

## The Real in Fiction. Introduction

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

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

Granted, conventional forms of narrative never stopped being written, and the shift away from the postmodern spirit of disengaged play towards a perceptible faith in the possibility of grounding fiction in a number of stable enough principles or beliefs has been progressive. Linda Hutcheon's category of "historiographic metafiction" for instance offers a valuable entry into a discussion of the various possible alliances between an apparently relatively autonomous form of fiction on the one hand, characterized by self-

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

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

All in all the papers gathered in this volume endeavored to investigate the question of the effects of fiction upon the readers' imaginative configurations as well as upon the forms of their relations to the world. From a more strictly literary perspective, the collective reflection will hopefully contribute to further the study of realism, in its more recent and traditional forms, by raising the question, among others, of the modalities of creating illusion as well as of the object of illusion—a fixed entity or a process. According to an apparent paradox that deserves attention, choosing to explore the representations

of the real through fiction implies analysing some of the ways in which fiction, as Philippe Forest puts it, “ceaselessly questions itself.”<sup>1</sup>

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

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

In “**Off-Centring the Real in Postcolonial Fiction**,” **Arijana Luburić-Cvijanović** offers a historical perspective on post-colonial literatures, from early responses to colonial literatures up to contemporary ones. Her thoroughly documented paper examines the generic diversity of post-colonial literatures—magic realism, the fantastic,

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<sup>1</sup> « La fiction doit réfléchir la réalité c'est-à-dire la penser comme fiction et elle ne peut y parvenir qu'à la condition de s'interroger perpétuellement sur elle-même. » *Le Roman, le réel, et autres essais*, p. 236.

the Gothic, science fiction as well as inclusive forms of realism—to enhance the diversity of strategies of self-representation and of “resistance to the conservative realism of colonial texts.” Two close studies, of Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* (2007) and of Shaun Tan’s graphic novel *The Arrival* (2007), further illustrate postcolonial strategies of “account[ing] for the historical trauma of colonialism” while subverting totalising discourses. All contribute to redefine “mimesis as a dynamic, transformatory engagement with the world, rather than a static attempt to capture the world” (Durrant 182).

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

In “***Kind One* by Laird Hunt, or a tale of a real twice lost: writing the individual and collective memory of slavery,” Anne-Julie Debare** demonstrates how fiction may counter trauma by subverting the representations that enable its outburst or its repetition. Indeed Hunt invents a hybrid form of fictional testimony, resorting to the expressive power of tales and myths and a poetics of indirection to constitute a transitional object for the memory of slavery to be passed on. Thus the novel, as it strives to circumscribe the dynamics of violence, creates a space allowing for the reader’s judgement to be suspended while configuring the real and time to make them habitable.

**Karim Daanouné**, in “**‘Missing people never make sense’: Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega* or, Addressing the Terroristic Real to Oneself,**” focuses on the US Global War on Terror, a historical reality that is addressed “both overtly and covertly in the

novel,” thus generating a double-entendre effect throughout the narrative. Karim Daanoune argues that the novel stages a return of the repressed real according to an “autoimmune principle” that “ultimately betrays the fact that [...] the enemy was no one else but the United-States itself.” Through an analysis of the workings of trauma at both the personal and the national levels, Daanoune demonstrates that Jessica’s disappearance points towards the US having directed terrorism against themselves in their very attempt to eradicate it, thus deepening loss and mourning.

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

In “**The Realism of Speculative Fiction: Planetary Polyphony and Scale in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future***,” **Pierre-Louis Patoine** shows how Robinson’s novel responds to the demands formulated by the new climate regime, by

upscaling the spatial, temporal and narrative frames, to bring them beyond the scope of individual human consciousness and experience. While reminding readers how reality is constantly made through the interactions of individual, collective and non-human entities, this polyphonic novel illustrates the potentials of speculative fiction to give hope in the powers of imagination to change worldviews and states of affairs.

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

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

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