

Broadcasting the Self: Autofiction, Television and Representations of Authorship in Contemporary French Literature

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Abstract

This article examines the rise of autofiction as literary notion and cultural phenomenon in modern France. The past decades saw the rise of texts which not only challenge the convention of traditional autobiography and its reader-writer 'pact', but also integrate visual modes of representation in the fabric of the narrative, as tools and metaphors for the process of projection of the self that is autofiction. As television became an essential medium to promote and disseminate the figure of the intellectual in France, it has also been used as a tool to shape and manipulate the notion of authorship in life-writing. Drawing on examples including Duras's televised performance and more recent texts by Beigbeder, Angot, Nothomb and Delaume, this article examines the use of the televised medium as site of contention for authors who have aptly exploited the potential of the small screen within and outside their textual productions. The conclusion asks if autofiction can be perceived as a literary equivalent of reality television.

Keywords

Autofiction, television, authorship, France.

Biographical note

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Since Serge Doubrovsky first coined the term “autofiction” in the manuscript of *Fils* in 1977, the French literary scene has witnessed the rise of this practice which has become an editorial and critical phenomenon. Ongoing debates on the definition of autofiction, coupled with the publication of many books in which autobiographical, often intimate details are inserted within a fictional frame, have ensured constant attention for texts which came to the fore shortly after “autobiography” acquired a legitimate place in French academic circles thanks to Lejeune’s 1971 study. This field of study gave rise to rich debates constantly fuelled by rapid changes in the theorisation and practice of life-writing. Indeed, the autobiographical genre has evolved under the emergence of new, mainly visual, forms of self-inscription making the writing of the self an everyday, democratic practice, and reinforcing Philippe Lejeune’s intuition that “autobiography belongs to each and every one” (2005, 213, my translation). The literary and artistic sub-genre¹ of autofiction not only resorts to the features of both autobiography (coincidence between author, narrator and character; use of real events and experiences) and fiction (choice of sequences and reordering in a non-linear order, inclusion of dreams, invention of episodes), but also often merges artistic mediums and narrative threads, creating fragmented texts. These texts which cannot be labelled either “autobiography” or “fiction”, but which consciously situate themselves at the boundaries between the two, have embraced technologies as publicity tools and as creative platforms. But autofictional texts also insert visual media into the more traditional written format, revealing innovative ways of thinking and broadcasting the self.

Following practices such as the use of photography and fragments in *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes, many autofictional works have emphasised the role played by visual tools of representation in the transformation of autobiographical practices. The use of photography

¹ Critics disagree on whether to call autofiction a “genre”. I am reluctant to do so – as Todorov argued, it takes time for a new genre to get established, and the term “autofiction” became widely used only in the 1990s. Furthermore, I tend to view autofiction mostly as a sign of evolution and transformation of autobiographical writing, in the wake of Doubrovsky’s conception of the notion since the end of the 1980s.

in Barthes (1975) or Marguerite Duras (1984), cinema and emails in Camille Laurens (1998, 2006), texting in Sophie Calle (2007), blogging in Éric Chevillard (2009), advertising in Frédéric Beigbeder (2000) and Chloé Delaume (2006), reality television in Amélie Nothomb (2005), not only contributes to defining autofiction as a hybrid, multimedial practice,² it also corresponds to a need for each writer to find their own voice in order to re-write, or re-live, personal experience and share it with readers in an accessible language. Turning technological devices into structural and stylistic tools creates an illusion of immediacy and proximity, a reflection of “contemporary” lives which is reinforced by the use of disjointed narratives and styles. The flexible category of autofiction, which allows writers to focus on short sequences of their lives instead of trying to grasp existence in its entirety, enables its users to create a real *mise en scène* of themselves, by editing, rewriting fragments of lived experience. Some autofictional enterprises consist in re-writing the same themes: that of loss and love in Laurens (*Philippe, Cet absent-là*), the trauma of (writing about) incest in Christine Angot (*L’Inceste, Quitter la ville*), the duality between public and private selves in Beigbeder (*Mémoire d’un jeune homme dérangé, Vacances dans le coma*). In these works, autofiction functions as repetition, as the re-writing, in “real” life, of past experiences, which will then be transposed to the written page. Integrating visual media in these works acts as a way of multiplying possibilities of representation and creating strategies of doubt and ambiguity which lie at the heart of autofictional practices. Many writers have drawn on both televised and cinematic resources to add depth to the (re-)telling of lived events. In Camille Laurens, the use of film settings in *L’Avenir* and *Ni toi ni moi* conjures up new layers of ambiguity to already intricate metaphors of self-projection.

Autofiction has two public faces which may seem contradictory: the first one is the reception created and shaped by journalistic discourse – one which is rarely positive, which

² Although the notion of hybridity, which leaves many questions unsolved, is far from being satisfying, as Schmitt notices (2010, 63).

tends to lack a solid theoretical framework and to focus mainly on motifs of exposure and exhibition in autofictional ventures. This overall “bad reputation” of autofiction arose partly from the publication of controversial texts (such as Millet 2001 and Angot 1999) but also from the media exposure which they garner, especially on the small screen: autofiction is a notion which journalists love to hate, and for these writers who have a noticeable media presence, bad publicity is still publicity. But the reception of autofiction is also shaped by a more restricted audience, that of academic circles who follow critical debates on the notion of autofiction, and view it first and foremost as a “theoretical adventure” as Jeannelle puts it (2007, 17).³

The “bad reputation” of autofiction in contemporary literature and in the media parallels that of television, often seen as a platform which prevents real discussion and interaction. Television is viewed by many as a tool which may ruin the credibility of genuine thinkers and which promotes “fast-thinkers”, as Bourdieu noted (2008, 29-32). Intellectuals who accept to play the game of televised exposure do so at the risk of damaging their reputation – as such, the philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, more commonly known as “BHL”, who frequently appears on the small screen, has become in the French-speaking world the denigrated, archetypal figure of the “mediatised intellectual” (Poiraud 2005). It is therefore worth reflecting on the deliberate use of this medium, both as a tool of expression, discussion, self-promotion but also as literary trope included within recent autofictional narratives. There is a tradition, especially in France, the country of *l’exception culturelle* where hierarchies are very neatly defined, where the field of cultural studies and “médiacultures” is slowly developing (Maigret and Macé 2005), of drawing a clear distinction between media and “culture” (the latter being a term which unmistakably equates high-brow culture). To

³ The steps of this “adventure” have been retraced many times, and the most exhaustive presentation is to be found in Gasparini 2008. More recently (2014), Isabelle Grell also synthesised the main theoretical positions on autofiction.

understand the role of television within autofiction as a literary and media phenomenon, it is essential, therefore, to place this study within the French context of production of texts and the creation of the author persona, and the role of the media in these processes. Whilst acknowledging the significance of recent (Anglophone) studies on the topic of intermediality and digital transformation of the self,⁴ we must also note that in the country of structuralist theory which saw the emergence of Lejeune, Barthes and Doubrovsky as major critical figures, the role of television is also intrinsically linked to the question of artistic and cultural legitimacy. Recent scholarly works on autobiography and first-person writing have seen a growing number of publications on the use of images within representations of the self – the past decade has seen a surge of interest in the notion of “photobiography” which attracted studies on issues of representation, reliability, involvement of the author-narrator.⁵ But academic criticism in French is approaching “visual” components – and, more broadly, “cultural studies” – rather cautiously, and while links between writing and photography have become a legitimate field of enquiry, the use and influence of moving images (cinematic and more importantly televised) on contemporary literature remains largely overlooked.

The present study focuses on television, its role in the creation of “autofiction” as a literary practice and media phenomenon, but also on its use and representation within autofictional texts. Among the areas of investigation which this article intends to open, the following questions emerge: is it relevant or useful to situate autofiction, a literary practice, within the rise of other media such as television? More specifically, since autofiction evolved in parallel to reality television, may some parallels be drawn between the two forms of self-exposure? The exposure of the self in the public domain, which is a feature of “reality shows”, unavoidably raises questions of legitimacy and the role of witnesses – but can these questions simply be transposed from one media to the other? To what extent does the

⁴ Such as Lundby 2008; Thumim 2012.

⁵ See Hughes and Noble 2003 or, for a specifically French context, Méaux and Vray 2004.

extensive integration and use of screens within autofiction impact on the ways in which visual media (in this case, television) contribute to the creation of the author persona and to the sense of confusion and doubt which inhabit any mode of self-representation?

Using television and screens to display personal lives unavoidably poses questions of referentiality and transparency: what the written text can conceal (the real identity of the author, their appearance, their flaws), the small screen does display, with far fewer ambiguities and possibilities for disguise. Furthermore, while writing is an intrinsic part of introspection, self-discovery and revelation processes (which are the private property of the author-narrator), possibilities of representation of the self on screen are usually in the hands of a team, a third party, and belong to wider strategies which do not leave a lot of space and scope for the unexpected and for personal initiative and creative practice. Bourdieu (2008) noted that the format of televised programmes, even those devoted to serious or topical “discussions”, is usually carefully staged and only allows limited time and freedom of expression for each speaker.

It is essential to my argument to give a quick overview of the context of the expansion of television and technology in France. The access to a variety of televised channels, satellite television and the Internet was not as quick and widespread in France as it was in other Western countries, notably the U.K. and the U.S. French television offered only three channels until 1984, when the private (and paying) Canal⁺ was created. The middle of the 1980s saw some rapid changes with the inauguration of a fifth and sixth channel in 1986, the privatisation of TF1 (the most viewed channel on French television) in 1987 and the creation of M6 the same year – changes which were closely tied to political decisions.⁶ French literary

⁶ See Rozat, <<http://www.inaglobal.fr/en/television/article/television-history-french-exception>> for more details.

productions and the diffusion of writers' public persona were influenced by these crucial changes in the broadcasting of information and in the way the nation finds sources of entertainment and collective identity. In the 1970s and 1980s, television became a significant platform of expression, debate and promotion for both writers and critics, but also a bone of contention, as some writers and thinker always refused to "go on television".⁷ The fabric of these promotional debates is very much tied to two literary programmes, *Apostrophes* and *Bouillon de culture*, both presented by Bernard Pivot, which spanned over twenty-five years of French television history, witnessing crucial changes in domestic and global politics and culture.⁸ These programmes have played an intrinsic part in the creation of the contemporary literary "canon", of debates and controversies; they have encouraged book sales enormously, and have also contributed to creating or confirming the legitimacy of certain writers, as noted by Patrick Charaudeau (1991) in his study on *Apostrophes*.⁹

It is against this backdrop of rapid media expansion and increasing mediatisation of authors, coupled with a literary context which saw a surge of autobiographical texts, that autofiction arose and increased in popularity. Lejeune's pioneering studies (*L'Autobiographie en France*, 1971; *Le Pacte autobiographique*, 1975) contributed to giving autobiography a definition and the critical legitimacy which it was missing. But this very new status of autobiography was both strengthened and questioned at the beginning of the 1980s by the publication of autobiographical texts by major figures of the Nouveau Roman – Duras (1984), Robbe-Grillet (1985), Sarraute (1983), Simon (1981). These texts which challenge Lejeune's perception of the genre have come to embody, retrospectively, the more flexible category of "autofiction". And crucially, the publication of *Fils* in 1977 marked a new direction in first-person writing, with Doubrovsky declaring that "autobiography" as a genre

⁷ For examples, see Delporte 2009.

⁸ These programmes aired from 1975 to 1990 and from 1991 to 2001 respectively.

⁹ This study focuses on the semiotic space of communication created by the programme.

is not suitable to recount events experienced by “common” people in the ebb and flow of daily life, and is not able to mirror the imprint of personal experience on the individual.

But the fortune of the term “autofiction”, which fully entered the critical domain only in the 1990s,¹⁰ is also closely linked to a rise in experimental forms of generically undetermined texts, many of them integrating visual media, which contain a visible autobiographical thread (in Sophie Calle and Hervé Guibert, for instance). A theoretical adventure from the start, autofiction is also a cultural phenomenon echoing broader changes in French society. In particular, autofiction is strongly steeped in a new culture of self-exposure which also affected writers, who in turn reflected on ways in which artistic devices can provide innovative ways of writing, or broadcasting, the self. Some of the key “founders” of autofiction are no strangers to this clever use of the media as a device to sell books, to create an authorial persona, and to engender confusion as to the status of their published text. Doubrovsky appeared on *Apostrophes* on several occasions: he was invited in 1982 for the publication of *Un Amour de soi*, when he also spoke as New York University professor about currents in literary production and criticism. He was invited again in 1989 on the publication of *Le Livre brisé*,¹¹ a disturbing autobiographical account charting his relationship with his wife, until the latter was found dead at their Paris flat. The programme does not make comfortable viewing, with Pivot suggesting to Doubrovsky that this text was partly responsible for his wife’s suicide – clearly blurring the essential distinction to be drawn, especially in the field of life-writing, between real life and the writing process.

But the writer whose appearance on television was to make an even more lasting impression on the audience and on the field is Marguerite Duras. Duras has become, in

¹⁰ The vast majority of critical studies and primary texts which contain the term “autofiction” in their titles were published after 2000.

¹¹ The exact dates are November 26th, 1982 (a programme devoted to “French quality” in which the heritage of the *Nouveau roman* was discussed) and November 13th, 1989.

retrospect,¹² a prime example of autofictional writing, in particular through her semi-autobiographical text *L'Amant* which is built around absent photographs (which were never taken), therefore inserting a clear thread of invention within an otherwise mostly and openly, autobiographical text. On 28th September 1984, to mark the publication of this best-selling book, Bernard Pivot invited her to take part in a special edition of *Apostrophes* which was, unusually, entirely devoted to her. The programme aired live and did not resort to the usual “salon”-style format which would encourage dialogue and confrontations between guests. *She* was the entire programme, the only guest, with her *franc-parler*, and an outfit – a skirt, light roller-neck sweater and black short-sleeve cardigan – which was to become her well-known trademark.¹³ There is no doubt that for her “fans”, this became a cult moment sealing her aura and her vision of writing; for the wider public, it contributed to the creation of the “la Duras” public figure.¹⁴ Duras used the programme to present her demanding vision of writing, but she also made several highly private declarations on normally taboo topics – love affairs, her incestuous desire for her brothers, her dependency on alcohol – and how these fuelled her writing. In this respect, although the programme was a well-respected cultural landmark which confirmed the participants’ status as *intellectuels*, Duras’ appearance on *Apostrophes* marked a clear irruption of the private sphere in a highly public domain, echoing the feminist motto “The private is political”. It also coincided with trends which were starting to emerge and would only expand in the following decades: the creation of “reality shows” devoted to the disclosure and discussion of personal topics, and the publication of autobiographical texts revealing increasingly intimate details in an open manner.

¹² When she was alive, critics tried to make her a member of the Nouveau Roman, a label which she always vigorously refused. Associations between Duras and the autofiction label are much more recent, and she is now cited in most studies on autofiction.

¹³ This is something which critics who meet her rarely fail to mention. See for instance Pallotta della Torre, who mentions the usual “Duras uniform” (2013, 8-9) which was made famous thanks to this television appearance and contributed to constructing the quasi-mythical image of Duras in the 1980s.

¹⁴ A figure which was going to become even more public throughout the 1980s thanks to regular – and sometimes controversial – contributions to newspapers. For more details, see Huguény-Léger 2011.

Cultural televised programmes such as *Apostrophes* and *Bouillon de culture* enabled the public to get to “know” writers, to put a face to the name of a book cover, to contribute to the celebrity status which some authors (such as Jean d’Ormesson or Philippe Sollers) enjoy in France. They also contributed to the rise of the “media intellectual”, and encouraged writers – even the media-shy ones – to appear on television, as this instantly increases their visibility and their books’ sales. Most writers will do so reluctantly, but others excel at this game, and exploit the resources which the media offer in terms of self-exposure. *Bouillon de culture* stopped in 1999 and was followed by other programmes, but with the multiplication of televised channels available and digital television, there is no longer one unique platform of expression on television for writers. Those who are likely to be invited on many programmes are those who are at ease constructing their public figure. This media game is particularly revealing in the case of autofiction, where so many debates revolve around the question of the authorial persona and the coincidence between author, narrator and character. A writer whose name and face are well-known to the public will be able to pepper their narratives with intertextual references to their public appearance, and reinforce certain traits of character to create an image of the author which eventually takes over their “real” identity. A writer who is in close contact with the French media circuit will have even more chances of doing so – such is the case for Frédéric Beigbeder and Chloé Delaume, two writers who have worked for various television programmes in their twenties and, as such, master the codes of public appearances and public persona. Both of them have produced autofictional texts making ample reference to the French media circles, and staging avatars of their author figure.

Frédéric Beigbeder has made contradictions and ambiguities (and the awareness thereof) the core of his autofictional production. He is a prime example of a writer whose work and success have been made possible thanks to the media. Having started his career in

the fields of journalism and advertising, he published his first book (provocatively entitled “memoirs”) at the age of twenty-five (Beigbeder 1990). He worked as a literary critic for various magazines and newspapers, including the tabloid magazines *Voici* and *Paris-Match*. As an advertising agent responsible for some high-profile campaigns, he is the author of some memorable advertising slogans for Bouygues Telecom or Wonderbra. He knows better than anyone that anything – desires, relationships, and culture – can be turned into a commodity and has made this idea one of the central arguments of his works, which have enjoyed vast popular success but less credibility as reputable literary texts. Now a best-selling author, Beigbeder had to leave his position in advertising after the publication of *99 francs* (2000), re-edited as *14.99 euro* in 2002, the story of a young, successful man who becomes increasingly disillusioned with the hypocrisy and lack of moral codes in the world of advertising. But he has not given up his multi-faceted career. He is perfectly integrated in the “closed circuit” constituted by French media, and uses this scene as setting of several of his texts, including *Vacances dans le coma*. He has presented and created many television programmes, most of them devoted to literary criticism and cultural production. As a literary critic, he is well-aware of the history of the word “autofiction” and the theoretical debates which surround it, and acknowledges writing novels which take inspiration from his own life.¹⁵ Many people will know him mostly through his television appearances and be familiar with the Dandy image which he portrays. In most of his novels, the protagonist bears an uncanny resemblance to what the reader-spectator knows of the author’s public figure. Contradictions lie at the heart of his image and literary productions: Beigbeder satirises the world of the wealthy Parisian elite whilst acknowledging that he fully belongs to this world;

¹⁵ “Ce qui me déplaît, c’est le terme d’autofiction. Enfin, ça ne me déplaît pas, c’est juste que je ne théorise pas mon travail. [...] Moi, je fais des romans qui s’inspirent de ma vie, où je la déforme, j’en rajoute beaucoup. [...] Pour le coup, s’il faut faire de la théorie littéraire, c’est beaucoup plus proche du roman autobiographique : roman inspiré de faits réels et tableau de son époque.” (“What I don’t like is the term autofiction. Well, not that I don’t like it, but I generally don’t theorise my own work. [...] I write novels inspired from real life; I distort it and exaggerate a lot. [...] If that’s theory you’re after, I would say that I’m closer to the autobiographical novel: a novel inspired from real facts which is also a mirror of its time.” My translation. In David 2007, 10-11.

he condemns advertising and consumption and takes inspiration from Baudrillard, but has taken an active part in the adaptation of “derived products” from his novels, as both *99 francs* and *L'Amour dure trois ans* have been turned into films. He is highly representative of this generation of writers who have grown up in an age of media expansion and use this platform as site of ludic constructions of the author persona.

Chloé Delaume, like Beigbeder, also masters television’s “instruments of production”, to use Bourdieu’s terminology (Bourdieu 1998, 10): between 2005 and 2007, she worked for *Arrêt sur images*,¹⁶ a television programme whose aim it was to reflect on the role, representation and working of media, specifically television. The concept of the programme was both original and controversial: for television to critique its own role unavoidably raises questions of distance and impartiality. The programme abruptly stopped in 2007 and was replaced by a website¹⁷ to which Delaume has been contributing since 2012. She too is well-informed on debates surrounding autofiction, which she views as an experimental practice allowing “travaux pratiques” (2010, 8): her autofictional enterprises resort to a wide array of media and tools, including television, music, and video games. In these, she gives shape to “Chloé Delaume”, insisting on the fact that this name refers to a construct (she was born Nathalie Dalain) – although it is never clear to the reader whom this avatar represents, as “Chloé Delaume” is itself a shifting persona. Delaume is one of few French female writers who have also contributed to theorising her views on autofiction in a text entitled *La Règle du je*, as homage to Leiris. As a writer who has an informed view of the media circuit, she has used this insider’s position to write *J’habite dans la télévision*, an experimental journey into the mind of a young woman who decides to watch television without interruptions and notes the effects of this immersion on her brain and her body. This book, which states that it openly

¹⁶ This is incidentally the programme in which Bourdieu took part in 1996 and which gave rise to his study *Sur la télévision*.

¹⁷ <<http://www.arretsurimages.net/>>.

draws on real experience, also reads as a highly informed essay on the workings of television programmes, the use of advertisement and the processes of manipulation of the viewer: it relies on factual information, scientific studies and statistics, whilst putting the first-person narrator in a state of loss of her faculties, whose discourse may not be completely reliable. *J'habite dans la télévision* therefore oscillates between a factual essay, and a fictional account which integrates a reflection on the media. This type of autofictional text acts both as both product and reflection of its time, made possible by the expertise of multi-faceted authors who have embraced new technologies,¹⁸ and display both attraction and repulsion¹⁹ towards certain forms of “communication”, especially television.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, French television took an increasingly private turn, with the rapid spread of “reality television” programmes – the first one, *Psy show*, started airing in 1983 – in which “ordinary” citizens were given a platform to discuss topics which traditionally belonged to the private sphere, such as relationships (whether they be familial, conjugal, domestic, more public), violence, representations of the body and affects. In her study *La Télévision de l'intime* (1996), Dominique Mehl views these “reality shows” as symptomatic of a wider social malaise in contemporary society, a *mal-être* which encompasses defiance and suspicion vis-à-vis official discourses and institutions, problems of interpersonal communication, and a broader reflection of evolution in the boundaries between the public and the private spheres. After 2000, reality television programme increased exponentially, following a format used in other Western countries, that of the competition. The last sections of Delaume’s *J'habite dans la television* are devoted to a “reality television” programme: a singing competition called *Star Academy*, which airs in France, following aspiring singers throughout various challenges and more banal aspects of

¹⁸ See Delaume’s website: <<http://www.chloedelaume.net/>>.

¹⁹ In the case of Delaume, this ambivalence is studied by Ducas 2010, in an article which proposes an analysis of the tension between authorship and the written text on the one hand, and the use of multimedia supports on the other.

everyday life. In *J'habite dans la television*, Delaume presents a highly critical and sarcastic view of the programme, which echoes the opinion widely held by the cultured elite. A recurring criticism about these programmes is their constructed, highly illusory nature, diametrically opposed to any genuine representation of “reality”. On the contrary, they are built around illusion, staging, performance, and as Mehl notes, the latest variants of “reality” television no longer rely on individuals disclosing who they are, but consist in displaying a projected version of what they could be, in an “imaginary mode” (Mehl 2007, 11).²⁰ For Ruth Cruickshank, reality television is “a reflection and contributor to the *fin de millénaire* crisis” as it “challenges and changes conceptions of reality, authenticity and communication” (2009, 43).²¹ *Star Academy* is a prime example of what Dupont (2007) calls the third age of reality television: programmes staged like competition giving the viewer an active role to play, by eliminating “weak” contestants. In France, this third stage was inaugurated by the programme *Loft Story* in 2001 – an adaptation of the Dutch programme *Big Brother* – which “only” aired for two consecutive years but set a trend for other “trash television”²² to follow.

Amélie Nothomb’s *Acide sulfurique* (2005) presents a clear and disturbing parody of *Loft Story*, whilst questioning the boundaries of human nature, ambition and compassion. Like the other authors under discussion here, she reflects on the notions of *spectacle* in contemporary culture. Nothomb is probably, alongside Beigbeder, the least camera-shy author mentioned in this study, and maybe the most immediately identifiable French-speaking, living writer. However, whilst she has created, thanks to television appearances, an idiosyncratic and easily recognisable authorial persona (see Lee 2010, 129-30 for her “performance” on *Bouillon de culture*), she keeps details of the private life away from the

²⁰ In this study, she summarises the key trends and characteristics of reality shows, and looks at more recent (post-2000) forms of reality television.

²¹ Cruickshank also noticed that the end of the Millennium saw a “proliferation of first-person narratives which intersect with the advent of reality television” (2009, 61).

²² The term “télé-poubelle” is widely used in French.

media. Although the majority of her texts are clearly fictional (some of them borrow from science-fiction, others from fairy tale), they share recurring concerns which seem autobiographical (obsessions with purity, innocence), and journalists tend to confuse author and narrator when promoting her texts (Lee 2010, 120). She has also published numerous texts presented to the reader and audience as autobiographical which contribute to reinforcing this constructed authorial persona. *Acide sulfurique* depicts life in the setting of a reality television programme which openly resembles a concentration camp (the programme is named “Concentration”), thus integrating into a fictive piece of work some of the criticism made when *Loft Story* came out, which likened the imprisonment of candidates to a totalitarian experience.²³ *Acide sulfurique* depicts not only life on the “camp” and the attempts at rebellion made by a young girl, it is also concerned with media and public reactions to the show: taking some of the actual components of successful reality television programmes such as *Big brother*, Nothomb condemns the hypocrisy of a large number of viewers who deplore this type of programme but watch it nevertheless, hence contributing to the record viewing figures it enjoys – a type of criticism also to be found in Delaume, who ironically mentions all those who have a TV set but claim never to use it.

This ambivalent mixture of fascination and repulsion for such programmes is also at play in autofictional texts by Christine Angot. Angot has become for many “the” name associated with the controversial side of autofiction – narcissism, the disclosure of sexual practices, the repetition of the same themes and obsessions all feature in her work, sometimes ironically. But while Angot has used some of her publications to condemn the invasive nature of the media, she has also been blamed for her frequent media appearances and for the exposure of private details of her life and that of other identifiable individuals. Christine Angot, who published her first novel in 1990, came to the forefront in 1999 with the

²³ Criticism made by Delfour 2001.

publication of *L'Inceste*, which explicitly drew on the experience and trauma which she underwent as a young girl. She is one of the most controversial contemporary writers, the one cited by many as the prime example of the narcissistic aspect of autofiction (Beigbeder has parodied her style²⁴ and hails her as anti-model). *Quitter la ville* deals in most part with the media reception of *L'Inceste*: as such, media coverage is one of Angot's main narrative concerns. Journalists are portrayed unfavourably in her work, and said to belong to another "race". Often accused of writing about unsuitable topics, Angot is not afraid of publishing books which will not make easy or comfortable reading. Her first novel, *Vu du ciel*, deals with the brutal sexual abuse and murder of a young girl, and with the news coverage of the event. The narrative is split between the voice of the victim, and that of "Christine", a young woman who cannot help experiencing fascination – which she knows will be considered unhealthy – for such grim *fait divers* and its coverage on television.²⁵ This is the most disturbing aspect of a text which, as Cruickshank (2009, 181) remarks, "[...] foregrounds the voyeurism of reality television, true-crime programmings, and the audiences they attract; their complicity in the construction and consumption of victims; and the mortal danger for media-inflated fascination." Ambiguity in Angot works on many levels: it is conveyed by the portrayal of, and the apparent fascination for, behaviours and emotions condemned by society, including incest, rape, violent crime; by the nominal identity between narrator, author and author; by the thematic concerns of the text. Angot has often insisted on the fact that the character "Christine" is no more than a construct which should not be confused with the

²⁴ In "Quitter Laval", <<http://style.modedemploi.free.fr/course47.html>>.

²⁵ She writes : "*Le goût du sang, voilà ce qui me plaît à moi. Une dégueulasse. Je suis à pendre. Tous trouveront l'affaire horrible. Peu avant l'enterrement, j'achète une caméra pour tout filmer.*" ("The taste of blood: this is what I like. I'm disgusting. I should be hung. They'll all find this story horrible. Just before the funeral, I bought a camcorder to record everything.") Angot 1990, 57. My translation. Italics are used in the original text.

author.²⁶ But as Rye noted (2010, 427), this dissolution of the autobiographical pact is a source of anxiety and confusion for many readers.

The rise of “new”, visual media (television was considered a “new” medium until the digital age took over) has multiplied possibilities of exposure, concealment and ludic games. Whilst the media, especially television, have been an essential platform to the dissemination of autofiction as a critical notion, the use of visual components within this writing practice reflects first and foremost its *modus operandis*: a form of projection of the self into imagined scenarios and fictional screens. Platforms such as cinema, television chat shows, blogs, interactive on-line games, provide adequate tools of exploration and experimentation which are central to recent autofictional practices. In spite of their obvious differences (Nothomb tends to keep her private lives away from media attention, Angot does not use new media or new technologies extensively in her work although she appears on television, Delaume is the only one who has clearly theorised her work and defined it as autofictional), all writers identified in this study have the ability to turn themselves into the character, but more importantly, into the author of their texts. In a practice characterised by blurred frontiers between author and character, the recourse to media and screens, to modes of exposure and construction of the self, contributes to the creation of an authorial identity to be clearly distinguished from the “private self” which remains inaccessible. This capacity for invention and self-performance is expanded by the possibilities offered by visual media to shape one’s public image.

²⁶ As remarked by Sadoux 2002, 172.

Since the start of the 1980s, the French cultural sphere has evolved under the influence of new technologies to an era of (hyper-)visibility of writers, an age of great self-awareness where the construction of the image of the writer is made possible thanks to television screens and other media. This has coincided with the emergence of reality television programmes on the small screens: first of all, in the 1980s, talk shows centred on the disclosure of taboo and traumatic issues, these programmes evolving towards “self-help” television, and finally programmes presented as “competitions”, with the promise of a better tomorrow for participants. Is it an exaggeration to assert that autofiction is the literary equivalent of reality television? After all, topics discussed by some (often controversial) autofictional texts belong to the sphere of exposure opened by “reality shows”: incest, jealousy, relationships, deviance in behaviour, sexuality, illness, drug-taking. Both categories have emerged and developed in parallel one to another, opening up a new domain in the cultural and televised landscape, and both depend on the disclosure and exhibition of private details in the public sphere. In terms of structure and narrative, what the two share is a degree of uncertainty as to the authenticity of the experiences which we are viewing or reading: with reality television, the viewer cannot verify if the “candidates” are genuine or not, if they are telling the truth or not, if their name is a “screen name” or not. While the content of these programmes is supposed to be “genuine”, the format is a *mise en scène* designed not to threaten the only viewing pact: that of a hypothesis of credibility (Mehl 2007, 61). Doubt is therefore produced by the interaction between the programme and its recipient: viewers are presented with programmes which provide an elaborate staging of events which, *stricto sensu*, are not fictional as they did happen – a trait which corresponds to the definition of autofiction.²⁷ Both autofiction and reality TV therefore rely on a significant dose of creation

²⁷ See Doubrovsky 1977 for his definition of autofiction; see also Baudelle, 2007, 62.

and illusion – with autofiction, real or lived events are transformed through the writing project; main characters are turned into authors.

Autofiction has emerged at a particular time and echoes evolutions in the cultural landscape and in the production and dissemination of knowledge and communication. In France, television still plays a crucial part in the promotion of an author, rather than the promotion of their books, a phenomenon in which publishers take an active part – each autumn, thousands of readers eagerly await the publication of “the new Nothomb”, as she has been publishing exactly one book per year since 1992 and is always one of the highlights of the *rentrée littéraire*. Each spring, thousands of people visit the *Salon du livre* in Paris, as an opportunity to meet best-selling authors and buy a signed copy of their latest book. Things have nevertheless evolved since the days of *Apostrophes*: many writers perfectly master “new” new media, have on-line presences, have insider’s knowledge of television and media circuits, and know how to exploit these media whilst distancing themselves from them – this use of the media strikes by its ambivalence, level of competence, and by the creative potentials which it inaugurates. The multi-faceted, multi-media forms of writing of the self to have emerged in the last three decades reflect broader transformations in possibilities allowed to explore and expose the self. But these publications also echo transformations in motivations for writing about one’s own experiences: as such, autofiction is also devoted to reflecting on writing and its possibilities, on the shaping of the public sphere, and on the role to be played by media in the domain of critical thinking and creative work. The autofictional writing practices discussed above have coincided with a staging of the authorial persona and with several strategies of ambiguity: many critics have discussed the inherently ambiguous facet of autofiction,²⁸ as a genre which fosters doubt and uncertainty. But this ambiguity also manifests itself in the use and representation of media – television, in particular, is still seen

²⁸ Such as Alberca Serrano 2007.

as an inferior, vulgar form of expression by members of the French intelligentsia. Autofiction, then, is not to be defined only as practice deliberately questioning boundaries between reality and fiction, but also as theoretical space, and importantly as media construct and phenomenon. The resort to these media – within the text and in a peritextual context – also fosters contradictions and tensions between the public image of writers and their representation in the written text. By multiplying voices (that of the author in interviews, the author on television, the narrator, character, the webmaster...), autofictional practitioners control the instability – and the omnipresence – of their authorial persona(e), a multiplicity which has expanded the creative space, displacing the authorial centre of gravity outside the name printed on a written text.

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