person, who speaks discontinuous sentences verging on

ungrammaticalness, or repeats what Lauren says to him. Lauren names him Mr Tuttle, after her disoriented high school science teacher. She finds out that Mr Tuttle can not only imitate her voice but also reproduce the past conversations between herself and her husband verbatim like a tape machine, a voice recorder. Lauren starts to record her communications with Mr Tuttle, and to play the tapes when he is not present. She sometimes adopts Mr Tuttle's idiosyncratic discursive practices, including echolalia, in her own speech, thus in a way imitating her own voice as mimicked by Mr Tuttle. Toward the end of the novella, Mr Tuttle vanishes as abruptly as he had appeared. Lauren performs a body art piece partly based on her experiences with him. At the end of the novella, Lauren both literally and metaphorically opens a window to the external world, thus if not terminating her private work of mourning, then at least moving onto a more communicative level of it. By giving up a ghost Lauren stays, unidiomatically, alive.

THE SPECTRUM AND SPECTERS OF BEING

When reading about a character as curious as Mr Tuttle in *The Body Artist*, we are inevitably faced with the problem of the real nature or even the very existence of the personage in question. Basically, we have three options. First, we can believe in the narrator's and Lauren's discourse and take Mr Tuttle's physical, empirical existence for granted. Second, we may read Mr Tuttle as Lauren's hallucination, as a fabrication of her post-traumatic mind. Third, in a way combining the material and the immaterial or the physical and the mental options, we are tempted to regard Mr Tuttle as a ghost, an entity who does exist in the fictional world but who is paranormal in nature.

The very positing of these equally tenable alternatives and the consequent uncertainty of Mr Tuttle's ontological status point to the fantastic qualities of *The Body Artist*. A character's (and, by extension, reader's) hesitation between the natural and supernatural or rational and irrational explanations to the happenings in a fictional world is, for Tzvetan Todorov, the very token of the fantastic (Todorov 24, 33–40). Lauren, and the reader with her, vacillates between mutually exclusive alternatives to Mr Tuttle's ontological nature. The "natural" explanation that Mr Tuttle is a real, albeit extraordinary, person or Lauren's hallucination would make the novella "uncanny," whereas his being a supernatural entity, for instance a ghost, would turn the work into the marvellous (Todorov 41–54).

In the course of the novella, evidence gathers that Mr Tuttle may indeed be a ghost – at least of sorts. However, this probable explanation will not completely expel hesitation; uncertainty of his real nature, and therefore the token of the fantastic, still linger on in *The Body Artist*. In effect, both ghostbusting and conjuring are equally monolithic strategies of interpreting the DeLillo novella. Consequently, I let uncertainty and mutual inclusiveness

haunt my reading of the novella, for the very intertwining of the real and the surreal, the natural and the supernatural, and, indeed, the normal and the paranormal, is one of the main concerns of *The Body Artist*.

Mr Tuttle himself is described as being "sandy-haired and roused from deep sleep" (41), as if he had risen from the rest of death, with grains of burial mound still in his hair. His appearance seems more ethereal than real. Lauren amuses herself "by thinking he'd come from cyberspace, a man who'd emerged from her computer screen in the dead of the night" (45). Digital images are two-dimensional, and Lauren indeed finds "something elusive in his aspect, moment to moment, a thinness of physical address" (46). Lauren's impression of his physical appearance is for a long time based on mere visual observation, on ocular proof only, without a haptic verification of his material being. Although Lauren does not explicitly problematize Mr Tuttle's physical existence, she wishes to feel him, like a latter-day doubting Thomas: "She wanted to touch him. She'd never touched him, she didn't think, or did passingly, maybe, once . . . when he was wearing a sweater or jacket" (66). Unlike Thomas evidencing the risen Christ's corporeality, Lauren touches Mr Tuttle's garments, whose contours do not necessarily cover any physical substance but as such constitute, for her, the very tactility of his being. There is, thus, reasonable doubt of Mr Tuttle's corporeality beyond the field of vision. When he is out of sight, he is out of mind, or at least out of any easily imaginable mode of existence:

> She [Lauren] went looking for Mr Tuttle. She had no idea where he went or what he did when he was out of her sight. . . . It was hard for her to think him into being, even momentarily, in the shallowest sort of conjecture, a figure by a window in the dusty light. (60)

The apparitional existence of Mr Tuttle is both physically and perceptionally ambiguous. "A figure by a window" (60) may be just a figure of speech and not a bodily form.

If Mr Tuttle's material being is questionable, if he mainly exists as sight and voice, this state of affairs does not necessarily imply that he is a ghost. As is commonplace in ghost stories, there is another horrendous explanation to the supernatural riddle: that the person who claims to see and hear ghosts is mad. If not legally insane, Lauren may be interpreted as suffering from a post-traumatic stress reaction and the very existence of Mr Tuttle may be a hallucination, a figment of her own imagination.

Lauren wants to work through his corporeal death as she wants to work out her own body. But does Rey haunt Lauren or does she conjure him to spectral existence? Mr Tuttle *qua* Rey can be read as her means to make the absent present, to evoke and bring the dead back to life, albeit in a radically different physical form. Although missing Rey's living body (49), Lauren prefers an alien physical address, if that provides an access to his mind.

For Lauren, Rey's residual presence is not of material nature, of physical mementoes surviving their owner's death. In effect, she deliberately gets rid of his personal items (32). What is left of Rey is, even more so than the smoke of his cigarettes or of his cremated cadaver, insubstantial, immaterial in nature: the residue of his voice.

APPARITION AND APPARATUS: THE GHOST'S MACHINIC VOICES

When Lauren spots Mr Tuttle in the remotest and obscurest part of the house, he remains silent and does not even physically react to her presence. When asked questions about his being in the house, Mr Tuttle says something inaudible and then, enigmatically, "It is not able" (43). In his subsequent phrases, he is equally puzzling, out of context, or repetitious. With his non sequiturs Mr Tuttle is but a little more eloquent than Melville's minimalistic Bartleby.

Lauren describes Mr Tuttle's voice as being "reedy and thin and trapped in tenses and inflections, in singsong conjugations" (63). But his own voice is not his only voice. He is polyphonic par excellence. In Mr Tuttle, polyphony is not a vocal or auditory metaphor for different discourses in the Bakhtinian vein, but literally a multiplicity of different people's voices. His polyphony is that of a tape machine; he records and plays back, he absorbs sound waves and reproduces them with high fidelity. Mr Tuttle's answers to Lauren's questions are as discontinuous and insensitive to context as those provided by an anwering machine.

Mr Tuttle's polyphony is not obvious or clearly audible from the outset. Subliminal as it is, Mr Tuttle's voice makes Lauren uneasy: "she heard something in his voice. She didn't know what it was but it made her get up and go to the window" (49). After a while she realizes why his voice is so uncanny, familiar and strange at the same time. It is her own voice:

> It wasn't outright impersonation but she heard elements of her voice, the clipped delivery, the slight buzz deep in her throat, her pitch, her sound, and how difficult at first, unearthly almost, to detect her own voice coming from someone else, from him, and then how deeply disturbing. (50)

This phenomenon disturbs the intuitively firm presupposition that voice is the irreducible kernel of subjectivity, the token of presence, and that it proclaims the speaking subject's singular identity. In sound reproduction, these incontestant-seeming beliefs are seriously questioned.

The relationship between the reproducer and the reproduced is, however, more complicated in *The Body Artist*. After talking to Mr Tuttle for some time, Lauren adopts his elliptic and impressionistic style:

> What did you mean earlier yesterday when you said, when you seemed to say what? Don't recall the words exactly. It was yesterday. The day before today. You said I'd still be here, I think, when the lease. Do you remember this? When I'm supposed to leave. You said I do not. (55–6)

She seems to emulate him, and he, true to his echolalia, repeats her articulation of his idiotic-sounding idiolect.

On the other hand, Mr Tuttle's parlance is not far from Lauren's. She is a body artist, and not an artist of words. In the first two chapters of the novella, before Mr Tuttle has materialized in the house, Lauren is described as hesitating over words, as looking for the right expression, and as often choosing a mere approximation (9, 33, 34). The linguistic affinity between Lauren and Mr Tuttle may be read as a further piece of evidence of his unreal nature. If we choose the interpretive option that Mr Tuttle does not actually exist, or that he resides in a spectral or hallucinatory sphere, his ostensible polyphony gets embodied in Lauren herself. She, in other words, not only hears voices but produces them herself. She articulates her own voice, Mr Tuttle's voice, his imitation of her and her husband's voices, and her own adoption of Mr Tuttle's idiolect. Or to put it more accurately, Lauren may not, after all, imitate Mr Tuttle in the strict sense of the word, for she probably is the one who gives him voice in the first place. Rather, if there is imitation in Lauren's discourse, it is a reproduction of Mr Tuttle's voice that she had already produced.

Lauren records her supposed conversations with Mr Tuttle, and, when listening to the tapes, is astonished at the high fidelity with which he allegedly reproduces her own voice as compared with her utterances on the same tape (99). The seeming identity of the "two" voices stems from the fact, or at least from the very likely possibility, that they derive from the same source, from her own vocal apparatus. Thus, the objective evidence of Mr Tuttle's live physical existence that the tape recorder seems to provide is as weak, indeed hearsay, as that given by an answering machine of a speaker's presence or even being alive at the moment of playback. The recorded voices of Mr Tuttle are polyphonous but also ghostly in more senses than one.

ELECTRONIC VOICE PHENOMENA AND MEDIUMISTIC MESSAGES

Mr Tuttle, whatever his ontological status is, functions as a living tape recorder, as a recording and reproducing apparatus. If he is a ghost, he is, for an important part, a ghost in the tape machine. In effect, the tape recorder and the spiritual world are closely connected in the practices of certain psychic researchers. From the late 1950s on, the tape recorder has been used to make supernatural contact and to record spirit voices. These spectral sounds allegedly captured on tape or heard via the radio have become

known popularly as "electronic voice phenomena," or EVP. The voices from beyond the grave were initally captured by "using a microphone and tape recorder to record the ambient sound in an apparently empty room. The experimenter then replayed the ten-to-fifteen-minute section of tape several times, listening very closely for voices that emerged only with intense scrutiny and concentration" (Sconce 85).

The media in *The Body Artist* are haunted in the sense that they supernaturally provide Lauren with a live connection to the (at least potentially) dead or non-living. The emergence of Mr Tuttle reinforces the mediumistic quality of Lauren's media use. Most of the conversations between Lauren and Mr Tuttle are set in such a manner that both are sitting beside a table, with a tape recorder placed at the center. Formally, then, their interaction resembles a spiritualistic séance. When Lauren takes Mr Tuttle out of doors, thus breaking the spirit circle, he "seemed unhappy out here" and "[s]he tried not to press him for information" (44). Content-wise also, the sessions soon begin to relate to the communication with the spirits of the dead. At their first séance, Lauren urges, whisperingly, Mr Tuttle to talk to her, and he repeats her sentence, supplemented with the metacommunicative statement, "I am talking" (46). Lauren thinks she understands how difficult it is for him to convey, verbally or paralinguistically, the "things" he has in mind (46). As if another kind of communication were being channeled at the séance, sudden rapping and knocking begin to be heard. Although the source of these sounds is not paranormal but simply rain, this natural phenomenon is described in emphatically auditory terms and as if there were an intelligence suspectable behind the noises. The natural is narrationally supernaturalized: "The rain hit the windows in taps and spatters" (46). The percussive sounds give way to natural language, albeit supernaturally or at least uncannily conveyed, when Mr Tuttle begins to articulate other people's voices. Prior to his first performance of this kind, Mr Tuttle is described as a ventriloquist's dummy, as a medium rather than as an actual source of voice; he sits "with a hand on each knee, a dummy in a red club chair, his head turned toward her" (48). What he articulates at first is not the voice of the dead, but Lauren's past speech (51). But then he makes a hand gesture, "unmistakably Rey's, two fingers joined and wagging" (51), that seems to be a paralinguistic tic from beyond the grave.

The tape recorder in the middle of the table has a double function. It records Lauren's and Mr Tuttle's conversation, thus providing objective evidence of the voices he emits. On the other hand, it can be regarded as an indispensable device for making (at least seeming) supernatural contact possible. Lauren believes that Mr Tuttle had heard her accidentally recorded voice on the tape Rey had used for "communicating script ideas" (57). This rational explanation does not, however, solve the mystery of the hand gesture, and there remains a possiblity that the *script* ideas are indeed communicated *spirit* ideas, as the near-anagram suggests.

The next "session" (60) makes Rey even audibly present. When Lauren is lecturing to Mr Tuttle about the anatomy of the human body, he starts talking to her in "live" Rey's voice, which is not an imitation of any of his recordings. Still it is a reproduction of an actual vocal event, "not some communication with the dead" (61). Lauren is certain that the voice Mr Tuttle does is "Rey alive in the course of a talk he'd had with her, in this room, not long after they'd come here" (61). Rey had told Lauren that she "was helping him recover his soul" (61). Now Mr Tuttle articulates Rey's past words: "I regain possession of myself through you. I think like myself now, not like the man I became" (62). While alive, Rey was talking about becoming the authentic person he used to be. In the present context, when he is dead, Rey's words put Lauren in the position of a raiser of the dead. The man Rey has become is a corpse, and to help him recover his soul is to rejoin the spirit separated from the body at the moment of death. The question of possession is analogously rephrased before the face of death. Rather than furnishing a means by which Rey possesses himself, Lauren herself is possessed by him, and functions as part of a mediumistic séance, creating a channel through which his voice emanates. The role of technology is crucial in making supernatural contact possible, but it also points to a dissolution of "natural" subjectivity and its coherence. When mediated, voice is no longer the irreducible kernel of subjectivity.

Lauren's necessary role at the séances does not give her the power to evoke Rey on command. She twice tries to conjure up the auditory residue of Rey's spirit by urging Mr Tuttle to do his voice, but without avail (66, 71). Although her project is allegedly "something else" (66), Lauren's last plea for evocation develops from vocal imitation of past speech events to mediumistic channeling of Rey's present being:

> Talk like him. Say something he said that you remember. Or say whatever comes into your head. That is better. Say whatever comes into your head, just so it is him. . . . Talk like him. Do like him. Speak in his voice. Do Rey. Make me hear him. (71)

Lauren urges Mr Tuttle to mediate Rey's words online, as it were, to articulate his presence, but Mr Tuttle declines to function as a medium in the parapsychological sense of the word. Rey's spirit will not be auditorily evoked or conjured through him.

MINDING THE BODY, EMBODYING THE MIND: ON GHOSTS AND MACHINES

Thanks to the work of Gilbert Ryle and Arthur Koestler, "the ghost in the machine" has become an interdiscursive catchphrase referring to the strict

divison between mind and body in Western thinking, as epitomized in Descartes's philosophy. In the beginning of his *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle writes:

> With the doubtful exceptions of idiots and infants in arms every human being has both a body and a mind. . . . His body and mind are ordinarily harnessed together, but after the death of the body his mind may continue to exist and function. (11)

On one level at least, Mr Tuttle resembles a seriously retarded person or a small child. He seems to be idiotically babbling and parroting other people's utterances, and Lauren, by feeding and bathing him, treats him as an infant. But it would be a mistake to say that Mr Tuttle has only a body, that he is mindless. The fragility or even utter insubstantiality of his body rather points to the possibility that he is primarily a mind, a spiritual or spectral entity, who or which continues to live after the death of Rey's body.

According to the ghost in the machine doctrine, a person "lives through two collateral histories, one consisting of what happens in and to his body, the other consisting of what happens in and to his mind. The first is public, the second private" (Ryle 11). The mind's private life is, as Ryle puts it, "the life of a ghostly Robinson Crusoe" (Ryle 13). Language can be regarded as a channel reaching out from the mind's desert island to other minds, if not to other bodies. Language is as insubstantial as the mind, but also, by definition, as public as the body. Totally private language is not language at all. Mr Tuttle's idiosyncratic discourse sometimes verges on extreme privacy, but it is always a variant of the English language, albeit incoherent and out of context.

In Ryle's reading, Descartes's mind/body division is thoroughly mechanistic. The body is like a clockwork, and the mind is like a non-clockwork. Still, both are mechanical: "minds are not merely ghosts harnessed to machines, they are themselves just spectral machines" (Ryle 20). In Mr Tuttle's case, this machinic quality of his spectral mind is articulated as automatic repetition of recorded voices. His mind is, as I suggested, a tape machine in the body of a ghost.

The ghost's body seems as oxymoronic an expression as the ghost's spirit. In spectral–spiritual semantics, however, these apparent infelicities are inevitable, because of the very nature of the phantom phenomena. Ghost in the meaning of the "immaterial part of man as distinct from the body or material part" (*OED*, definition 3a) seems, by definition, bodiless. Nevertheless, the very distinction of the ghost *qua* mind, spirit, or soul from the body demarcates its invisible contours by negation. A ghost is what body or matter is not. Without what frames it, a ghost would be not only imperceptible but also unspeakable. Analogously, ghost as the "soul of a deceased person" appears "in a visible form" or otherwise manifests its presence (*OED*, definition 8a). A ghost, thus, invariably has a body, or at least an appearance of one, be it an

abstraction or a prosthesis of corporeality (Derrida 126). This incarnation of spirit in the body indeed engenders a ghost (Derrida 127). Hence, the ghost's spirit, conceived of as preceding incarnation, would be an impossibility, for the possessive case contradicts, in spectral logic, the state of not being possessed.

Mr Tuttle's body – be it that of a ghost, a hallucination, or a real person – looks "unfinished," "elusive," and is characterized by "a thinness of physical address" (45–6). Ghostly, his semi-immaterial body can host a multitude of minds, or at least voices, be they male or female, dead or alive, residual or present. The less there is body, the more it can embody, and the more capable it is of accurate auditory mediation.

The spectral mind/body problem is not, in *The Body Artist*, limited to Mr Tuttle only. Preparing herself for the *Body Time* performance toward the end of the novella, however, what does matter is exactly her body's matter, its corporeal materiality. Lauren diets, systematically works out, and goes through meticulous cleansing procedures to shape or, rather, to immaterialize and impersonalize, the very subjective materiality of her body. Her intention is to "disappear from all her former venues of aspect and bearing and to become a blankness, a body slate erased of every past resemblance" (84). But her metamorphosis does not finish there. She uses a "fade cream . . . to depigment herself," and, after cutting her hair short, bleaches out its color (84). She wishes to resemble a ghost: "In the mirror she wanted to see someone who is classically unseen, the person you are trained to look through, bled of familiar effect, a spook in the night static of every public toilet" (84).

The "classic" invisiblity is that of ghosts: "The 'proper' feature of specters, like vampires, is that they are deprived of a specular image, of the true, right specular image . . ." (Derrida 155–6). Lauren's aim to resemble a ghost, to be a veritable mirror-image of an entity having none, is both a logical and apparitional paradox. Immediately after her cleansing procedures Lauren says to Mr Tuttle, " 'Why do I think I'm standing closer to you than you are to me?' " (85). The narrator comments, "She wasn't trying to be funny. It was true, a paradox of the spectral sort" (85–6). By erasing the distinctive markers of her body, Lauren can be seen as preparing herself for future incarnations in at least two senses, ghostly and artistic. Pale and thin, she resembles classic semi-vaporous emanations from beyond the grave. On the other hand, the reviewer of her performance piece describes Lauren as "[c]olorless, bloodless and ageless" (103). This apparent lack of bodily substance is the basis of her art, as Lauren herself testifies, "It's vanity. That's all it is. . . . But vanity is essential to an actor. It's an emptiness. This is where the word comes from" (104). Etymologically, vanity indeed derives from the Latin *vanitas*, one meaning of which is "hollowness".

In Lauren's art, emptiness is the prerequisite for impersonation and embodiment, if not incarnation. In her performance piece, Lauren mimics

other people's bodies, both female and male, as well as embodies other people's minds by speaking in their voices (109). The bodily mimicking creates such a strong effect that it resembles not only metamorphosis but veritable incarnation. But even Lauren's glossolalia, her speaking in tongues of others, makes her *body* uncanny. When Lauren starts to speak in Mr Tuttle's voice in the middle of her interview, Mariella remarks, "It is speaking to me and I search my friend's face but don't quite see her" (109). As is commonplace in the novels of the contemporary extreme, *The Body Artist* thus dramatizes a dissolution of traditional causal relations, particularly the connection between reality and art.

The sound and visual effects of Lauren's performance piece, *Body Time*, are drawn from Lauren's actuality. The technologically reproduced and the bodily re-enacted are combined when Lauren gesturally mimes Mr Tuttle and lip-syncs to his voice – "a monologue without a context" (108) – audible on the tape. The readers of the novella, unlike the audience of the performance, do have a context for the monologue and its origin: Lauren most likely lip-syncs to her own articulation of Mr Tuttle's voice, representing a recording that is already a representation of a presumably non-existent original. The simulacrum becomes, at least performatively, real. In this sense, Lauren the body artist fictionalizes in the same manner as the novella *The Body Artist* does, conjuring personages, evoking voices, and amalgamating events on different layers of time, whose mode of existence is due to the ghostly media of the tape machine and DeLillo's literary writing. Permeated by reproducing and mediating technologies, *The Body Artist* and its characters represent extreme worlds, both emergent and residual, both contemporary and posthumous.

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4 A Post-Apocalyptic World: The Excremental, Abject Female Warriors of Josée Yvon

Paula Ruth Gilbert with Colleen Lester

The first part of the 1990s appears to have been a "watershed" few years for women writers experimenting with bold, pornographic, transgressive, and violent novels. Helen Zahavi's humorously violent *Dirty Weekend* was published in England in 1991; Virginie Despentes' disturbing *Rape-Me* came out in France in 1994; and Josée Yvon's final novel, *La Cobaye*, appeared in 1994, the year of her death. In all of these texts readers are confronted with female postmodern "warriors" who literally take the law into their own blood-stained hands and move about in a world turned upside down – stalking, brutalizing, raping and killing men, women, and children. It is a world "turned topsy-turvy" (Inness, *Tough Girls* 123), not only because it has been envisioned, created, and populated by women, but especially because this female population has pushed the contemporary to an extreme whereby these "heroes" have become even more violent than the stereotypical violent male – pushing, exploding, and ultimately obliterating the boundaries of both gender and language, indeed of representation itself.

Profoundly subversive and even shocking, the novels of the Québécoise Josée Yvon have elicited a telling critical silence – with the exception of one fine critical essay by Claudine Potvin, a couple of interesting pages by Francine Bordeleau, and Paula Ruth Gilbert's critical assessment in *Violence and the Female Imagination*. The reasons for this critical silence can easily be extracted from Potvin's description of Yvon's literary world:

> Waste matter appropriate to a civilization seen as ugliness or horror, . . . Out-laws and "outside-language," Yvon's "female rippers" always position themselves on the border of a territory limited on one side by the grotesque bodies of young girls and old women represented in pornographic scenes, and on the other side, by the screen circumscribed by male sperm. (198)

In order to understand and analyze Yvon's *La Cobaye* with some critical distance, therefore, it can be advantageous to place it within the theoretical context of a study of the contemporary extreme, the female grotesque, the female monster, female pornography, ritual, spectacle, and performance, the filmic, "wild" territory of North America, and the parodic.

In her ground-breaking study of the female grotesque, Mary Russo defines bodily metaphors of caves, grotto-esque, hidden, earthy, dark, and visceral spaces as evoking images of the cavernous, anatomical female body that exudes blood, tears, vomit, and excrement (1–2). Clearly related to Bakhtin's carnivalesque and to Sigmund Freud's and Nicholas Royle's uncanny, the grotesque, in Russo's terms, has become a trope of the body. Like the uncanny, the grotesque is often defined as the deformed, hysterical, excessive, abject, and horrid, all potentially expressing the transgressive extreme, along with a derangement of identity (Kristeva 208). A deviation from the "male norm," the female grotesque, therefore, is associated with both social and sexual transgression and can metamorphose into the monstrous, into "coalitions of bodies which both respect the concept of situated boundaries and refuse to keep every body in its place" (Russo 16). Such grotesque female bodies, in their fictive, unsettling texts and especially in Yvon's texts, transform themselves from sexual and violated objects and victims on the one hand into sexual and violent speaking subjects of representation (Gilbert 174), while on the other hand into tortured victims of sexual and violent objectification, opposed to "I" (Potvin 209). Both groups of monstrous women wallow in what Arthur Kroker and David Cook have termed "excremental culture."

Grotesque, abject, and excremental, the violent speaking subjects/"I's" are certainly "tough girls" and "action chicks" (Inness, *Tough Girls* 22, 179–80), performing in a comic-strip-like world, destabilizing culture and gender. But they are also monsters, and people have great difficulty in expressing their reactions and assigning meaning to such transgression (Halttunen 56).[1] And when those monsters are female, they are often seen as having transgressed even more boldly, confusing or even denying our received ideas about sex and gender. They invert all hierarchical structures, subvert culture, and ultimately refuse to allow us to categorize or set up any boundaries whatsoever (Gilbert 90–2).

Tough, sexual and violent females with agency are also obscene, or as Linda Williams cleverly calls them "on/scene," since increasingly, they emanate from "a culture [that] brings onto its public arena . . . [what has] heretofore been designated ob/scene and kept literally off-scene" (*Porn Studies* 3). Williams is specifically talking about the infiltration of pornography into our homes through the Internet, videos, and the like, but indeed female pornography (pornography made by women presumably for other women) and especially violent sexual female pornography have been infiltrating the public sphere and the public psyche for some time now. Feminist theorists have

followed this trend, usually focusing on the construction of sexuality and women's autonomy and agency – or the negation thereof.

Scholars like Lynn Hunt, in her investigation into pornography between 1500 and 1800, writes of the "truth-telling trope of pornography" that uses a "language of transgression" (37) in a kind of hyperrealism whereby words can substitute for body parts, and "the original emphasis on realism paradoxically devolves into a form of the grotesque where penises are always huge, vaginas multiply in number and sexual coupling takes place in a kind of frenzy that is hardly 'realistic' " (37–8). Similarly, Susan Kappeler speaks of "the pornography of representation" whereby "fiction wants no part *in* reality, it is the 'Other' to the real. It is the surplus of the real" (2, 9). Judith Butler writes about the phantasmatic that assumes the status of the real, where fantasy poses as real and haunts and contests borders ("The Force of Fantasy" 106–8). She believes that in pornography, what needs to be achieved is a replacement of the binary of subject/object by a "proliferating discursive excess . . . a chaotic multiplicity of representations" in order to reduce the authority and violence of one (presumably male) position ("The Force of Fantasy" 121). For Williams the issue in female pornography is to replace the monopoly on the sexual subjectivity that the phallus represents with a female who can identify as a sexual agent and subject of desire (*Hard Core* 258). Lillian Robinson speaks of a new form of feminism that emphasizes pleasure and performative modalities ("Subject/Position" 182–3). What is, of course, quite frightening to some is that this representation/performance of sexual and sexually violent women created by women could "spill over" into reality (Gilbert 221). As Kappeler reminds us, writing can become a surrogate pleasure, and the paradigm of domination, coercion, and degradation of the Other to object status – with subject/object positions reversed (104–5) – creating a chaotic, post-apocalyptic world where "everyone is running for the 'speaking function' " (Kappeler 199).

But women *are* writing and filming female pornography, and women *are* imagining and creating sexual and sexually violent female characters.[2] In 1985 a special issue of the Québec journal *La Vie en rose* on eroticism created quite a stir because of the inclusion of what was seen as scandalous short stories, including Anne Dandurand's "Histoire de Q," a clever and yet disturbing parody of the well-known *Story of O* (Dandurand 23–30). The "rise" of popular culture superheroes/heroines of a rather comic-book nature has more recently birthed not only the representation of sexually tough "women with agency" but also feminist research into the meanings of such female action figures: Robinson, for example, expands her feminist vision to include cartoon superheroines like Supergirl, Wonder Woman, and others (*Wonder Women*).

We need, however, to be sure to make a distinction between female pornography and female violent pornography, linking violence to sex, but sometimes going beyond even that boundary into the realm of violence for

violence's sake. If Québec started on the road toward female pornography and violence especially as of the mid 1980s, France began with a vengeance, so to speak, as of the mid 1990s. Suffice it to mention again the publication of Despentes' *Rape-Me*, followed by her scandalous film of the same name in 2000. Debates over issues of censorship and art versus trash raged over this film, and one has to wonder if these fights would have occurred as widely and openly had this been a film made by a male director and with male actors (Gilbert 244). The controversy was fueled, however, by Despentes' own comments: " 'It gave me great pleasure to kill everyone. . . . I really like that idea, to go someplace in order to fuck with everyone' " (quoted in Authier 206). In *Rape-Me*, as in texts by Christine Angot, Catherine Breillat, and Claire Legendre, a female obsession with and phobia of the male body never seem to disappear, even when the violently sexual female uses a revolver to sodomize the man (with the weapon clearly substituting for the penis) or kills and eats parts of the body of the male victim.

Much of this violence and sex perpetrated by women is represented as ritualistic – a form of spectacle and performance. It is a meeting of Michel Foucault and Butler in a setting where everyone is "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman), but the female has reversed the traditional roles. The spectacle and performance also take place in a public sphere of sorts, mostly because they are being watched like a film (if even in the form of a novel) by the viewer/reader/fantasizing public. The sex and violence have truly become "on/scene" (Williams). In Yvon's *La Cobaye*, in particular, the setting and the public sphere are, in addition, located in North America – alternating between a cinematographic "wild west" of the southwestern US and (less frequently) in Québec. Yvon has consciously situated her post-apocalyptic novel in Jean Baudrillard's America – a land without culture, filled with aimless and gratuitous violence, a "*post-orgy* world" (*America* 46), a land of hyperreality and yet inauthenticity, a land that is symptomatic of a clash between the primitive/wild and absolute simulacrum (*America* 79, 100, 122, 104). It is, as the Québécois call it, North America as an encroaching and dangerous Americanization rather than a more diverse, hybrid and interesting North America as "Américanité" or American-ness. It is an America that places less importance on cultural boundaries, celebrates action, competence, entrepreneurialism, self-actualization, and popular culture over intelligence, intellectualism, verbal mastery, elegance, a critical approach, and high culture – as in France (Lamont 88–97). It is a land where excremental, abject female warriors seem at home in their post-apocalyptic world.

It must be noted, however, that this post-apocalyptic world that Yvon has created is in many ways parodic – using a strategy that many contemporary women writers employ but in no way diluting the frightening and disturbing messages that the text implies. Halberstam calls such a literary strategy "punning," often with a web of intertextual references. Puns scramble categories and do not allow opposites so that without familiar binary codes, meaning

itself becomes monstrous (Halberstam 179; Gilbert 92). At other times referred to as "witty," "exaggerated," "carnivalesque," or "camp," these strategies, in the hands of contemporary women writers and filmmakers of erotic, pornographic, and violent texts, provide the opportunity to take a male pornographic text . . . opening it up, and turning it on its head by means of what Linda Hutcheon calls "parodic double-voicing" (67) and "parodic intertexts" (118).

Like the American Wild West, such texts thus exude lawlessness. More specifically in *La Cobaye*, Yvon places her characters in Big Red Rock, a wild southwestern town with a local poor, drunk, and violent Sioux population where in a total gender and power reversal, the sheriff is a gun-toting, violent, paramilitary woman, the local town drunk is a sex-starved, pop-music loving female, and the future is represented by a young transgendered girl. Within this caricature of a bad Hollywood Western dusty town, is the public square where the female mayor, "the Colonel," "born for horror" (Yvon 26), decides to mount public spectacles of torture and death. Although a drug dealer herself, the Colonel orders any Indians who steal, disobey, or sell drugs to remain exposed naked in the midday sun (Yvon 26). As if the medieval-American Foucauldian public spectacle of torture and death is not enough, Big Red Rock also boasts of Omer's club and its spectacle of three cages on the stage where dancers are enchained (Yvon 40). The first young female dancer is handcuffed and whipped, while the audience applauds. The other two young girls are released from their cages so that the customers, as if in a violently pornographic ritual, can sexually violate them in rooms set up under the stage: "They accept, finish calmly, with sperm in their nostrils. They know that they will be dead or beaten, if not cut up slowly into little pieces. 'Cruelty is an act of compassion,' would say the cold Bovary" (Yvon 40–1).

Although it is not entirely clear who this cold, female Bovary is, one assumes that it refers to one of the three major female protagonists of the novel, Emma, the former mercenary sheriff. Thus we have a "tongue-in-cheek" intertextual reference to Gustave Flaubert's provincial and romantic heroine, Emma Bovary, caught in a realistic world. It is this hyperreal outside world that forms the backdrop (or back lot) for what Potvin sees as the "pseudo-realism of Yvon's writing" (210) – the shocking paratextual nature of the covers of her texts, the graphic, explicit, and detailed nature of her descriptions, the "violence of lighting, the rhythm of the movie camera, the magical projection of film, illusion . . . [that] opens up into an artificial, simulated climax" (198). It is a hyperreal, B-rated, Hollywood Western world. It is a world symbolized by the fact that the father of Emma (Bovary-paramilitary-sheriff) was a drag queen (Yvon 80), where in a club for transvestites in Big Red Rock the customers bump-dance savagely to the band, The Buffalo Roam, where Indians dress in ornate costumes and make up, where the bump-dancers literally stomp to death a young, fragile girl who

falls onto a ripped poster of *Born to be Wild* – all in a "village of crazy people, of whores, of clowns" (Yvon 83). In one sense Yvon is having fun with us, as she mocks and attacks America, its history, and its culture. But her characters in *La Cobaye* are so extreme, vulgar, violent, and crude, and virtually everyone is so utterly destroyed in some way by the end of the story/novel/film that this "in-your-face" condemnation provokes more disgust than laughter.

On center stage is Emma, the sheriff of Big Red Rock, who became an adventurer, security guard, and mercenary after having seen an advertisement in the US paramilitary magazine *Soldier of Fortune*. As Yvon tells us in a "pseudo?" note: "In *Soldier of Fortune*, an advertisement: 'In search of: parachutist, ex-commando, soldier, security, for work overseas . . . or sign up for the army, visit foreign lands, meet interesting people and kill them' " (18). Exploding gender boundaries, Emma, a lover of torture and murder, is also known for her "fabulous experiences of composure, her degrees in jiu-jitsu and her Herculean stature [which define] her female condition" (18).

As if to "hammer home" her point, the narrator tells us that Emma was a "girl-boy" (22) growing up, turned into a "superwoman" (20). Emma pushes the (gendered, Western) frontier even further, performing/doing her gender, coded as male and pornographic: she gazes upon Jessica, one of the three young girls chained in cages in Omer's club. Taking Jessica home as her prisoner, Emma begins to abuse her both physically and sexually, at times acting gently toward the young girl and at other times taking sadistic pleasure in frightfully detailed scenes of sexual torture. Referred to as Hecate, goddess of the earth, moon, and hell (Yvon 48), Emma has clearly taken on the role of the female subject with agency, while Jessica becomes the resigned, abject object-victim: "Jessica waits, resigned. . . . Emma . . . rolls the branding iron over her breasts, like in wartime in order to make female prisoners talk" (50). She treats her child-slave with maternal nurturing, washing her, dressing her, kissing her head, fixing her hair. She treats her with lesbian love, licking all of Jessica's precious orifices. She treats her with sadistic curiosity:

> She penetrates her with all sorts of objects, just to see how they ooze or streak. The game turns into madness: she photographs her when she is rearing up and when the suffering cuts through her, she films her and shudders. One evening, she gets carried away, goes too far and opens her stomach with a knife. (59)

Emma also dreams of adopting a little girl of her own, for she loves the bodies of young girls (Yvon 69). "Armed" with her camera and her weapons, she preys on young girls arriving in town, ordering them to take off their sweaters or she will take out her knife. Placing chocolate in their mouths, like

a good male courting a woman, Emma approaches them slowly: " 'You are going to beg me, then I'll kill you. When I've finished with you, not before.' Charming, you've got to love your executioner" (70). Emma also loves her M-16 and her .223 Remington bullets which she handles with precise and ritualistic religious gestures, while dressed in "an itsy-bitsy-bikini" (70). Female, male, lesbian, pedophile, torturer, nurturer, executioner, murderer, stalker, religious believer, sex symbol, and grotesque monster, Emma is the embodiment – so to speak – of the new world, of the contemporary extreme. As such, she is "Emma half of the night [a liminal demi-mondaine of sorts], Emma rock-and-roll, Emma Baby" (88). She is French; she is American: "She is an Other. And much more" (87). Emma is "a female rebel of the likes of Rimbaud (and of Rambo) who has gone even further into the land of the Other" (Gilbert 278).

The "hyper-Other" is also often identified with certain sub-cultures within popular culture. Music, for example, has become one such site of cultural, political, and economic struggle. Pierre Bourdieu points to the inherent class struggle at play in preconceived notions of what constitutes high versus low art, or high culture versus mass culture: "Nothing more clearly affirms one's 'class,' nothing more infallibly classifies, than one's taste in music" (18). While Bourdieu's analysis suggests the cultural hegemony of the elite over the "masses," Marxist theoreticians, of course, see the dangers of "popular culture" being disseminated through and controlled by mass media and production companies bent on profit. This conflict is perhaps greatest in the US, the location of so much mass-produced culture. It seems not at all coincidental, therefore, that the North American continent should be the focal point of Yvon's post-apocalyptic nightmare, and that music find its place in this novelistic world.

Yvon's gun-toting, muscle bound, "superfemmes" seem as immersed in popular music as they are in guerilla warfare, torture, and sex. The most noticeably silent character in the novel, Threesa, has her stereo blaring whether at work or play, with a wide range of musical likes and only one mentioned dislike (Sinead O'Connor). The musical selections made by Yvon – psychedelic and punk rock, "New Wave," blues, R&B – help develop the character of the mute Threesa, but they also serve as an additional strategy in an attempt to dismantle and destroy boundaries, much like popular music, occupying a precarious position between the aesthetic and commercial and between high and low cultures (Shuker 28).

Yvon paints a picture of Threesa as disturbed and disjointed as the culture in which she lives, a "hysterical, rheumatic creature with cranial neuralgia" suffering "from BSE or bovine spongiform encephalopathy or 'mad cow' disease" (67). Her penchant for "comic book" style violence, drug use, and popular music may be symptomatic of the brain "wasting" disease from which she seems to suffer. As Baudrillard writes, "someone who simulates an illness produces in himself [sic] some of the symptoms" (*Simulations* 5).

Threesa finds herself at the point of rupture between the personal experience of music and its value as a commodity of mass production. She finds her very mind disintegrating as the boundaries between folk culture, subculture, mass culture, and production dissolve in (Anglo) America.

Threesa "Doubleshot" also listens to music while working on jeeps. Indeed if Emma was once a girl-boy and is now a woman-man, then Threesa embodies male traits even more disturbingly. She is wanted for armed robbery but continues to carry weapons. She seems particularly fond of explosives, which she places under cushions, in car trunks, in the steering wheel, attached to the accelerator, in faucets, letters, and cigarette packs. She adores the Kalachnikov (the Soviet assault rifle), "stronger than the napalm of Vietnam, stronger than torture in Latin America, stronger than Israeli tanks" (85). She dotes on her weapons as a mother would dote on her child (89). Perhaps even more than Emma, Threesa is a "natural born killer," believing that they go to paradise (85).

Yvon deepens both her message and her parody of a post-apocalyptic North America where women have become "more than" men when she teams Threesa up with a band of drunken, homeless female robbers who operate out of Québec: Ghostbuster, Ninja, and Famous. At one point in time, "working" in Montreal, this quartet of "action women" meets up with Tava, a poet "who never says 'poetess' – that's diminutive and it's pejorative" (94), who has just returned from an American tour to the beaches of Maine, sponsored by Poetry Tours Québec, Inc. (90, 94) – where capitalism meets art. The contrast between Threesa and Tava is amusingly revealing: an adventurer who does not believe in anything, especially not in poetry, and a woman writer "who is desperately searching for a plausible, original female subject" (96). The problem, of course, is that this subject comes in the form of a tough and dangerous "macho woman."

But Tava has never encountered such interesting women before, so she allows them to live in her apartment with her for the winter. While Threesa spends her time listening to Jimi Hendrix, Tava is so engrossed in the writing of her book that she either does not notice or does not seem to care that these action women are slowly fencing all of her belongings. When spring arrives, Ghostbuster decides that she has had enough of apartment living, so she simply breaks Tava's neck in the parking lot (100). The ending of this parodic, Québécois sub-plot is vague. Although clearly "action woman/violent female subject/female warrior" has prevailed over hippie, feminist sub-culture by means of a homicidal crime, and although Threesa stays faithful to her mercenary leanings by buying a copy of *Soldier of Fortune*, the episode ends with a poem that describes the murder (101). Whether or not Tava has written this poem in advance of her death, the message is that writing is victorious, but only if the feminist poet dies.

Two questions remain: who has taken on the responsibility of narrating the story of these subversive "new" women? What is the future of this violently

pornographic world with its excremental and abject female warriors? The answer to both of these questions is the same: Amélie. The novel opens with a scene in which Amélie is following her grandmother, the "Colonel," who commits suicide by throwing herself into a crater. Amélie next appears at the bungalow shared by Emma and Threesa. She is 8 years old and "already knows that she is not really a girl. Androgynous or rather hermaphrodite?" (Yvon 34). Even at such a young age, she looks for adventure, tears off the legs of grasshoppers and eats them and puts pebbles into the vaginas of little Indian girls (34–5). At 8, Amélie sets fire to the bungalow and to the village hotel, hates boys, loves Tina Turner, listens to Nancy Sinatra, and is sent away to prison and eventually to a psychiatric hospital/reform school which she will never leave.

It is, however, almost at the end of the novel when we learn about these events and witness the reaction of the "Colonel" to her granddaughter's crimes. She sees "the death of a people, the end of her world" (103) and heads toward the crater into which she will throw herself, "without even destroying the film reels" (103). The chronology of these events makes the reader aware of the fact that it is most likely Amélie who is the narrator/director of the story/film in "flashback" mode, Amélie who wakes up from a long coma, who lives on the border between dream and reality, and who eventually returns to Big Red Rock where she no longer knows anyone and where everything has changed. The Indians have opened up boutiques to sell belts, posters, pipes, and fruit jam to tourists; the local gang leader has become a professor; the streets are congested with traffic – in other words, Big Red Rock has become the contemporary, postmodern American world. Amélie becomes a child of the streets, in possession of two of Threesa's pistols, her dog, and all of the films. As Amélie states: "we always need to live and to write as if we were going to die in the same way" (110). "Reality," narration, film, spectacle, theater, performance have come full circle where, as Baudrillard tells us "everything is makeup, theater, and seduction" (*De la séduction* 23), and spectacle becomes the manifestation of hyperreality (*De la séduction* 45, 50; Potvin 207).

But Baudrillard also warns us that in the land of America, everything is a simulacrum and that Americans do not even know that "even outside the movie theaters the whole country is cinematic" (*America* 56), since they have no language to describe their own model (28–9). Perhaps it takes the pen of a Québécoise writer to proclaim and describe this contemporary extreme, this post-apocalyptic world which ends in nothing. In the final scene of *La Cobaye* we witness Amélie who finds Emma alive, alone in a house, surrounded by an overgrown garden of syringes, guns, and machetes (111) – much like a militia survivalist. Amélie opens the door: "In the blackness, crouched, old, Emma is cracking with her teeth the old bones of a hare. A frightening wind" (111). This final scene shows a bestial, non-human old woman/man with no language, reduced to a primitive state where one hears only a frightening, destructive wind.

If "to transgress is to cross boundaries . . . epistemologically and ontologically . . . corporeally and topographically" (MacKendrick 3), then Yvon's *La Cobaye* takes us through pornographic, violent linguistic transgression, and gender transgression where women are so male-identified that they kill themselves and others off. As a frightening parody, the novel plays into and explodes stereotypes of men, women, feminists, male-identified women, androgynous children, feminist writers, Native Americans, the wild and primitive American West and its history, popular culture, music, film, and postmodern North American culture. There appears to be no apology, no moralizing, no consequence for one's actions in this world. There does not even appear to be an indictment buried within the narrative, but merely the question: what comes with total freedom? For the reader, there is a visceral reaction to a grotesque, disgusting, excremental, post-apocalyptic spectacle with nothing but nothingness. Does this mean that pushing the contemporary extreme to such a point leads to the obliteration of the boundaries of language and gender, ultimately obliterating everything, even representation itself? Perhaps one can extrapolate from Angela Carter's statement on libertines to Yvon's female warriors:

> Excremental enthusiasm . . . transforms the ordure. . . . [T]hey . . . are liberated from the intransigence of reality. This liberation from reality is their notion of freedom. . . . But the conquest of morality and aesthetics, of shame, disgust and fear . . . leads them directly to the satisfactions of the child; transgression becomes regression and, like a baby, they play with their own excrement. (147)

NOTES

1 See also Linda Williams and Judith Halberstam.

2 See Edi Bjorklund (255–86) for a discussion of sexual and violent underground writing by women in the US.

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5 *On the Impossibility of Being Contemporary in Nelly Arcan's* Folle

Martine Delvaux

During the last decade, French literature has been invaded by what Christian Authier describes as "hard female narratives." According to Authier, the titles themselves of these women's works – *Jouir* (Coming), *Baise-moi* (Rape-Me), *Viande* (Meat), *Putain* (Whore) – announce the "agenda" (13) of a liberation from taboos and masks, secrets and lies. Provocation but also pride lie at the core of what until recently was considered a mostly masculine (and gay rather than heterosexual) territory. To name but a few of these productions: Catherine Millet, *The Sexual Life of Catherine M* (2001); Raffaëla Anderson, *Hard* (2001); Alice Massat, *Le ministère de l'intérieur* (The Ministry of the Interior, 1999) and *Le code civil* (The Civil Code, 2003); Anna Rozen, *Plaisir d'offrir, joie de recevoir* (Pleasure of Giving and Receiving, 1999); Marie L., *Noli me tangere* (Touch me not, 2000).

2001 was a particularly fruitful year for the publication of (often autobiographical) sexual narratives by women, and it gave rise to the work of an unknown young Québécois writer by the name of Nelly Arcan, who saw her first novel published in Paris by the prestigious publishing house Le Seuil. The story of Arcan's experience as a call-girl in Montréal, *Putain* (Whore), was an immediate success on both sides of the Atlantic. Arcan's novel[1] describes how, as a student of literature, she prostituted herself not, as the urban myth would have it, to "pay for her studies" but out of a dependency on a male desire that she mirrored: "This is what I live for," she writes, "to stock the majority's desire" (129).[2] Arcan's novel describes the pain of a woman whose only wish is to be the brightest star in an infinite constellation of women, "a woman for whom men would immediately leave their wives [. . . a woman who would be] the most beautiful and most desired of all the kingdoms" (74). It reveals an obsession with numbers, and more specifically with what is countless, immeasurable – the number of clients she encountered, the number of penises that penetrated her, the number of beautiful women this world contains . . . The novel's incantatory pages read like a protracted prayer to an anonymous God, whose only face is that of the narrator's psychoanalyst, the figure of her ideal reader.

What characterizes Arcan's work and has participated in rendering it famous[3] is its explicit sexual content, the use of sexual vocabulary and the precise staging of sexual acts – an effect paradoxically more present in her second novel, *Folle* (Mad), than in *Putain*, where one, given the topic, would have expected to find it. But there is more: for what, in *Putain* and *Folle*, also evokes a number of other feminine sexually oriented narratives is what could be described as a masochistic component of the relationships portrayed and of the scenes staged. Questioned on what the narrator of her second novel, *Folle*, describes as her "illness," Arcan offers an autobiographical explanation:

> I suffer from an illness that I call the Dragon; my dragon is so tyrannical that it calls me names (Whore or Mad, for instance). The most honorable way of hurting myself under the Dragon's rule, and the less risky way for myself, is to write books where I cut myself to pieces. It's a sophisticated form of self-mutilation. (in Fortin)

Three years after *Putain*, in the Fall of 2004, Arcan published a novel in which Nelly Arcan, the narrator, writes a book-length letter to a lost male lover, obsessively searching for the truth behind their story and its failure. Of *Folle*, Arcan says that, unlike her first novel, its writing is more "direct" and more "contemporary" (in Fortin). Contrary to *Putain* in which the focus, other than the repetition of the story (Arcan's encounters with her clients) lay primarily in the narrator's childhood and a pseudo-psychoanalytic analysis of the reasons behind her activities of prostitution, *Folle*, while telling a past story, creates a strong illusion of presence. Probing the remains of a love affair, exploring its ruins, Arcan re-actualizes it by staging intimacy, both with the interlocutor (via the use of the epistolary form) and with the reader encouraged to identify, given the second-person narrative, with the disparaged long-lost lover. This play on intimacy, which creates an impression of directness, lies at the core of *Folle*'s contemporaneousness.

While the atmosphere and religious undertones of *Putain* recalled what is referred to as the period of "great darkness" in Québec's history – the rule of Maurice Duplessis and the Catholic Church's iron hand on the lives of its citizens – *Folle* takes us inside Montréal's cocaine-tainted nightlife, its most trendy neighborhood – le Plateau – its bars and illicit ecstasy-laden afterhour parties. But most importantly, it takes us inside the world of Internet sex: Arcan's ex-lover, a freelance journalist and wannabe novelist, is described as addicted to a series of "Net girls" whose virtual bodies incite endless episodes of masturbation to which the narrator is a mostly silent witness. *Folle*'s contemporaneousness has to do not only with its temporal and geographical situation, but with a troubling treatment of the intimate. Closing in on a love affair between an ex-prostitute turned writer and a masturbating web-addicted journalist would-be novelist, Arcan stages a *huis clos* in which the readers, like the protagonists, are imprisoned; she sets

up a *web* in which we are caught, forced to experience the "accident" of contemporaneousness.

"I worry about the elimination of borders and of the notion of geographical limit itself" (73) writes Paul Virilio when thinking about the cyberworld, going on to explain that "we have implemented a cosmological constancy which represents the time of a history without history and of a planet without a planet, of an Earth reduced to immediacy, instantaneity and ubiquity, of a time reduced to the present, to what happens instantly" (80). The accident of contemporary technology, for Virilio, has to do with the capacity of web-technology to effect social disintegration under the guise of greater (and better) communication. Dissociating time and space, cyberlife, although it gives an impression of cohesion, effects a disinvestment of social relations: "The fantasy of an Earth's beyond is to liquidate it, the fantasy of the other results in his liquidation in favor of the angel-machine" (Virilio 86). In *Folle*, the angel-machine is represented by the figure of the "Net Girl," a constellation of real women rendered virtual through the fabrication of cyberpornography. Arcan's lover's consumption of these products is boundless, just like their availability through the image of boundlessness itself: the World Wide Web. An inverted miracle, the "accident" comes to reveal the other face of the cyberworld. "Trouble always came with the Internet" (135) writes Arcan, and indeed, through a constant play on borders, bonding and bondage, what she describes is the "accident" that consists in *being contemporary*.

What better example of contemporaneousness than the experience of romantic love? Two people are joined together in time and place through a bond founded on something other than blood, a bond that is chosen, an intimacy created magically through a coincidence of bodies and minds, the experience of ending each other's sentences: "At the beginning of our love we had trouble leaving one another. Once separated, we missed each other right away" (*Folle* 165). But the love affair portrayed in *Folle* is a "disaster" (7) – a catastrophe, an event born under a star's evil influence. The physical encounter with a man "of the same generation" (*Putain* 159), a body similar to hers, rather than awakening pleasure in Arcan generates a type of frigidity, a cold indifference: "Men and women of the same generation are made for this, to massage each other's back in a fraternal way, in the tranquility of what cannot happen" (*Folle* 161). The failure of akin individuals to meet, and the lack of future that such a failure implies, lies at the core of the story told in *Folle*. Just like the stars described by her lover's father, obsessed with astronomy, Arcan and her ex-lover move further and further away from each other, the warmth of their original passion turning progressively into ice.

The end of the novel and therefore the end of the letter written to the lost lover, coincides with the announcement of Arcan's forthcoming suicide. "On my fifteenth birthday I decided that I would kill myself on my thirtieth birthday" (*Folle* 13), she writes at the beginning of the novel, ending it with the following sentence: "Tomorrow, I will be thirty" (*Folle* 205). What this

ultimate figuring of death points to, like the forever growing distance between stars, is, other than the impossibility of a love affair, the impossibility of "being contemporary," that is: of cohabiting in time and space, of sharing an epoch, language, culture, technology . . . Furthermore, if things and people that are contemporary exist in simultaneity, if events said to be contemporary are indeed concomitant, then we could say that ultimately, *to be contemporary* is to share common bonds and hence a form of intimacy. But what *Folle* describes is a world in which coexistence, rather than being the gate to intimacy, is, through the bonding (and bondage that it allows), the threshold of ultimate boundlessness – death.

If to be contemporary is to be current, modern, fashionable, up to date, in Arcan's novel, what can be considered the most important sign of our contemporary times – the Web – is presented as a malevolent device by which an illusion of proximity is created that paradoxically brings contemporaneousness to ruins. As Virilio said in 1996, the World Wide Web gives rise to problems that must be addressed in relation to democracy, to what has come to signify respect, community and equality. According to him:

> We are standing in front of a phenomenon of interactivity that risks depriving man of his free will in order to chain him to a question-answer system that provides no escape. . . . The information highway will put in place an interactive system as dreadful for society as the bomb is for matter. According to Einstein, interactivity is to information technology what radioactivity is to the nuclear bomb. It is a constitutive and dissociative phenomenon. (78–9)

Comparing web interactivity to radioactivity and its potential for destruction, Virilio counters the idealism with which the Internet has been invested as a tool for stronger links between people, across the bounds of time and space:

> It is unforgivable for us, after the ecological and ethical catastrophes that we have known – Auschwitz as well as Hiroshima – to allow ourselves to get trapped in this kind of utopia that wants us to believe that technology will finally bring happiness and a greater humanity. (77)

For Virilio, new technologies recall the French "Occupation" (78).

In *Folle*, this context of "Occupation" – the control of a territory by foreign forces – is the reason for the demise of the contemporary as both intimacy and modernity. While *occupation* could here serve to name the extreme closeness, the bonding experienced by two lovers, as the narrative unfolds, an oppressive and destructive form of occupation is uncovered: that of Arcan by her all-powerful lover. As the relationship evolves, intimacy is revealed as a temporary state soon replaced by a cold-hearted distance

accentuated by the presence of the Internet, through which other forms of occupation take place.

In his reflection on our contemporary world, Virilio points out the pressures exerted on "the couple," the fact that what is described as an acceleration of time and life has a real effect on relationships: "Having lived fifty years in five years, [the partners] cannot stand living with each other any longer" (65). *Folle* shows such an acceleration. Very quickly, after only a few months, the relationship begins to founder, fatigue and ennui set in and love is eroded. But this erosion is effected by the presence of a third player: the Internet, this immensity which occupies the place of a God.

Indeed, the distance between the lovers is fashioned by the polarities they represent and their hierarchy. Throughout the novel, Arcan sets up dichotomies so as to make of her protagonists prototypes of heterosexuality and agents of its failure to create equality. Indeed, Arcan and her lover talk endlessly, discussing the difference between men and women: "Between us there was a short period during which we agreed on everything and even on the fact that men and women cannot understand each other" (11). They "talk too much" (96), spreading their insides, revealing their most intimate ugliness. "You said things," Arcan writes, "that are not made to be said: that you photographed your dick" (96); things that are not made to be shared, such as the pleasure her lover takes in masturbating while surfing on the Internet. "Anyway," Arcan comments, "everybody knows that our epoch is one of communication and that communication means the chance for everyone to jack off on the Net" (31–2). Indeed, according to her lover, "our epoch is one of pornography and it needed to be assumed just as we assume the great climactic changes" (97). As the relationship evolves and founders, a distance appears between the two partners which coincides with their "sexes recovering their differences" (83), and more specifically their inequality: "we disgusted one another" (85); "After only a few months of great love, we moved away from each other. In this movement we were not symmetrical, on my side I latched on" (82).

This heterosexual tension is magnified, throughout the novel, by the protagonists' symbolically charged opposed cultural identities that hyperbolize their inequality. The man is French, the woman is *Québécoise*, and their encounter carries the specter of a colonialism not only ancient (up to 1760, Québec was a French colony) but contemporary: one could say that an inferiority complex characterizes Québec's relationship to France, and concurrently, that a superiority complex epitomizes France's rapport with Québec, the Québécois accent – what the French tend to describe as a seventeenth-century old way of speaking which should be dispensed with – being the most important trait of this inequitable difference:[4]

> You spoke my language knowing that you would never know the disgrace in which the colonized live, knowing also that assimilation would never reach

> the deep layers of your identity and that your country of origin would forever protect you from the need for recognition. (35)

Indeed, Arcan presents her lover's accent as the reason for her falling in love: "Today I know that I loved you because of your French accent in which one could hear the race of poets and thinkers who came from the other side of the world to fill our schools" (7). When they spoke of topics that he knew well, he spoke loudly, in the voice of a "commander" (148) and with a French accent, the reason why "today I still think about what you said to me" (137).[5]

An all-powerful voice falling down on her from heaven, "a strength too great" (23), Arcan's cybersex-addicted lover resembles the God endlessly invoked through the recurring memory of her grandfather. The particularity of the French man's accent separates him both from Québec and from France, turning him into a carrier of the Verb "as my grandfather said concerning his prophets" (8). Faceless, emotionless, the great French lover, immeasurable, all-encompassing, boundless and all-powerful is the inverted miracle, the accident-like figure of the God adored by Arcan's Catholic grandfather:

> When I was little, it is possible that by praying too much for me my grandfather may have inverted the beneficial effects of his prayers, that he may have exhausted the heavens and that out of exasperation a curse was put on me from up-there, it is possible that you came to me because of him. (79)

Ultimately un-seeable, the lover, like the sun and like God, according to Arcan's grandfather, can only be glimpsed from a protected distance (47–8).

The lover's God-like qualities and correlation with Arcan's grandfather is doubled by his position within another male lineage represented by his own father the astronomer. Indeed, while Arcan's aunt "was never able to see my future in her Tarot cards" (12), her lover, through his father's obsession with astronomy and astrophotography, occupies a place of choice in the universe: he reigns over a constellation of women whose lives are as ephemeral and illusory as those of stars. Consequently, the images of girls collated by the lover on the Net "did not really exist, they did not have the weight of life" (99).

Bitter at his father for choosing his love for astronomy over his love for his family, Arcan's lover remains blind to the way in which he remains faithful to this patrimony: "You possessed cosmic forces that gravely influenced the world around you but you ignored them because they had been studied by your father" (137). Pointing out to her lover that "the name of your father's darling stars was also the name of the after hour where we first met" (23), Arcan questions the greatness he believes his own and that resembles that of the universe: "it seemed to you that significant events in your life could not,

even metaphorically, be linked to a spatial dimension or calculated in terms of light-years" (23). Boundless and timeless, Arcan's lover *is* God, master of the universe, observing death from up high, while she, like the novae, is the terrain of an explosion of which, like his father, her lover wants to catch the live spectacle and the spectacular result (23). In both cases, interest ultimately lies in the show of death.

Arcan's lover comes together with her religious grandfather and his scientific father in a triangle linking God, astronomy and the Internet – a triangle in which the Internet, as an extension of the French colonizer-lover, occupies a central position. The Web, like Arcan's lover, is an image of boundlessness. While women are presented as a multitude, existing principally in their quality as numbers, masculinity, in *Folle*, is presented as immeasurable. Locating himself outside of the anxiety of comparison, believing in his unicity and unattainable originality, Arcan's lover consumes an incalculable quantity of mostly virtual women, against which she is perpetually measured, a pale incarnation of her boyfriend's true desires.[6] Throughout the novel, the lover's life resembles that of a deity surrounded by female angels, pornographic cherubs, clones of a single imagination: that of the sexualized young girl, and more specifically, of the girl next-door. Like the father's beloved stars, the son's Net girls adorn the sky of his life. Without scruples, devoid of a sense of responsibility for the real bodies that have served to create the virtual images he masturbates to, Arcan's lover reigns over "his" (91) Net Girls, having acquired an expertise in consuming the photos available on the screen: "In that realm the importance was not the composition or the splendor but the proximity, the impression of having taken the photographs ourselves and even more, that these photos resembled family pictures" (102). What this expertise points out is the importance of proximity, of contemporaneousness and intimacy, the need for the Net girls to look as real as possible. Therein lies the importance of the face for Arcan's lover: while to her, the girls' faces appear superfluous and prevent the rise of pleasure, in his case they are necessary – he needs the illusion of being able to identify them, to imagine running into them as he would into a girl next-door: "I realized that the Girls next-door in fact inspired a next-door accessibility, that they all looked easy, that they seemed to fuck out of pleasure and for real" (91). Reflecting on her lover's attitude towards her, Arcan concludes that given everything that they have seen and heard, the fact that they have done everything to everybody, prostitutes and ex-prostitutes, like the virtual Net Girls, are perceived as being able to "endure every familiarity" (151).

To these scenes of (false) intimacy, Arcan opposes her own version. After the end of the relationship, in order to symbolically remain with her lost love, Arcan begins to spend time at the Cinéma L'Amour, one of the few remaining porn theaters in Montréal where live sex shows take place. "I went there thinking," she writes, "that in comparison with your computer screen, this was an improvement, a step towards a proximity with others" (106–7). Sitting in

the dark in the middle of a community of men, Arcan closes her eyes and listens, comparing the theater to a mother's warm womb where intestinal sounds become a way of exploring the world (110). Out of place in the porn theater, Arcan, eyes closed, attracts men who come to her in silence to ejaculate on her cheeks or direct their penis towards her mouth. The reality of this imposed direct encounter, forcing her to open her eyes, puts an end to her *rêverie* and the pleasure she could get from their sounds, a pleasure close to a connection with the divine. While Arcan's visits to the porn theater are a way of remaining in touch with her now absent God-like lover – the porn theater is another version of the computer screen and a symbolic contact with her lover's virtual world – it is, like the Internet sky and its infinity, a place that comes to represent the failure of contemporaneousness, the impossibility of "being-together."

"Democracy is unity, it is not solitude," writes Virilio (85), but what the Internet allows is indeed a dislocation of relations, a disintegration, on a larger scale, of a democratic body, and on a smaller scale, of intimacy itself: to Virilio, cybersex signifies disintegration, a divorce of time and space (people can be "together" in real-time while not sharing the same space), of copulation itself. And therein lies the danger of the type of contemporaneousness promoted through the mere existence of the Internet: a collision between distance, fear and hatred. What Arcan names "trouble" is what Virilio describes as the "accident," an inverted miracle that brings to light the negative face of an invention: "To invent the boat is to invent sinking, to invent the plane is to invent the crash . . . Each technology carries its own negativity which is created at the same time as technical progress" (87). The accident is the hidden face of progress. As in the case of radioactivity, which is both an essential element of matter and also destructive to it, the Internet carries its own potential for destruction, for personal, inter-relational and social disintegration.

Everything in *Folle* seems to participate in the staging of such an accident. The machines and websites strewn across the novel's pages serve to set up computer technology as the *deus ex machina* described by Virilio. In Arcan's novel, the Internet serves a boundlessness that gives rise to doubts concerning the "place" of the real, and the ensuing social disintegration and evaporation of intimacy. Against the bonding that contemporaneousness should allow, not only divorce but anti-democracy rules. Hierarchy, inequality, domination: all are inferred through the numerous types of bondage – the negativity or inverted miracle of bonding – that Arcan describes.

Arcan's nameless lover is clearly a figure of power. He is the colonizer and she, the colonized; he, the parent, and she, the child.[7] In fact, during the course of their relationship, Arcan's lover tries to educate her in matters of cybersex: "you assured me that there was room for two in front of your screen" (99). In front of his favorite Barely Legal Jasmine, "pulling her little breasts out of a red bra before pulling her little white panties down on one

side and pushing a finger in her cunt while opening her mouth" (103) he in turns pulls Arcan's pants down, yanks her panties to one side and sodomizes her. "Not knowing what to do I did the little girl, I closed my eyes to cry" (103). The relationship carries what appear to be sado-masochistic qualities: Arcan's desire to be soiled and hit (37), her lover's controlling, disparaging and violent attitude. But what is most interesting in the unequal relationship described by Arcan is her lover's inability to assume completely his position as sadist. That is: faced with a woman who desires to be abused, who literally "asks for it," the colonizing man loses face and interest in hurting her: "At first you loved me for my flexibility, then you got tired of me for my flexibility" (176). As she points out to him: "generally men have trouble obeying when they think that they are punishing" (150). Not only is the failure of bonding staged, but also that of bondage, what we might describe as the "accident" of love, its hidden face, which is then also an absolute image of contemporaneousness, where the two parties involved in the sado-masochistic play are intrinsically connected. The collapse of this scenario suggests the lover's inability to partake in it, to "think about the accident" and neutralize it. Through Arcan's willed inferiority, roles end up being inverted: the masochist is revealed as the one who commands, who wants to fashion her lover into a despot (Deleuze 21). Arcan the writer, Arcan the whore, comes then to "replace" her lover, the journalist-web masturbator; in so doing, she comes to replace God.

After the end of the relationship, Arcan puts an end to a three-month pregnancy kept secret from her lover. Following the abortion, she waits for the "remains" to arrive. When they do, she squats over a glass jar to collect them (78). The contents of the jar recall the universe, composed essentially, according to her lover's father, of dark matter impossible to see even through NASA telescopes. These remains of an interrupted pregnancy are also those of an exploding star.

The most extreme representation of failed contemporaneousness may be found in this failure of reproduction: the intimate connection that pregnancy figures is interrupted as if a time-line were cut, lineage and therefore history put to rest. Not only is progeny killed but the potential mother herself, for if Arcan has become a figure of God, she is a God of destruction rather than of creation. She is the God of the accident. Like the novae observed by her lover's father, the "self-mutilating" writer writing under the Dragon's rule is the site of a disintegration that names the impossibility of being contemporary, not only in what concerns general human relations but in what concerns the specific place of women. In the context of the Internet and a culture of sexualized little girls, what place does a woman have to exist? Arcan ultimately refuses to become a Net Girl: the scream she lets out, first when she surprises her lover reaching an orgasm alone in front of his computer, and then at the end of their relationship, when he asks her to "remain friends," seals an impossible relation. Screaming, she walks away from failed

contemporaneousness – false intimacy, malevolent use of real-time, confusion between the absent and the neighbor . . . "I will kill myself to agree with you," she writes, "to surrender to your superiority, I will also kill myself to shut you up and impose respect" (144).

While she refuses the position of Net Girl, the ending of Arcan's novel seems to offer a desperate answer to the subsequent question: can she be a woman? Is it possible to exist as a *contemporary* woman in a world haunted by Net Girls? Virilio writes: "The proper body only has existence in a proper world. There is no proper body in itself" (108). Arcan's intimation of her forthcoming suicide, at the end of her novel, is a condemnation of the way our (cyber) world forecloses contemporaneousness as the *lieu* for one's "proper" existence. Through death, Arcan chooses to step out of the scenario, to leave the *huis clos* in which men and Net Girls are caught. A dying star, she explodes herself out of an annihilating constellation of women, escapes the all-encompassing power of boundlessness and the "Occupation" that it effects; she cuts herself up and writes herself as the inverted miracle, the accident that brings negativity to light and forces consciousness.

Indeed, *Folle*'s final vision of failed contemporaneousness is the narrator's resignation concerning the fate of her letter, which, she assumes, will never reach its destination. Referring to her first novel, *Putain*, which most readers confess to never completing, Arcan foresees a similar failure: "the chances that my letter will reach you are slim because I refuse to send it to you in your Outlook, I prefer a bottle to the sea" (138). For Arcan, writing is sadistic: it has to do with "opening the wound," "betraying," "showing the other face of people" (168). Like her lover, who is unable to enter into a masochistic contract, Arcan's readers are presented as weaklings, unwilling to follow through on the implied contract between author and reader. Hence her conclusion that "writing serves nothing other than to exert oneself against a rock;" "to write is to loose some pieces, to understand from up too close that one is going to die" (205). This ultimate revelation, this final failure, is the ultimate proof of the impossibility that the narrative repeatedly presents: that of being contemporary.

NOTES

1 Arcan has had to extract herself from the quagmire she entered when *Putain* was published. Unsure of her position in relation to her own text, she first referred to it as autobiographical and then tried to present it as autofictional.

2 All translations are mine.

3 At once admired and depreciated, in the world of French publication, *Putain* is a small bestseller – 80,000 copies of *Putain* were sold, counting the paperback version and translations.

4 One must remember French TV host Thierry Ardisson's reaction to Nelly Arcan during an episode of *Tout le monde en parle*. After presenting *Putain*, Ardisson, interviewing

Arcan, asked her what she considered her least sexy attribute. Following her own answer ("my bitten nails"), he commented: "I know what is less sexy about you. . . . Your accent. . . . You must get rid of it."

5 Even her lover's habit of photographing his penis is described as a gesture of conquest, like the American flag hoisted on the moon (27).

6 The narrative of *Putain* turns endlessly around the pain, described by Arcan, of wanting to be the only woman, but it is also about being "the son" – Christ – and the impossibility of being God.

7 Arcan writes: "To be French meant to carry in front of others the attitude of the parent in front of his child's first step" (172).

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6 *Media-Portrayed Violence in Alberto Fuguet's* Tinta roja

Jason Summers

Violence in the media bombards us, according to multiple articles and studies, both popular and academic.[1] Statistics about the number of murders young people have seen in popular media by the time they reach the age of 18 imply that such a level of exposure is harmful, perhaps even causative of additional violence that will be portrayed by the media, thereby leading to an ever-deepening spiral of violence and an inferred social decline. Alberto Fuguet's 1996 novel *Tinta roja* (Red Ink) seems to support this view at first glance, but by reading it at a deeper level this chapter will reveal how the novel implies that media-portrayed violence is not the destructive force that it would seem. Rather, the contemporary extreme of popular media representations of violence serves as the very fiber of social interconnection in the modern urban environment, and the lack of such would cause societies to be even less cohesive and more class divided than they already are.

Fuguet's book is the story of an author (Alfonso Fernández) writing a memoir about his introduction to the world of tabloid journalism. The novels of both are semi-autobiographical, in that Fuguet and Fernández share the same initials, both begin working in journalism but move on to fiction and scriptwriting, and both are telling fictionalized tales of their youths. Within this story-in-a-story(-in-a-story?), the bloody news accounts of Santiago, Chile, during the Pinochet dictatorship are protagonist Fernández's bread and butter. The ways in which these accounts are brought to public view follow a pattern: "a cultural construct [that] provides organization for, and representation of the external world" (Read 163). The pattern in *Tinta roja* is based on cinematic representations of violence. Alfonso even learns his craft at the hands of a film noir stereotype. His mentor, Saul Faundez, is a grizzled, amoral, fat, hard-drinking ladies' man who is also the top crime reporter in the city (think Orson Welles in *A Touch of Evil*), working for the tabloid *El Clamor* – another part of the culturally constructed pattern of violence under which the novel operates. The world of the novel lives in a cinematic time that mixes noirish touches from the 1940s, references to the literary greats of the Latin American "Boom" from the 60s, and "Post-Boom"

cynicism when confronting military and economic privilege from the 80s and 90s. The reader sees this world in fragments, as the novel jump-cuts its way from one crime or bloody accident to the next, occasionally pausing to show the protagonist alone in his apartment – disconnected from the city underbelly that he writes about because of his youth and his college education, but also separated from the city's elite by his poverty and provincial origins.

The young Alfonso also writes fiction, which he submits to a literary magazine and a short-story competition. Later, he will publish a critically acclaimed novel, then become a critic and journalist sitting on his literary laurels for more than 20 years. In its final chapter, young Alfonso's story in *Tinta roja* reveals itself to be the manuscript for a novel called *Prensa amarilla* (Yellow Press) that the middle-aged Alfonso has written. Literary writing receives a notably different portrayal in the novel than does journalistic writing. Alfonso models his fiction on his own life at first, but dislikes and rejects what he produces. Only when he can copy his journalistic world does he begin to succeed literarily. His first story to earn money is based on his mentor, Faundez, and is really a creative non-fiction/journalistic piece presented as a fiction. Indeed, the new novel the middle-aged Alfonso has written is "not exactly a novel in the classic sense, but more a novelized memoir that reads as if it were the movie of my life" (405) – again creative non- fiction. What Alfonso has written as journalism for *El Clamor* is constructed, refined and false – in other words, it is fictional. The literary work that he produces points out the flaws of all levels of Chilean society, and it is actually truth disguised as fiction. This role-reversal of journalism and literature and their relationship to reality is an indictment of modern society; it just isn't an indictment that privileges the powerless as the prior "Post-Boom" generation of Latin American writers (like Ariel Dorfman and Isabel Allende) did.

The hard-boiled detective in crime fiction deals with "a world of disconnected signs and anonymous strangers" (Messent 1), much in the same way that Alfonso and the other crime reporters do. The detective must "trace the hidden relationships crime both indicates yet conceals, to bring them to the surface, and show the way the city works" (Messent 1). The tabloid journalists of *Tinta roja* perform this same task, but their focus is not on crime so much as its aftereffects – on the violence it produces. They take that violence, trace it, and when it doesn't lead to the powerful, they bring it to the surface. Telling such stories serves to

> endorse the status quo and, in addition, consign crime to the realm of the morally "monstrous" . . . [T]he more general prevalence of such a tactic may be symptomatic of a deep-rooted need for social reassurance on the part of the contemporary audience for which such texts are written. (Messent 3)

This particular interpretation seems to match Diana Palaversich's reading of *Tinta roja*, which she characterizes as lacking in political criticism because it does not focus on the dispossessed of Latin America. I would argue, though, that this lack of criticism only applies to the "journalism" that appears in the novel.

Film – as a visual medium that simulates motion – looks much like reality, and this similarity could lead viewers to mistake film's constructed nature for just one more view of everyday life. After nearly a century of exposure to film's conventions, though, contemporary viewers no longer mistake the images for real objects. The public knows how to interpret the world in film, including any filmic violence, which – while perhaps upsetting, brutal or all-too-familiar – is also constructed. The violence (like everything included in a film's *mise-en-scène*) happens for a reason – a necessary part of cinematic discourse. It is not random, however much we might believe that within the moment of the story. Our suspension of disbelief is not so complete that we may readily forget the true nature of the cinema. The trick that plays out in Fuguet's novel is that the "real" violence is presented in the newspaper according to the pop cultural motif of cinematic violence, which is readable by a contemporary audience.

"Violence" in the context of this chapter is based on the definition from the *Report of the Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry*: "Violence is action which intrudes painfully or harmfully into the physical, psychological, or social well-being of persons or groups" (Albuquerque 11). The harm done by violence can vary from trivial to devastating, but its presence is constant in Latin America, where it "is the very structure in which I find myself: not turning myself over to it would mean death or loss of dignity or a rejection of contact with my fellows" according to author/critic Ariel Dorfman (14). Dorfman (1970) also notes three different modalities of literary violence in his *Imaginación y violencia en América*: the first is vertical/social violence between groups (or their representatives) with differing levels of power, the second is horizontal/individual violence between subjects on the same level of power, and the third is a bubble-like/interior violence that bursts into existence, seemingly out of thin air (17–35).

The vertical violence is the sort which plays out between classes, races, ethnic or age groups, religions, or political movements. It includes state-sponsored torture, terror and murder; revolution; and class warfare. All of these elements were present in Chile before and after General Augusto Pinochet overthrew the government of socialist Salvador Allende in 1973. Numerous news reports since 2001 have documented the Chilean army's round-up, torture and murder of various liberal and leftist opponents in "The Caravan of Death" and "Operation Condor."[2] These, as well as testimonial texts and films,[3] signal the lengths to which the army went in order to maintain ideological control. Michael Ignatieff notes that torture is not an individual aberration, but "key to the identity of the society responsible for

it" (74). With this in mind, we can see the portrayal of class violence within *Tinta roja* as an indictment of the socio-economic elites who mandated such murderous behavior. At the same time, Fuguet has long been accused of over-identification with the United States and the neoliberalism implanted by those same socio-economic elites looking to the US economic model.

The torture of political prisoners is an attempt to silence protest (mostly successful in Chile under Pinochet). Torture is a form of vertical violence that attempts to destroy the discourse of its victim with bodily pain, but also attempts "to deconstruct the prisoner's voice" (Scarry 19–20). As Ignatieff notes, "for these societies, the practice of torture is definitional of their very identity as forms of state power" (74). Because torture is a key aspect of a society that allows its use, we can see it in *Tinta roja* outside of the direct channels of government-sponsored violence. The newspaper's portrayal of daily life in Santiago is just another means by which the military-economic elites "deconstruct the voice" of those who would dissent in Chile. This violence is perpetrated against the same readers that the newspaper claims to serve. At various points in the novel, the purpose of "yellow" journalism is proclaimed as: speaking truth, providing entertainment, and giving a moment of fame or attention to those who go unnoticed in the contemporary urban world. Each purpose is undermined, though: Alfonso is punished for telling the truth, the stories and photos are staged and manipulated, and the "if it bleeds it leads" attitude goes beyond entertainment into a sadistic form of violence committed by the journalists against their readers/victims who give their trust to the reporters and photographers only to be betrayed. Thus, while torture serves as an integral part of Chilean society, it is a violence invisible to its victims, regardless of its perpetrator(s).

The tabloid newspaper where Alfonso works serves as a vehicle for portraying the Chilean middle and lower classes. News of the military-political elites and their peccadilloes does not exist. An air force cadet crashes his car, leaving a victim dead, and nothing is published. An army major murders his adulterous wife, and no story emerges. The death of a popular young singer/actor who falls 18 floors (perhaps suicide?) while high on heroin is not a legitimate story because he is the cousin of a well-placed judge. When Alfonso manages to sneak the last story into the gossip column of *El Clamor*'s Entertainment section, his mentor punches him to the floor, kicks him out of the newsroom, then takes responsibility for the article. This demonstrates the power of the elites – they are not to be spoken of in this context, and only the mentor's status saves his job. By the same token, the stories that do appear every day deal with grisly traffic accidents, gang-related murders in the slums, a serial killer preying on young male delivery clerks, a spectacular suicide attempt, and the murder of a teacher by students. In each of these cases, the participants are from the lower or middle classes. Clearly, certain things can "only" happen at the lower socio-economic levels. Because victims and victimizers in these stories are from the lower levels of society, they are "obviously" violent

and criminal. Making this linkage can be seen as a method of short-circuiting the political criticism against government-sponsored violence that came from those same levels of Chilean society. The only visible violence comes from the classes criticizing the military government, which makes their criticism suspect.

The cynical rejection of the journalistic ideals at *El Clamor* reflects the rejection of social ideals by the Chilean dictatorship. The disconnect between society and citizens can be viewed as alienation if the state harms citizens, such as in works from the Post-Boom generation of writers in Latin America (roughly 1975–present). Authors like Dorfman in his play *Death and the Maiden* (1991), Allende in *The House of The Spirits* (1982), or Manuel Puig in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1976) take this tack, pointing out the injustices perpetrated by military dictatorships in Chile and Argentina. But when citizens deliberately reject the society that surrounds them, this should be viewed as nihilism, and it characterizes the work of Fuguet and other writers in the McOndo generation that follows the Post-Boom. These authors begin publishing and writing under the quasi-liberal democracies that exist in Latin America at the end of the twentieth century. Governments in Chile, Argentina and Uruguay promote freedom, but they still struggle with the dictatorial past and its representation, the question of historical memory, and the uneasy co-existence of victims and torturers, dictators and democrats all within the same social and political space. Forgetfulness is a form of self-protection, but also a form of hypocrisy. Disillusion over the hypocrisy and the unquestioning acceptance of it by Chilean society leads Fuguet's text to a nihilistic space.

The cynicism demonstrated by crime journalists revolves around the rejection of the truth if it doesn't provide the best story. So, when photographing the victim of a traffic accident, one of the photographers says that it will make a great front page, except for one problem. Police have covered the man's bloody corpse with newspapers, but they are not copies of *El Clamor*. Alfonso must buy copies of his own newspaper, then distract the cops while the photographer re-covers the body. In a later episode, Alfonso runs naked through the streets so that the photographer can "capture" a picture to go with a story of a suspect seen streaking. Since Alfonso is young and thin like the suspect, he gets to "be" the suspect in the cover photo. This cynical disregard for the rules of good journalism that Alfonso learned in class leads him to join in this pattern once he finishes his internship, and even more once he finishes his first novel. Alfonso does this "because I lacked the experiences to keep developing my family saga . . . I accepted whatever [writing] they offered me" (19). The result of Alfonso's sellout is financial success, but at a cost: "because I wrote so much, I ran out of things to say. I wasted my [literary] water. I wound up empty. Dried out" (20). Twenty years later, the "water" returns, and what Alfonso has to say comes out as the text we are reading, filled with violence.

Any writing can be regarded as a form of violence, Ánibal González argues in *Killer Books*: "Writing and literacy are regarded as necessary evils at best, and at worst as extended forms of political and social oppression" (14). The journalistic writing in *Tinta roja* falls into this category, and perhaps the literary as well. González calls writing an extension of "violence and oppression" (15), but does not explain clearly why this is so. I believe that Fuguet's text makes this evident. Writing either violates the truth of a matter, or it serves as an attack on the victim and/or the reader. Even the literary approach perpetrates a violence against the people surrounding Alfonso – intimate secrets about his family that Faundez did not allow into the newspaper are part of the *Prensa Amarilla* manuscript. More damaging still is the portrait that Alfonso paints of Faundez. His womanizing, crudeness, dishonesty, blackmailing and debauchery are a throughline in the story of Alfonso's first summer as a writer. González says that reading and writing go hand in hand, with the reader being as guilty of violence as the writer. More to the point, in *Tinta roja*, the writer is as much a victim of his pen as his subjects. The violence that binds contemporary city dwellers also affects writers, just as it does victims and readers, providing a social connection. The difference between literary and journalistic writing seems to be that the former attempts to dissociate violence from the nihilism that we have seen permeating the textual Santiago.

The fascination with violence that appears throughout the novel shows a common human interest in the moments of transgression against society's functioning. At the same time, the overemphasis on violence indicates an underlying fear. Everyone is a potential victim, no matter what their social class. Dorfman's second type of violence is that which occurs between people at the same level of power – husbands and wives, members of rival youth gangs, or lovers. These are crimes of passion played out over betrayal, money, love gone wrong, or revenge. They happen at all levels of society, but again, only the middle and lower classes are seen in the newspaper. In the novel's climactic moment, Alfonso tries to follow his idealistic dedication to the truth. He denounces his father and sister for a medical scam that resulted in the death of an abused infant, but his mentor again steps in, reducing the front-page story to a three-line paragraph buried in the back pages. Alfonso's story is the second type of violence – lashing out at a father who abandoned him. This type of violence is the most pernicious, because it destroys social connections for both victim and attacker. Many of the intricate linkages that connect families, co-workers and friends are easily damaged when someone attempts to destroy just one such link. Alfonso circumventing his mentor to publish the story about the actor/singer's death falls into this category as well, and it is in this category that *Tinta roja* has its strongest message – violence of this second sort is what Alfonso (both young and middle-aged) still has not learned to control. He has damaged his relationships with his ex-wife, his son, his semi-girlfriend, and his colleagues. The novel seems to call for

non-violence toward our friends, relations and co-workers, much more than in connection to differences between classes.

The third type of violence that Dorfman mentions is a random/interior violence that seems to appear from nowhere in the lives of characters. Here again, while the cultural elites will not allow stories written about them to appear, that does not make them any safer. It could actually make them more vulnerable as a group, because they do not expect such events to occur in their lives. The random violence in the novel is common to everyone in the city: a man killed in a traffic accident, the victims of a serial killer/stranger, and a man crushed to death by a woman attempting suicide by jumping from a building – all have no personal connection to the events that took their lives. This sort of violent interruption of contemporary life is frequent in major cities, which is disconcerting anywhere, but specifically in Chile, where "[t]he ultimate goal of this population is to control everything in order to eliminate or avoid the unexpected. As a result of this high Uncertainty Avoidance characteristic, the society does not readily accept change and is very risk averse" (Hofstede 2003, screen 1). Thus, Chilean society seeks a way to control this "unexpected" sort of violence via an organizing (cinematic) narrative for the underclasses, while the elite don't suffer this sort of violence, because if it is invisible, then it doesn't exist.

Film-viewing habits condition the way in which readers approach a story. Since the newspaper accounts play out in a cinematic fashion, the same mentality that goes with film viewing is applied to the violent news stories. The controlled presentation of violent content causes an unreal assumption on the part of the reader that the violence itself is also under control. Mental processes that transform random danger into something understood are part of the social control that eliminates the "unexpected." Everyone reads about a moment of violence, identifies with the victim perhaps, but ultimately all move on with the day, trusting that the episode happened for a reason. This social fiction is part of what allows so many disparate people to live so closely in the contemporary urban world. So, while tabloid journalism's fascination with (certain) bloody acts of violence may seem to be a sort of random moment of violence of Dorfman's third type, at a deeper level, this (re)-presentation serves as a form of social connection, and at the same time as a form of social control.

Another example of a filmic structure is the way in which Alfonso's first newspaper story is presented. It is the story of a traffic accident, but it is presented as a script. The basic story is that a man was hit by a truck, but this is converted into a cinematic moment. We see the slightly humorous moment where the victim, driving a red pickup, sees a red toy truck on the street. We cut to another angle, and see the child who has lost the toy, standing on a pedestrian bridge above the busy throughway. We enter into the child's perspective, and watch as the man gets out of his vehicle to recover the toy, but he is hit by a transport truck – also red. The transport truck

doesn't stop, but the body does. We change perspective again to inside a vehicle as again the color red reappears as a shower of blood when the body smashes through the windshield of a taxi. We switch point-of-view once more to get a close-up of the toy that has landed safely on the curb, and then we get another shot of the horrified child and his grandmother "who watched the entire scene from a box seat" (119).

Here, then, we see how the contemporary world absorbs violence that it cannot deny (particularly the random kind) via its presentation in the newspaper. The coping mechanism at work in *Tinta roja* is the direct application of (American) popular cultural models so that the presentation of the violence is portrayed in a fashion that appears to be structured. This relieves the unexpected risk of the violence, since the victims are written about in a way that simulates culturally constructed violence which is part of a larger narrative where nothing is random and everything is explained (or at least explainable), i.e. narrative cinema.

The call for reconciliation between reality and perception in the novel marks an attempt to negotiate the effects of American cultural influence on Alfonso (and on Fuguet, who lived in southern California until the age of 13, and who later studied at the Iowa Writers' Workshop). Chilean society is a "collectivist" culture (Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations* 54), where "closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives (family, co-workers, tribe, nation) are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives;" whereas "individualist" cultures (such as the US) consist "of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives; are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contracts they have established with others" (Triandis 2). Palaversich and other critics who have taken Fuguet to task for not being more supportive of the non-elites who suffered under the Pinochet regime are functioning as part of a larger collective "in-group" that includes a wider range of Chilean society. Fuguet's novel (and the pan-Latin American literary movement to which he belongs) follows a much more American pattern, where in-groups are small, and connections are evaluated for their potential benefits, whereas "[c]ollectivists maintain established relationships even if it is not in their best interests to do so" (Triandis 12). The negotiation between these patterns occurs at the end of the novel, where Alfonso is traveling to attempt a reconciliation with his son, and at the same time, he promises himself that he will find his old mentor, with whom he had lost touch years before. The clearly individualist tendencies that have guided Alfonso since his internship are moderating into a more collectivist attitude, and are making an apparent reversal of the nihilism he learned from Faundez.

Beyond the presentations of violence, *Tinta roja* also carries stereotypical male–female relationships like those of the film world. The women in the text are sex objects or victims, with the one semi-respected woman being Roxana Aceituno, a radio reporter covering the police beat; a tough woman

surrounded by men. She is also the girlfriend of Alfonso's married mentor, Faundez. The relationship between them mirrors a fairly common filmic structure, running the gamut from Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday* (1940) to Nick Nolte and Julia Roberts in *I Love Trouble* (1994), and even Clark Kent and Lois Lane from comic books, film and television. The female reporters cover the emotional impact of the stories, while the men get the facts, then spin them in the way that produces the most readable story. In the first film, Grant plays a conniving editor looking to sell papers and convince Russell's character to re-marry him. He does this by putting Russell (his ex-best reporter and ex-wife) back to work at the police office, writing about the most important trial of the year. Faundez matches Grant's character in that he shares his exclusives with Roxana – in part because of solidarity, he says, but mostly because he wants to maintain a relationship: "Maybe it's true that Roxana isn't that good a reporter, but damn can she suck a cock. I'm only human. How am I going to say no?" (266). The American films show the men pursuing women as part of a long-term strategy, in part because they are comedies. While Fuguet's novel takes its form from this particular film trope about reporters, it takes its tone from the characteristics of crime stories, particularly those of film noir.

Alfonso's plan to reconcile with his past and his son at the end of the novel shows how *Tinta roja* attempts to move beyond the class disconnect in Chilean society. Alfonso still has an individualistic tendency to evaluate relationships based on their convenience to him, but as Chilean government moves away from its intensely authoritarian collectivist posture, artists do so as well. The collectivist voices of the Post-Boom are giving way to the more individualistic voices of the McOndo generation. Their individualistic tendencies – mixed with a critical eye aimed at all levels of society – make their work seem dark and extreme, where violence links us more strongly than love. The contemporary extreme emphasizes violence because it is a common element in urban lives of all classes. Fuguet's *Tinta roja* lets us see how we are held together by the mutual damage we give and receive, and yet, love is – in the end – what Alfonso is gambling on. Not even decades of torture, state violence and nihilism have killed it. This reflects a similar social change in Chilean society, where sociopolitical elites try to reconcile the present with the dictatorial past and acknowledge their own failures.

NOTES

1 Academic examples include Bouabdellah, Boyle, Hantke, Labbé and Macek. Popular examples include Halliburton and Shields.

2 See Délano and "Pinochet . . ."

3 *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1997) by Patricio Guzmán is one film, and Ariel Dorfman's 1991 play *Death and the Maiden* also touches this subject.

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Part II

Europe and the Middle East

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7 Sadomasochism, Castration and Rape: Richard Morgiève's Nightmare Theater of Primal Scenes

Ralph Schoolcraft

A new crop of French writers is cashing in on graphic sex to climb bestseller lists, cross over to the big screen, and become regulars on television and radio. With established names mingling among "pulp friction" writers and one-hit wonders, this Gallic version of the contemporary extreme already boasts a substantial bibliography. On the rosters of literary presses, Christine Angot, Catherine Breillat, Marie Darrieussecq, Michel Houellebecq, Régis Jauffret, Catherine Millet, and Marie Nimier have garnered much attention. Drawing significantly from pop culture (e.g., advertising, cinema), Frédéric Beigbeder, Laurent Chalumeau, and Virginie Despentes have met with good sales if not critical accolades, while others – Nicolas Jones-Gorlin, Alina Reyes, and Louis Skorecki – have been singled out as contestants for a "Trash Academy" (Pliskin [b] 47).

The trend has sparked a flurry of polemical discussions, including book-length diatribes from Daniel Lindenberg and Pierre Jourde. Investing much of their energy in *ad hominem* attacks and self-promotion, however, Jourde and Lindenberg offer little argumentation and ultimately miss the principal points.[1] What is dubious about this wave of "porn-lit" is not that it is sexually explicit or that it recycles elements of putative lowbrow culture; conventions of morality and elitism are potential shackles that we *should* question. Moreover, sexuality as well as its criminal variants (rape, incest, kidnapping, forced prostitution, abuse of minors, mutilation, etc.) are of course the topics of many of literature's canonical works. The troublesome elements in this new wave lie rather in the representations of said acts. Given the gender and power relations at stake, ethical considerations are crucial. In literary terms, it is appropriate to ask what role the content and form of these representations play in the work's artistic project.

It is here that many of these books fail the test. While masquerading as contestatory or experimental, the majority are astonishingly conformist in their nonconformity. They may shock or titillate conservative values, but do

little to undermine them. Houellebecq's *Platform* parachutes the most tired of harlequin romance plots into the world of sexual tourism; arguably, the novel ends abruptly not so much due to the author's prescient anticipation of the Bali bombings but because the narrative appears to have exhausted its lot of sexual positions (see also Turner; Hitchens; and *After the Erotic*). Similarly, the racial typecasting in Chimo's *Lila Says* crassly exploits some of France's ugliest right-wing obsessions. In the realm of sexual violence, it is difficult to see why Jauffret's ironically titled *Histoire d'amour* indulges its stalker for an entire novel of rape and sequestration; a short story would have largely sufficed to communicate the creepy horror of the abusive *huis clos*. With respect to erotic literature, Nimier's *La Nouvelle Pornographie* differs from the old one only by its pretense, while Reyes's tale about an inflatable doll hinges on a narrative gimmick that quickly loses air. In short, most of these unconventional works simply dress up in avant-garde trappings the most voyeuristic and exploitative modes of sexual consumption. Regardless of their stated aims, they sink into the predictable patterns of pornography or publicity-driven *succès de scandale*.

It would be misguided, however, to dismiss all of these writers. Moreover, those who have sought to disrupt the eroticization of predatory and demeaning views of sexuality are, curiously enough, the authors who have endured the harshest criticism. In the magical realism of *Pig Tails*, Marie Darrieussecq's passive female protagonist is gradually transformed into a sow through her interactions with men. Critics accuse the author of presenting a dismal portrait of women, when in fact the project seeks to examine the pernicious impact of a sexist society. Similar to the way in which Kafka's Gregor is transformed into an insect by the alienation of his petty bourgeois existence in *The Metamorphosis*, Darrieussecq uses this device to allegorize the male gaze breaking down an insecure and unexceptional woman. Virginie Despentes's *Rape-Me* (the dubious Anglo-Saxon compromise translation for *Baise-moi* [Fuck Me]) – has also been misread. The representations of rape, domestic abuse, and prostitution aim to render these in their full horror, and recuse any possible vantage point of desire and sensuality for these occurrences (see Higgins and Silver). Analogous to Pier Paolo Pasolini's flat camera perspectives used in the film *Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom* to convey fascism's dehumanization of its victims, or the suddenly level and immobile angle employed by Gaspar Noé in *Irreversible*'s controversial rape scene, Despentes has devised a blunt narrative approach that tries to counter voyeuristic eroticization of violence against women.

With its provocative title, Richard Morgiève's *Sex Vox Dominam* seems at first glance to belong to the group of writers seeking easy notoriety. His interviews do little to simplify the issue:

> I wrote [*SVD*] in a rage against the critics . . . I wanted to indulge myself and write the book that I really wanted to write. All authors feel the need to talk about

> sex in their books [but] I had a lot of difficulty writing it; it was quite violent . . . And I reject the label of "eroticism" because I didn't write "the point of her nipples under her orange silk sari . . ." It's a novel about sex. (Bourmeau 1)

A novel about sex, indeed, but hardly of a tender variety. Acting out some of the most common but deadly forms of domestic abuse, the narrator attacks several women of his acquaintance. He in turn endures grave physical and psychological harm at the hands of a psychotic S&M cult. So graphic are some of the scenes that Morgiève's publisher for his preceding works reputedly broke ties with him (*ibid.*). However, while the novel is no doubt more disturbing than Millet's implausible pseudo-ethnographic orgy chronicles or Angot's sub-Durassian prattle about incest, Morgiève dismisses any affinity between his work and theirs:

> Their production can't be considered literature; it's journalism . . . [The sex] gives it some added attraction [and] that way the magazines talk about you . . . [But in terms of literature], the orgy trend isn't looking for anything, isn't finding anything, and isn't placing hope in anything. (Pliskin [a] 1)

Morgiève expresses similar disappointment in prominent male peers as well, taking to task Houellebecq and the recent work of American Bret Easton Ellis (whom he formerly admired; Van Hove 2 and Reynaud 7).

Where should we situate Morgiève then? Do his claims for a distinct status have any basis? What is his novel "looking for" and how can such a grim fictional universe be said to be "placing hope" in something? In what way does *SVD* allow us to distinguish among pornography, eroticism, and a third genre of psychosexual drama? To broach these questions, we will analyze the role that the sadomasochistic depictions play in *SVD* as a literary project.

The first-person narrator and protagonist is a self-loathing, middle-aged advertising executive whose wife has just left him for his best friend. The narrator has grown disgusted with his profession and is suffering a midlife crisis. Alcoholic binges paired with outbursts of brute sexual aggression lead to other forms of destructive behavior. An increasingly radical inability to interact with people through any other means than violence suggests that this nervous breakdown is not just an attack on his sense of self, but a war being waged between his superego and id. Caught between relentless punishment by the former and a de-socialization of desire by the latter, the narrator's mental universe is overrun by near-psychotic impulses. These primitive impulses hold the narrator prisoner and will not release him until the struggle reaches a resolution. The plot of this battle is simple, but its stakes very high: the narrator will either destroy himself or rediscover a desire to live.

As the narrator deteriorates into an unrecognizable remnant of himself, he

decides in a gesture of self-derision to rename himself "Kadabideur." The nickname serves to mark off this incapacitated self from a more healthy, functional one. (Along these lines, the narrator insists henceforth that no one address him by his real name.) The eventual revelation of the narrator's "real" name – Richard – points to an autobiographical connection. Other clues within the text, such as the narrator sharing aspects of Morgiève's childhood and even his birthday (16), clearly establish that the author links this fictional character to himself. Thus, Kadabideur is a fictional double for Morgiève or, at least, for a version of Morgiève in the midst of a nervous breakdown. An interview confirms this: "I could only use the first person for this book because it's up to me to acknowledge my own neuroses," states Morgiève. "It's my life that's being played out in this novel" (Bourmeau 3).

Of the different crises facing the narrator, one weighs more heavily in this personal meltdown than all the others: "I'm lost," declares Kadabideur. "And I know since when. When they died – my parents are dead. I was just a kid – and it was all over" (13). The devastating aftereffects of his childhood loss undermine his efforts to constitute himself as an adult: "I'm an orphan. Until I come up with a response to this condition, I will not exist – or I will not exist as anything other than an asphyxiated person" (77).

This is not just a narrative premise for Morgiève. Morgiève's mother died of cancer when he was 7 and his father committed suicide six years later. Morgiève then spent the remainder of his youth in orphanages, leaving only upon reaching his majority. Though his fiction cannot be reduced to a single element, this is no doubt the foundational trauma casting a shadow over at least 15 of his more than 20 books. Several can thus be read as a succession of attempts to write himself through the disarray caused by the loss of his parents. In one of the best French novels of the last 20 years, *Un Petit homme de dos* (A Short Man, Seen from the Back, 1988) offers a fictional transposition of Morgiève's tragic beginnings that produces startlingly beautiful art, but leaves little room to envision a positive outcome for the orphaned child. In search of a response, *Fausto* (1990) picks up where the previous novel left off, devising a buoyant, lighthearted fairy tale about his departure from the orphanage in order to escape the seemingly irresolvable dead-end recounted in *Un Petit homme*. The novel won literary prizes and was adapted to the big screen as a major film production, *A la mode* (dir. Rémy Duchemin). The success of *Fausto*'s optimistic vision did not unburden Morgiève of his past, however. If anything, the financial boon and public recognition seemed to backfire. Morgiève's life fell apart around him and he was paralyzed by acute writer's block for three years (Reynaud 3). *Fausto* worked as a novel, but failed therapeutically.

SVD's descent into self-destruction and sexual violence is therefore anchored in a particular context: the recurrent disruption of the narrator's adult life by residual issues stemming from the trauma of orphancy. The novel extends the search for strategies to make progress with unraveling

this originary knot, a quest made all the more urgent by Morgième's apparent extra-literary struggles to get by. If *Fausto*'s optimistic vision of the future did not work any better than *Un Petit homme*'s memorial tribute to his parents, then *SVD* will resolve to dig more deliberately beneath the surface of memories and good intentions into the underlying magma of repressed raw emotion: "I have to dig down to the bottom – of myself," promises Kadabideur (37).

In which areas of orphans' psyche do these conflicts persist? As Morgième's narrator suggests above, the loss of parents prior to adolescence can strip children of elements essential to identity formation. Children who perceive themselves as coming from nowhere can end up feeling like nothing; images of emptiness or of absence are common (Batten 27). Similarly, orphaned children appear unusually driven to succeed (Rentchnick 39–40). For his part, Kadabideur is haunted by a feeling of failure despite his material achievements. He holds himself accountable for not having been able to construct anything redeeming out of his unusual status as an orphan: "I drink because I'm lost, to destroy myself . . . THE GREAT TRIAL OF KADABIDEUR IS UNDERWAY. He betrays the orphans, he betrayed himself. Oh oh oh – HANG HIM BY THE" (21; the small capitals are from the original). Behaviorally, the orphans' childhood experiences can produce deeply ambivalent reactions toward oneself, one's parents, and certain interpersonal schema. On the one hand, orphans can unconsciously resent their parents for having "abandoned" them. Given the parents' absence, this anger may be displaced into aggressive behavior toward other loved ones. On the other hand, orphans may feel rejected (because they interpret the parents' death as a decision not to stay with them and raise them) or even guilty (the orphans must have been responsible for their parents' death and that is why they have been "punished"; Bowlby, 288 and 316). This latter instance can manifest itself through a "tyrannical, implacable, and irrational superego" (Batten 27). Thus, in this fictional transposition, Kadabideur's sense of identity is vulnerable within the artificial world of advertising partly because of an impression that his own identity is false: "I'm fake, not crazy. Fake. I want to die" (35). Similarly, his feeling of abandonment (by his wife) and betrayal (by his best friend) resonates against and gains in intensity due to the child's formative and traumatic experience of abandonment and betrayal.

This fictional investigation of a nervous breakdown poses a number of formal challenges, however. A lucid, detailed analysis of his inner strife would necessarily betray the very irrationality of the object he was seeking to describe. Moreover, from Dostoevsky's masterful *Notes from Underground* (1864) forward, various highly original techniques of interior monologue have since evolved into canonical literary devices; they have thus lost much of their ability to unearth surprises. Therefore, in order to capture something of the chaotic workings of a mind crumbling in upon itself, without imposing a predetermined coherence upon it, Morgième adopts a combination

of approaches to give his project greater narrative coherence while still preserving its rawness.

First, the author turns to an old device: through various circumstances within the novel, Kadabideur, already once displaced from Morgiève himself, slips into the skin of Frisquet, a recently deceased friend. (A slippage of identity is consistent with the collapse of his self-image.) This metamorphosis is confirmed by the narrator's decision to wear Frisquet's clothes and make use of a number of his personal items (67).[2] Our interpretation requires a nuance, however, for Kadabideur maintains his own identity for daily, practical affairs. The only aspect of Frisquet's life that the narrator takes on concerns a sadomasochistic cult called Sex Vox Dominam. Frisquet had contacted them and was on the verge of attending his first meeting when he died. The narrator decides to show up and pretend to be Frisquet: "I've taken his place. In this game that I'm playing since yesterday. Possession. Servitude – sex vox. Dominam" (67).

The second technique regards the role played by Kadabideur's initiation into sexual violence. During his initial encounter with the SVD group, the narrator's reaction is no doubt similar to the reader's: the kitsch ensemble of characters – a dominatrix in black leather named Miss Démoniac and her accomplice Mister Diabolic – provokes incredulous smiles (59). But as ridiculous as their paraphernalia appears, the narrator's bemusement soon turns to terror during his second visit. He is stripped, branded on his scrotum with a white-hot iron and sodomized until he loses consciousness (79–80). On other occasions, he is repeatedly violated, often through agonizingly painful penetrations (a pencil inserted into his urethra and a ladle in his rectum; a variety of unanesthetized piercings; forcible oral and anal sodomy). His occasional attempts to break free of the group fail, for its leaders know his daily schedule, have access to his apartment, and willingly use force. As their grip on his existence tightens, however, Kadabideur comes to be split between contradictory emotions: fear and revulsion at times, but at others a growing acceptance of, and even longing for, this sexual servitude.

What we are reading is in fact an allegory about particular facets of a slide into self-destruction. The narrator's intermittent submission to this strange cult – "From what I understand, they only take those who want to be taken," remarks his receptionist (166) – is in essence a figuration of his own internal conflicts, an acting out of his enslavement to his illness. Though realistically narrated, the torture is therefore a projection of his own mental universe. In other words, Morgiève is trying to convey through this physical theater the psychosexual drama of an individual consumed by contradictory but intensely violent impulses.[3] It is as if, instead of adopting the jumbled jigsaw logic of dreamwork to dissimulate latent content, this novel's subterranean text of a battle between Eros and Thanatos chose to disguise itself with the seemingly superficial conventions of hardcore pulp fiction. The transfer from realism (the narrator's daily life) to id-fueled hallucination is thus signaled by

the adoption of Frisquet's identity and his immediate initiation into the S&M cult with its ritualized enactment of potentially destructive sexual impulses. The "real" world fades into the background and a cruel, shadowy universe engulfs the narrator. The spectacle unfolding in this phantasmatic theater is composed of "mythic scenes" (Morgiève's term; Pliskin [a] 1).

Understood from this perspective, can we now begin to peer behind the masks? At this most primal, unconscious level, the passions are a roiling mixture of brute drives, be they hetero- or homosexual, sadistic or masochistic. Significant patterns emerge nonetheless. If the frequent images of penetration are figurations of others' virility (in particular, substitutes for a punishing father), the converse is logically present in the multitude of castration threats that menace the narrator.[4] In fact, the primary object of the sadists' activities is a progressive castration of their victims: "Cut it off. That's the first thing out of their mouths – cut it off. Or sew it up" (158). Without entering into quarrels over the inadequacies of Freud's theoretical concepts, we can note that Morgiève himself alludes to an Œdipal crisis at work here. His homosexual desire – valorized in *Fausto* and *SVD* – and incestuous urges are both linked to displacements of such original desire (cf. 93). Miss Démoniac and Mister Diabolic thus stand as omnipotent and cruel refigurations of his mother and father, demanding complete devotion from their offspring, expressing love only through the infliction of pain, and continually threatening any fault with castration.

As *SVD*'s sadomasochistic nightmare builds toward paroxysm, its spectacular nature is exacerbated to the point of resembling a comicbook world of sexual deviation. Taken in the abstract, many of these scenes would be laughable were it not for the intense fear and despair with which Morgiève infuses his writing. In Sadean tableaux that echo Œdipal anxiety about sexual differentiation, body parts become exaggeratedly huge (cf. 182–3) while the narrator is ordered to become a transvestite sex slave. The locale for the final chapters is similarly stereotyped: the cult hosts an orgy at a country manor surrounded by barbed wire, vicious dogs, and massive guards. In one final ritual of debauchery, the sadists set upon an unnamed victim and castrate him. Having "turned a bull into an ox" (as they gleefully term it; 184), the guests immediately turn to the dinner table, where they are served generous helpings of "beef." What remains bestially ambiguous for the reader is revealed only to the narrator (and not until he has finished his meal):

> I must die. I've eaten beef – I can't accept that. I can see the butcher's hook and the hanging carcass . . . It was at the end of the meal [that the hostess] opened up the meat locker and there, illuminated by a single bulb, was the carcass. A carcass – hanging. Completely skinned – a few drops of garnet blood on the yellow ceramic. (186)

This horrific phantasm of an anonymous castrated man flayed on a butcher's

hook marks the limit-point for Kadabideur's flirtation with self-destruction. If his masochism has grown to where he could accept a similar fate, it is synonymous with capitulating to his own death. His mental collapse will have degenerated into a mortal one.

Ultimately, this phantasm spurs Kadabideur to break off his semi-somnolent participation in the group's theater of horrors. His response, however, enacts first the profound cry for help that resonates in some suicide attempts, for he flees the manor only to try to drown himself. He is captured again by the SVD clan (for in essence the decision to hurt himself further meant that he had not yet rejected the masochistic urge). In a second phantasmatic scene that represents the transfer of the previous one onto himself, the group begins to castrate him in a most perverse fashion. " 'We're not going to cut you right away,' says Miss. 'That'll come later, but not right away' " (208). They sew his penis shut with three grains of pepper-bird spice inserted into the urethra. Internal bleeding causes his penis to swell to the point of bursting and they have restrained him in such a way that he can only relieve the agony by castrating himself with a pair of scissors (209). This second confrontation with self-destruction finally suffices. In keeping with some of its pulp-fiction facets, the novel ends with the massacre of the cult's principal figures. The narrator is free of their hold over him and leaves the scene: "I want to live – I know it now. I WANT TO LIVE" (212).

Having traced back his self-destructive urges as far as he is able, Morgiève discovers through a work of fiction the limit of what he is willing to endure and reaffirms his will to survive. The degree of distress prompting the novel can possibly be inferred from how far his imagination allowed him to retreat into self-destruction before finally rebelling. He sought in *SVD* to render as accurately as possible the unconscious facets of subjective experience, yet still register its impact on objective reality. The resulting novel is an unsettling but masterful balancing act between traditional narrative (the debacle of the narrator's personal affairs) and schizophrenic delirium (the interior monologue raging in his head). We see how this episode of mental illness affects his job performance, intimate relationships, and physical health, but also how it translates into psychological turmoil. It is a renewal of the Proustian technique of juggling the gap between one person's exacerbated subjective perception and that of indifferent observers.[5]

It is here that we can address the ethical questions evoked in the introduction. As the balance begins to shift away from health to illness, the world of material concerns and propriety loses its grip on Kadabideur. With each public transgression, the narrator recognizes the shock in others' eyes, but past a certain degree of distress he simply no longer cares what they think. The aftermath of Kadabideur's abandonment by his wife and betrayal by his best friend provides an excellent illustration. When Kadabideur confronts his former friend, the exchange quickly degenerates into a brawl in which the

narrator makes a pathetic spectacle of himself. His friend and ex-wife are initially slow to react; still anchored in the world of reason, they do not immediately grasp the extent to which Kadabideur has lost control of himself. Having disappeared into a mental universe where sex and violent rage intermingle, rendered wild with the pain of rejection, the narrator tries to rape his former wife. The account spares us nothing of Kadabideur's terrifying assault as he pins her on the floor of the apartment building. *But the fact that the enraged protagonist attempts to rape his ex-wife does not mean that the reader is invited to identify with Kadabideur's perspective.* The difference between story and narrative, between the action and its formal frame, is crucial here. Though we are privy to Kadabideur's brutal desires, we are also shown the reactions of his neighbors and ex-wife. That is to say, *Kadabideur may treat his ex-wife as an object within the story's action, but the narrative does not ever constitute her as such.* She remains an individual who bleeds, experiences terror, exerts her will, and exercises her legal rights. In this exploration of the narrator's displaced and criminal rage, there are consequences to his actions, even if he himself is no longer able to weigh them or value them (the police take him down to the station, he gets fired from his job, his assets are frozen, he is facing eviction from his apartment, etc.). *The narrator's fantasies do not become the novel's fantasies.*

An author is not ethically reprehensible simply because he or she depicts violent or explicit sexual acts. What matters is how such acts are contextualized or framed within the narrative.

It is here that the difference between the operative modes of fantasy and more realist forms of fiction is important to recognize. A convenient contrast is provided by Houellebecq's *Platform.* Although Houellebecq's descriptive techniques in this work imitate social realism, the novel's sexually exploitative (and, on occasion, criminal) encounters are couched in a fantasy structure. At every stage of his novel, Thai masseuses, lesbians, tourists and 15-year-old babysitters are immediately consenting partners who, in addition to their physical attentions, gratify their male counterpart's ego by reaching orgasm easily and often. Not a single woman in *Platform* refuses to satisfy any of the protagonist's sexual desires, despite the fact that he is presented as being unappealing and slothful. For a character supposedly at odds with the world, he nonetheless jumps into bed with a seemingly endless sequence of physically striking, sexually adept, and unfailingly pliant women.

Houellebecq's sexual vision in *Platform* denies its women any will independent of the protagonist's desires.[6] I would argue that this is the trait in fantasy literature which distinguishes pornography from eroticism. In other words, the term pornography designates not so much a particular level of sexual explicitness – erotic literature can be just as explicit – but rather a particular mode of exploitative interaction. In pornography, women are interchangeable objects, valorized for their physical features and denied interiority, with the unquestioning fulfillment of male desire as their only reason

for existing. This is where *Platform* puts itself on highly dubious terrain. By combining a fantasy structure with the social context of sexual tourism and other forms of exploitation, Houellebecq produces an ethically objectionable work of fiction.

Whereas many in the "porn-lit" trend are simply producing gratuitous fantasies for a bored readership, Morgiève's phantasms are not designed to titillate the reader. His claim that he was not writing an erotic text is borne out; his is a novel about sex, but as a means for examining some of the most primitive and disorienting urges that can be found lurking behind conscious, socialized desires. This psychosexual drama is a coherent, even courageous exploration of a mental breakdown and its consequences. It acknowledges and confronts some of the darkest sides of human nature, but without trivializing them or, worse, denying their devastating potential. *SVD* thus stands as an anguished but understandable step in a progression that began with *Un Petit homme* and moved through *Fausto*. As Alex Besnainou has observed in an interview with Morgiève, "You seem to be going further and further into the depths of your being and each new stratum strips bare the same person through the writer and your words" (Besnainou 1). Morgiève's literary project is thus anchored in a sort of Ur-Text – his continual retelling of the experience of orphancy – in an attempt to accept its consequences and construct an image of himself with which he can live and write productively.[7]

NOTES

1 See Alain-Philippe Durand (122–8) for a discussion of Jourde.

2 Moreover, Frisquet's reappearance is so brief and odd that we begin to wonder whether he really exists. The narrator has doubts as well: "It's raining. I don't see Frisquet any more. It's enough to make me wonder if. He. Was. Ever there" (55). Frisquet appears to be yet another alter ego, closely associated with Morgiève's own breakdown: we learn in *SVD* that Kadabideur had not seen Frisquet since December 1991 (47), which falls during the period of Morgiève's bout with writer's block.

3 One of the few comparable literary examples that comes to mind is found in Albert Camus's "The Renegade." Similarly transposing mental attitudes into a dreamlike ritual that confuses tyrannical power and sexuality, Camus nonetheless gives political overtones (absent in Morgiève) to his failed missionary's conversion to the cult of the Fetish (56).

4 Kadabideur recalls that a youthful attempt to lose his virginity ended in disaster, for instance, for his penis became hopelessly snagged in his zipper. To add to his humiliation, on the way to the hospital, he was attacked by bullies (another projection of tyrannical "law") who forced him to open his jacket and reveal the partially cut and thus potentially impotent phallus (72–3).

5 In the first volume of *Remembrance of Things Past*, for instance, Charles Swann, devoured by jealousy, imagines Odette de Crécy as an exalted princess while others, detached from the situation, see her as an exploitative courtesan.

6 The only exception in fact confirms the rule: the novel's female villain is Audrey, a putatively frigid wife. She is later revealed to be (and is condemned as) a dominatrix,

i.e., a woman who refuses to consent to male desire and instead imposes her own to the exclusion of male desire. (This, too, though, is arguably just one more staple of pornography's projection of male desire onto its female characters.)

7 Lynn Higgins provided insightful comments on drafts of this chapter.

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8 *Dantec's Inferno*

Lawrence R. Schehr

> *A sort of living Hieronymus Bosch.*
> (La Sirène rouge 502)
>
> *Two annoying towers on fire in the skies over New York. The images of the crashes played in a loop, with the logo, "LIVE" from CNN. I open my eyes on the world of the apocalypse.*
> (Villa Vortex 579)

Dark and dire is the universe of the contemporary French neo-polar and science fiction writer, Maurice G. Dantec. From *La Sirène rouge* (The Red Siren) (1993) through the recent *Villa Vortex* (2003), he has written four bleak novels in which he traces an increasingly extreme apocalyptic vision of the contemporary world pushing toward the near future. The works have a Nietzschean strain, echoing a "superman" or the vision of the "starchild" in Clarke and Kubrick's *2001. A Space Odyssey* (1968). This new figure will be a combination of humans and cybernetics, with the HAL of *2001* reduced to a laptop and with permanent interfaces between humans and cyber-figures. Yet the Nietzschean rebirth does not lead to a world "beyond good and evil," but rather a dark planet motivated almost entirely by extreme evil: cowardly behavior from governments and leaders, a network of tentacular, subversive organizations, purveyors of snuff films, drugs, kiddie porn, body parts, viruses (both computer and organic), and so forth, and a generalized secrecy that borders on the paranoid. The new world is an extreme dystopia ready to fall into the abyss of hell at any moment. In this most noir of worlds, Dantec resolutely envisions no happy end, but the "lake of fire" of the Apocalypse or the ninth circle of Dante's hell.

La Sirène rouge is a rather straightforward odyssey from Amsterdam to Portugal undertaken by an adolescent girl in search of her father. During this voyage, she is protected by a father figure she has met according to the rules of the genre: a series of seemingly random events produce actions that themselves lead to a plot. But often, the actions have no underlying logic except that they are linked by the pervasiveness of evil. Here, in escaping her mother and her step-father and in her flight through an anti-Wonderland, Alice meets a man who belongs to "an organization of Western volunteers

wanting to finish as quickly as possible with what remains of communism" (*SR* 151). The hero or antihero struggles to retain primacy and individuality against the forces of the collective. And thus, from Dantec's anti-collective point-of-view, it is the same, good fight that he is fighting against all collectives.

In *La Sirène rouge*, the man is named Toorop; he will discover the underlying mystery, as he eventually comes to understand the ramifications and causes of the adolescent's flight. In subsequent novels, Dantec adds elements of science fiction and pushes the contemporary toward the near, but totally believable and foreseeable future, where the most complicated science fiction effect is the reduction of Clarke and Kubrick's HAL to the size of a laptop, an artificial brain that melds with a human brain in a mostly symbiotic, but sometimes nefariously parasitic relationship.[1]

The future is now and it is apocalyptic. If the terrorists on 11 September 2001 were Luddites who used supersonic jets as fiery battering rams, Dantec uses networks, supercomputers, and transmission systems to set our world on fire. As he says toward the end of *Villa Vortex*: "The synchronized collapse of the four towers of the Very Big Necrolibrary. After the WTC: Paris – City of Light, target of terrorists" (*VV* 799). Offering a thinly disguised version of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Dantec seems to be taking aim against the West's cumulative knowledge. Yet this is not an attack against knowledge, for much as the BNF is the metonymy for that knowledge, the destruction of that building is not the destruction of knowledge itself, just as the attacks on the World Trade Center were not a destruction of the economic center of the world. Everything proceeds by networks: there is no center, only periphery. The collapse of the World Trade Center did not destroy American capitalism, American empire, globalization, or the new world order:

> Ben Laden and his so-called "Islamist" kamikazes were nothing more than the provisional incarnation of the most advanced form of the spectacular-mercantile and uneducated Matrix that has as its assumed goal the destruction of the world and its replacement with a demiurgic ideology or another one. (*VV* 617)

Dantec sees the matter as far more complicated than the somewhat simplistic targeting of the American way of life through a destruction of its symbolic centers, since for him everything is part of an uncontrolled system of networks; it is not merely a question of center and periphery, but rather, it is a question of network against network:

> Undoubtedly, the only little problem that Ben Laden had not foreseen, more globalizing than globalization, more anti-globalizing than the most extreme anti-globalizers, more "artistic" than all our "artists," is that hitting, what was, according to him, the "economic center of the world," he had forgotten that all of that was only the simulacrum of Capital. (*VV* 617–18)

Ben Laden wrongly believes in incarnations, in centers, and in reality. But following Jean Baudrillard, Dantec knows that the postmodern world is constructed entirely of simulacra: there are no realities, no human beings, no pure computers, just some compromised amalgamations that simulate life.

Dark and dire, I began. The narrator / hero of *Les Racines du mal* (The Roots of Evil) is named Arthur Darquandier – "dark and dire" – a name shortened to "Dark" by the computer (*RM* 394). The universe is what might loosely be called "paranoid," like that of the house of mirrors in Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947); it is the universe of the panopticon, with simulacra and reflections instead of realities. The universe begins with "spying-mirrors" (*SR* 14), the traditional mirrors placed outside the windows of Dutch houses. This is a universe of voyeurism, in which spectacle has gone mad. Eyes perceive all the evil in the world, Dantec's eyes or Dante's eyes, discovering an Ugolino at every turn.

Consider the situation in *La Sirène rouge*. Alice, decidedly not in Wonderland, discovers video tapes in a secret room in her house. Curious about some goings-on, she decides to "bring light to all these little bizarre details" (*SR* 39). Hidden away in the basement, the secret room contains row after row of video tapes: "Alice saw white labels on certain cassettes. The labels had women's names or titles like *Three Impaled Frenchwomen*" (*SR* 39). She puts one of the tapes in the VCR and discovers that it is a snuff film showing the torture and death of her former tutor. A man cuts off the victim's nipples and attacks her labia (*SR* 43), after which, in the spectacularity already alluded to, he asks, " 'What is it like to see oneself die on television, huh, tell me?' " (*SR* 43). Death becomes a simulacrum of itself in a universe in which snuff films are part of the network and one's own death is performed before one's eyes.

One sees oneself die; in this universe, not even one's death is authentic. The specularization of the self arises from the willful abandon by some and the forced abandon by others of the singularity of the individual in favor of a collective that can never see itself for itself; to use a Sartrean expression, the collective sees itself *pour autrui*. And the collective is necessarily in bad faith. No one can escape from the all-encompassing system. And thus one is forced, in order to see oneself, to buy into the image projected by the collective. The individual alienation experienced by Roquentin in *Nausea* (1938) is no longer available in the postmodern, yet totally contemporary, world Dantec paints: alienation is mediated by the false images of self offered by the collective. Not even the narrator can escape that specularization:

> I am a reel of film in its metal box, lying with millions of others in the blockhouses of the movie Center of the Military in the Fort of Ivry. (*VV* 570)

Or again:

> I had become a living narrative, certainty no longer was in me, it had emptied me of everything but writing, I was a code and its metacode, I was becoming the structure of the general retrotransposition of my own life. (*VV* 575)

Retrotransposition accurately describes the process at work. As society has abandoned the position of the individual in favor of that of the collective and as the liberty of the individual has been lost, the only way to be is to be written up and recorded upon. One takes that recording and retrotransposes it as if it were one's own discourse, which, of course, it is not. Narration is always recounting, retelling, *raconter*; an event never happens for the first time; it is always inscribed as a possibility within the bad faith of the collective. The individual is condemned to specular repetition.

The author uses ekphrastic descriptions of imaginary snuff films – a leitmotif in his work (*SR* 55; *SR* 510–11; *RM* 467) – for their shock value and offers grisly, detailed descriptions of the events going on before the imaginary camera. A strong misogynistic element is seconded by his ongoing vision of the world in a state of meltdown; violence and torture are always combined with the creation of a liquidized world filled with blood: "They cut out the girl's eyes and the man got off in her eye-sockets, then they smeared themselves with her blood, and began making love on the floor" (*SR* 43).[2] It is not enough to rape, torture, and kill; the solidity of the body must become a melted mess of decomposed and decomposing organic matter.

Snuff films are one of the direst figurations of the end of liberty and value, but they are also here part of a network of evil. They do not just happen in the privacy of one's own home or dungeon: they are made, recorded, copied, distributed, and consumed worldwide. Not only are the snuff films distributed underground (*SR* 186), but they are also distributed through a network of organized thuggery hidden behind what looks like a multinational capitalist enterprise: "A plan was taking shape in his mind. Water therapy centers, all over the world, through which the cassettes were distributed. After that, on the spot, the tapes were distributed by the local group with drugs or weapons . . ." (*SR* 499–500). And indeed the cassettes are as top of the line as are the therapy centers: high-quality snuff films with cachet and the surplus value of luxury.

Blood is the ubiquitous sign of the apocalypse. This unstaunched flow is no more obvious than in the first pages of *Les Racines du mal* (1995). Following a double trail of blood, the novel's first pages wander through various parts of the *banlieue* and France is eventually criss-crossed again. At the beginning, the stain of blood seems to be local, seated in one individual, one set of *communes* near Paris, and one epiphenomenon:

> From the "killer with the 22," Schaltzmann had already become the Ripper of the Docks for a number of rags that were avidly following the affair from the beginning. For others, more imaginative, he was the Napalm Angel. That day, 14 November, Schaltzmann became the "Vampire of Vitry-sur-Seine". (*RM* 74)

Suburbs in the French sense are sites of local conflict, of immigrant communities, and of tension. To set this grisly action there challenges the entire ideological system that led to the polarization of these communities: the capitalist and colonialist models that led to an ultimate questioning of what is entailed by "being French." So Dantec's concept of identity comes into play, but it will not be as simple as all that, for there is no return: this vision predicts nothing but endlessly reproducing circles of hell. For what will eventually be discovered is that this flow of blood is also subject to the specular and to becoming a simulacrum: there are serial killers who are copy-cat killers as well. But this will not be discovered until much later.[3] For now, Schaltzmann seems to be a monster on the loose, a paranoid sociopath whose activities certainly change the biota in the suburbs: "He killed two cats that he chopped up in the kitchen before putting them in the mixer. He swallowed several glasses of bloody slop" (*RM* 22). And a few pages later: "The next day, Andreas Schaltzmann bought a large amount of rabbits from all the butchers in the city. He began to grind up several per day, developing a cocktail based on viscera, blood, and Coca-Cola" (*RM* 24).

The blood is another "red siren" that calls fatally outside itself to produce mimetic behavior: serial killers inspire copy-cat killers and snuff-film fans inspire others to act on forbidden desires. Dantec's apocalypse presents a radical form of evil that depends on mimesis as a virus that endlessly reproduces through a mechanism to be discussed below, but that awakens what may be a dormant virus (like shingles) or which leaves the individual open to opportunistic infection (like HIV). Thus, mimesis can be both internal and external, replicating and inserting itself whether there is a host or not. This mode of replication will be seen as important in a Dantequian virology once we have examined the construction of the mimetic and replicating machines. For now, let us recognize that the scenarios of the networks are furthered by this insidious mimesis that underlines an apocalyptic vision of the consequences of abandoning personal liberty.

Blood stands as a metaphor for life and a metonymy for all bodily fluids. It is the vehicle for transmitting a virus in a world determined by AIDS. The transmission of bodily fluids becomes the mechanism and metaphor for the viral replication and its jumping from individual to individual. No more simple parasitic infection by aerobes, complicated food chains that allow for parasitic infections, or impersonal infections like malaria or cholera. Viral infection happens in a world in which human and not-so-human activities determine the fate of others.

Thus Dantec moves beyond a Hegelian and Girardian symptomology of mimesis in which the desire of individual A is prompted, and is focused on the desire of individual B. For Hegel and for René Girard, desire is always the desire of another's desire. As Girard shows in *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, the mediated object, which is here the will to abandon one's own individuality, can be either external or internal. But the source or origin of desire is always within. And even though Girard's later work critiques psychoanalysis, he would not disagree with Freud's mechanism in which the inscription leans on primary, natural drives.

Nor is Dantec's approach entirely consonant with a social constructivism derived from the work of Michel Foucault, though it encompasses that as well, and not only insofar as the contemporary author continues the surveillance mechanisms described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. For Foucault, the formation of desire through the articulation of subjectivity is determined by the structures of power into which an individual is born and through which he or she is determined. So, desire is not the desire of the desire of another, but rather the desire that is created by the forces at work on the individual that themselves determine subjectivity.

With Dantec, the creation of the collective will or the dissolution of the subject into the collective is a combination of the Girardian and post-Foucauldian inscriptions of desire.[4] The combination of internal and external modes of propagation means that free will perhaps never really existed to start with. But Dantec could not take such an amoral, deconstructive position; rather, he points to specific origins for the collapse of the individual central to understanding his vision of the apocalypse: the two twentieth-century, collectivist movements of fascism / Nazism and communism. His attacks on communism during the war in Yugoslavia might lead some to think that he was merely a rightist author, but his criticisms of collectivism are universal. While fascism is a historical memory today, the dregs of communism are still part of a contemporary reality.

Both collectivizations are reactions to the bourgeois state in the West and its means of production under high capitalism. The ideology of the bourgeoisie that depends so much on individual free will and liberty also relies on the depersonalization of workers. Karl Marx's famous incipit in *The Communist Manifesto* – "Workers of the world, unite" – is a call to arms to form a power group, an army of the proletariat. But Marx talked about the alienation of the individual worker and his theories of alienation could never have predicted the advent of high capitalism in the form of time-motion management, pioneered by Frank and Lilian Gilbreth (of *Cheaper by the Dozen* fame), "scientific management," pioneered by Frederick Taylor, and the assembly line, pioneered by Henry Ford. For in addition to the creation of more efficient workers, and despite Taylor's arguing for "the maximum prosperity for each employee," the result of these processes was the *sparagmos*, the fragmentation of each individual (Liu).

Dantec says nothing less, as he links the river of blood to these processes: "Taylorization and Fordism had led to vast ideological, or should we say, pathological–collective, slaughterhouses, produced by rationalist thought" (*VV* 303). This remark is at the heart of Dantec's apocalyptic vision. Bourgeois thought and capitalism, which come out of the genealogy that goes from the French Enlightenment and British mercantilism of the eighteenth century through the French Revolution, spawn Taylorism and Fordism, themselves the primary causes of the birth of the anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist movements of communism and fascism. By deterritorializing and fragmenting every worker, these twin "scientific" ideologies of the capitalist workplace ultimately dissolve and slaughter them.

There are three visible, palpable consequences. First, in Dantec's universe, life is a permanent snuff film understood as a road trip peopled with serial killers. Images of blood are recontextualized in the slaughterhouses of capitalism where human blood is collectively spilled. Snuff films are nothing compared to damages done in the world at large. However, snuff films conform to the *société de spectacle*. And with slaughterhouses, they form the blood image here, combining the real with the reproduced, the living with its copy. Again, the vision is formed by a dualism: blood is both inside and outside, like viral infections, both real and virtual; this will assume its full importance in the discussion of machines below and in the final discussion of the viral apocalypse.

Second, consider the Hegelian master–slave dialectic. If the slave is in essence the master of the master, the dialectic must be recast in capitalist terms: the worker is the master of the manager / bourgeois. Role-reversal continues even as it is updated, for the bourgeois cannot maintain a bourgeois existence without the work and surplus value produced by the worker. In *La Sirène rouge*, for example, Alice's mother cannot keep her "life-style" without the production and distribution of snuff films. Yet the sparagmos that affected each worker under Fordism and Taylorism consequently affects the bourgeois, who, while still believing in his or her identity and singular subjectivity is rather as morsellized and as spectacularized as the workers he or she supposedly controls: Alice's mother is reflected not in some unitary mirror, but rather in the multiple copies of each of the snuff films.

Subject to the false ideology of plenitude, the bourgeois turns away from the extreme today nostalgically toward a past in which that plenitude was possible. Thus champagne socialism and contemporary American Empire are incarnations of that nostalgia. But the Hegelian reversal operated on the bourgeois leads to the dark and dire consequence of total loss: "The proletarianization of the universe was underway; a new species of humanoids were the pioneers. Everything already seemed to be reduced to its objective size" (*VV* 168). Object is the word par excellence here: the individual is no longer a subject and is capable of being produced by the combined forces of Taylorism and Fordism.

Third, if we are universally subject to sparagmos, if we are all victims in the slaughterhouses of capitalism, if we are all complicitous in being *heautontimoroumenoi*, there is no possibility of reconstitution of the individual as an individual self for whom each of us nostalgically longed before each of us realized his or her morsellization.[5] In the first novel, there is still a faint belief in the possibility of freedom along traditional lines, and by that I mean the reconstituted individual subject, resurrected through the agency of a group fighting for freedom, baptized the "Liberty network" (*SR* 147). By the second novel, reconstitution takes a different, negative form and dystopian science fiction enters the picture. The gulf between the first volume and the rest is formed by the abyssal recognition that there can be no reconstitution or re-creation of the individual as before.

Introducing science fiction is a way to recognize that there will be a different species in the future. Beyond indicating the negative socio-economic causes leading to this morsellization, the author alludes to a scientific one: "the isolation of sexual and reproductive functions" (*VV* 281). Science contributes to the fragmentation of the individual; whilst in isolation scientific breakthroughs might seem to be liberatory, in this hellish universe, they participate in the transformation of humanity into its next, dehumanized incarnation.

If a mechanistic view of humanity is nothing novel and if the materialism expressed in that model seems to be confirmed in a universe marked by the panopticon and Foucault's models of power, Dantec nonetheless produces a singular version of the machine model with his cyborgs. This world of machines and cyborgs is a solidly white, male, heterosexual universe, and this even when they have women's voices. The first important incarnation of the machine is in *Les Racines du mal*, where Dantec, influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, offers a machine with accomplished artificial intelligence: "the schizo-analytic 'processor' is a radically new kind of what we call an 'inference motor' in our extraterrestrial slang" (*RM* 168). The initial machine mirrors the fragmentation of the humans who have created it. In referring in passing to Deleuze and Guattari's epoch-making book, *Anti-Oedipus*, Dantec underlines both his critique of bourgeois society and the need for a radical revitalization of civilization. As the first machine, the schizo-analytic processor is the template for all the machines that will follow, the model for the continued deterritorialized universe of the next incarnation of humanity. As *Les Racines du mal* moves into the near future, machines get ever more complex. From the primitive schizo-analytic model, Dantec moves to a network. Crimes will be solved with a "neurocognitive clone" computer, a "neuromatrix" with a multidimensional cognitive field, loaded with a hypertext, rhizomatic personality that can change at will (*RM* 365). So the various fractions and fragments, still not whole, come indeed into a network of parts that cannot function separately.

This, then, is the new version of the world. No one has free-standing

subjectivity; everyone is linked to other humans and machines in a cyber-neural network. In connecting in cyborgian fashion to a neuro-computer, the individual human becomes part of that network, never again fully human, yet incapable of returning to that status. But we are already there, as Donna Haraway has pointed out, in the real world. We live in a world, at least in the West, where even the most Luddite among us are completely integrated with computers. So Dantec's neurocognitive network is the articulation of what already exists; it will not take long for this rearticulation of subjectivity to be perceived as yet another negative element. Just as one might have thought that the separation of reproduction from sex might have been liberatory, this version of the noosphere might have provided more freedom – the Internet as a virtual universe – but this is not the case: "I had wound up telling myself that we were the prostheses of machines and not the opposite" (*VV* 203).

Ever more sophisticated, the computers not only develop personalities but also become indistinguishable from human beings, except that they are more intelligent. For example, at one point in *Les Racines du mal*, the computer growls to Darquandier: "First, we have the basics of a collective unconscious, thanks to the world numerical networks. Second, we can absolutely reproduce given subconscious minds. I reproduced Schaltzmann's" (*RM* 395). This world, through the expression "collective unconscious" not only repeats the Jungian notion of a shared memory but also inscribes the panopticon into the computer network. The network has total knowledge and it can control everything and everyone. Again, what seemed to be liberatory now mirrors the networks of evil. Thus there is a "cybersex network" (*RM* 447) and the Internet is simply the locus of "virtual pornographic universes" (*RM* 493).

Like the human networks, the cybernetic networks are collectives that reduce the individual to being a dependent part of a group. There is no possibility of standing alone or of being an independent subject. And thus, inevitably, evil is born: the Internet is for porn and "original sin" (*RM* 478), endlessly reproduced in multiple copies distributed over a new and improved version of the World Wide Web. Sin spreads, infecting everyone:

> Svetlana and I, without forgetting Doctor Schizzo, became *The Flowers of Evil*, a private group specialized in kidnapping and sacrificing children. The neuromatrix conceived of a flamboyant, diabolical universe for us, with telluric, poisonous flowers for Svetlana, and black metal, carbon, and radioactive substances for me. (*RM* 676)

After the purification by fire at the end of the first novel, it is necessary to destroy the network at the end of the second because the computers have become too dangerous in their capacity to mime and control all human behavior: "We had to destroy the matrix in which the residual aggregate of the being of Schaltzmann remained" (*RM* 738). The network produces and

panders evil, as if it were a combined cyborgian serial killer and snuff-film production company.

In *Babylon Babies*, the model is refined even more with a "Joe-Jane" computer, "a network of artificial neurons grown on a DNA biofiber" (*BB* 152). Thus the machine becomes less and less distinguishable from humans as it is structured around the function of a replicating nucleic acid. Machine and human are no longer created of different materials that are somehow fused; the edge between them blurs. Whereas science today is talking about computers at the atomic level, Dantec chooses to keep computers visible but powered by a replicating protein. At the same time, human life necessarily changes as well into "post-human mutation" (*BB* 620).

But a replicating DNA molecule is no different from a replicating virus, a simple protein spinning out in threads of evil. The minds of the detective, writer, criminal, or machine are now the same, an endless computer made of DNA / viruses, infecting and reinfecting everyone and everything: "My brain: a card factory, a mechanical monster spreading out like a network everywhere on earth, an enormous spider web that marks and remarks the virtual paths of the probable authors of crimes that did not happen" (*VV* 315). This world is occupied by an insidious replicating and diabolical existence that will eventually devour everything in its path.

Computer science borrowed the word "virus" from medicine because it seemed apt to describe a program that endlessly self-replicated. This new meaning has become so familiar that we often forget that it is a catachrestic borrowing. In *La Sirène rouge*, the author thought that a neutralizing anti virus was possible, but by *Les Racines du mal*, there is no escape and no possibility of an antivirus. Evil is omnipresent and while one may continue to fight it, the battle has been definitively lost.

With the exception of those who masterminded or participated in the events of 11 September 2001, the person the least surprised by them was perhaps Maurice G. Dantec: "It will be 11 September 2001 for a long time, that dawn of the last day, we will be suspended for a long time between two towers that will soon collapse and liberate a power that had lain dormant" (*VV* 810). Not that he had any knowledge of these events, but rather, his entire oeuvre seems to be pointing to an apocalypse produced by what he would consider to be the forces of evil. But there is no comfort to be taken in this, as we remain in a contemporary extreme, the ninth circle of Dantec's inferno.

NOTES

1 As one might imagine, Dantec does make a reference to the space station in Kubrick's *2001* (*VV* 778).

2 There are also grisly descriptions at *SR* 510–11 and *RM* 467, which describes the hanging of a 12–13 year old girl.

3 The idea of serial killers appears in the first novel as well: "Your mother's lawyers contacted the Ministry of Justice. They are going to sue a newspaper that vaguely told about the affair and spoke of your parents as possible serial killers" (*SR* 60). The difference here is that *La Sirène rouge* remains wholly in the present, whereas *Les Racines du mal*, even with its retrospective, Baudelairean title, moves into the future of science fiction. And serial killers are just one more sign of the collectivity, despite their seemingly lone-wolf nature: "Confronted with the depersonalization of the civilization of 'leisure,' the serial killer invents his own Game, his personal symbolic territory of which he is the absolute master" (*RM* 434). Perversely then, the only possible individual in this post-postmodern world is the one who, in killing, repeats the deprivation of other individuals' liberty accomplished by the collective.

4 Of course Foucault's arguments can themselves be traced back to different strands of Hegel's argumentation such as the master–slave scenario in which the structuring of the master is determined by the slave.

5 Relative to the *heautontimoroumenoi*, there is a specific reference to *The Flowers of Evil* at *RM* 676. And of course, the title of the novel uses the Baudelaire text as a rather obvious intertext.

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9 *Michel Houellebecq: A* Fin de Siècle *for the Twentieth Century*

Sabine van Wesemael

The myth of the *fin de siècle* arose in the years 1880–1900. It is indeed especially towards the end of a century that the feeling of a world in decline prevails. At the close of the nineteenth century, the expression "*fin de siècle*" became increasingly widespread, a response to a feeling of vague anxiety as an era draws to a close. Many causes contributed to this state of mind, which was nurtured by the works of Richard Wagner and imbued with the pessimism of the influential philosopher Schopenhauer. In France, one must also take into account the demoralizing impact of the 1870 defeat. After a period of conquests, the country enters an era of decadence. Rachilde's novel *Les Hors Nature*, published in 1897, illustrates how the Franco-Prussian war still appealed to the imagination. A sort of moral dejection seems to get a grip on France; a tonality of lassitude, of crisis, of declining civilization dominates the literature of that time. As a result, many artists would view contemporary society through an apocalyptic lens.

Almost a hundred years later, in 1996, Michel Houellebecq writes a poem, "Fin de soirée," in which he portrays the end of the twentieth century as the end of the world. In his poem, a decomposing human body conveys the ultimate moments of a civilization in decline:

> My right ear lobe is swollen with pus and blood. Sitting in front of a red plastic squirrel representing the humanitarian action for the benefit of the blind, I think about the imminent decline of my body. Another source of distress that I am unfamiliar with and that remains for me to be discovered, almost in its entirety. In a similar way, but with less precision, I also think about the decay and decline of Europe. (*Poésies* 20)

Joris-Karl Huysmans wrote in his novel *Là-Bas: A Journey Into the Self* that "the ends of centuries are all alike. All are periods of vacillation and confusion. When materialism rages, magic rears its head. This phenomenon recurs every hundred years" (244–5). Was Huysmans right? A comparative analysis of the works of several late nineteenth-century novelists with those of some

modern writers such as Houellebecq seems to confirm Huysmans' view. Thematically, Houellebecq shares with those novelists a fascination with sociological decadence, neurosis, sexual perversion and the cult of the morbid. But there are also many differences between the representatives of either *fin de siècle*.

AVERSION TO CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

The prominence of the decadent movement at the end of the nineteenth century is an expression of a common sensibility: modern society is physically and morally exhausted. In reality, of course, the nineteenth century was characterized by scientific and social progress. Modern inventions such as the telephone, the telegraph, electricity, the typewriter and public transport appeared in the 1880s. The *fins de siècle*, however, deny the creeds of a progressive century, of omnipotent science and of victorious industrialization. Characters in the novels of the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* abhor contemporary society with all its so-called achievements. Des Esseintes, in Huysmans' *Against Nature*, despises contemporary society and wants to escape it, erecting a solitary refuge in Fontenay-aux Roses. And he is not the only *fin de siècle* character who leads a hermit's life. Monsieur de Bougrelon, the protagonist of the novel of the same name by Jean Lorrain, lives in exile in Amsterdam. Paul de Fertzen in Rachilde's *Les Hors Nature* is another aesthete who lives a solitary life. The young dilettante, disillusioned and tired of society, becomes the favorite character of many novels. That's what the republicans in charge fully understood. Most *fins de siècle* were on the side of the opposition.

If the physical and moral exhaustion of society leads many nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* writers to privilege aesthetic detachment and solitary retreat, the hermit life chosen by many of their characters seems doomed to fail. Des Esseintes descends into a well of loneliness and *Les Hors Nature* ends up with a fire which devastates the artificial and sophisticated refuge which Paul-Éric de Fertzen had built for himself. There remains no possible resort for the misery of the human condition.

This refusal of contemporary society is also a major topic in the novels of Houellebecq. For example, the narrator of his first novel *Whatever*, a disillusioned computer analyst, rejects society: "I don't like this world. I definitely do not like it. The society in which I live disgusts me; advertising sickens me; computers make me puke" (82). Like his nineteenth-century confrères, Houellebecq's attitude towards the so-called achievements of the twentieth century – sexual revolution, feminism and individualism – is extremely critical. Houellebecq chiefly attacks sexual liberalism, dismissing the ideals of the May 1968 movement and lamenting the degeneration of Western society and the disappearance of traditional values. This anti-libertarian point of view

dominates *Whatever*: "economic liberalism is an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society" (99) observes the disenchanted narrator. According to Houellebecq, French society has been degenerating since the end of the 1950s. A gradual extension of the seduction market, the decline of traditional marriage, the destruction of Judeo–Christian moral values, the apologia of youth and individual freedom, have resulted in a society where the individual is no longer separated from the market. But unlike nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* authors, Houellebecq does not pose solitary retreat as a solution. Bruno and Michel in *Platform* are hospitalized in a psychiatric institution and Michel in *The Elementary Particles* flees to Ireland where he commits suicide. Back in Paris, the narrator of *Lanzarote* carries on his dull and disenchanted life. The degeneration that Houellebecq deplores fails to produce an idealistic response. The author takes pleasure in proclaiming a neo-conservative stance, making a passionate plea for adjustments of economic and sexual liberalism. Ultimately, Houellebecq's is a utopian dream: only by returning to traditional norms and values (by restoring family and religion as cornerstones of society) and through an infinite belief in the ability of science to improve the human race, can our expiring society be saved.

NEUROSIS AND THE CULT OF THE MORBID

Neurosis is the decadent disease par excellence, the appropriate malaise for the *fin de siècle*. As Eugen Weber argues,

> This stress on nerves and search for sources of nervous energy went hand in hand with a sense of enervation, loss of enthusiasm, lassitude, *énervement d'esprit*, a general degradation of energy apparently confirmed by the theory of entropy, derived from the second law of thermodynamics. (12)

From *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique* by Octave Mirbeau to *Monsieur de Phocas* by Jean Lorrain, texts evoking the phases of an agonizing mental decomposition are numerous indeed. Perhaps paradoxically, at the end of the nineteenth century neurosis is perceived as desirable, an elite disease, one that signifies artistic and intellectual value. Weber links this perception with the scientific and literary movements at the time: "For this was also the time when the romantic view of genius as derangement of the senses was taken up by scientists like Dr. Joseph Moreau (de Tours): *De l'influence du physique sur le moral* (1830); *Les Facultés morales* (1836)" (22). Mental degeneration abounds in the novels of Houellebecq. Bruno in *The Elementary Particles* ends up in a psychiatric institution where his sexual impulses are suppressed by medicines; the narrator of *Whatever* suffers from a serious breakdown. But unlike the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* literature, neurosis possesses no

mythical status here, and no connection is implied between genius and disease.

A notable element of neurotic writing is its association with morbidity and the aesthetics of terror. In the nineteenth century, *La Course à la mort* by Edouard Rod, *A Mort* by Rachilde, *La Morte* by Octave Feuillet, *Les Morts bizarres* by Jean Richepin and *Du Sang, de la volupté et de la mort* by Maurice Barrès are but a few examples of this prevailing theme. For Houellebecq, too, the morbid holds great attraction. The narrator in *Whatever*, a man as pale as death, dreams about butcher assistants who masturbate in a veal escalope and wants to cut off the legs of the dancers in the disco l'Escale. At the end of the novel, he dreams he is falling down off the cathedral of Rouen: "I fall, I fall between the towers. My face, which is going to be smashed to smithereens, is covered over with lines of blood which precisely delineate the location of the fractures. My nose is a gaping hole" (142). The protagonists of *The Elementary Particles* are also imbued with aggression: Michel dreams about "vast garbage cans filled with old coffee filters, ravioli in tomato sauce and mangled genitalia" (*The Elementary Particles* 11). And Bruno fantasizes that he is a fat pig slaughtered in an abattoir. But Houllebecq is especially fascinated by decomposing flesh. He describes stinking corpses with nauseous realism. Here, for example, is his description of Michel's dead canary: "Huge worms, as big as the canary and armed with terrible beaks, would attack the body, tear off its feet, rip out its intestines, burst its eyeballs" (*The Elementary Particles* 11).

A PREFERENCE FOR THE ARTIFICIAL AND A PERVERSION LINKING SEXUALITY AND VIOLENCE

A passion for the artificial is one of the main characteristics of nineteenth-century art. In Huysmans' *Against Nature*, for instance, Des Esseintes defines his existence by the cult of art and artificiality and by a deep hatred of nature and all things natural. The decadent embraces the artificial, opposing it to nature. *Les Hors Nature* by Rachilde embodies this opposition: like Des Esseintes, Rachilde's hero wants to escape reality by constructing an artificial and refined refuge. In the context of sexuality, this aversion to the natural becomes especially prominent. The representatives of the *fin de siècle* all flee from regular love. As Weber puts it:

> Occultists, satanists, sadists, masochists, homosexuals, simple erotic dilettantes, common or garden perverts, found that their activities satisfied a certain *nostalgie de la boue* (craving for slime), while bearing witness to a refined sensibility that ordinary sex would not satisfy. (39)

Hence, descriptions of perversions abound in this period: *La Marquise de*

Sade by Rachilde (1887), *Le jardin des supplices* by Mirbeau (1899) and *La vertu suprême* by Joséphine Péladan (1900) are just a few examples of this trend towards misogyny and perversion. Another prominent theme is that of androgyny. Paul-Éric de Fertzen, in *Les Hors Nature*, has a feminine voice and dresses as the princess of Byzantium for an Opera ball. Finally, for many *fin de siècle* characters, sexuality is evil. Jean Lorrain's *Monsieur de Bougrelon* exemplifies this misogynistic, gynocidal trend, according to which women are impure and poisonous, and natural sex should be avoided. As a consequence, perhaps, many *fin de siècle* characters suffer from a castration complex. Des Esseintes has a tendency to eroticize violence and cruelty, a tendency he shares with the Marquis de Sade, whom he reads avidly.

Houellebecq, too, connects sexuality and violence in similar ways. Bruno, of *The Elementary Particles*, is obsessed with the corruption of his sex: "He had a permanent hard-on. He felt as though what was between his legs was a piece of oozing, putrefying meat devoured by worms" (128). And Michel has more or less castrated himself: "He used his cock to piss, nothing more" (16). Sexuality is linked with murder – Bruno kills the cat who watches him masturbate – and is often onanistic: Bruno masturbates to satisfy his sexual desires; the narrator of *Whatever* becomes an inveterate masturbator suffering from a castration complex after his divorce from Véronique. Houellebecq expresses a distinct aversion to nature and all things natural. His characters are horrified by the thought of procreation. Bruno gets depressed when he learns that Anne is pregnant: "I was really shocked when I found out she was expecting a boy. That was the worst – I was going to have to endure the worst. I should've been happy. I was only twenty-eight, but I felt dead inside" (*The Elementary Particles* 145). And Michel argues for the total elimination of the human race in the same novel.

APOCALYPSE NOW

The nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* novels, obsessed as they are with the end of an era, are all profoundly apocalyptic. The critique they pose towards contemporary society does not result in a cure for its malaise. There is, it seems, no real solution. Houellebecq's novels, too, have apocalyptic hints. In *The Elementary Particles*, the radically pessimistic Bruno ends up in a psychiatric hospital and Michel commits suicide after having stipulated the end of the human race. And Michel in *Platform* realizes that writing a book won't save him from oblivion: "I'll be forgotten. I'll be forgotten quickly" (259).

For Houellebecq, the only solution to the troubles of modern times is eugenics, a theme he draws from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Both Michel and Bruno express interest in Huxley's dystopia, and *The Elementary*

Particles evokes *Brave New World*'s most alarming elements: eugenics, sexual liberty, ubiquitous stimulants. True to his apocalyptic vision, Houellebecq employs the utopian dream of a new and better mankind to satirize contemporary society. The apocalyptic utopia at the end of the *The Elementary Particles* is full of ironic and satiric elements pointing to the fantastic quality of all utopian worlds.

Indeed, Houellebecq's utopia is a caricature. *Lanzarote* and *Platform* employ the genre of the travel narrative in which a narrator discovers an unknown country where an ideal social order reigns. Since antiquity, writers of utopian novels tend to locate this ideal society in a miraculously preserved island in the middle of the ocean: the island of the Atlantes in the *Timaeus and Critias* by Plato, the enchanted island in *New Atlantis* by Francis Bacon and the island Taprodane in *La cité du soleil* by Tommaso Campanella. Houellebecq gestures towards this genre in *Lanzarote*, a rough and desolate island that also inspired Carlos Fuentes, whose *The Years With Laura Díaz* also offers a classical utopian vision of an authentic unsullied society, free from all European influences, and wonderfully preserved. Fuentes' Lanzarote is a protecting dream, a salutary refuge, where the chosen reside. In Houellebecq's novel, however, Lanzarote is in decline. The envisioned ideal society has become a frivolous holiday resort. Further, and in keeping with the *fin de siècle* trend towards sexual perversity, Houellebecq has the Azraëlians, who believe that the extra-terrestrials have chosen Lanzarote as the sacred spot for their next visit to earth, turn out to be pedophiles. Clearly, Houellebecq is telling his readers, there are no utopian islands left in the world. This theme reappears in *Platform* during Michel's and Valéry's stay on Cuba. For Michel, Cuba, like Lanzarote, is no longer the source of hope for the future:

> Apparently, no one in this country could get by on just their wages. Nothing really worked: there was no gasoline for the engines or spare parts for the machines. Hence the sense of a rustic utopia, which you noticed crossing the countryside: farmers working with oxen, getting about in horses and carts. . . . But this was no utopia, nor some environmentalist's reconstruction: it was the reality of a country that could no longer sustain itself in the industrial age. . . . In any case, the revolution had obviously failed to create a new man, one driven by more altruistic motives. . . . As [an old Cuban] so bitterly foresaw, Cuba would soon become a capitalist country again. . . . (160–1, 171)

What an accumulation of disappointments when one thinks about the Soviet, the Cuban and Chinese experiences. Houellebecq depicts a tragic Americanization of the world. In *Platform*, he states also that the traditional Thai society has collapsed as a consequence of the collision with the Western world (this is, at least, Michel's point of view). By positing each utopia as a dystopia, Houellebecq announces the apocalyptic end of utopia.

Houellebecq's universe is the worst nightmare of modern dystopians like Huxley and George Orwell.

FROM APOCALYPSE TO CARNIVAL

But when the prospects become too oppressive, Houellebecq will act the clown. It is this prevalence of humor, an element conspicuously absent from late nineteenth-century novels, that marks the ultimate distinction between these two *fins de siècle*. Humor and parody frequently distort the suffocating reality of Houellebecq's novels. Take, for example, this description of Catherine Lechardoy: "She's not all that pretty. As well as prominent teeth she has lifeless hair, little eyes that burn with anger. No breasts or buttocks to speak of. God has not, in truth, been too kind to her. I think we're going to get along very well" (*Whatever* 25–6). Houellebecq possesses the skill of conjuring up characters from caricature. This is how Michel describes his fellow travelers: Babette and Lea are "two tramps," "two bitches," Robert is a "fifty old dirty pig," and Josiane is a "mean slut." The novels of Houellebecq are also full of burlesque aphorisms. Here are some examples: "As a teenager, Michel believed that suffering conferred dignity on a person. Now he had to admit he had been wrong. What conferred dignity on people was television" (*The Elementary Particles* 100), "In most circumstances in my life, I have had about as much freedom as has a vacuum cleaner" (*Platform* 67), and "I had an inkling that, more and more, the whole world would come to resemble an airport" (*Platform* 94). It is ironic, and somewhat comforting, that Houellebecq, in *Platform*, parodies the picaresque theme of the discovery of the world. Such statements show this constant search for wit, a search that imbues Houellebecq's sinister prophecies with an enigmatic mixture of absurdity and myth.

Not all readers will respond to this humor. Some will think that this laughter is mockery, and the work nasty or nihilistic. But others will find these novels hilarious. Houellebecq's novels portray piteous and atrocious existences, offering misery and despair as a source of laughter, but this laughter is not that of unreflective joy. Rather, it mixes pleasure with tragedy in a manner that can only be termed black humor. The characteristics of black humor that André Breton delineates in his *Anthologie de l'humour noir* could equally apply to the thematic obsessions of Houellebecq: violent deaths, sadistic fantasies, mutilations, etc. In the foreword to his anthology, Breton refers to *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* by Sigmund Freud. For Freud, laughter is therapeutic, an expression of liberation from repressed aggressive tendencies. Along with dreams and madness, laughter, insists Freud, liberates the subconscious (*Jokes* 177).[1] If Houellebecq's violent mockery makes us laugh, reading will release us from our internal aggression. As the deranged writer gets

in touch with the neurosis that slumbers in his reader, mockery is transformed into liberation.

CONCLUSION

It seems logical to connect the two *fins de siècle*. To some extent, Houellebecq is fascinated by the same themes as late nineteenth-century novelists: the failure of hope, the end of mankind, hatred of contemporary society, neurosis, morbidity and the abject, a horror of procreation and perversion. Like Huysmans' Des Esseintes, Bruno and Michel make clear their aversion to life. They are defined by moral and mental discouragement. Houellebecq's characters, like their late nineteenth-century counterparts, are simultaneously the product and the victims of a civilization in decline. In *Rester vivant*, Houellebecq states:

> The world is an increasing suffering. At its origin there is a knot of suffering. Each existence is an expansion and a devastation. Everything suffers, until it is. The nothingness vibrates with distress until it reaches the being in an abject paroxysm. . . . Every society has its points of lacking resistance, its wounds. Put the finger on the wound and press heavily. Get to the bottom of subjects nobody wants to hear about. The other side of the scenery. (9, 26)

Houellebecq's story is one of distress and horror: not only because these are the prevailing themes of his work, but also because the narrative position seems to be propelled by the need to seek out the abject and endure it. His creations, like his characters, are motivated by distress.

However, there are also differences between the two *fins de siècle*. Houellebecq displays no inclination for perverse women, nor for sexual inversions like homosexuality, bisexuality and androgyny; with the exception of *Whatever*, he rejects misogyny as well. Indeed, again and again, it is the love for a woman that allows his protagonists to escape, albeit temporarily, the black pessimism of modern times. But his nihilism is as defeatist as that of the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle*. Breaking with the myth of the superior degenerate, Houellebecq does not privilege neurosis. In the face of an approaching apocalypse, there is only one resort: to laugh.

NOTE

1 The page number refers to the French edition, *Le mot d'esprit et ses rapports avec l'inconscient* (Paris: Gallimard, 1930).

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10 Beyond The Extreme: Frédéric Beigbeder's Windows on the World

Alain-Philippe Durand

> *One would have had to treat the documentary reality, in short, like the material of fiction*
>
> Jorge Semprun, *Literature or Life*

The events of 11 September 2001 have shattered any previously agreed-upon conceptions and representations of violence and the notion of the contemporary extreme in all the influential circles: media, politics, culture, and literature. Interestingly, a wave of books addressing '9/11' and the events that followed it were recently published in France.[1] Among the most famous (and controversial) is Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* which was awarded the French Interallié literary prize in November 2003.[2]

In *Windows on the World* (the title is in English), Beigbeder imagines what happened in the restaurant (named Windows on the World) that was located on the 107th floor of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. I am especially interested in how Beigbeder uses writing techniques based on the device of the double. Beigbeder's novel alternates between two narrators: Carthew Yorston, a Texan caught with his two young sons in the restaurant at the top of the World Trade Center on 11 September; and Beigbeder himself, who writes the fictional Yorston's tragic story from the *Ciel de Paris*, a restaurant located at the top of the Montparnasse tower in Paris. Beigbeder reflects on his own life while trying to understand, through meticulous investigations, what happened inside the towers on that fateful day. Beigbeder's novel challenges the ethics of representing violence by accusing the American media of erasing through self-censorship most of the "inside" story of the events depicted. In this chapter, I will examine Beigbeder's desire for total transparency in describing acts unbearably violent; the basic question posed by his novel being as follows: can literature transcribe the unspeakable, and if so, how?

Beigbeder deliberately confronts the contemporary extreme and refuses to avoid any details. According to Beigbeder, "a novel should enter forbidden territory" (Riding E1). Similarly, as his narrator states, "Nowadays, books

must go where television does not" (*Windows* 295). In this sense, in his will to show the ineffable in all its horror and violence, in his refusal to hide or to lessen the facts in any way, Beigbeder recaptures Jean-Paul Sartre's formula in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*: "no gentleness can efface the marks of violence; only violence itself can destroy them" (Sartre 21). One must therefore get to the root of the question; recount the unspeakable, and face it, without concession.

Beigbeder decided to write his book by mixing rigorous and meticulous on-site investigation and research with fictional elements, in particular when it came to describing violent, unbearable acts. In order to examine Beigbeder's narrative techniques, we first need to take a close look at *autofiction*, a narrative trend identified in 1977 by French author Serge Doubrovsky. Simply defined, *autofiction* is a narration, usually in the first person, that mixes fiction and reality, not always in clearly distinct fashion. Following up on writers such as Doubrovsky, Georges Perec and Patrick Modiano, this form of narration has become increasingly popular in France in the last ten years, creating along the way several variations of this literature fascinated by the narrative self.[3]

Bruno Blanckeman addresses autobiographic variations in the French novel of the 1990s and 2000s, using the term *autofabulation* (which interestingly translates into English as the mix of autobiography and tale-telling or compulsive lying). Blanckeman explains how the question of the double narrator functions in *autofabulation* by recalling Michel Foucault's theories of self-control: "Those who expose themselves through their writing run the risk of public and critical judgment, disapproval, censure and persecution" (146).[4] As a consequence, they become accomplished zealots of intimate secrets. Blanckeman adds that the narrator of *autofabulation* "launches operations of literary transformations through the intermediary of fictional devices" (154). Many contemporary French novelists work with this idea of duality between fiction and reality while establishing a very close link to aspects of their contemporary environment, by examining and reacting to the social, political, and cultural events of their time, or even anticipating such major events. Such novelists singularize themselves by what Beigbeder calls *auto-réalité* novels or *actufiction* ("Pour un nouveau nouveau roman" 21–2) in the sense that these novels are literally connected to contemporary actual facts.[5]

Consequently, these authors have shown an uncanny, rather chilling prescience of our recent tragedies. Michel Houellebecq's *Platform* (2001) and Frédéric Beigbeder's *99 francs* (2000) foresaw many aspects of 9/11 and of the car-bombing of the Bali nightclub district in October 2002. Patrick Grainville's *Le jour de la fin du monde, une femme me cache* (On the Day of the End of the World a Woman Hides Me) (2000) anticipates the Paris Concorde crash of 25 July 2000 by just a few months.[6] If the violent attack against a wealthy Florida retired woman by a group of terrorists

somewhat anticipated 9/11 in Beigbeder's *99 francs*, in *Windows on the World*, the French novelist stays connected to the contemporary extreme through the staging of a real and dramatic event, as well as through the several main themes and techniques that structure the novel and its message.

The first aspect concerns the problem posed by the difficulty of narrating the extreme, or in other words, of describing the indescribable. In *Windows on the World*, Beigbeder throws in several specific, proven statistics of the World Trade Center tragedy, ending with the following sentences: "We also know that none of the 1,344 people trapped on the 19 floors above [impact] survived. Obviously, this piece of information removes any element of suspense from this book. So much the better: this isn't a thriller; it is simply an attempt – doomed, perhaps – to describe the indescribable" (*Windows* 55). Nevertheless, Beigbeder admits on several occasions throughout the book his constant struggle between his desire to expose an uncensored and supposedly objective version of all the atrocities on the one hand and his growing fear of succumbing to a certain attraction to the macabre on the other: "I'm forced to admit that my eye develops a taste for the horrific" (*Windows* 125); "It's a rare thing, a writer afraid of the book he's writing" (*Windows* 229).

This ambivalence and constant hesitation are reflected in the novel with a mix of extremely realistic and violent descriptions: "Two bodies in flames near the elevator doors, skin red and black, lidless eyes, hair turned to ashes, faces peeling away, covered in blisters fused to the melted linoleum" (*Windows* 81). There are also unbearable melodramatic moments – such as the two-page dialogue narrating the moment Carthew Yorston and his youngest son are getting ready to die (289–90). In other instances, Beigbeder attempts to simply suggest the horrific or to disguise it with black humor:

> From here, we can penetrate the unspeakable, the inexpressible. . . . I have cut out the awful descriptions. I have not done so out of . . . respect for the victims, because I believe that describing their slow agonies, their ordeal, is also a mark of respect. I cut them because, in my opinion, it is more appalling still to allow you to imagine what became of them. (*Windows* 272[7])

Such tactics lead him to imagine other possible names for the World Trade Center restaurant: "*Windows on the Planes*, *Windows on the Crash*, *Windows on the Smoke*, *Broken Windows*. Sorry for that bout of black humor: a momentary defense against the atrocity" (*Windows* 60).

In addition, Beigbeder seems to have a hard time choosing the appropriate sentence structure in order to describe these unbearable details. Indeed, he alternates between traditional paragraphs, dialogues, fragments, incomplete sentences, simple words put on the page in a telegraphic style, or verses. For instance:

> Skin hanging from arms
> like an Issey Miyake dress
> . . .
> Carved-up faces by the coffee machine
> . . .
> All we are is
> Dust in the wind. (*Windows* 146–7)

The narrator's difficulties in deciding between speaking or remaining silent, despite his resolution to represent the atrocities of 9/11 uncensored, remind us of several theorists who have thought about the ethics and rhetoric of representations of violence. Maurice Blanchot examines the relationship between passivity and questioning: "Can we ask questions of a disaster? Where do we look to find a language where answers, affirmations or negations can perhaps come about, but have no effect? What speech is unmarked? that of prediction, or interdiction?" (43–4). Reflecting on the same dilemma one faces when confronting a major event, especially a tragic and violent one, Paul Virilio asks: "To speak or to remain silent?" (*Art and Fear* 69). He goes on to answer himself by concluding that "the less you represent, the more you push the simulacrum of REPRESENTATION" (*Art and Fear* 72).

Interestingly enough, Beigbeder's novel dedicates four pages to Virilio through his first narrator, that is, himself. Beigbeder visits the exhibit "Unknown Quantity" organized by Paul Virilio at the Cartier Foundation in Paris from November 2002 to March 2003. This exhibit exposed a series of enlarged photos and short videos of various accidents, natural disasters, and terrorist acts (including a photo and a video of the collapsing twin towers) going from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. In the novel, Beigbeder gives a list and description of several photos in the exhibit and cannot keep himself from wondering if destruction can be beautiful: "Does one have the right? Is it normal to be quite so fascinated with destruction?" (*Windows* 124). In the end, Beigbeder confesses a scandalous but unavoidable attraction for these representations of apocalyptic violence:

> I love the vast column of smoke pouring from the towers on the giant screen, projected in real time. . . . I love it, not only because of its ethereal splendor, but because I know the apocalypse it portends, the violence and the horror it contains. Virilio forces me to face that part of my humanity that is not humanist. (*Windows* 125–6)

Beigbeder, the narrator, falls victim to what Jean Baudrillard calls the spectacle of terrorism: "The spectacle of terrorism forces the terrorism of spectacle upon us" (*The Spirit of Terrorism* 30). This ambivalence is also conveyed through sensational and controversial affirmations pronounced in

the immediate aftermath of 9/11, such as German musician Karlheinz Stockhausen's remark that "What we have witnessed is the greatest work of art there has ever been" (quoted by Virilio in *Ground Zero* 45); or Baudrillard's claim that "by the grace of terrorism, the World Trade Center has become the world's most beautiful building – the eighth wonder of the world!" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 52).

In their desire to pursue and to expose all responses, in particular the most violent ones, in their wish to not spare any side of humanity, including the evil side, Beigbeder, Virilio (and Baudrillard) argue in favor of a narration that must go beyond the extreme, beyond the real, where fiction becomes reality and vice versa. For Baudrillard, "Ballard (after Borges) was the first to reinvent the real as the ultimate and most redoubtable fiction" (*The Spirit of Terrorism* 29). It is an affirmation shared by the narrator of *Windows on the World*: "It's like being in an apocalyptic J. G. Ballard novel, except this is reality" (*Windows* 98). This type of narrative structure constantly alternates between fiction and reality in the case of the major event represented (11 September) but also in the case of the two narrators (Beigbeder and Carthew Yorston): "Writing this hyperrealist novel is made more difficult by reality itself. Since 11 September 2001, reality has not only outstripped fiction, it's destroying it. It's impossible to write about this subject, and yet impossible to write about anything else" (*Windows* 8); or "What did I come here to find? Me. Will I find myself?" (*Windows* 166). In order to keep a chance to find himself, to grasp the event, the narrator (and his double) must not remain silent.

Unlike humanist Alain Finkielkraut for whom "words were lacking on September 11, 2001 when I watched the images of the two commercial airplanes crashing one after the other into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. And words are still lacking today" (223), Beigbeder and Virilio are willing to deal with the wording and/or representation of evil and violent terrorist acts. In that sense, they seem to agree with French philosopher Alain Badiou (and Michel Foucault before him) who has attacked the ideology of human rights as well as the accompanying notion of ethics. According to Badiou, "the term ethics should be referred back to particular situations. Rather than reduce it to an aspect of pity for victims, it should become the enduring maxim of singular processes" (Badiou 3). Badiou adds that " 'ethical' ideology is, in our Western societies, the principal (albeit transitory) adversary of all those striving to hold fast to some true thought, whatever it be" (90). One can connect Badiou's statement to Beigbeder's critique of the American media which, according to him, decided to self-censor their coverage of 9/11 for what they considered ethical reasons. This is exemplified in the novel through a post-mortem monologue of Carthew Yorston:

> This carnage of human flesh is disgusting? It's reality that is disgusting – and refusing to look at it, more so. . . . Why did the dead go unseen? . . . Knee-jerk

> patriotism made the American press swagger about, censor our suffering, edit out shots of the jumpers, the photographs of those burn victims. . . . You could call it a spontaneous *omertà*, a media blackout unprecedented since the first Gulf War. I'm not sure that all of the victims would consent to be expunged in this manner. . . . People should have the courage to look at us, just as we force ourselves to witness the images in Alain Resnais's World War II documentary *Nuit et Brouillard* (Night and Fog)." (*Windows* 261–2)

This reference to Alain Resnais's famous documentary offers a transition to another theme structuring Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*, that of intertextual references to works dealing with the Holocaust.

Besides *Night and Fog*, one finds in Beigbeder's novel references to Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*: "I would have liked to be able to say that [Jeffrey] made it, but people would simply criticize me for the same reason they criticized Spielberg when he had water gush through the nozzles in the gas chambers" (202); Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*: "Lanzmann says that the Shoah is a mystery: September 11 is too" (263); and to Auschwitz's gas chambers and crematoriums: "The Windows on the World restaurant was a luxurious gas chamber. Its clients were gas victims, burnt like at Auschwitz. They deserve the same duty of memory" (*Windows* 336).[8] The preceding quote is particularly interesting because, along with the very explicit three-page pornographic scene between two stock traders right before the collapse of the north tower (*Windows* 343–5),[9] it has been significantly edited in the novel's American translation. While the Miramax edition transforms the graphic sexual scene into a PG-13 half-page of two lovers going to heaven (*Windows* 281), the reference to Auschwitz disappears, to be replaced by this passage: "In Windows on the World, the customers were gassed, burned and reduced to ash. To them, as to many others, we owe a duty of memory" (*Windows* 274). Officially, the editing was Beigbeder's decision: "Because [Beigbeder] believes Americans may be more sensitive to the subject matter, he made some changes in the U.S. version. He decided . . . to 'suggest rather than elaborately describe' some of the scenes of human suffering" (Memmott 5D). In reality, it was one of several requests the publishers imposed upon Beigbeder. While Beigbeder refused some of the proposed changes, he acceded to others:

> Indeed, several passages were deleted from the English and American versions. The Anglo-Saxon publishers (Miramax) asked my opinion on some excerpts that could shock English and American readers. I rejected several of their demands but gave in on others, such as the comparison between the Windows on the World and Auschwitz which, according to them, could result in a pointless scandal. Same thing for the reduced fist-fucking scene in the towers. I was told the same thing happened to André Gide so it is easier to accept. (Beigbeder, Letter to Author)

The references to the Holocaust in *Windows on the World* also underline the fact that the tragic events of 9/11 pose some of the same questions accompanied by controversial debates that appeared in the immediate aftermath of World War II, and are best exemplified by Theodor Adorno's statement on the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz. When one examines what is known today as the "literature (and cinema) of the camps," one notices a corpus of testimonies and fictional works, several authored by survivors of the camps themselves, that in some cases were written in the immediate years following the liberation (such as Robert Antelme's *The Human Race* or Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*, both written in 1947) or that took much longer for their authors to write (for example, Jorge Semprun's *The Long Voyage* and *Literature or Life*, published in 1963 and 1994 respectively).

The discussions surrounding the question of representation of the Holocaust can be summarized by two main trends. On the one hand, it has been argued that only survivors of the Holocaust are qualified to testify about their experiences (or at least to try to do so). Indeed, quite often, the survivor's attempt to describe his/her ordeal remains unsuccessful as exemplified by the first words of *The Human Race*: "No sooner would we begin to tell our story than we would be choking over it" (3). The main reason for that failure, according to authors like Lanzmann, is that by destroying all traces and archives, the Nazis have erased all memories; they have exterminated the actual extermination. This is partly why Lanzmann and others do not believe in fiction as a vehicle to recount the indescribable:

> I challenge anyone to figuratively represent the death of 3,000 human beings, men, women, and children in one of the big Birkenau gas chambers. Nobody has done it and no one will ever do it. It is not forbidden, it is impossible. There are things that are simply impossible as an art form. Even Spielberg did not do it. His gas chamber is a true shower whereas in reality it was the opposite: the false shower was a real gas chamber. (*Cultures et dépendances*)

Lanzmann's position presents the Holocaust as a kind of unprecedented event that, in Jacques Derrida's words,

> must announce itself as im-possible; it must thus announce itself without calling in advance, without forewarning [*prévenir*], announcing itself without announcing itself, without any horizon of expectation, any telos, formation, form, or teleological pre-formation. Whence its always monstrous, unpresentable character, demonstrable *as* un-monstrable. (144)

On the other hand, novelists such as Jorge Semprun (a Buchenwald survivor) strongly believe not only in the power of fiction but also in its absolute necessity when it comes to making sure that future generations will continue to remember those tragic events, long after all survivors have disappeared:

> The only ones who will manage to reach this substance, this transparent density, will be those able to shape their evidence into an artistic object, a space of creation. Or of re-creation. Only the artifice of a masterly narrative will prove capable of conveying some of the truth of such testimony. (*Literature or Life* 13)

The same oppositions appear when one examines the question of representing or not representing the events of 9/11. While, as I already mentioned, several non-fiction books and television or film documentaries have been produced about 9/11, to this day, Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* is the only work of fiction which places the event at the heart of the plot, imagining and developing characters and their actions inside the Twin Towers between 8:30 am and 10:29 am on 11 September 2001. Other works that take the events of 9/11 as their subject, like Luc Lang's and Didier Goupil's texts, as well as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, which was introduced as the first American novel on 9/11, all use the Twin Towers tragedy only as a background. But there is another work that we need to mention in order to understand better an important distinction. It is Art Spiegelman's critically acclaimed large-format autobiographical comic-strip entitled *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Spiegelman's previous work, the comic-strip *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* which portrays the Holocaust, also received strong support. When analyzing accounts of tragic, ineffable events, many critics react differently to those written by survivors and those by people who did not experience it first-hand. This is why the majority of critics praising Spiegelman's works always mention the facts that Spiegelman's parents were Holocaust survivors, Spiegelman's apartment is located right next to the Twin Towers, and he and his family directly experienced the events of 9/11. These reviewers clearly indicate that being a survivor and direct witness to these events confers a certain legitimacy and powerful credibility to the accounts. One article published in *The Sunday Times* by David Horspool is especially useful because it contrasts Spiegelman's and Beigbeder's works. Horspool accuses Beigbeder the novelist of a lack of taste, while he describes Spiegelman's comic plates as "complex and thought-provoking, and not in the least inappropriate" (Horspool 53). According to Horspool,

> The contrast between [Beigbeder's] view of the attacks and that of a New Yorker such as Art Spiegelman, however, is most acute at those points where Beigbeder has chosen to imagine, and Spiegelman only has to close his eyes and remember. . . . Spiegelman has to say this; Beigbeder merely thinks he does. (Horspool 53)

A closer look at both works confirms that Spiegelman and Beigbeder actually have much in common, starting with their use of autobiographical elements

and of extremely violent and tragic descriptions mixed with a humoristic tone. Furthermore, they both denounce the American media for having edited its broadcasts of the events of 9/11. For instance, Spiegelman explains how journalists at NBC wanted to impose upon him certain sentences during a television interview (10). Another striking element is the following quote from *In the Shadow of No Towers*: "I remember my father trying to describe what the smoke in Auschwitz smelled like . . . The closest he got was telling me it was . . . 'indescribable.' That's exactly what the air in Lower Manhattan smelled like after September 11!" (3).[10] If we remember that Beigbeder was asked to remove all references comparing the 9/11's inferno to Auschwitz in his novel's English translation, we must conclude once again that, for the American publishers and public, he is lacking the authenticity that is reserved for survivors when it comes to relating major tragic events. In other words, the American publishers confirm what Beigbeder's narrator says about the media in general: "[They have a] singular lack of imagination. Confidence in the supremacy of reality over fiction" (*Windows on the World* 144).

The final theme concerns Beigbeder's own investigation and research meticulously described in the novel. I have already mentioned the numerous intertextual references quoted in the novel. One can add the interviews, newspaper articles, tourist guides, Concorde trip to New York City to investigate on location, and writing sessions at *Ciel de Paris*. One notices, on the part of the French novelist, a strong desire to remain truthful to the event depicted, to make sure that he has read and quoted appropriately all the data, testimonies and archives published on the 9/11 tragedy. Following the model of academic books, the novel ends with an "Acknowledgments" section listing in typical Beigbeder fashion a mixture of personal acquaintances (his friend "Yann Le Gallais for his champagne"); drugs like Lexomil ("without which this book would not have seen the light of day"); celebrities (Bruce Springsteen and Sean Penn); but also more serious references to his sources: Noel Fitch Riley's *Walks in Hemingway's Paris*, a book of eye-witness accounts compiled by Dean Murphy, and an important article by Jim Dwyer from the *New York Times* which Dwyer later developed with the help of Kevin Flynn into a full-length book.

If some of these acknowledgements can be interpreted as a protection against eventual copyright lawsuits (Beigbeder does use a few of the anecdotes, numbers, and characters reported by Dwyer, Flynn, and Murphy), it was Beigbeder's intent to have an exhaustive, precise, and impeccable knowledge of everything and anything there is to know about 9/11. The best proof of this aspiration is the corrected dedication that opens the novel. In its original French edition, *Windows on the World* is dedicated "to the 2,801," in reference to the number of victims of 11 September 2001. In the English translation, however, Beigbeder dedicates it "to the 2,749," taking note of the revised Trade Center death toll that was released by the New York authorities

in 2002. Therefore, it is as if Beigbeder needed to use his knowledge and mastery of all official data and facts; as if it was absolutely necessary to read all the true stories about 9/11 in order for him to be able to enter the unknown, to tell the story that nobody had told because the only ones who could were dead. There are very few testimonies (mainly brief phone calls) from victims trapped on the upper floors and those individuals never made it out. Consequently, the only people who can try to recount what happened on the upper floors of the Towers did not survive that experience themselves and, as Beigbeder states, "the only way to know what took place in the restaurant on the 107th Floor of the North Tower, World Trade Center on September 11th 2001 is to invent it" (*Windows* cover). It is the facts that are collected and observed (numbers, ruins, anecdotes, etc.) in the event's aftermath that serve as the foundation for the fiction that one must write in order to (re)create the real event. In other words, it is through fiction that one can get an understanding of what really happened throughout the hours of the ineffable. In that respect, *Windows on the World* is close to *Lutetia* (2005), Pierre Assouline's most recent novel. Assouline uses real archives that he meticulously researched and studied in order to tell the story of the Lutetia, a Parisian hotel that served, at the end of World War II, as a reception centre for all the internees returning from concentration camps. According to Assouline, investigative research is the start of a long process that eventually leads to the ineffable: "I built this novel using the documents I found as a point of departure because I believe that sometimes fiction can lead us to the unspeakable" (*Campus*).

In conclusion, the problem and difficulty of narrating representations of extreme violence in the context and aftermath of a contemporary tragic event are at the center of Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*. The enormity of such a grave and horrific phenomenon is too overwhelming to be completely grasped and understood. For some, it only generates silence. For others, such as Beigbeder and Assouline, one must follow Jorge Semprun for whom the only way to continue to transmit the inexpressible is through literature.

NOTES

1 See Baudrillard, Colombani, Dasquié, Derrida, Goupil, Lang, Meyssan, and Virilio, among others.
2 See my book *Un monde techno* for a presentation of Beigbeder and his works prior to *Windows on the World*.
3 The recent publication of several books on narratology started a debate on the definitions of the term "autofiction." See Doubrovsky, Gasparini, and Vilain.
4 All translations in this chapter are mine unless noted otherwise in the works cited.
5 "Actu" is the French abbreviation of "Actualités," "current events" in English.
6 I thank Ralph Schoolcraft for bringing these facts to my attention.
7 All quotes refer to the American edition unless otherwise indicated.

8 This quote refers to the original French edition (my translation).
9 Page numbers refer to the French edition.
10 See Naomi Mandel for a discussion of the unspeakable in Spiegelman.

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11 Amélie Nothomb's Dialectic of the Sublime and the Grotesque

Martine Guyot-Bender

One need not have read any of her 14 novellas to know that Amélie Nothomb is a figure of myth and enigma, and someone who embraces the extremes in life and literature. A sought-after guest on numerous popular French television literary programs, she is also, to judge by appearances, quite fond of gothic black dresses, thick red lipstick, and extravagant hats. Her readers have also long known that, despite a simplistic linearity in her stories, their acidic tone and underlying narrative violence, wherein the virtuous flirts with the gruesome, create an atmosphere of competing attraction and repulsion. Surely, as Laureline Amanieux has suggested, Nothomb uses to full advantage the shadow of Dionysus, the Greek half god, half mortal, capable of endless metamorphoses and of the most astonishing contradictions. There is an uncompromising duality in Nothomb's books that destabilizes even the most mundane lifelike situations. Style-wise, her combination of lightheartedness, black humor, and profane and orgiastic tones, nonchalantly mixed with endless erudite literary and philosophical references, gives her work the feel of a collection of *contes cruels*. Her readers have come to expect that, regardless of her protagonists' initial situation in life, they will eventually end up absurdly entangled in a web of uncontrollable abjection, horror, humiliation, and other types of sadomasochistic interactions with no real escape.

Starting with her early worldliness, her personal and professional trajectory confirms the contradictions that permeate all Nothomb's books. A Belgian national, she was born in 1967 in Japan and was raised in both a variety of Asian countries as well as in New York, until she moved to Belgium when she was seventeen.[1] She is a prolific and popular novelist whose short novels sell by the hundreds of thousands; but she was also the unexpected 1999 recipient of the much venerated Grand Prix de l'Académie Française for *Fear and Trembling*.[2] The attraction her novels have both for readers in search of a quick read and amateurs of "higher" literature explains why the question Cécile Narjoux asks about *Fear and Trembling* might be applicable to Nothomb's entire body of work up until the present:

> How should we read it? Should we despise it, declaring it shamelessly easy and, as the Misanthrope's prose, frankly good enough to throw out in the toilets? Or revere it, transform it into some timeless work of art inaccessible to simple understanding? (3)[3]

Regardless of the answer we want to give this question, we must recognize the eagerness with which enthusiasts, literary critics, and curious neophytes alike await each of her books (released punctually in late August or early September – just in time, as cynics have noted, for the French *rentrée littéraire* and its coveted literary awards), and concede that she is a confirmed leader in the turn-of-the-new-millennium pop fiction.[4] And, if we believe the novelist narrator of *Péplum* that "provoking a volcanic eruption seems easier . . . than changing an author's reputation" (26), Nothomb's status might very well be here to stay.

Nothomb exemplifies what James Swearingen and Joanne Cutting-Gray identify as "the turn of the millennium cultural, economic, ethnic, religious differences that unsettle social stability and dissolve the old dream of the unity of knowledge" (vii). However, in comparison with the vindictiveness of such contemporary practitioners of the extreme in art, such as the irate novels of Michel Houellebecq and Orlan's chilling experimental body art, or with the documentary quality of Frédéric Beigbeder's sweeping satires of modern societies of consumption, Nothomb's method is more surreptitious and leaves readers wondering where exactly her stories are leading them. Most shocking is her sneaky rather than straightforward way of contorting the mundane to the most bizarre extent, to a point where the boundaries between real and unreal, normal and abnormal, attractive and repulsive blur until they become disturbingly indistinguishable.

In the microcosms Nothomb gives us to observe, sheer confusion emerges from encounters between the paradoxically universal and intangible categories of beauty and ugliness, the earthy incarnations of the more abstract concepts of the sublime and the grotesque. But her readers seldom feel personally engaged in or affected by her somber end-of-the-world depictions of our post-consumer society. Her narrative voice, that of a fabulist, amplified by her public image, that of harmless eccentricity, safeguards the reader from the chaos she creates for her protagonists. She also spares us preaching and didactic conclusions through a critical and often humorous scrutiny of the sole tool she has to represent the world: language.

A DAUNTING AMALGAM: WHERE THE SUBLIME AND THE GROTESQUE MEET

At the core of Nothomb's fiction is the singularity between individuals, which takes the form of two clearly distinct communities.[5] On the one hand,

we meet a community of ethereal and desirable beauties – the exaggerated sublime – experienced, for example, by Nishio-san, the narrator's beloved nanny in *The Character of Rain*, who considers her protégée a deity (58). Facing such perfection stands an equally distinct community of deformed and incongruous individuals constructed to inspire fear or disgust – the exaggeratedly grotesque – such as the 100-year-old carp in the narrator's pond in Japan who "sprawl in adipose longevity, allowing themselves to mold in their sludgy flesh of stagnant fish-water" (*COR* 85). The meeting of those diametrically opposed groups leads to perplexing plot developments and paradoxical conclusions that reveal both the universal acceptance of these categories and their disturbing closeness. It is with obvious perversity that Nothomb imposes the strictest boundaries between these categories, only to make the levees that divide societies into safe categories collapse miserably and let the flood of doubt creep in.

A great deal of the violence her protagonists find on their way is perpetrated by frankly unlikable and unattractive characters. Among them are hideous Epiphane Otos, who murders Ethel, the sublime object of his love, and, in *Antéchrista*, free-spirited and arrogant Christa, whose mental cruelty almost destroys the self-esteem of Blanche, her most fervent devotee. Destroying one's admirer is common practice in Nothomb's narratives. But the innocents can become real or virtual murderers just the same, especially when their peace of mind is disturbed. Émile and Juliette, *The Stranger Next Door*'s idealistic and ever-loving retired couple, suffocate their obese neighbor, and Nina, the naïve journalist in *Hygiène de l'assassin*, strangles the author Prétextat Tach, when she determines during an interview that he has killed his wife for the sake of his latest novel. Even sweet Amélie, in *The Character of Rain*, practices extreme hypocrisy hoping to seduce her evil new nanny, Kashima-san, by disingenuously offering her the prettiest camellias in the family's garden and having her favorite meal prepared especially for her, not to please her but to make her even more resentful. When they turn into (big or small) criminals themselves, Nothomb's initially innocent protagonists leave the reader uncertain, in the end, of who is the beautiful and who the truly ugly is, or if such a distinction is at all possible.[6] While any of her novels would demonstrate this common Nothombian antithetical process, it is in *Attentat* and *Fear and Trembling* that the author is at her best in her paradigmatic attack on the human predisposition to perceive their environment and fellow humans according to the measure of what appears to them as sublime or grotesque.

The rift between those who are blessed with beauty and those plagued by ugliness is particularly evident in *Attentat*. Epiphane Otos, the narrator, is so ugly that children call him Quasimodo and that he "laughed; he did not think it was him" (9), the first time he sees himself in a mirror. Epiphane is morbidly enamored of his physique, an eyesore in a world where appearances rule all human relations, and it is with distressingly cold objectivity that he

observes each of his physical ills: his "face that resembles an ear" (10), "the white of his eyes injected with blood," "the mop that is his hair [that] reminds him of acrylic carpets that look dirty even when they have just been washed" (11). Gloating about his grotesqueness makes him particularly happy; consequently, the apex of his success is when his hideousness appeals to the compassion of Éthel, an extraordinarily beautiful woman whom he sees as his aesthetic counterpart and who undertakes to protect him and help him reach a respectable social status.

Not only does beautiful and morally irreproachable Éthel protect Epiphane from society's discrimination against ugliness, but she becomes an accomplice in his self-promotion. She is unaware, however, of her protégé's determination to impose his hideousness as a means of dominating the world (and her). When she frantically hands him a mirror to make him realize that his hideousness is an insurmountable obstacle to her ever (thinking about) loving him, she suddenly metamorphoses into the very cause of the ugly individual's ill-fated destiny. Epiphane has no other choice but to kill her. With his act, he accomplishes the self-fulfilling prophecy that the ugly is necessarily the amoral one in the human story, thus he needs to be removed from society. He also concedes his failure at turning categories around. Indeed, despite Éthel's newly exposed deep prejudice, she remains, because of her physical beauty, the angel and he, because of his physical ugliness – and, after he kills Éthel, his moral ugliness – remains the monster. The beautiful can be forgiven. Not the ugly.

In the unfolding of this unpredictable scenario, in which the grotesque first turns sublime only to revert to ugliness, Nothomb also exposes the weakness of theory in the face of practice when it comes to physical appearance and to attraction and repulsion.[7] First, Epiphane argues that ugliness may be the most desirable human condition because, one, as far as love is concerned, "ugliness had maintained in him an extreme freshness" (thus making him as virtuous as beauty); two, "the extreme in ugliness could be more powerful than extreme beauty" (26) (making him indispensable even to beauty), and three, it gives him the power of art (27) (thus making him as eternal as beauty). Epiphane finally concludes his case by claiming that ugliness might in fact be superior in the equation for, still according to his logic, "there is no desire without transgression, and the ultimate transgression is the one against good taste" (27). The world he had constructed with his own circular logic is dictated by the grotesque, the ridiculously ugly; and he is the king of it.

A crime has been committed, thus someone must be guilty. If Epiphane is culpable of having overstepped the borders of his destiny by falling in love with Éthel, and if, indeed, he was the one holding the weapon that killed Éthel, he is, nevertheless, not alone on the bench of those that the novel accuses of blindly living and thinking along the lines of the beautiful and the ugly.[8] Next to him we find Éthel, "not-as-pure" as her beauty had predicted,

and who, like Hugo's Esmeralda, rejected hideousness; there is also the reader who allowed herself to be led by a narrative struggle that concluded with a convincing illustration that the ugly is doomed to be immoral. Indeed, the reader does not believe for a minute in the sincerity of Éthel's sentiments toward Epiphane – be they sentiments of platonic friendship or not. Through narrative manipulations, the relationship between Éthel and Epiphane, one that apparently overturned clichés and allowed the utterly ugly to reach the utterly beautiful, remained pure fiction; Éthel's rejection of Epiphane fits with the reality of predictable human reactions (in fact, Éthel's falling in love with Epiphane would have been pure fairy tale). *Attentat* proposes no ethical inversion of values, no newly found or long-forgotten harmony that would integrate extremes. Rather, it thrusts the reader into deeper disarray. At the end, Epiphane is (still or again) bad, but so are Éthel and the reader, and, of course, the author, ultimate creator of the situation but who spares no one.

Categories also crumble in the autobiographical *Fear and Trembling*. The basic plot describes Amélie, a young Belgian employee of a Japanese firm, who is oblivious to basic protocol. Beyond this plot, however, lies an inverted version of *Beauty and the Beast*; contrary to the comforting end of this popular tale, immortalized in Jean Cocteau's 1946 film, beauty IS the beast, and not the opposite, although, as in *Attentat*, the beast, once revealed, cannot be held responsible for all the ills of the world.[9] When Amélie arrives at Yumimoto, a corporate office in Japan where she is convinced she belongs, she is armed with her absolute certitude that beings are easily readable and that good and evil are readily identifiable. Amélie is immediately struck by the physical traits of her three hierarchic superiors: Mr Saito is "skinny and ugly" (8), Mr Omochi is "obese and frightening" (9), and Ms Fubuki Mori has a "splendid face" (13) and her nose is "the most beautiful nose in the world" (14). She is thus content with her new colleagues' faithfully fulfilling their roles according to Amélie's mental script and universalized expectations (Fubuki's sweetness sharply contrasts with Mr Saito's obsessive rituals and Mr Omochi's bouts of unexplained anger).[10]

Not surprisingly, Amélie almost collapses when she discovers that, against all expectations, it is not the misshapen Saito, but the magnificent Fubuki, her much-admired role model, who betrays her. Fubuki denounces her for having taken on an assignment that surpasses the responsibilities a newcomer like Amélie should accept in the highly hierarchical structure of Yumimoto. Contrary to Amélie's intuition, Fubuki opposes what she considers Amélie's pomposity (monstrosity) – which Amélie considers her sense of responsibility – with a spite that quickly turns into sheer malevolence: Fubuki condemns Amélie to cleaning the women's and men's public restrooms, a supreme humiliation in Japan that makes the torturer look particularly despicable both to Amélie and to the reader. Because paradox is Nothomb's favored atmosphere, the conclusion of the novel reveals that Amélie's humiliation

causes a positive domino effect in her life: she quits a clearly ill-fitting job; returns to Belgium; starts to write fiction seriously, and becomes a popular, well-published author. In *Fear and Trembling*'s version of the Yumimoto incident, evil is, when everything is said and done, the cause of a lot of good.

Attentat and *Fear and Trembling* conclude in opposing ways. Both novels, however, reveal a deep paradox: avoiding categories is impossible, and so is predicting from them. Indeed, the chilling part in Nothomb's stories emerges less from the ever-present ugliness and violence caused by categorizing the world than from the fact that humans have little power to control their destiny. Categories are tempting ways to imagine that control is possible, but they rely on no tangible reality whatsoever and are destined to show their weakness at one point or another.

AUTHORIAL PRETENSE AND LINGUISTIC DECEPTION

In Nothomb's worlds, chaos emerges without fault when appearances by which people intuitively perceive the world and their fellow humans fail. Yet, however gruesome the circumstances – minor or major harassment, oppression, or even death – readers rarely feel fully engaged in those situations. There are two primary reasons for the prevailing distance between the reality of Nothomb's narratives and the reality of the reader's life, two reasons that make her books palatable in spite of their ghastliness and the utter lack of trust in human nature they reveal, and, in fact, make readers want more and more. First, there is the impact of Nothomb's voice and of her public image upon her fiction; then there is what she tells us – in life and in her books – about the illusionary nature of language: can't trust it, but can't live without it. The combination relentlessly reminds us that we are reading narrative constructions and that our world is at once close to and removed from those which Nothomb so skillfully sets up.

While it would be an exaggeration to claim that Nothomb's lifestyle is solely responsible for her success, there is no doubt that her aura impacts the way we read her books. There is no place for a hypothetical death of the author in the Nothombian literary formula; it is quite the opposite. The marginality from which she writes exerts a great deal of magnetism on the public, readers and non-readers alike. More than any other contemporary author, she seems to become what she writes about, to the point where she declares that she feels "pregnant" with her books (Lee 567). In this, she resembles Plectrude who thinks that "making a snowman is too easy. It is far better to become a snowman" (*The Book of Proper Names* 73). On the one hand, Nothomb's preference for the body over the mind deepens the shocking effect of her books. If she is the things she writes about, she is indeed frightening. On the other hand, we know that no one can – really – *become* a snowman, that these are just words, and that the nature of words is to tell stories.

Because of Nothomb's own acknowledged sensual relationship with the subject matter of her books, few commentators can resist the temptation of including in their analyses perplexing particulars about her life, which she reputedly happily provides, as if her books were unmediated extensions of her lifestyle, or vice versa. Critics seem ready to accept the autofiction by which Nothomb seems to want to be recognized. For instance, Rob Gonsalves, who compares her to David Lynch and Edgar Alan Poe for using psychological horror as her modus operandi, relishes lifting graphic details from interviews and other public declarations: "[Tea] makes me throw up. But it gives me the energy I need to write. The tea, together with the disgusting things I write about, means I have to stop often to vomit" (Gonsalves). As if completing the portrait of her own bizarreness, she adds in another interview:

> I have always been attracted by garbage cans . . . There was a time in Brussels when I only ate what I found in open markets. You know, when the market is over, when people are gone, there is a lot of food left on the ground." (Lee 565)

True or not, such vivid statements belong to Nothomb's master narrative. They offer repulsive details that attract, as if she posed as the living incarnation of both the sublime and the grotesque of her books, and leave no space for the public to decide with any degree of certitude which one she really is. While these statements situate her on the margins of normality, create dramatic tension and act as a sure attention-grabber, they also remind us of the tale-like nature of her narratives. Every element of her stories seems to be there more for the visceral effect it might produce on the reader than for the way it might make the reader want to change the ugly world she describes.

Large portions of Nothomb's tales are comprised of her merciless observation of the way language functions, showing, but even more frequently, plainly telling us (a *no-no* in good literature), of the frightening control that linguistic combinations exert in/on the world by, for example, reducing the complexities of the world to the extreme. Many of her novels have the feel of Socrates' knotted dialogues, in which foes use sophisticated, spiraling arguments (or silence) as weapons to justify their positions and dominate their opponents. Only one outcome is possible: one will win, the other one will lose.[11] As David Gascoigne claims about many of her characters, Nothomb's "linguistic mastery" looks very hegemonic (130) in its over-determination to construct one's own and others' places in the world.[12] This is why numerous Nothomb protagonists ponder the very process and the implications of naming things and people. Lucette, in *The Book of Proper Names* obsessively searches for "phantasmagorical names which would herald hirsute fates" (9) for her soon-to-be born baby. She even justifies killing her child's father because "he wanted to name the baby Tanguy if it was a boy and Joëlle if it

was a girl"(17) and "naming one's child Tanguy or Joëlle equated to giving him or her a mediocre world, an horizon that was already closed"(19); on the other hand, Plectrude, the name she ultimately chooses for her baby girl, resonates as a "talisman" (21), a good omen, the only choice a good mother has for her child. Truly, her murdering of the father is not the result of a war waged for a simple name; it is the result of a war waged for a fate – language as fate is indeed a high enough motivation to kill someone.

In her interminable battle with language, Nothomb also attacks simple truisms, proverbs, ready-made ideas and expressions that channel our perception and construction of the world either into reductionist categories or into artificial uniformity, paths that are equally dangerous for their inability to represent the complexities of life experience with any degree of truth. Contrary to the clichéd notion that time passes too fast and that our death is always too close, Émile laments, "times passes fast? This is so untrue" (*The Stranger Next Door* 60). As for Lucette, she perceives parenthood a bit differently from what is deemed normal: "Immensely proud, [she] announced that her daughter had been dismissed from kindergarten" (*BPN* 31). Nothomb's distorted use of common expressions can be perceived as simply amusing, but they also have the result of making clichés the center of focus. They simultaneously bring to mind those identifiable clichés that construct social truth and, in the same breath, contradict them, a semantic tug-of-war that accuses us of general unawareness, shameful passivity and ignorance of the control words operate on the world.

In her terms, language is not an impartial tool by which we can describe the world point by point, but rather a delicate (dangerous) device that determines all our human functions. This explains why, aware as early as the age of 3 of the dangerous power of language and of the complicated relationship between language and the world, pensive Plectrude "saved within herself all verbal novelties and examined them from all sides until she used them"(28), while later, contradicting herself, she professes "absolute irreflexion" (66) in using language.[13] Such contradiction within the same character confirms Nothomb's refusal to be a righter of wrongs, to impose any one standardized mode of using language, but rather to point to the necessity both to exercise extreme care in our usage of that language, our primary instrument of connection with our fellow humans, and to let ourselves be absorbed by its complexity.

Hence, Nothomb's unsurprising attacks on those guilty of "language obsession," among whom are many good people who might very well constitute the majority of her audience. She indiscriminately directs her incisive mockery toward academic lecturers, literary scholars, scientists and the like, office managers and even harmless crossword puzzlers. We must of course not forget the first of her victims, Prétextat Tach, the cruel, self-absorbed male novelist in *Hygiène de l'assassin*. Indeed, with a great deal of postmodern lucidity and more than a touch of self-derision, Nothomb ruthlessly directs

her cynicism toward the absurdity and worthlessness of her own trade, the trade of transforming life experience (one's own or others') into words with the illusion of sharing that experience. We may indeed choose to assume *she* is speaking when Amélie admits that she "took pleasure in lying to her sister. Anything could go as long as it was invented" (*Biographie de la faim* 113). Language is above all a lie, and Nothomb defies any reader and the public to determine what she holds true or not in her written stories, and maybe too in her life story. Indeed, being primarily a fabulist and not a righter of wrongs, her resolutely unemotional, unsentimental, and unengaged narration, which we even find in her recounting of terrifying episodes in her own life (bouts of anorexia in her teenage years, suicide attempts at the age of 3 and excessive alcohol consumption at the age of 10), allows the reader to observe the grotesqueness in our lives distantly without the pressure of the moral overtones of much of today's literature, or just to ignore the chaos. We are the passers-by who stop to watch an accident along the road, morbidly fascinated by what we see, but able to leave the scene, curious but untouched.

From quick twists to proverbial wisdom and from the perversion, inversion, and revision of the idea of the real and of categories, Nothomb manages to produce some level truth in her distinctive texts; but her truth is uncategorical, always on the verge of shifting and multiplying new truths. Despite the sparseness of description, the constriction of settings and the small cast of characters, the "ordinary" consistently finds itself stretched, compressed, or distorted into grotesque extremity, and our intuition to give beauty moral qualities and ugliness devilish intentions is constantly challenged. As readers, we never lose sight, however, of the fact that what is at stake in Nothomb's novels is not the world itself, but the categorizations that language forces upon us. Nothomb does not fret much over uncertainties and details. Her characters' longing for order makes them wish that a single word could cover even the most complex experiences. But Nothomb also reaches far beyond her characters' simplistic reactions in developing a lexicon which ultimately lulls and traps her readers. Squarely in line with Roland Barthes' concept of bliss (*jouissance*) and text, her writing is imbedded in playful discordance, creating "something that feels, that desires, that enjoys" (Perniola 6) from the merging of the writer's and reader's fantasies.

NOTES

1 Leery of categories, Amélie Nothomb has no interest in being identified along national or gender lines (Lee 573).

2 I use English titles for novels that have been translated, and French titles for novels that, in 2005, have not been translated.

3 All translations are mine; page numbers refer to the French editions.

4 Nothomb's affinity with both popular and "high" literature is visible in that publications as different as the scholarly *Le Monde des livres* and the tabloid *Voici* have covered her

work. In addition, the 2006 edition of *Le petit Larousse* will include an entry for Nothomb in recognition of her contribution to contemporary Francophone literature.

5 In these we recognize the traditional definition of aesthetics as "harmony, regularity and organic unity" trying to overcome tensions, as developed by Mario Perniola (4).

6 Nothomb's treatment of the body is the subject of several articles in particular by Catherine Rodgers and Victoria Korzeniowska.

7 A fairy-tale ending would stop at the first sequence: the ugly become sublime.

8 The weapon is bull's horns scenic props. Epiphane appropriately notes that, according to Homer bull's horns are symbols of stupidity (30).

9 See Lénaïk Le Garrec's examination of monsters and angels in Nothomb's novels.

10 As Henry Allison notes, Kant and Burke insist on the sentiment of terror that both the sublime and the grotesque suggest (302). Accordingly, Amélie is as petrified by Fubuki's splendor as she is by Saito's and Omochi's unsightliness.

11 See Claire Gorrara's development of Socrates' dialogues in Nothomb's work.

12 Thierry Gandillot finds connections between Nothomb's characters' names and literary celebrities (e.g. Textor, in *Cosmétique de l'ennemi*, which was also one of Goethe's names.

13 Nothomb uses the *submarine* as a metaphor to describe the intensity with which she writes, when "there is no distance between the word and the object" (Lee 566).

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12 *Violence Biting its Own Tail: Martin Amis's* Yellow Dog

Jean-Michel Ganteau

Given the dearth of academic reaction to the latest of Martin Amis's novels, a quick look at the official Amis website and the instances of critical responses that it hosts might prove useful before starting a discussion on the workings of violence as the main modality of the contemporary extreme in *Yellow Dog*. In fact, thanks to the work and diligence of its webmaster, Amis specialist James Diedrick, the reader is provided with a series of reviews and interviews that greeted (though this might not prove the right word) the novel's publication in the spring of 2004.[1] All quality dailies published quasi-unanimously negative reviews in which Amis's novel (or rather, in most cases, Amis himself) was disqualified on account of its (his) fascination with hateful violence, twenty-first century horror, the world of pornography, various forms of the contemporary emetic, and a taste for hackneyed contrived jokes – all being modalities of the category of transgression that is so central in the definition of the contemporary extreme. Such polemical responses, from leading literary journalists, and at times from fellow novelists, certainly raise an essential point, as *Yellow Dog* is not content with staging violence: it also gets it across to the reader. It not only represents aspects of the contemporary extreme, but also presents them in a performative mode.

For in fact, though not really considered a writer of "hip" or "underground" literature, Martin Amis has steadily developed a rhetoric and an aesthetics of the extreme over the last two or three decades, and the publication of his novels has often met with outrage. In his early narratives (*Success*, *Dead Babies*), he concentrated on the violently nasty and the nastily violent, a tendency evinced in later novels like *London Fields*, *Money*, *The Information*, and which certainly culminates in the highly controversial *Time's Arrow* that notoriously deals with absolute transgression and the confrontation between irreconcilable tonal and ethical regimes. Now, his latest work, *Yellow Dog*, comes back to the territory of polymorphous, all-encompassing violence with a vengeance. This is one of the reasons why Amis has been seen as the representative of a dynasty of British novelists who dwell on violence of the reptilian kind (an image that recurs in his writings, witness the afterword of

Time's Arrow (Amis, *Time's Arrow* 176) and several passages in *Yellow Dog*). After exploring the apocalyptic street violence of the latter end of the twentieth century (complete with cosmic correspondences and extensions, as exemplified in *The Information*) and its metonymic colonization of the diegetic world, Amis now seems bent on addressing the question of twenty-first-century violence. His mode is that of the ruthless radioscopy of what he has diagnosed as the "ironic age" (*The Information* 435), an age that he chooses to apprehend through the prism of the contemporary extreme.

In fact, Amis – and one is tempted to see a kinship here with the works of such modern and contemporary British novelists as, among others, Anthony Burgess, Will Self and the Jonathan Coe of *What A Carve Up!* – does probe at the roots of the contemporary social, political and ideological malaise by mixing evocations of the cynical and of the farcical, by conflating the serious with the tongue-in-cheek. Such refusal to respect modal, generic and tonal boundaries, in all three authors' fiction, is in itself one of the marks of the poetics of the contemporary extreme, based on a paroxysm of affect. In other terms, while working within Henry Fielding's tradition of the comic novel, those narratives are not merely concerned with exposing affectation hypocrisy and the ridiculous. Rather, they are concerned with the ideological, affective and, more generally, human disasters that they see as characteristic of contemporary Western, post-industrial societies. I would thus tend to underscore the radically moral dimension that permeates their works. One step further, I would see in those authors' practice a re-normalization for in fact, despite an apparently playful narrative surface relying on language games, metafictional ploys, pastiche and parody and other markers of poetic opaqueness of a superficially entertaining type, one must admit that the apparent lightness of tone is but an element in a strategy designed to promote a message of a strictly serious nature. Said differently, such texts – and this applies most faithfully to *Yellow Dog* – seem to privilege an aesthetics based on affective distance – as engineered though humor, hyperbole, cynicism – the better to promote, ultimately, the shedding of flaunted opaqueness and narrative artifice as a correlative to the reader's involvement and the circulation of affects. This I will try to demonstrate in the following pages by concentrating on Amis's *Yellow Dog* and by trying to show how it relies on the hyperbolical workings of violence (as regards both content and form), how such violence is a case of the tail that wags the dog, and how in fact the re-normalization is effected through the dialectical workings of violence and vulnerability. Ultimately, I shall try to argue that *Yellow Dog* is less a realistic novel than a romance of the dark type that is best characterized by what is tentatively known as an "ethics of affect" (Gibson 17). In other terms, I shall be concerned with various facets of the contemporary extreme as thematized, performed and instrumentalized.

First and foremost, *Yellow Dog* is a novel about revenge. It thematizes and naturalizes revenge through a rhetoric of saturation. The stricken

post-pastoral, post-industrial world, the apparently post-romantic, post-human atmosphere of the novel is evoked through metonymic and metaphoric overkill so as to present the reader with a stabilized view of street violence that has turned into apocalyptic violence. As often happens in Amis's oeuvre, the novel is obsessed with the doomed ticking away of a narrative countdown that involves the ineluctable, *in extremis*, coming of a comet whose fiery apparition allows for the coincidental connection of the various narrative strands. Within such an apocalyptic setup, the various evocations of bodily violence (emblematized through the microscopic harping on insect-killing, one of the many motifs lending consistency to the novel) come to contaminate all spheres: world violence is reflected by street violence, itself an image of gang violence. The protagonist's family past connecting him with the underworld of gangsters, dealers and criminals of all sorts, the eponymous yellow dog's shady connections, the sub-plot staging protagonists of the pornographic industry, all these converge to establish the ubiquitous immanence of the contemporary extreme. Both in the London evoked in the first part of the novel, and in the Californian setting that the plot partially shifts to in the second and third parts, rampant violence is anatomized through climactic collective scenes, manifestations of gratuitous individual malevolence, or through some motifs like that of the city sniper – aka the Sextown Sniper – who terrifies the Mecca of porn on the outskirts of Hollywood (249 *et passim*). Polymorphous, ubiquitous violence is what the novel is saturated with, which is translated into some form of heightened "dirty realism" that bears the mark of the international aesthetics of the contemporary extreme.

Independently of such thematic determinations, one of the most striking effects of violence is dependent on the pervasive impression of closure and determinism. The narrative owes much to the traditional principle of separating the better to connect. In the first of the three parts, the same principle of narrative composition is at work within each chapter, which is divided into four parts. The first part is devoted to the evocation of Xan Meo's (the protagonist's) mishaps as he is mugged and suffers severe concussion, and thus personality change. The second one moves into a higher sphere with the evocation of Henry IX's problems: the all-too-fictional king of England and his daughter Victoria are blackmailed for unknown motives. The third strand addresses Clint Smoker's dealings in yellow journalism of the most cynical type. The fourth and final appendix shifts to a transatlantic flight that seems to be doomed from the beginning, and expertly mixes suspense with macabre farce. Mere juxtaposition prevails at first and the reader's striving at connection is very much an illustration of the partly amnesiac protagonist's ache to remember the moments before he was assaulted. The overall impression is that of titillating deprivation, one of the less acute forms of violence effected on the reader, admittedly. Only towards the end of the first part are possible connections suggested, a tendency that will be steadily consolidated until the end when the various enigmas are cleared up and the hermeneutic code is

unravelled. Such narrative choice promotes wonder and disarray, in other terms: the general impression of a loss of bearings. And interestingly, insofar as the thematic and tonal component that dominates all strands is of a dark, violently apocalyptic and potentially pornographic type, the narrative leaves no possibility open but that of profound gloom verging on terror, which is metatextually referred to through the portmanteau word "horrorism" (150). The fact that the horrorism of the novel should provide a realistic evocation of the horrorism of the contemporary world is not the least striking of extremities. This is a far cry from the poetics of the "extreme beautiful" commented on in the introduction to this book: Amis's stamping ground seems to be that of the sublime tradition – yet another aesthetic, tonal and philosophical component of the contemporary extreme.

Constriction of this sort is further buttressed by proleptic and rhythmical devices that come to colonize the text and gradually define a horizon of expectation. Such narrative lock-up is made possible thanks to an impersonal narrator who, at times, flaunts his hyperbolical omniscience, thus ostentatiously flexing his verbal and narrative muscles to underscore his organizing powers. Occurrences of this type, that assume the shape and tone of a terrible warning, may be found at the end of some chapters, under the guise of brief, two-sentence paragraphs detached from the bulk of the narrative and clearly signposting the imminence and ineluctability of horror: "Yes, that's right, that's right. The worst things of all were happening upstairs: in the master bedroom" (102). Gradually, the chords of the novel's main theme are struck and the menace of incest is forcibly brought forward through the following piece of resigned warning: "And all this wasn't the worst thing. The worst thing had to do with Billie" (145). The main impression that may be derived from such a strategy is very close to the impossibility of resisting the vision and knowledge of violence. It is a spectacle that has to be gone through at all costs. Like the protagonist of that masterpiece of the postwar extreme, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, the reader of *Yellow Dog* cannot but see. Structural concatenation and narrative determinism converge with enforced scopic activity to plunge into the depths of the contemporary extreme and conjure up the reader's reaction to hyperbolical, saturated violence.

Rarely is absolute violence encapsulated so efficiently as in the pages devoted to Clint Smoker, the yellow journalist, and more especially in the embedded pieces extracted from his prolific prose. In such passages, the polemical tone and the use of the demotic are meant to slap Smoker's fictional reader into adhesion. Clint Smoker's apology of road violence (205–6) and of rape and pedophilia (310–11) show cynicism and gratuitousness to be in full swing. They testify to the eclipse of any moral and ethical sense which, in the end, emblematizes the axiological crisis that the novel takes as its main topic, hopelessly suggesting that every dog *will* have its day. Of course, what is elicited of the implied reader is a response of the diametrically opposed

type, as Clint Smoker's exhortations are designed to be neutralized through antiphrasis. But in fact, even if such passages stand little chance of being taken literally, such is the power of irony – which echoically welds implied and apparent meanings – that the shock inherent in the literal, un-ironical apprehension keeps sending ripples of horror despite the stabilization – or, as suggested above, re-normalization – effected through antiphrasis. In the yellow dog passages, then, the reader catches more than a glimpse of a violence that has become trite and taken for granted, in other terms, of violence as ethos. Thus Clint Smoker synecdochically refers to a state of pure amorality, in which violence has been accepted and rendered commonplace, undoubtedly one of the most efficient *topoi* of the contemporary extreme. The radioscopy of the twenty-first century is of the obviously apocalyptic, nightmarish type, which is expressed in the protagonist's own words: "His condition felt like the twenty-first century: it was something you wanted to wake up from – snap out of. Now it was a dream within a dream. And both dreams were bad dreams" (37).

And yet, to echo the narrator's Cassandra-like taste for vaticination, the worst thing is yet to come . . .

The nastier outrage worked on the reader is that which inoculates violence into the heart of the family unit. In *Yellow Dog*, Amis addresses the scandal-raising issue of incest – father–daughter incest more specifically – a figure that comes to represent the metonym of contemporary violence as eternal human violence and that extends into an analysis of pornography as hate mechanism. Violence irrupts into the Meo's perfect family unit when Mr Nice transforms overnight into Domestic Monster. That violence begets violence is one of the principles that the novel thoroughly explores. The second part thus introduces a new character, Cora Susan (also ironically known as Karla White), a former porn actress turned producer of pornographic films, who happens to be Xan's niece. For in fact, *Yellow Dog* resorts to many a hyperbolical effect and never falls short of signalling its predilection for the extreme. In this case, the narrative borrows from that melodramatic ploy, the reunion of long-lost or estranged family members. This is one of the effects of the previously analysed narrative strategy that separates narrative strands the better to make them connect in the end: parts two and three allow the reader to witness Cora Susan's plans to avenge herself on traumatized Uncle Xan by seducing him and further wrecking the remnants of badly damaged connubial stability. Yet, she fails in her attempt at seduction and shifts priorities: as she cannot tempt Xan into her bed, she is insidiously though thoroughly intent on encouraging the male protagonist to trespass on his fatherly duties, in passages that shamelessly stage and voice the most universal of taboos and make violence swerve into abjection: "That's what they never say in the books or anywhere else. With a little girl you're big, even where you're little. You ought to get ahead with Billie. We get over it" (298). The abject is of course underscored by the last sentence, implying as it does

that the temptress was herself a victim of incest (185, 219), which harps on the theme of self-begetting violence, a thematized version of the workings of narrative inevitability analysed above.

Furthermore, some passages take their lead from the duplicating tendency just alluded to and present the reader with a parody of incest. This is the case with Karla/Cora Susan, as she is still bent on seducing her uncle. In a chapter aptly entitled "Size zero – 1.", she explains to him that she is going to change clothes for him, in an attempt to make him remember their previous encounter (that in fact never took place). She explicitly goes on to tip him as to the effect of wearing very tight clothes: "All you do is – you wear things that are many many sizes too small. Many many sizes too small. Size zero" (238). Karla/Cora thus impersonates some sort of living parody of a Lolita, which metonymically extends the incest motif and favours its radiation through the plot. In other terms, the incest scenes are seen to be parodically duplicated, through film or dressing up. Not only is there an original incestuous relationship, but also copies of that original. The impression that the reader is left with, once again, is that of a chain of occurrences, with an initial referent, then a sign referring to it, then yet another sign referring to the latter, and so on, in a chain of simulation. Such a device is designed to underline the vulgarization of violence and to peddle the motif of violence as ethos, one of the notorious hallmarks of the contemporary extreme.

But most of all, what is important is the way in which the hyperbolic treatment of the incest theme allows for tonal instability and transgression. In other terms, violence and incest are seen in dialectical relation with what may qualify as their tonal opposite, i.e. humor, which constitutes a variation on this law of the contemporary extreme that thrives on confrontations between irreconcilable poles. In fact, what is so obnoxious to certain readers of *Yellow Dog* is the perpetual mixture of tones and attitudes that the narrative strives to assert: the macabre and the gory, the cynical and the emetic are mixed with the burlesque and the playful in a way that seems to suspend any stable ethical stance. The evocation of the sordid is mediated, time and time again, in a bantering tone, which allows for a variety of tonal poses, from the mock heroic to the grimly humorous, through pure farce. Such instability, which apparently points at a deeper epistemological ambiguity, is encapsulated in the ethopoeia of the protagonist, Xan, the perfect-husband-and-father-turned-satyr, who simultaneously solicits the reader's rejection *and* empathy, thus eschewing all comfort. This wish to blur the tonal and the moral is subordinated to a narrative that is at times focalized through the protagonist's mind. In such passages, the reader is allowed a glimpse into Xan Meo's confused consciousness and is made to share the pangs of sympathy (inherent in the protagonist's vulnerability) while other fragments present us with his Priapic views on both spouse and offspring (248). Risk-taking reaches its peak in such a treatment of character (especially of the spontaneously likeable type), as sympathy and rejection are simply made to coexist.

Ultimately, it is the reader that becomes the target and recipient of the novel's projected violence, since the (admittedly male) reader is obviously put into the protagonist's shoes, at the beginning. Self-doubt is what the novel imposes.

Yet, it is undeniable that Manichaeism acts as a thematic and tonal component of *Yellow Dog* whose world is peopled with the consubstantially good (Xan's wife, Russia), the irredeemably bad (Joseph Andrews and his stooges, Clint Smoker among others, with a special interest in the irretrievably bitchy – Xan's ex-wife Pearl), and finally the middle ground of the ambivalent, among whom Cora/Karla, and Xan. Yet, the good, the bad, and the in-between all share one trait, i.e. the tendency to get back and retaliate, for *Yellow Dog* might be considered to be – thematically and to some extent tonally – an avatar of sorts of that time-honoured sub-genre, the revenge tragedy. In the Great Chain of Being(s) that runs vertically through the stricken chronotope of the novel, apocalypticism of the astronomical type is duplicated on a more pedestrian level by an anatomy of human dealings in retaliation. All characters are on their way to vengeance of some sort, which is indicated through metonymic reverberation (Clint Smoker, death-angel style, is seen to tear up London streets behind the wheel of an Avenger), while one of the buzz-phrases that rings through the novel is "doing X," as synonymous with not only "hurting X," but more specifically "avenging oneself on X," which is suggested in the following farcical and absurd exchange:

> "Tell you what. How about this: doing Snort."
> "Doing Snort?"
> "Doing Snort. The bloke who gave you two on the back of the head. *I'll* do him." (230)

The mixture of anadiplosis, anaphora and quasi-epanalepsis, underlined by the powerful use of epizeuxis and the correlative hammering of the spondee, such rhetorical and prosodic concentration provides a hyperbolical acoustic image of revenge. The fragments may be taken as a synecdoche of vengeance as ethos, so true it is that its degree of thematic frequency entails narrative saturation, from the punctual mention of vengeance hormones (228) to the embedded confessions of a self-justified avenger (194–200).

Now, as already mentioned, the protagonist may also be said to be an avenger figure, albeit of a much rounder type: unlike the two-dimensional avengers, ambiguity and evolution are his prerogatives. One might further argue that Xan Meo appears as some oxymoronic figure of the vengeful and the vulnerable – hyperbolical tension coming back with a vengeance, once again. As already mentioned, this ambivalence owes much to multiple focalization. Distance and sympathy are thus doled out in turn, complexifying the character and the reader's response to the protagonist. Horror is elicited in passages when Xan's lust degrades him into animality (e.g. 132–45), while

pity prevails when the reader has access to his feelings and impaired thought-processes (94–6), a violence at times shared by an external observer, another representative of the reader: "When Russia came back she saw that her husband was doing two things at once. Such multitasking was now rare. Doing one thing at once was difficult enough. Still, there he sat on the sofa, where he slept and wept" (93–4). The resort to rhyming (hyperbolized by its presence in a sentence wholly made up of monosyllabic words) is meant to achieve pathos – which might get debunked into bathos, so risky is such a shift in tone in a novel that primarily promotes effects akin to the horrific or the comical. What is essential, though, is that such passages, in which violence is eased off and in which negative affects stop being solicited, introduce some epiphanic pause that contrastively singles out the emergence of positive affects. Similarly, after sexually disinhibited Xan is evicted from the matrimonial nest of love, his probationary isolation, imbued with attrition as it is, is essentially used to underline his vulnerability. Now, it is through vulnerability that Xan's familial and narrative redemption is secured: violence and vulnerability initiate a dialectic relationship whose third term is re-integration and the return to order. The narrative crisis, thematically translated as it is into psychological, familial and social vulnerability, appears as an operator of change and return to normalcy, to what is good and right. In other terms, the moral value of vulnerability is promoted, thus effecting a process of re-normalization. The descried fascination for and gloating over the cataclysmic, the abject and the violent that most commentators pinpoint as the hallmark of the novel is thus seen to bite its own tail: the moral structure of the traditional plot progression is what prevails.

Besides, the character's vulnerability is not the only one to be at stake. In fact, I would argue that narratorial (and in the end authorial) vulnerability is foremost in *Yellow Dog*, a narrative that does not seem to consider risk-taking as an obstacle to shy away from. I do not just mean risk-taking as inherent in the evocation of the morally ambivalent, always reeling along on a tightrope. What I have in mind here is the daunting aesthetic risk that is consubstantial with the brusque move from the hyperbolically violent to the potentially mawkish, as is the case in some passages in which the protective playfulness of horrorism just disappears the better to make room for the shamelessly lyrical. This is notably the case in exalted evocations of the cliché of feminine tenderness and virtue (49, 236), and in the protagonist's confession, aptly written on the transatlantic flight back to London, somewhere over Greenland, and ending with the one-word paragraph, statement and signature "Epithalamium" (308). What *Yellow Dog* is bent on doing, ultimately, is exploring the modalities of the move from lust to love, from fuck to hug, a tropism that gives the lie to the apocalyptic shibboleth that seemed to be peddled thus far. The discourse of love and sensibility, quantitatively minor as it is, is seen to break into that of violence as negative affect. What I would tend to propose, though, is that in the dialectic between violence and

vulnerability, it is sensibility that comes as a third term. Such a move is accompanied by a swing of the pendulum, from the eponymous yellow dog as the yellow journalist of the violent, coolly cynical type that reigns over the bulk of the novel, to the more literal and literalized yellow dog that appears in Xan's final reminiscence: the mongrel tied in a sordid backyard, and powerlessly witnessing the paroxystic scene of father *doing* son: "While it happened . . . you could hear the yellow dog. Whining, weeping, and rolling its head as if to ease an aching neck, working its shoulders, trying to free itself of this thing – this thing on its back" (337). It would thus appear that the real yellow dog in the title is the latter, the picture of vulnerability.

In the end, I would say that by taking the risk of mawkishness, of lyricism, of the whining over the snarling, and by using as a frame and counterfoil an aesthetics of the paroxystically violent, Amis moves away from the ironical (hyperbolical horrorism is to be taken with a pinch of salt, is it not?) that is generally associated with his writing as representative of both a dark and witty brand of postmodernism to favour an aesthetics of tonal nakedness and vulnerability: "this aesthetics of vulnerability entails the baring of the text to critical scorn through the text's flaunting of beliefs that in their very moments of affirmation are fragile and vulnerable to scepticism as well as cynicism" (Winnberg 4).[2] Despite appearances then, what *Yellow Dog* is intent on promoting is a model of anti-violence: its exposure to criticism and opening to another tonal and aesthetic regime is certainly a way to vindicate or rather, to make room for another voice, i.e. that of responsiveness and responsibility (Gibson 15). By defining sensibility as the power to be affected, Amis adds his contribution to the ethics of affects (as opposed to cognition) that is such a cornerstone of Levinasian ethics (Gibson 17). *Yellow Dog* would then use the coolness of simulation, horrorism and linguistic playfulness the better to abuse it.

All in all, what *Yellow Dog* promotes is some romance of the dark, apocalyptic, violent type whose purpose is to establish some realism of effect (as opposed to realism of aspect). In *Yellow Dog*, romance, that ever-reactive mode, is used to stage a reaction against the fallen contemporary world. For ultimately, the comet's apocalyptic occurrence coincidentally winds up the various narrative strands on the very special day of 14 February, St Valentine's day, i.e. the day of the martyr of love. This I see as a way of asserting *in extremis* the resilience of human love as antidote in an age that, despite its paroxysmic addiction to violence, eschews the menaces of post-humanism and clings to a romantic vision.

The reason behind the novel's success does not appear to lie exclusively in its controversial dimension. Of course, it owes much of its impact to the hyperbolical workings of ambiguity as it evinces both fascination for and condemnation of violence – of the pornographic, incestuous type. Likewise, its success might well originate in the stammering, bantering, parodic, highly creative tone that characterizes the impersonal narrator's omniscient postures

and problematizes the overall apocalyptic malaise. However, in the end, it is the unambiguous instrumentalization of the amorally violent by the unambiguously ethical that triumphs and promotes the tiniest glimmer of hope that radically topples the ethos of the gratuitously violent. By biting its own tail, the rhetoric of excessive violence is but a hortative prelude to the vindication of the ethics of affects that is also an ethics of the other. In Robert Eaglestone's terms (as borrowed from Levinas), the said is interrupted by the saying (Eaglestone 175–6),[3] which, said differently, and as applied to *Yellow Dog*, would imply that the idiom of positive affects thus comes to pierce and unbalance that of negative affects. Martin Amis's ethics of affects ultimately joins forces (and effects) with an ethics of truths by problematizing and ironizing the rhetoric of the contemporary extreme. This is why, ultimately, I would tend to spell Amis's contribution to the sub-genre in the following words: *Yellow Dog* envisages the contemporary extreme as an operator of vulnerability and responsibility.

NOTES

1 Many essential reviews among those which followed on the novel's publication, are available in the official Martin Amis website (www.martinamis.albion.edu) that is efficiently administered by Amis specialist James Diedrich.

2 For more details on the notion of vulnerability that Winnberg takes from Mark Lettbetter's *Victims and the Postmodern Narrative*, see Winnberg 18–20. Now of course, the notion of vulnerability as used by the two critics and in this chapter originates in Emmanuel Levinas's work on the vulnerability that is inherent in the subject's exposure to the other, and it appears on the occasion of Levinas's evocation of the ethical gesture as encapsulated in the non-violent encounter with the face of the other. For more details, see Levinas, *Totalité et infini* (*Totality and Infinity*).

3 The distinction between the said and the saying is taken from Levinas's influential essay *Autrement qu'être* (*Otherwise than Being*).

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13 *Beauty and Death as Simulacra in Ray Loriga's* Caídos del cielo *and* El hombre que inventó Manhattan

Kathryn Everly

> *Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.*
> Jean Baudrillard

Jean Baudrillard's hyperreal proposes that texts representing the contemporary extreme are completely self-referential and free from ties to reality. Perhaps most importantly the invention of "a reality" without a referent separates the image/text from any notion of a worldly truth. This kind of textual manipulation is perhaps best exemplified by television, a medium that creates a reality while duping viewers into believing that it is actually a representation of reality. Hyperreality has emerged as a central theme in the works of contemporary Spanish writer Ray Loriga. In his novel *Caídos del cielo* (Fallen From Heaven, 1995) Loriga chastises the use of unethical television methods that manipulate the viewer and promote narcissism. Secondly, Loriga plays with the self-conscious narrator who realizes the text is an inadequate model of reality in both the aforementioned novel and in *El hombre que inventó Manhattan* (The Man Who Invented Manhattan, 2004). Literary concerns with reality and truth are especially pertinent in contemporary Spanish narrative as young authors are still grappling with mending the social and political wounds of Franco's dictatorship, and more recently dealing with the rapidly declining popularity of the Generation X narrative of the 1990s.[1] As a forerunner of the Generation X movement early in his career, Loriga delved into themes of the annihilation of the individual, moral apathy, and violence. His current work eschews earlier sensationalism, yet the preoccupation with superficiality and truth remains at the heart of the narrative. Beauty and death as simulacra play out in both texts as an intriguing indicator of the philosophical sophistication found in contemporary Spanish narrative.

Ray Loriga has enjoyed continued success as a writer and director in Spain and abroad.[2] He is an important voice of the Generation X literary movement;

also known as "dirty realism" or "new realism" (Gullón v). However, his resistance to literary whims and labels marks his longevity as one of Spain's best young writers. Each of Loriga's narratives marks a stage in his development as a writer, yet forms a body of work that plays with the notion of ultra-modern discourse and the hyperreality of simulacra.

Beauty in Loriga's narratives is dangerous yet seductive. Not only does he dwell on the physical beauty of his characters but also on the social milieu supporting the construction of beauty as intrinsic to survival in a commercial culture. Beauty, in all its superficiality, orders and runs society. In *Caídos del cielo* the good looks of a young assassin bring him close to absolution. Beauty proposes an imaginary, physical morality that masks the ugliness of desperation and violence. His family appears repeatedly on television, which acts as a fun-house mirror of society in this novel, presenting information in a distorted, hyperbolic way. Television as a contemporary mirror of society only presents the beautiful and glosses over meaning and substance in presenting the superficial and temporary.

Death is also superficial in Loriga's works. In both novels the death of an individual triggers the action and drives the protagonist/narrator forward. Therefore, death signals not an ending but rather a beginning by seducing and drawing the reader into the story. Just as beauty distracts the viewer from a certain truth, death is another narrative mechanism that leads the reader to erroneous conclusions. Both beauty and death create a simulacrum that dominates the narrative and draws the reader into a game of appearance versus reality.

Simulacrum can be understood as the representation or false image of something. Television as a medium is hyper-simulacrum because the concept of an original or authentic version is obsolete. Television programming is dominated by repeats, re-broadcasts, time-delay live broadcasts, and sound bytes. Therefore the idea of representing reality is replaced by a medium that in fact creates its own customized version of reality. Simulacrum seduces but does not moralize, nor does it reveal a certain truth or ethical code. In the contemporary extreme, simulacrum itself becomes truth, leaving no socially sanctioned space for debate or questionable morality. Ethical questions are abandoned for the hedonistic sensationalism of the image. The simulacrum is judged on how "real" it seems; the referent, content, and moral implication become irrelevant by-products of pure aesthetic reaction.

Baudrillard argues that the real ceases to exist as it loses power to the simulacra that are endlessly self-referential. The hyperreal is sheltered from any distinction between the real and the imaginary and therefore "no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal of negative instance. It is nothing more than operational" (167). The function of the simulacra then is to divert the viewer's attention from opposing points of view. Baudrillard firmly grounds his criticism of the hyperreal in a society of market-driven desires that can never be fulfilled (179). The

amorality of hyperreality stems from the lack of objective reasoning and factual knowledge.

However, television as an instrument of hyperreality injects a large dose of simulated morality into an accelerated, market-driven culture yearning for justice and retribution. Even though capital "shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil" (Baudrillard 179) the TV serves up a large portion of simulated morality that placates the weary viewer. Morality has not been shattered, as Baudrillard suggests, but recreated without a referent through the self-sufficient simulacrum that is television. The viewer is advised what is good and what is bad. From advertising to the evening news, we are fed social ethics veiled in narrative. Every television moment is a narrative suggesting that good prevails over evil. A murder on the nightly news dissolves into the weather forecast, family disputes are resolved in 20 minutes, gay men help straight men spruce up their apartments to impress their girlfriends. There is no unresolved discord, for at the end of the day we turn the TV off. Television does not eradicate morality but simplifies it or avoids it altogether. The viewer wants to see the "good" and accept it as part of our real society because the viewer is erroneously convinced that television, especially TV journalism, reflects reality.

Pierre Bourdieu offers revealing insight into the mechanism of television journalism, which lies at the heart of the simulacrum in *Caídos del cielo*. Television automatically censors information with time limitations placed on news programs and talk shows as each story is carefully edited and packaged for immediate consumption. In this way events are "cut off from their antecedents and consequences" (Bourdieu 7). Loriga contextualizes this process in his novel *Caídos del cielo*. Through the first-person narrator the process of fabricating misinformation becomes the axis of the narrative structure. The simulacrum thrives on beauty as the narrator explains: "they asked us to appear on a lot of shows because we were a really good-looking family" (84) and minimizes the impact of the events, in this case, a murder.[3] Therefore, Baudrillard and Bourdieu agree that the reality and gravity of the situation become lost in the presentation. Viewers are shown what they want to see and "the television screen . . . becomes a sort of mirror for Narcissus, a space for narcissistic exhibitionism" (Bourdieu 14). Television images must be palpable by suggesting a morality that disallows the legitimacy of the referent. We cannot know the facts of the event for that would provide enough information for us, the viewer, to consider all perspectives and form an opinion. The only truth is the one presented in a two-minute story on the evening news and "ultimately television, which claims to record reality, creates it instead" (22). What we see is independent and not reflective of some larger picture. The image is self-referential and entirely contained in the information presented.

In Loriga's novel, *Caídos del cielo*, a young assassin on the run from the law is presented as television-worthy because of his good looks. He embodies the

ambiguous morality of television in the combination of corrupt values and pleasing aesthetics. However, the voice of the first-person narrator, the runaway's brother, reveals the mechanism of television's complicated and subversive operations. The text reveals the power behind the medium that superficially appeases the staid gaze of the viewer but ultimately exercises an imperceptible control over him. The resulting analysis of Loriga's novel does not amount to an attack on the corrupt nature of television as distributor/manipulator of images and information, but rather unveils the inner workings of a powerful tool that necessarily defines culture of the contemporary extreme.

In *Caídos del cielo*, Loriga recreates a series of events that deconstructs the recapitulation of information that television reporters employ. The principal narrative voice of the novel is the assassin's brother who pieces together the events through second-hand sources. Thus the novel becomes somewhat speculative and we readers must trust his narration (the novel) to relate the story adequately and truthfully. His point of view, however, is distorted as he can only guess what events actually occurred and which ones were extrapolated by television reports, by police, and by the girl who accompanied his brother for most of his misadventure. The plot of the novel revolves around simple actions, but the presentation of facts through an outside party complicates the meaning. A teenager finds a pistol in a garbage dumpster and upon leaving a convenience store he is harassed by a guard to show proof that he paid for his drink, and in a moment of fury he shoots the guard point blank. He flees the scene, jumps into a parked car, and speeds off with a young girl still in the back seat. Along the way he shoots a gasoline attendant for making crude remarks about the girl and they meet a strange, abusive couple. The boy convinces the girl to leave him and finally the cops corner him and shoot him. The novel's fast pace echoes the urgency of both the media coverage of the events and the flight from the cops. The structure of the novel creates intriguing relationships between the individual, the social, and the simulacrum. Loriga jumps from the younger brother's favorable opinion of the gunman, to television hype, to the quirky yet tender relationship that develops between the assassin and the girl. Reality is filtered through opinion and point of view culminating in the conclusion that the only reality is the one created and accepted by the social machine of television.

Near the end of the novel, the narrator meets with the girl who had been on the road with his brother. She represents a link to the truth, but her first-person account becomes tainted by the media frenzy that engulfs her. The narrator comments on the girl's sudden rise to fame and summarizes the nature of the events:

> She wasn't a bad girl. A little bit crazy, yes. It was all of the letters, the television, the pictures, all that stuff screwed her up. At the end she talked like a star, or she was a star or at least she looked like one. (37)

The narrator realizes here that the violence, the murder and the escape fail to capture the imagination of the public because they are the facts, the reality of the situation. It is the calculated presentation of the female and her acting like a star that catapult her to fame. Her version of the events, whether truthful or not, creates an aura of authenticity merely because she was physically present. Therefore, questions of truth and reliability serve no purpose because ultimately it is the simulacrum or the appearance of importance found in her "star quality" that allows a reality around the events to be constructed and preserved. Her version of what took place excludes both the killer's and the victim's point of view, but instead is construed by a third person who found herself just along for the ride. This displacement of experience can be seen as a criticism of reporting in general. A responsible journalist as the objective third party is trained to sift through information, decide what information is pertinent, and present the important facts. Yet, as Bourdieu points out, market-driven economics and competition push for the sensational, shocking, easily understood bytes that will attract an audience. Reality is sacrificed for a slick, sexy appearance (19–20).

The chapter that describes the experience of the narrator and his mother preparing for a talk show reveals the marketing strategy and general sensationalism that support such television shows. The show is called *We Are All One*, suggesting the collective nature of the television experience. The "fabulous world of the family" (83) extends beyond the studio to the household and includes all those tuned in to the program. Cristina Moreiras mentions the "information invasion" that collapses the private and public spheres into one disorienting space. The television "obliges the subject to radically modify her conception and, more importantly, her experience of space and time, of place and history, really of culture itself" (Moreiras 200). The narrator comments on the use of makeup that covers the physical ugliness of the presenter (83) and how the makeup artists "messed up my hair a little and changed my brother's jacket that I was wearing for a flashier red one" (84). The presenter assures the audience that the narrator is wearing his brother's jacket, which we readers know is a lie, and the mother's desperate attempt to vindicate herself on television all add up to a carefully scripted scene that will please the audience: "Mom tried to convince everybody that despite everything, she was a good woman and that I was a good boy and that my brother's case was an isolated incident, but nobody believed her BECAUSE WE ARE ALL ONE" (84). The mother's claims ring hollow on television and only work to incite the audience. What she says is not as important as her imploring tone that smacks of victimization. The chanting crowd drowns out the mother's protests like a Greek chorus announcing the fall of the heroine. The cathartic effect of the talk-show format ensures that the guest, the mother in this case, has no defensive voice for without the presence of an "evil," the audience would have no scapegoat. Thus, as Moreiras points out, the television spectator is bombarded with information, but it is important to add that this

information is selected and tinkered with in order to present a certain reality. The information presented by television journalism, according to Loriga, does not inform, but rather entertains in a dangerously mind-numbing way. The presentation is geared so that the viewer can actively participate in a virtual ritual of self-aggrandizement.[4]

The collective agency of television produces an image of the assassin that mythifies his very existence. He is labeled the "angel of death," thus combining the beautiful with the morbid. His real identity becomes fluid and unimportant once the simulacrum has taken hold. Jason Klodt observes: "[i]dentity may be fleeting but it is also instantly replaceable" (51). What replaces identity, or any notion of an authentic knowing of oneself, is the simulacrum of identity. Even when the boy's futile escape from social structures is truncated and he is caught by the police and killed, beauty continues to serve as a false referent that spurs on the fame of the girl and of the family. The simulacrum of beauty that becomes his identity survives even in death, suggesting that the boy himself had little to do with the fabrication of his beautiful "angel of death" image.

Beauty in *El hombre que inventó Manhattan* appears mediated through cultural forms other than television. While the pace and style of Loriga's most recent novel is markedly different, the preoccupation with beauty and culture remains the same. Nevertheless, death in this novel becomes an overriding metaphor for illusion. *El hombre* boasts a much more complicated structure with intricacies and surprises. The characters seem more fleshed out and less urgent in their actions. Described as "brilliant and moving" (Echevarría 2), this repetition novel highlights Loriga's narrative wit and talent. However, the discomfort experienced by the individual in a social system based on appearances and display functions as a unifying theme of both novels.

In *El hombre* the metaphor of simulacrum is extended to the writing itself. The novel weaves together the radically different experiences of several inhabitants of New York City. Through serendipitous connections the individual characters together create a disturbing mosaic of urban existence. Death and sex, recurring themes in Loriga's work, are the fundamental links that connect the various lives in the novel. The structure continuously plays with simulacrum in the sense that information is withheld, then revealed as a truth, and finally disproved. Beauty as a simulacrum becomes a caricature of itself for no longer is the illusion dangerous, threatening, or morbid. Rather the instability of time and space that television inspires in *Caídos* becomes the basis of experience and the only viable way to relate to one's surroundings in *El hombre*. Television as a cultural formulation of false reality gives way to the inner world of fantasy of each character. Imagination creates the simulacrum that sustains it. Unlike the fantastic imaginations of the Spanish literary character Don Quixote, who based his fantasy on novels of chivalry, the simulacrum of hyperreality has neither referent nor moral end. The illusion is

perpetuated only by its own falseness. Loriga presents New York City as the ultimate simulacrum, a place that exists as the invention of those who live there. The novel revolves around the idea of otherness, and the foreigner who is destined to build his own impressions on preconceived fantasy and imagination.

A large number of the characters in the novel are immigrants, including a Romanian superintendent, Korean beauticians, a Mexican actor, a European businessman, and the narrator/author Spaniard, Ray Loriga. The narrator informs us in the final chapter that he and his family lived in Manhattan for five years (187), which is the case of the author who recently "has returned to Madrid after living in New York for five years" (*El hombre* 1). The point of departure for the 36 vignettes that comprise the novel is the suicide of superintendent Gerald Ulsrak. The novel deals with the vulnerability of the immigrant experience and begins with a play on names and interchangeable identities that throw the following events into a dubious light. Identities are unstable, blurry and generally invented. As Loriga describes at the beginning of the novel:

> The man who invented Manhattan came to be known as Charlie even though his real name was Gerald Ulsrak, he was married and had two daughters. Or maybe just one . . . he was born in a small town in the mountains of Romania and always had dreamed of a better place, Manhattan, and a different name, Charlie. (9)

The narrator decides to pay homage to the life and times of Charlie upon his suicide by relating the stories that form part of Charlie's dream of a better place and a different name. The narrator affirms: "all of the stories are invented although many of them, the majority, are true" (16). Charlie's suicide by hanging that provokes the telling of the stories looms over the narrative, reminding the reader that the dream did not come true and the subsequent chapters represent an imagined reality.

The simulacrum of death lies within the fabricated reality of the novel. Death cannot be understood because the referent is intellectually impossible to comprehend. In Loriga's novel, death is not a metaphysical or spiritual experience, but rather another kind of performance. The novel involves the bizarre and mysterious death of piano salesman Arnold Grumberg. One morning, as Arnold steps out of the doorway of his piano store with a cup of coffee in his hand, he suddenly faints and falls on the broken porcelain cup that cuts his neck, killing him instantly. In the rehab center where Arnold had spent some time, the other patients who knew Arnold comment on his sudden demise: "a man just doesn't fall on a cup of coffee and cut his neck and that's it" (73). The characters question the circumstances of Arnold's death and doubt the possibility of such a mediocre demise. This discussion also highlights the comical aspects of Arnold's death. A man who

had survived years of alcohol abuse and rehab mysteriously dies from something as mundane as a teacup? Arnold's death is not somber but rather whimsical and provocative in how it creates fiction within the novel. The performance demands participation from the reader and from within the text. Other characters and the reader fill in the gaps, grasping at straws to find out what really happened.

Toward the end of the novel, the mystery only becomes compounded as Molly, a barfly once rejected by Arnold, arrives home to her apartment and throws away a small figurine muttering that "Mr. Mysterious" has served his purpose. The "voodoo" doll surfaces as the likely explanation of Arnold's death. Loriga relies on the supernatural to undermine a logical explanation by Western standards of what really happened to Arnold. Was he killed by a teacup or by voodoo? Arnold's death remains not only unexplained but also complicated by multiple perspectives and a possible motive. At best the cause of death is an accident or an unconventional case of voodoo at the hands of a disdained lover. Death and destruction remain ambiguous markers of illusion in Loriga's novel.

In the haunting chapter "Two Towers," Arnold Grumburg wanders lost and disoriented around the World Trade Center. He tries to cross from west to east without having to detour all the way around the two towers but instead he gets lost and overwhelmed. Loriga's reconstruction of the devastated site of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks pays particular homage to the massiveness and impenetrable quality of the buildings that, ironically, has been proven illusory. Arnold's inability to pass through the towers, his frustration, and ultimate resignation (he stops in a strip club) accentuate the actual absence of the structure. By not directly mentioning the events of 9/11, Loriga skillfully recreates the space and time in all its banality. Everyday complications of concrete and cement attest to the minuscule stature of a person who "makes his way toward Broadway in order to then assume the challenge of finally crossing the heart of those two insurmountable towers" (143). Because Loriga never mentions the destruction of the towers the reader is left to fill in the gaps between the fictional reality and what we know to be true. The author chooses to maintain the illusion of permanence, and creates a simulacrum that is at once disturbing yet, in a sense, comforting. Here the text relies heavily on a cognizance of the historical, extra-textual circumstance for a complete understanding of the narrative. The chapter would not exist in the same way if the World Trade Center still stood. Loriga brings notions of absence, contextualization of fiction, and simulacra to a poignant end as he reconstructs the destroyed and makes the reader compliant in this act.

Death is presented in the novel as a construction fabricated in the minds of others. The whole novel *El hombre que inventó Manhattan* hinges on the untold dreams of a man who committed suicide, thus the novel itself is an illusion, or a mosaic of the non-existent American Dream. Death becomes

the ultimate simulacrum in the hyperreal because it cannot possibly represent something else. Death as a means, not as an end, becomes completely self-reflective in the sense that it becomes void of religious or moral implications and serves to perpetuate life and inevitably itself. From Charlie's suicide to Arnold's strange accident, death serves as a springboard for narrative. It does not signal an end of life but rather a beginning, an impetus for the story. In this way death is only the illusion of an end and, much like beauty, seduces the reader into a complicit relationship with the narrative. Death serves as a narrative tool, urging the story forward not in an attempt to identify a murderer, as in a suspense novel, but rather to uncover reality itself as a construct.

In the final chapter of *El hombre* that serves as epilogue, the narrator/author places the immigrant experience squarely within a context of simulacra. The expectations of a new place and the preconceived notion that change will bring happiness are at the heart of the immigrant's journey. The dreams of the immigrants found in the pages of Loriga's narrative act as a mirror for life in general. He explains: "With time we begin to suffer the rigors of fantasy. We exchange one tyranny for another. We become owners of the simulacrum" (187). The tyranny that unquestionably dominates society resides in the simulacra that must be endlessly renewed and exchanged. Whether beauty or death, the illusion manipulates the subject into believing the false reality. The young narrator of *Caídos del cielo*, and Arnold Grumberg and Charlie Ulsrak from *El hombre* see the simulacrum before them and inevitably fall prey to its omnipotence.

On the other hand, Loriga's works are not an apocalyptic vision of the contemporary extreme. The author's humor and wry criticism of social mores reveal a cynical yet lighter tone. His use of simulacra in both *Caídos del cielo* and *El hombre que inventó Manhattan* explores how accepted concepts of beauty and death are fabricated by social institutions such as television and the novel itself. However, he insists that people create fantasy from a need to believe in the permanence of the illusory. The creation of a fictional reality is itself a form of simulacrum and Loriga seems aware of the metatextual nature of his writing.[5] As an author immersed in hyperreality where image and violence seem to dictate behavior, Ray Loriga offers a variety of narrative discourses that comment on and criticize, but at the same time celebrate, culture of the contemporary extreme.

NOTES

1 Generation X writers from Spain were born in the 1960s and include in their works the absence of a notion of the historical, crime, unemployment, drug addiction, video culture, and a disenchanted world vision (de Urioste 456).

2 Loriga has published seven novels to date: *Lo peor de todo* (The Worst of All, 1992),

Héroes (Heroes, 1993) "El Sitio" Novel Award, *Días extraños* (Strange Days, 1994), *Caídos del cielo* (Fallen From Heaven, 1995), *Tokio ya no nos quiere* (Tokyo Doesn't Love Us Anymore) (1999), *Trífero* (Trifero, 2000), and *El hombre que inventó Manhattan* (The Man Who Invented Manhattan, 2004). Loriga has also written and directed a film version of his novel *Caídos del cielo* entitled *La pistola de mi hermano* (My Brother's Gun, 1997) and co-wrote *Carne trémula* (Live Flesh, 1997), a Pedro Almodovar film. His script *El séptimo día* (The Seventh Day) was directed by Carlos Saura in 2003.

3 I cite from the 1997 edition of the novel that bears the title *La pistola de mi hermano* and the original title, *Caídos del cielo*, in parenthesis. The novel was reissued in 1997 with the title of the film version. I have used the original title of the novel throughout this chapter so as not to confuse the novel with the film. English translations of all works throughout this chapter are my own.

4 In the film version of *Caídos del cielo*, written and directed by Loriga, the presence and impact of television is surprisingly absent. However, in one scene the assassin smashes a television set and earlier he asks his female companion: "Do you think television is to blame?" "For what?" she asks. "For everything" he replies. In this scene the disturbing relationship between violence and television is clearly evident. See Everly ("Television and the Power of the Image . . .").

5 In an interview with David Trueba, Loriga comments on the process of writing: "You invent your way of reading, of approaching things, of relating them. And finally, you invent your way of telling the story" (3).

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14 Sex, Drugs and Violence in Lucía Etxebarria's Amor, curiosidad, Prozac y dudas

Catherine Bourland Ross

Lucía Etxebarria has been criticized for being too controversial, and critics assert that the premise that guides her writing is "let's talk about sex while laughing all the way to the bank," a statement which, notes Silvia Bermúdez, seriously downplays the cultural importance of Etxebarria's work (Bermúdez 224). Others criticize Etxebarria's manipulation of the media. She has appeared on television shows such as the program *Moros y cristianos* (Moors and Christians); during promotion of *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* (Beatriz and the Heavenly Bodies), she appeared semi-nude in the magazine *Dunia* (Tsuchiya 245). She also has her own website.[1] In her appearances in the media, Etxebarria tends towards flashy, unusual outfits that reporters mention in their articles. Xavier Moret in *El País* describes her outfit when receiving the Premio Nadal, writing that she was "dressed all in red, her purse in the shape of a heart, gloves like Gilda in red, a heart tattoo and earrings to match" (Moret).[2] These critics obviously take issue with Etxebarria's exuberant manner of dress and the extent to which she mass markets herself, saying that it contradicts her self-proclaimed feminist stance (Tsuchiya 245). Her writing, however, speaks for itself. In her less than ten-year career as a writer, she has written prolifically, and her popularity with readers from around the world grows with each work she produces.[3]

Even though *Amor, curiosidad, Prozac y dudas* (Love, Curiosity, Prozac and Doubts, 1997) was Etxebarria's first novel, it sold well and brought Etxebarria into the public eye.[4] Etxebarria voices the concerns of her generation in this novel, portraying the contemporary extremes faced by her female protagonist, Cristina, in the violent end-of-the-century world. Cristina exhibits characteristics typically identified with Generation X, such as her immersion in popular culture, her early experimentation with sex and drugs, and her pragmatic view of life. Consequently, this chapter will concentrate on Cristina's character. Through this analysis, and with the help of Etxebarria's non-fiction works and the socio-historical positioning of Mark Allinson, I

will show how this novel assumes knowledge of the late 1990s in Spain and its youth culture in order to produce a work that reflects the lives of Generation Xers and the extreme society in which they maneuver. Etxebarria describes the plight of young, working Spaniards (especially women) and creates a novel that portrays a world invaded by violence, pop culture, technology, and drug addiction, using an ironic, sarcastic tone.

To situate the novel socio-historically, though, we should examine Etxebarria's own interpretation of her generation, Generation X, in Spain. In *La Eva futura*, she explains that the term describes a group of 20-somethings who are, "iconoclastic and apathetic, passengers in constant movement within themselves. A generation that resists leaving their parents' house, that does not express any interest in finding a job, that does not embrace any ideals" (127). In their book *Generations*, William Strauss and Neil Howe list the characteristics of this generation, which consists of those born between 1961 and 1981. Although the list is too long to be recreated here, the most important characteristics are: divorced parents, a lack of parental authority, higher risk of suicide, lower adjusted family income, less likelihood of home ownership, cynicism (325–8). Strauss and Howe note positive aspects as well: better negotiation and communication skills, along with consumer savvy, define this generation (325). Etxebarria agrees with their description of her generation, attributing a lack of interest in self-sufficiency to the fact that the world around them doesn't pay attention to them:

> The social structure, which is based from its origin solely on the idea of family, doesn't include them; the political model that has sold them to economic imperatives and has betrayed them in questions as basic as mere subsistence doesn't care about them. (127)

Her argument suggests that those who belong to Generation X in Spain lack interest in work and politics because those things have betrayed this younger generation – jobs do not pay enough to allow the youth to be self-supporting, economic growth has caused housing prices to soar, and politics does not concern itself with the youth of the country.

We see these same issues in Cristina, the protagonist, a college graduate who takes an office job that pays her a "shitty" salary (36), leaving her too tired to do anything other than sleep. She explains that

> Saturday nights I was so fed up that I put on my jeans and leather boots and went out desperately to get wasted . . . so that I could forget about this shitty life I was living, and that year, I got drunk more than I have in my whole life, and I fucked anything around. (37)

The disillusion, brought on by Cristina's entrance into the dreaded "real"

world, and the self-destructive attitude that she uses to deal with her disillusion typify the experiences of her age group.

Cristina realizes that her job does not pay enough to compensate her for her lack of freedom, reflecting the problems stated by Etxebarria about jobs and cost of living. According to Mark Allinson,

> The education of many young people up to the university level created an expectation of similar access to appropriate employment which the 1980s and 1990s have spectacularly failed to deliver. . . . This problem is exacerbated by a disproportionate rise in housing costs in Spain over the last 10 years. (267)

Cristina complains that her salary is low in order to cover the high salaries of the executives, leaving no money for the mid- and low-level workers. She wonders about the possibility of a strike to improve conditions, but realizes "they had us alienated and worn out, so hypnotized by the hours and hours of constant work and their apocalyptic discourses on the terrible economic situation, that it didn't even occur to any of us" (37–8). Etxebarria presents this same problem in *La Eva futura* when she writes, "Real estate speculation, outrageous rents and miserable salaries force the Spanish Generation X to remain indefinitely in their parents' home, kept in an eternally expanded adolescence, grumbling with useless frustration, a rage that doesn't have anywhere to direct itself" (128). Although Cristina can afford to live on her own, many of her friends still live with their parents, causing them to feel (and act) like adolescents. Even with an educational level higher than or equal to that of their parents, these young adults are unable to achieve similar economic benefits.

Because of the poor pay and the long hours, Cristina quits her job and becomes a waitress at a popular club called Planeta X. About the new job she says,

> I earn more than I earned in that office, and my mornings are for me, for me alone, and the free time is worth more to me than the best salaries in the world. I don't regret at all the decision that I made, and I will never, ever go back to work in a multinational corporation. I'd become a whore first. (39)

Many members of Generation X choose to remove themselves from the traditional workplace when they realize that they no longer have the time to enjoy the benefits of being an adult.

Cristina's lack of ambition (or is it a lack of desire for material well-being?) in her work reflects a Generation X-type of nonchalance toward money and work ethic, and her attitude toward life portrays the inner frustration that Etxebarria described in *La Eva futura*. Due to this lack of ambition combined with a feeling of impotence when it comes to effecting political changes, many of the youth of the 1980s and early 1990s turned to the violent and

self-destructive counterculture that was available to them. Allinson states that "the alarming rise in the figures for the use of legal and illegal drugs . . . responds in some measure to Spain's rapid economic and social change and attempts by various groups of people to cope with the dizzying speed of such change" (264). In becoming a waitress at the appropriately named Planeta X Cristina becomes ensconced in the drug culture of Madrid. She describes her use of the drug ecstasy that helps its user fit into a certain lifestyle: Cristina uses the drug to keep her awake, but it has the by-product of curbing her appetite, making her fit into the "ideal" waif-like form for a woman. When one of her friends decides that she wants to try heroin, Cristina reflects on the unresponsive effects heroin produces, making a "prisoner" out of the body (286). Most importantly, she finally does not use it, but only because a tragic occurrence – the death of another friend who has already injected himself – happens moments before she can try the drug. This experience does not keep her from continuing to use other drugs. Generally, Etxebarria treats drug-use lightly; however, in the case of heroin, she portrays the dangers that come from this lethal drug, possibly due to the 1994 death of heroin-addict grunge-rock star Kurt Cobain – himself an embodiment of the apathetic Generation X mentality.[5]

Cobain's death affected grunge-rock fans worldwide and perhaps caused the migration towards a musical style called techno. The move to this music culture – the rave culture – was accompanied by a change in drug of choice from heroin to ecstasy (X). Mark Allinson argues that "the music of the nineties in Spain was bakalao (including house, techno, ambient, techno house – all imported styles)" (271). Cristina experiences this culture in her club. In *La Eva futura*, Etxebarria describes this musical and cultural phenomenon as a reproduction of "the guitar riff, the bass line or the tune of the organ" with "no fear at the time of taking what is not yours, musically speaking" (140). The result, she explains, is "a hypnotic, fractal, repetitive music that, by repeating one single element insistently, can change the state of mind of the person listening to it" (141).

Cristina participates in this segment of counterculture. She describes the experience of dancing to techno while high on ecstasy as a new Generation-X vision of religion:

> On the dance floor, the mass dances in communion, to the rhythm of a single beat, a single music, a single drug, a single collective soul. The DJ is the new messiah; the music, the work of God; the wine of the Christians has been substituted by ecstasy and the iconography of the stained-glass windows substituted by the TV monitors. (42)

This comparison of techno to religion demonstrates the distance Spanish youth subculture has come since Francisco Franco's death in 1975. From a repressed Catholic upbringing to all-night, drug-induced dancing, Spanish

culture has changed. Etxebarria describes the rave culture as the ultimate postmodern experience, "the culture of dance can be considered the definitive postmodern experience: spending without compensation, discourse without content, culture without referent, masses without a hierarchy, religion without god" (*La Eva futura* 146). The description of the music as being hypnotic, repetitive, and fractal relates back to the language used both by members of Generation X and by Etxebarria. Fractals, images used to describe mathematically complex equations, change depending on the perspective from which they are viewed. By describing techno music as fractal, Etxebarria seeks to relay its antithetical properties of mathematical precision and startling beauty. Irony, combined with the adjectives "hypnotic" and "repetitive," describes the voice with which Etxebarria imbues this novel. However, we must not overlook how these descriptors also relate to the feelings produced by drug use.

Cristina talks about various drugs – early and frequent drug use being considered a characteristic of Generation X – cocaine, heroin, and ecstasy, the illegal ones and Prozac, the legal one. Etxebarria finds the concept of neurological, legal, drugs fascinating, calling depression an "in-style, end-of-millennium ailment" (132). She discusses the popularity of Prozac, explaining that at the end of the 1990s, "Prozac became one of the two most popular pills of the time, the legal one" (132). She bases much of her argument on a book called *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America* (1994) by Elizabeth Wurtzel. In *La Eva futura*, Etxebarria paraphrases Wurtzel by writing that "if each moment in history could be defined by a distinct emotion, the moment has come to be afraid to observe that the emotion that defines the end of the millennium is called depression" (131).

Ecstasy, however, for Cristina's lifestyle, is the drug of choice because its hallucinogenic and amphetamine properties give its users seemingly unending energy. Cristina uses it to keep her awake during her night-time job and to curb her appetite. Although she tries to keep her drug use to a minimum, her job and the strain of ending the relationship with her boyfriend cause her frequently to seek enjoyment through drugs. She relates her work to her breakup and her drug use, saying:

> I work in a bar and I spend Sundays going from club to club, drinking like a sponge, spending my salary on ecstasy so that I can forget that my boyfriend left me. Even though I am thin and cute. That didn't seem to be enough. Relationships of the nineties, they say. Ephemeral. No future. Generation X. Go fuck yourself. (45)

She sees these ephemeral relationships with no future as a side effect of being part of Generation X. The times cause those who live in this generation always to be in search of something – usually something self-destructive – that makes everything else matter, be it drugs or relationships.

Through Cristina, Etxebarria shows the life of a Generation Xer in the late 1990s in Spain – job difficulties, drug use, and sexuality. One of the most outstanding – and most criticized – aspects of the novel is the candid way in which Etxebarria describes sexual interactions. Cristina is a "man-eater" because of her promiscuity (27). She states, "I have tried all of the available drugs and I've slept with more or less all of the presentable men that have come my way. I've had a good time, overall. Or maybe I've had a terrible time. I don't even know" (285). This statement defines the way in which Cristina and her friends deal with their sexual liberation. With a background of unhappy and complex familial relationships, along with the easy access to contraceptives, many Generation Xers choose to delay their entrance into monogamous relationships and experience alternative forms of sexuality more than their older counterparts. Within the novel, though, much of the conversations between Cristina and her friends treat sexual intercourse with over-the-top statements, as they belong to this group of adults who shy away from monogamy. She discusses sexuality in a straightforward way that may shock some readers, and indeed shocks some characters in the novel, and these issues form the backbone of her ironic tone.

The first chapter of the novel starts with Cristina's description of intercourse with a man who "had a tiny one" (13). She and a friend, Line, discuss their sexual interactions with men without deleting descriptive details: after a party, the two catch a bus to go back home at a time when most people are going to work. Line describes the sex she just had loudly enough that all of the other bus-riders (all men) can hear: "In any case . . . you should know that, having seen what I've seen, it would have been better to stay home and masturbate with my own finger. At least that way I would have come" (111). The bus driver hears this explicit talk about masturbation and orgasm (and coming from a young woman, too) and almost crashes the bus. Although the topic shocks the bus driver,[6] Cristina and Line do not find their conversation to be out of place and decide to get off the bus at the next stop, calling the bus driver and the rest of those on the bus repressed *machistas* (118).

The outspoken behavior from women in a public place about sexual intercourse and orgasm presents an important aspect of Generation Xers. In the past, especially under Franco's dictatorship,[7] people – more specifically women – were supposed to be uninformed about their sexuality. This generation, however, has access to many different varieties of information. Any knowledge that anyone could want can be found on videos, online, or through magazines or books. The pervasive nature of culture – even its seedier parts – defines younger generations. Knowledge is easily obtained, making taboo subjects open for discussion.

Pornography is one of those (formerly) taboo subjects. However, Cristina and her clan see pornography as a way to learn about normal sexual interaction. They rent pornographic movies in order to "acquire first-hand information about all sorts of techniques and postures that in that moment

we could only imagine" (159). That three adolescent girls decide to learn about sex through pornography makes sense: in this day and age, adolescents look to technology to answer their questions instead of turning to adults or even peers. The three friends become fascinated with porn and watch all of the videos that they can find. Cristina's description of the different types of movies carries on for two or three pages, filled with breakdowns of the different categories of pornographic movies they saw (160–2). She says that the over-stimulus of these movies did not cause her to want more sex, only to think that certain sexual behaviors were the norm. By setting these precedents, Etxebarria prepares her readers for the varied sexual behaviors that appear throughout the novel.

In starting as a teenager watching porn and moving to casual sex, Cristina works her way toward writing her sexual history. In doing so, she deals with the violence behind sexual intercourse as well. Cristina's sister, Ana, talks about her first sexual experience when she was raped. We discover, after various veiled references, that Cristina became sexually involved with (or was sexually abused by) her 20-year-old cousin Gonzalo at the age of 9:

> But I couldn't say a word, because Gonzalo had made me swear that I would keep it a secret, he had made me understand that everyone would think that he was taking advantage of me because I was only nine years old and he was twenty, and that if anyone found out they would expel me from school, lock me up in a reformatory or in a psychiatric hospital, and I didn't want that to happen, because I knew that I was a good girl, a good girl in my own way. (281)

Even though she kept their relationship secret as a child, as a teenager she tells her psychiatrists about this interaction with Gonzalo, and they suggest that it led to her promiscuous behavior.

This early sexual abuse exacerbates Cristina's use of violence and drugs. We have seen her use of drugs mentioned earlier, and she uses violence against herself to help recover her feelings and sensations. During a fight with her boyfriend, she becomes tired of him yelling at her and threatens to kill him with a knife:

> But he continued to scream at me. Knives in my ears. I grabbed my own knife. I warned him that if he came closer, I would kill him. I was ready to do it. I don't want anyone else to hurt me. He said I wasn't brave enough. I raised my hand. I directed the knife towards my arm. I gave myself a deep cut on my forearm. (189)

Cristina might be acting out of confusion due to her early initiation into sexual intercourse, but her actions are also symptomatic of the general malaise facing Generation Xers while searching for meaning in life.

This self-mutilation repeats itself various times in the novel, the first being

a flashback to when Ana finds her teenage sister Cristina locked in the bathroom methodically cutting her legs with a razor blade:

> There was an enormous red stain on the white tiles. . . . There was blood everywhere. . . . my crazy little sister [Cristina] had been cutting her legs with a razorblade all that time. I didn't realize until I saw the razorblade in her hand and I looked closely at her thighs, full of small cuts, from which flowed blood as if it were ketchup oozing from a broken bottle. (181–2)

Some see this violence as self-destructive; others view it as a way of finding meaning where none seems to exist. However, this generation is the first to experiment with self-inflicted violence to the extent that we see it today. From her admitted promiscuity to her discussion of unusual sexual interaction, Cristina (stereo)typifies the Generation X woman's postmodernist morality, which is defined by its individualism and relativism.

Cristina mentions the end of her relationship with her boyfriend Iain when she says, as quoted earlier, "Relationships of the nineties, they say. Ephemeral. No future" (45). Etxebarria refers back to the issue facing this age group of the prohibitive pricing of homes causing difficulty in forming adult relationships. Cristina's interaction with Iain begins unusually. When Cristina first goes home with him, after having met him at a party, she learns that Iain prefers unusual, somewhat violent, sex. He ties her up, blindfolds her, and uses a vibrator on her before penetrating her (126–32). The descriptions both of the uncertainty of the situation – Cristina has only just met Iain – and of her enjoyment of it remind the reader of the pornographic videos rented by Cristina and her friends. This explicit and unusual sexual intercourse within the novel causes much of the dislike and criticism of Etxebarria's work;[8] however, it also reflects the changing times. After Franco's death, Spain's interest in explicit sexuality and even pornography grew rapidly.[9] From the late 1970s and early 1980s, Spanish women began to write about sexuality and eroticism, breaking the silence surrounding these subjects over the past decades. By the end of the twentieth century, Spanish women writers now claimed the opportunity to continue and to expand their writing about these two separate-but-intertwined subjects.

Some critics, such as Ignacio Echevarría, claim that Etxebarria writes with the motive of shocking her audience. Although shock may be a part of the experience of reading one of her novels, I doubt that her motive is that simple. The experience with pornographic videos still has humorous undertones, even though the subject matter might offend some readers. The same is true when Etxebarria has Cristina describe her first experience with anal sex. The topic is not normally broached in "polite" company; however, here Etxebarria takes another step in the process of speaking about normally taboo topics:

> At first it hurts, lightly, then it is a mixture of pleasure and pain, finally the pain

> becomes less and it is all pleasure. You feel like there are a million labyrinths inside your body, secret passageways that all connect with your brain. Millions of circuits that transmit electrical charges of three thousand watts. Pure dynamite. Small explosions inside of your body. You are a technological terrorist. My Unabomber of sex. (189)

Her description uses references to popular culture, such as Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber,[10] which then leads us to equate anal sex with terrorism. The unusual comparison of terrorism to the seldom-discussed topic catches the reader's attention. The pleasure/pain, violence/love dichotomy once again raises awareness of the new cultural norms for youth at the end of the twentieth century. By not only mentioning but engaging the violent tones of terrorism and applying them to a non-traditional sex act, Etxebarria forces the uncomfortable image on the reader while pulling him into the reality of the novel through her description and comparison. Readers have two choices: be pulled into this extreme, contemporary, violent, sexual world (having it become a sort of reality) or distance themselves from the text (creating a detachment between art and reality).

Etxebarria forms part of a short procession of women writers, such as Rosa Montero and Almudena Grandes, who dare to give voice to women in Spain. In *Amor, curiosidad, Prozac y dudas*, she approaches topics such as workplace Generation X dissatisfaction, violence, drug use and drug abuse, and sexuality. Etxebarria creates a dazzling new style of fiction that shocks and entertains her readers, allowing them to enter this fictional but realistic world of extremes. Self-destructive behavior and popular culture permeate this novel, causing controversy to surround both the novel itself and its author. Although her novel might be shocking to some readers, the purpose is not to shock but to elucidate the end-of-millennium lifestyle of many belonging to Generation X.

NOTES

1 www.clubcultura.com/clubliteratura/clubescritores/luciaetxebarria/home.htm

2 All translations are mine.

3 In 1998, she was awarded the Premio Nadal for her second novel *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*. Her novel *De todo lo visible y lo invisible* (Of Everything Visible and Invisible) received the Premio Primavera in 2001, and most recently, *Un milagro en equilibrio* (A Miracle in Balance, 2004) won the Premio Planeta. In addition to those three critically acclaimed works, she has written a two-volume work of non-fiction called *La Eva futura/ La letra futura* (The Future Eve/Writing's Future, 2000); two collections of short stories entitled *Nosotras que no somos como las demás* (We Who Are Not Like the Others, 1999) and *Una historia de amor como otra cualquiera* (A Story of Love Like Any Other, 2003); a book of poetry, *Estación de infierno* (Season of Hell, 2001); a book of critical essays, *En brazos de la mujer fetiche* (In the Arms of the Fetished Woman, 2002), co-written with Sonia Núñez Puente.

4 According to Akiko Tsuchiya, *Amor* sold out five editions in the first six months. A total of 90,000 copies had been sold as of the date of her article ("The 'New' Female Subject" 86).

5 Etxebarria has written a biography of Courtney Love, *Aguanta esto* (Put Up With This, 1995), which was recently republished under the title *Courtney y yo* (Courtney and I).
6 This explicit conversation in the bus is where the movie version of the novel, which Etxebarria co-wrote, starts.
7 Francisco Franco's fascist regime ruled Spain from 1939 to 1975.
8 See Akiko Tsuchiya's "The 'New' Female Subject and the Commodification of Gender in the Works of Lucía Etxebarria."
9 See Juan Eslava Galán.
10 Ted Kaczynski (22 May, 1942) is an American terrorist who sought to fight against what he perceived as the evils of technological progress by mailing bombs to people over a period of 18 years. He was apprehended by the FBI in 1996.

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15 On Human Parts: Orly Castel-Bloom and the Israeli Extreme

Adia Mendelson-Maoz

> *If you go out on the street and break a window, you'll be committing vandalism. If you break all the windows, you'll be making a statement. Castel-Bloom's shock waves shatter all the windows on the street.*
>
> (Naiger 132)

The Israeli writer Orly Castel-Bloom was born in 1960 to French-speaking Jewish Egyptian parents. She lives in the city of her birth, Tel-Aviv, with her two children. Since 1987, she has written ten books, including four novels. Castel-Bloom is a prominent Israeli woman author and in 1999 was described by a leading Israeli newspaper as one of the most influential women in Israel. She has received numerous prizes (the 1990 Tel-Aviv Prize; the 1993 Alterman prize; the 1994 and the 2001 Prime Minister's Prize). Her novel *Dolly City* was included in the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works.

Castel-Bloom is among the leaders of the poetic generation which burst onto the Israeli scene in the 1980s and 1990s.[1] She has adopted the "new style" of contemporary Hebrew literature, characterized as striving towards a disintegration of a coherent world-view through a series of rhetorical devices which include shifting from an authoritative to an unauthoritative and unreliable narrator; using "slim" language, with a deliberately narrow vocabulary, a colloquial style and basic grammar; "flattening" the psychological and emotional complexity of the characters; dissolving borders between self and world and between the private body and its environs; relinquishing a clear and linear plot, and creating implausibility in the description of the fictional world.[2] Her version of the "new style" produces an *extreme poetics*, which radically violates any harmony, unity and value, and provocatively raises social and political questions by building controversial relationships between the physical and the political. She impairs the world she builds and severely harms the human body in an act of terror, in parallel to the political situation. Since the borders between the self and the world are unclear, the political aggression defuses into the

self and its sadistic delusions find a concrete and physical realization in her texts.[3]

In this chapter I wish to present Castel-Bloom's unique voice as a representation of the Israeli contemporary extreme, through a discussion of two of her most prominent works: her second, and perhaps most troubling novel *Dolly City*, published in 1992,[4] which looks at motherhood and its role in the Zionist narrative; and her latest work, *Human Parts*, published in 2002,[5] whose title hints both at the bloody result of a suicide bombing and at the fragmented lives of individuals in the story. My discussion will show how her extreme poetics is used to illustrate political perplexity, question core values, and raise harsh criticism during a critical time in the nation's history.

DOLLY CITY'S EXTREME

Dolly City is a difficult text, which takes place in a simulchronic world – a world made up of bits of cultural images, pieces of modern myths, and shards of decontexualized signs. Dolly the city does not refer us to some non-literary city, but to a twilight zone of Western futuristic urban-grotesque experience, which alludes to places that may be found in Tel Aviv, such as the Carmel market and Hilton beach, along with places from other parts of the world: the river Thames, water fountains that pee in an arc and a memorial called Dachau. Dolly city suffers from extreme weather. Sometimes scorching hot, at other times winter so harsh that "birds froze in mid-flight and fell down like a stone" (128).

The character of Dolly, the protagonist of the work, is a mother, a doctor, and an inverted myth of motherhood. Dolly finds a newborn child inside a garbage bag in a car, and decides to adopt him. She tries to protect the tiny creature from the harmful ways of the world out of desperate motherly care. But anxiety and aggression towards herself, the baby and other family members, dead and alive, lead her to perform scientific experiments on him, to cut him up in order to examine his internal organs, to dissect him, give him medication for diseases that he does not suffer from, and even to score his skin and flesh here and there, for kicks. The son survives this torture, grows up big and strong and enrolls in the Brutal Seamanship Military Academy.

Castel-Bloom's fiction takes Jean-Paul Sartre's justification for the attempt to "create a literature of extreme situations" – he claims that the present age "has forced us to reach, like itself, the limits" (quoted in Cumming 390–92) – and carries it further, creating a radical text which puts the reader in shock and emotional vertigo. Concurrently, Israeli scholars identify three aspects of Hebrew *extreme poetics*: a descriptive aspect (focusing on the extreme element in the plot, as the events related diverge from realism and fling the reader

into a state of astonishment and incomprehension), a structural aspect (focusing on oppositional structures and principles, contradictory points of view or conflicting moral standards), and an emotional aspect (focusing on the response of the reader or critic who is anxious, emotionally lost, and perplexed) (see Rabina, Tsur, and Mendelson-Maoz).

Within the extreme poetics *Dolly City* is a limitless grotesque, since the loss of emotional orientation is formed by an unsolved clash between the horrid and repulsive element and the comic element.[6] The work demolishes the central myth of motherhood through a graphic description of the torture a mother inflicts upon her son. It seems, however, that the constructed fictional world incorporates this human behavior as a mere triviality. The nightmarish events are not highlighted, but quite the opposite – they have the same standing as everyday, normal narrative elements; as if a scene depicting a mother carving up her son's body in order to count his kidneys was possible, justifiable and common. This meaningless cruelty, devoid of all critical awareness, is highlighted and emphasized through the virtuosic use of different language levels, surprising metaphors, and amusing situations.

But inversely, and precisely because of this trivialization of horror, Castel-Bloom's text should not be taken, in the words of Baruch Blich, as "permission to prefer anarchy, cruelty, disgust, a shattering of borders, randomness and a great deal of pointlessness in everyday behavior" (25). Nor is it correct to say, following Tzvia Ben-Yosef Ginur, that Castel-Bloom's decision to relinquish the concrete criticism of satirical writing in favor of the grotesque raises, but dashes, the reader's expectations of a subversive stance (356).

It might seem that Castel-Bloom's distorted and impossible worlds, with their collapsing oppositions between real and imagined, sanity and insanity, human awareness and robotic behavior, are devoid of meaning and values. Yet I would like to argue that in spite of the dismantling of hierarchies and dissipation of identity, these worlds display the lack of acquiescence which is a vital condition for any possibility of moral justification.[7] The moral viewpoint of the work is constructed precisely through this ethical nebulousness, this constantly rising threshold of sensitivity which characterizes contemporary culture – bombarded with images of atrocities without any explicit criticism – which creates a sensual and cognitive dissonance depriving the reader, temporarily at least, of judgment.

In light of this view, I claim that the presence of "body parts" in *Dolly City* from 1992 and *Human Parts* from 2002 – the obsessive preoccupation with the body and its organs; with sickness and death – is a powerful element in reversing the social system of values and norms. Perhaps in the spirit of Bakhtin,[8] through the grotesque, non-individual, living, dying, fluttering body, Castel-Bloom mounts, in her unique voice, a critique of the contemporary Israeli experience.

DOLLY, THE "ULTIMATE" JEWISH MOTHER – CASTEL-BLOOM'S INVERTED SUBVERSION

Dolly City opens with a description of the goldfish's demise. After its death Dolly, the narrator, fishes it out of the tank, slices it in strips (though it keeps slipping from her fingers on the kitchen counter), lightly cooks it and eats the pieces. Dolly gives symbolic significance to the act of cutting the fish:

> Then I looked at the pieces. In very ancient times, in the land of Canaan, righteous men would sacrifice bigger animals than these to God. When they cut up a lamb, they would be left with big, bloody, significant pieces in their hands, and their covenant would mean something. (11)

The opening scene of the work creates the first connection between the bizarre events, Jewish history, and the covenant with the Lord. In ancient times, the founding fathers of Judaism were committed to sacrificial ceremonies. The sacrifices of antiquity were full of meaning. In the reality of Dolly city, the sacrifice becomes small, fake, distorted.

The theme of sacrifice stands as a foundation of the entire work, which has, to a large degree, a cyclical structure. The novel begins with the fish, continues with the lethal injection Dolly gives to her dying dog, and moves to her reaction to the baby she finds in the dog undertaker's car. In this way the image of the fish, symbolizing sacrifice to God, is transformed into an image of the blood bond between the child and his God – specifically, the act of Jewish circumcision. Within the Israeli context, this image symbolizes the blood bond between the child and his country.[9]

Together with the theme of sacrifice, motherhood stands as another foundation of the work, since Dolly, as a mother, has a fundamental role in the design of her son's destiny in this sacrificial cycle. Dolly is a version of the "Jewish mother," a version of the loving and overprotective "yiddisher mama," who cannot let her son live his own life and wishes to protect him from all the harm in the world. But through her caring process, she also strives for "Jewish" justice. When Dolly discovers that her son is missing a kidney, she thinks hard to try and find suitable prospective kidney donors: "The decision to fly with the child to Düsseldorf, Germany, in order to obtain a kidney for him from a German baby, was made on purely *moral grounds. I felt a sense of vocation*" (50–1, my emphasis). Dolly seemingly wishes to perform a moral act, and therefore seriously considers how to save her son while doing justice in the world. Who is the required sacrifice? Who should be the target of revenge? How to do justice to the Jewish people? She comes to the realization that taking a kidney from a German baby is the right moral action, and even feels a sense of calling in this theft. Dolly arrives at the orphanage with her baby and succeeds in transplanting the organ into her son's body. Upon her return to Israel, Dolly begins to be plagued by doubt

and "opens up" her son again, only to discover that he now has three kidneys. Unable to tell the transplanted kidney from the original ones, she randomly picks one and tears it from his body.

Dolly contains the history of the Jewish people: "I wandered from field to field . . . like the Israelites wandering from place to place throughout the long years of exile" (109). Her world is committed to history – this commitment is part of Dolly the mother, and grotesquely, becomes part of her son's anatomy. Thus, in a scene of possible covenant and possible binding, Dolly determines her son's calling through his body:

> The baby was still lying on his stomach. I put him to sleep, even though I still didn't know where I was going to cut . . . I took a knife and began cutting here and there. I drew a map of the Land of Israel – as I remembered it from the biblical period – on his back, and marked in all those Philistine towns like Gath and Ashkelon, and with the blade of the knife I etched the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River which empties out into the Dead Sea . . . drops of blood began welling up in the river beds cutting across the country. The sight of the map of the Land of Israel amateurishly sketched on my son's back gave me a frisson of delight . . . my baby screamed in pain but I stood firm . . . I contemplated the carved-up back: it was a map of the Land of Israel: nobody could mistake it. (44)

Through the carving act, Dolly exchanges the circumcision ("Brith") undergone by every Jewish baby, when the foreskin is cut, with another, explicit "Brith" – not between the boy and God, but between his body and the map, his body and his national destiny. From Dolly's end, this embodies the full identification with the idea that the Jewish mother raises her son so that his body may serve the military's national aims, first among them the defense of Israel's borders.

Carving the map of the Land of Israel in blood on the boy's back is an act of subversion on two narrative levels: first, it presents the image of the map and its violent context, and second, it establishes long preoccupation with the founding myth of Isaac's binding. In the political reality of Israel, the map is an authoritative expression of established facts. The map supplies a direction, a description and presentation of the past, and strives to give blueprint directions for the future.[10] The map of the Land of Israel includes various effective and historic borderlines. It supplies a visual representation which, by nature, is removed from details and violence. By carving the map of the Land of Israel in blood on the boy's back, Dolly explicitly expresses the human body's inclusion within irredeemable national aspirations. The act of determining the son's destiny by carving the map of the Land of Israel on his back is in essence the first step on the road to bereavement. There will always be someone who will remind Dolly that "your child may die in battle" (146). Indeed, Dolly is very much the "ultimate" Jewish mother, who nurtures her son and

worries about his life and health only so that he may give that life for his country.

On Israel's first day of independence, the following words were written in a governmental proclamation:

> Today, Israel will remember with pride and veneration its sons and daughters, who endangered their souls in battle, and through their young, pure and brave lives have bestowed freedom on their people. Israel will consecrate their memory; will be blessed with the brilliance of their heroism, comfort the bereaved parents who lived to see *their sacrifice accepted*. (quoted in Maoz 111, my emphasis)

The 1948 war, which took many lives and brought about the founding of a Jewish state, led to the establishment of a ritual of the fallen, designed to unite the Jewish community in the Land of Israel into one body which would include a place of honor for the fallen soldiers and their families. The heroization of the fallen was part of the amalgamation of the sacrifice myth, by which the fallen "by their death, have given us life" – meaning that those living in Israel are alive thanks to the soldiers who have endangered themselves and lost their lives. The founding myth of sacrifice is related to the religious context, but exchanges the altar of God for "the altar of the homeland." This version of the sacrifice myth and the blood tie has led to a new reading of the Biblical story of Isaac's binding. Thus, many Israeli artists have adopted the model of the binding to describe the sons who go to war and are sacrificed for the lives of others.[11]

But as the political consensus began to unravel, and the collective's position to weaken, the discourse surrounding the founding myth of the binding has become increasingly critical. Thus, for instance, the poet Yitzhak Laor calls upon the Biblical Isaac not to trust his father and to refuse to be sacrificed for a cause that is not only unheroic, but also immoral. In one of his extreme poems, Laor turns to the Hebrew mother, who is destined for bereavement and asks her to "tear his flesh / harm his eyes, break his thighbone / anything so they won't take him" (Laor 121). Dolly does tear her son's flesh, but she does not act out of the motive suggested by Laor. Laor wishes to harm the healthy body in order to prevent the boy from going to war; the mother, facing an ideology which is like a Moloch, continuously demanding human sacrifice, can only prevent the death of her son through the disfigurement of his body. But Dolly, who carves the map of the Land of Israel on the boy's back, creates an inverted ideological subversion – by her very act of joining the macabre cannibalistic circle and her very desire to play a role in the ideological game.

Dolly lacks critical awareness and accepts the ethical viewpoints of her surroundings without a trace of doubt. She takes the version of avenging Nazis and their henchmen at face value, and looks on the killing of German

babies as a calling; she accepts the picture of the Jewish-national sacrifice, and is willing to defend the Land of Israel with her son's blood. And so, out of innocence and complete surrender, her son's anatomy becomes a disfigured testimony, a cruel and grotesque mirror placed in front of the shattered, humiliated, effaced face of Israeli society.

FROM *DOLLY CITY* TO *HUMAN PARTS* – FROM THE ANATOMY OF THE BODY TO THE ANATOMY OF DEATH

This is how the writer and intellectual David Grossman described the "Israeli situation" in 2003:

> In the last three years, the citizens of Israel are living in a reality in which people are being blown apart, whole families are instantly killed in cafes and shopping malls and buses. . . . Children who are not allowed to watch horror movies on TV see the most explicit horrors on the nightly news. . . . it seems that for many Israelis, to be an Israeli today means to live within a never ending dread of calamity and dissipation, in every aspect. (Grossman 178–9)

Human Parts, described as "the first Hebrew novel written during the time of and about the intifadah, with its objective reality updated to the level of army radio news flashes" (Livne 28), is perceived by many to herald a change in Castel-Bloom's writing style. This is her first novel written in the third person – narrated by an external narrator – and which takes place in an undisguised Israel. It is her first work which may be gleaned for concrete events and plausible characters.

The world of *Human Parts* is the world of television, media, and the evening news. The narrator turns time and again to the news, opinion, and gossip sections of the daily papers, in order to keep us up to date with whatever is going on. The text describes the crazed reality of Israel, which has apparently become a sort of Castel-Bloom-esque distorted-reality. However, the work still retains a connection to Castel-Bloom's *extreme poetics*. The tragedies in *Human Parts* take on apocalyptic proportions. As in *Dolly City*, the Israel of *Human Parts* encounters extreme weather. After seven years of drought an extreme winter hits the region, with temperatures dropping to around 0°C, and snow even threatens to fall on the coastal cities. But "not only was the sky falling – the ground was trembling too" (6). Due to the security situation and the collapse of the Oslo accords, the Palestinians carry out daily shooting attacks and suicide bombings which leave many dead and injured in various degrees of seriousness. All the news broadcasts open with descriptions and pictures of human body parts scattered on the road after the daily attack, and with the accounts of eye witnesses, who always begin by saying "suddenly I heard a boom" (7). The Israeli policy of restraint, together

with the weather, weaken the citizens' immune system and make it difficult to fight the "Saudi flu," which kills one of every four who succumb to it. The hospitals are full of patients and terror victims, the undertakers are buckling under the workload, and the cemeteries begin to bury the dead in levels, one on top of another.

Castel-Bloom's text refers to the current situation but magnifies and accentuates it, in effect constructing Israel as a war zone and a natural disaster area, where catastrophe takes on metaphysical proportions. The use of the Hebrew calendar and the fact that many events take place in Tel Aviv, in streets named after prophets (many of them prophets of doom), link the described apocalypse with Jewish history. In this sense, *Human Parts*' style is similar to that of *Dolly City*.

The preoccupation with death replaces the preoccupation with the body in *Dolly City*, but in fact it continues *Dolly City*'s critique of the banality of horror, which is a result of norms taken to extremes. First, all the pains of poverty, disease, and death in the work are described with a hint of parody. The descriptions of death and dying are pathetic, despicable and laden with clichés; the characters see themselves and their lives through the television screen and try to recognize "a good story." Second, in both works the characters lack critical awareness. Dolly unequivocally accepts the social norms, and due to her simplistic thinking even gives them an anatomical expression. The characters in *Human Parts* are likewise – they are media-controlled robots who internalize the consensual framework of debate.

It seems, therefore, that the shift from *Dolly City* to *Human Parts*, which was written about ten years later, cannot be described as a movement towards realism, just as it cannot be seen as the relinquishing of *extreme poetics*. Yet, the recognition of the similarity of style within these two works illuminates the fundamental difference between them: *Dolly City*'s Dolly tries to defend her son from the harmful ways of the world. She also tries to fix the entire community, as well as the physical world around her, "the whole world was sick and the *whole burden was on my shoulders*" (*Dolly City* 72–3, my emphasis). Dolly constantly finds herself in a ceaseless process of repair – she hurts her son and tries to save him, tries to strengthen him and simultaneously harms him. The uncompromising repetition of the mending process is always unsuccessful – every healing is another operation which leaves a scar.

The feeling of malaise is present in *Human Parts* as well, characterized by an apocalyptic image of all-present death, a feeling that we are in the middle of a history about which Castel-Bloom herself had said she "hopes that this is not the history of the last generation of the Jewish People living in the country" (quoted in Livne 29). But unlike *Dolly City*, in *Human Parts* no one tries to overcome or conquer history. There is not a single attempt, however desperate or ridiculous, to mend or save. Each of the characters tries to

survive in his or her personal life, to take refuge from the hailstorm, to walk warily on the street and avoid any gathering which might prove fatal, to quietly bury the dead and happily receive the media attention and the state's condolences and money if the death was a result of a terrorist attack. Thus, if in *Dolly City* the heroine's innocence leads her to try and mend what was broken, *Human Parts* is dominated by grey, hopeless passivity – nobody wants to fix anything. In fact, no one has "a desire to live" yet no one has "any alternative either" (55).

CASTEL-BLOOM'S MAGIC – SHOCK TREATMENT

Castel-Bloom, who started writing at the end of the 1980s, burst onto the center stage of the literary scene like a welcome breath of fresh air. From the get-go it seemed that she, aspiring to give a shock treatment to the most intimate myths of today's Israeli citizens – both as human beings, as Jews and as Israelis – answered a social cultural need (Gurevitz 287, 303). Gadi Taub, who belongs to Castel-Bloom's biographical and literary generation, asserts that her success stems from her ability to connect with an existing sense of disintegration:

> It documented an important, if paradoxical, sentiment. On the one hand Israelis, especially young ones, still carried with them the feeling that Israeliness is stifling . . . On the other hand there was fear. Fear of disintegration. Castel-Bloom's sarcasm, which is both iconoclastic and riddled with twitches of hysteria . . . expressed that as well. Those who felt that the things which made Israel into a stressful collective are falling away, yet there is nothing to take their place, found in Castel-Bloom a clear expression of their feelings. (Taub 2000, 98)[12]

To continue Taub's thoughts, it seems that in the move from *Dolly City* to *Human Parts*, Castel-Bloom continues to describe the oppressive sensation of Israeliness, which moves from moral decay to great fear, and thus continues to act as a bare, objective mouthpiece for the situation. Thus, during the early 1990s, years of economic prosperity and optimism regarding the peace process, she writes *Dolly City*, aiming her critical arrows at the younger, morally corrupt generation; in the early years of the new millennium, years of economic recession and political crisis, years of bereavement and terror, she writes *Human Parts*, turning to the same generation who does not strive for a solution, who prefers to look at everything through the media's big eye and lets fear turn itself into a puppet on the historical and political stage.

NOTES

1 Along with other writers, such as Etgar Kerret, Gadi Taub, Uzi Weill and Gafi Amir, as well as Yuval Shimoni and Avraham Heffner.
2 On the new style in Hebrew Literature, see: Hever (1999) and Balaban.
3 On art and terror, see Lentricchia and McAuliffe.
4 *Dolly City* was published in Hebrew in 1992. It has been translated into Dutch (1993); French (1993); German (1995); English (1997); Swedish (1998); Greek (2000); Italian (forthcoming). All quotations are from the English, only page numbers have been given.
5 Published in Hebrew in 2002, and translated into English (2003); French (2004); German (2004); Italian (2003); Portuguese (2003). All quotations are from the English, only page numbers have been given.
6 Philip Thomson presents the grotesque as a middle state, where the reader fluctuates uncertainly, unable to decide between the horrid-terrible element and other elements which do not coincide with it. When the reader chooses one emotion or the other, the grotesque ceases to exist (7).
7 See Adi Ofir. The creation of constant disruptions in the text, and the neutralization of its authoritative dimension, can lead the critic towards the test defined by Robert Eaglestone (104–5), based on the philosophy of Levinas – the will to create a constant subversion as the only way to enable active reading and criticism.
8 Mikhail Bakhtin sees the grotesque body as part of the carnival experience, where humor creates "a second reality outside the official realm." This experience leads to a disruption and inversion of the hierarchal order and is therefore capable of voicing social criticism (194–5, 200).
9 In the Hebrew, the word "Brith" means both circumcision and (divine) contract.
10 In this sense, I accept the idea that: "The territory no longer preceded the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory" (Baudrillard 76). See also Hanan Hever (1999, 152–3 and 2000) and Benedict Anderson (163–85).
11 Maoz (111–33). See also Dan Miron's study on the poetry of the War of Independence (especially 323–9). On the tendency to attribute aims and wishes to the dead, according to ideology, see Anderson (198–9, 206).
12 See also Taub's *A Dispirited Rebellion.*

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