Notions of time and epoch in contemporary French fiction: Montalbetti, Lenoir & Pireyre

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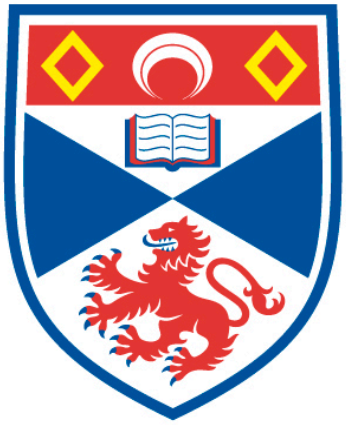

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the notions of time and epoch through the works of three contemporary French authors: Christine Montalbetti, Hélène Lenoir and Emmanuelle Pireyre. The theoretical framework for this study draws upon literary criticism, time studies and cultural theory: it investigates in particular the ways in which literary fiction may respond to what has been called a 'culture of speed' in capitalist economies of the twenty-first century. This culture of speed is traced back two major epochal shifts: the revolution in information technology, which has permitted the generating and sharing of information at exponentially higher speeds, and an increasing consciousness of the vast time cycles within which we might situate our own epoch or individual lives. This work considers the ways in which this collective and paradigmatic shift might be reflected in literary fiction. It examines the representation of new information technologies within these literary works, focusing in particular on the texts' representations of obsessive or compulsive uses of technology and the kinds of anxieties emerging as a result of the ubiquity of these devices. It further questions whether new aesthetic trends, what has been called a 'post-internet aesthetic', may be emerging in literary fiction in light of some of these changes. Further investigation of the representation of diegetic time within these texts demonstrates that these literary works appear to resist the current time culture of speed and simultaneity, embracing instead the literary devices of repetition and digression while maintaining a dilatory pace. This study also considers the emergence of 'short-termism' and insularity within these literary texts as reflecting a wider societal trend, especially in light of recent theoretical work on the vast timescales (for example those of the planet's climate cycles) that have become increasingly present in political and journalistic discourses.

ABBREVIATIONS & PRIMARY CORPUS

Hélène Lenoir

B *Bourrasque* (Paris: Minuit, 1995).

SD *Son nom d'avant* (Paris: Minuit, 2001).

R *Le répit* (Paris: Minuit, 2003).

PR *Pièce rapportée* (Paris: Minuit, 2011).

EP *Elle va partir* (Paris: Minuit, 1996).

CJ *La crue de juillet* (Paris: Minuit, 2013).

FS *La folie Silaz* (Paris: Minuit, 2008).

MM *Le magot de Momm* (Paris: Minuit, 2001).

T *Tilleul* (Paris: B. Grasset, 2015).

Emmanuelle Pireyre

CT *Comment faire disparaître la terre ?* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

FG *Féerie générale* (Paris: Editions de l'Olivier, 2012).

FI *Foire internationale* (Paris: Les petits matins, 2012).

Christine Montalbetti

SA *Sa fable achevée, Simon sort dans la bruine* (Paris: P.O.L., 2001).

EC *Expérience de la campagne* (Paris: P.O.L., 2005).

W *Western* (Paris: P.O.L., 2005).

OH *L'origine de l'homme* (Paris: Folio (Gallimard), 2006).

JA *Journee Américaine* (Paris: P.O.L., 2009).

EO *L'Evaporation de l'oncle* (Paris: P.O.L, 2011)

LH *Love Hotel* (Paris: P.O.L., 2013).

VV *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent* (Paris: P.O.L., 2014).

VF *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses* (Paris: P.O.L., 2016).

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: CHANGING TEMPORAL PARADIGMS

Perceptions of time and epoch in the twenty-first century

Since the turn of the new millennium almost two decades ago, a cultural and societal shift has been taking place in France, in Europe, and beyond. We have seen the emergence of critical terms such as Zygmunt Bauman's 'liquid modernity',[1] Gilles Lipovetsky's and Sebastien Charles' 'hypermodernity'[2] or 'the contemporary' as a periodising category.[3] The origins of this shift, it appears, lie in the rapidly changing parameters of human interaction and experience. These parameters are tied up both with changes in our culture and with the geo-political and global context in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Many of these changes, I will argue, are bound up with changing conceptions of time and epoch. Viewing time and temporality as a central facet of human experience is far from being a uniquely twenty-first century concern, but there has been a fairly recent and paradigmatic change in our temporal experience, and it began to emerge in critical, sociological and philosophical discourse several decades before the symbolic 'year two thousand'. In 1989 David Wood posited that time was soon to become, once again, the main focus of human experience, after what he called a 'century-long "linguistic turn".[4] This prediction was revived some twenty years later by Mark Currie, who writes in 2009 that 'it is about time that this prediction about time came true'.[5] This shift in our conception of time is also tied up with our changing perception of 'our time', what we might call our own epoch. This notion of epoch, as I am employing it here, is shorthand for the way that we think about our place in historical time, and where 'our time' begins and ends. It is therefore a notion which relies heavily on our current methods of periodisation, which may themselves, of course, be heterogeneous and dependent – somewhat paradoxically – on the epoch in which they originate. Both of these notions will be of the utmost importance throughout this study, which will examine both the ways in which literature, and in particular

[1] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000). First published 1999.
[2] Gilles Lipovetsky and Sébastien Charles, *Les temps hypermodernes* (Paris: Grasset, 2004).
[3] Extensive discussion has taken place on the question of 'the contemporary'. Lionel Ruffel outlines the history of the concept in: Lionel Ruffel, *Brouhaha: Les mondes du contemporain* (Paris: Verdier, 2016). Ruffel also discusses the term at length in: Lionel Ruffel, *Qu'est-ce que le contemporain?* (Nantes: Editions Cécile Defaut, 2010).
[4] David Wood, *The Deconstruction of Time* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), p. xxxv.
[5] Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 1.

the literature of metropolitan France, engages with the 'time culture' of the twenty-first century, as well as looking at the ways in which the texts react to or engage with the notion of 'our time' or epoch.

It would perhaps be wise, at this point, to pause and consider the particular relevance of French literature to questions of time and epoch. As in much of Europe, notions of a cultural crisis or 'turning point' have been at the forefront of critical discourse for much of the twentieth and early twenty-first century. This crisis-thinking is often linked by observers and critics – implicitly or explicitly – to the very same notions of precariousness, speed, and information overload that I believe are central to the changes in time culture and conception of epoch taking place in the wider culture. Ruth Cruickshank's explanation for what she calls a 'long twentieth century of crisis thinking'[6] juxtaposes the scientific advancements which 'undermined the tenets of religious belief whilst furnishing humankind with the tools for its own destruction' with 'the development of mass markets and media' which, she believes, 'threatens the ability of culture to maintain a critical distance, the autonomy of art, and its potential as a vehicle for political struggle'.[7] Additionally, the sheer volume of novels being published year upon year leaves the French literary field in the grips of the same kind of information overload which permeates all other aspects of cultural life. Dominique Rabaté points out that the *rentrée littéraire* now sees at least some six hundred titles, mostly novels, which he argues 'engend[re] le sentiment d'une pléthore ménaçante'.[8] As Rabaté observes, this situation could be interpreted either as a symptom of the richness of and powerful attraction exercised by the novel or as a harbringer of forced invisibility for a growing number of works which remain undiscovered by the media and readers, 'chassées par un nouvel afflux de livres quelques semaines plus tard'.[9] Viart and Vercier express dismay that 'Aujourd'hui tout est "culture" et plus rien ne permet de distinguer la valeur des créations artistiques dans une 'production' de plus en plus vaste'.[10] Cinema and television, they suggest, challenge the hegemony of the novel

[6] Ruth Cruickshank, *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction: the Aesthetics of Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 21.
[7] Ibid. This assessment of the literary-cultural situation in France begs comparison with the state of affairs for British and American literatures. It is clear that independent publishers (and traditional bookshops) have fared better in France that in these Anglophone markets. Nonetheless, it is important to note that independent publication is undergoing radical change. For example, while P.O.L. remains well-known for its experimental literature, French publishing giant Gallimard now holds the majority share of the company.
[8] C.f. introduction to the edited volume: Thierry Guichard and others, *Le Roman français contemporain* (Paris: CulturesFrance, 2007), p. 10.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Dominique Viart, Bruno Vercier, and Franck Evrard, *La Littérature française au présent: Héritage, modernité, mutations* (Paris: Bordas, 2005), p. 265.

over storytelling, since they 'proposent au jeune public des fictions plus facilement abordables, plus gratifiantes dès un très jeune âge'.[11]

A second reason for French literature's particular pertinence to questions of time and epoch lies in the quite unique ways in which critical theory is bound up with literary production in France. The literary and critical fields have overlapped to a great extent and for a number of years; a significant number of writers of fiction are also essayists or theoreticians. In the three case studies I have chosen for this particular investigation into time and epoch in French fiction – the works of Christine Montalbetti, Emmanuelle Pireyre and Hélène Lenoir – one author (Montalbetti) is also an established literary critic and academic, and another (Pireyre) has written at length on the theoretical ramifications of both her own creative practice and that of the wider literary field while also participating in creative writing programmes, while the final author (Lenoir) has no published non-fiction works. This span of engagement with the literary and critical establishments in France seems to be representative of the wider field.

Of course, in the globalised world of the twenty-first century, the study of national literatures itself has been called into question. As the editors of the *Routledge Companion to World Literature* point out:

> [The] ongoing debates [about the concept of 'world literature'] have major implications for the study of individual national literatures as well as for broader regional configurations, and they affect our understanding of earlier periods as well as the literature of the globalising present.[12]

It is worth keeping in mind that the study of a national literature inherently places rather constructed limits upon the primary corpus in a world where lines can no longer be drawn neatly along borders and national identities. As the focus here is on the ways in which literature engages with our changing conception of time, it is possible (and indeed highly likely) that many of the phenomena observed in the texts of this study are also occurring in literatures of other countries across the globe. Since the changes in temporal conditions can be seen as reaching across most developed and developing nations along with the spread of globalised turbocapitalism, the French context will inherently be similar to those of other countries.[13] As

[11] Guichard and others p. 11.
[12] Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, 'Preface: Weltliteratur, littérature universelle, vishwa sahitya …', in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. xvii-xxi (p. xviii).
[13] The term 'turbocapitalism' was most comprehensively defined in the eponymous book by Edward Luttwak. Luttwak spoke specifically about the French context in a *Libération* interview around the time of its publication.

Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello suggest in their work on the socio-political changes in the late twentieth century, the French context, while unique in its cultural and political history, can be seen as to some degree analogous with the changes in other developed nations during this time:

> Nous ne prétendons pas que ce qui s'est passé en France soit un exemple pour le reste du monde ni que les modèles que nous avons établis à partir de la situation française aient une validité universelle. Nous avons, néanmoins, de bonnes raisons de penser que des processus assez similaires ont marqué l'évolution des idéologies qui ont accompagné le redéploiement du capitalisme dans les autres pays développés […].[14]

The French literary context is a rich area of research for the study of time in literature, and provides valuable insight into the wider, globalised field. The primary corpus of this study is therefore drawn from a spatially limited context; it is also important to draw attention to the other inherently temporal parameter set by the expression 'contemporary French literature'. The term 'contemporary', both as an adjective and a noun, has been much debated in recent years. It seems to variously describe a temporal category (literature published in the last two decades, for example) and an aesthetic one ('the contemporary' as a periodising category). Theodore Martin disagrees with the notion of the contemporary as a period, despite the fact that '[a]s a staple of book titles, conferences, and course offerings, the word now functions as an easy scholarly shorthand for the ongoing history of the present moment.'[15] He notes that the term 'the contemporary' applies to many different time frames: 'With no agreed-on beginning and no ending in sight, the contemporary does not so much delimit history as drift across it.'[16] There is a degree, however, to which Martin's central thesis relies on a conflation of the periodising 'the contemporary' with the adjectival form 'contemporary' with its connotations

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He writes of: 'la transition de [l'Europe] vers ce que j'appelle le "turbo-capitalisme": mondialisation totale, privatisation totale, déréglementation totale. Le turbo-capitalisme est un modèle terrible, lui résister conduit à une situation pire encore.' In employing this term, I refer to societies which have employed or appear to be working towards these three principles of globalisation, privatisation and deregulation. Pascal Riche, 'L'Américain Edward Luttwak, auteur de "le Turbo-capitalisme", juge durement les dernières fusions; "La tentation du monopole guette la France"', *Libération*, 20 September 1999, <http://www.liberation.fr/futurs/1999/09/20/l-americain-edward-luttwak-auteur-de-le-turbo-capitalisme-juge-durement-les-dernieres-fusions-la-ten_283999> [Accessed 14/02/2018].

[14] Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), p. 34.

[15] Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism and the Problem of the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 2.

[16] Ibid.

of 'presentness' which has, as he does note, been in use for centuries.[17] A similar perspective is put forward by Paul Rabinow:

> [T]he contemporary is not an epochal term. For much of the twentieth century various movements that labelled themselves modernist were fixated on 'the new.' And the identification of the new was frequently tied to a more or less explicit philosophy of history in which the new was usually better or at least the result of an inevitable motion.[18]

Rabinow's account of the contemporary is compelling because it both denies the usefulness of the contemporary as a periodising category and also suggests that the *use* of the term contemporary tells us something (much like the term 'modern') about the ways in which, much like other temporal frameworks for understanding 'culture', it is underpinned by an idea of newness and, by extension, a certain view of time itself. Lionel Ruffel also seizes upon the inherently temporal nature of the term 'contemporary' and the shared conception of time which must shape it, writing that: '[Le mot 'contemporain'] saisit le problème là où il se pose: dans l'imaginaire du temps.'[19] Ruffel, however, sees the contemporary as an experiential or a periodising category; a coming-together of different times. Jacob Lund and Geoff Cox suggest that 'the contemporary is at once a periodizing category in the sense that it is our era, the time in which we live, and a modal or experiential category in the sense that it is a particular relationship to time and history […]'.[20] They also suggest that it (along with the associated term 'contemporaneity') 'operates as a designator of the changing temporal quality of the historical present, which is not […] simply a coming-together *in* time, but *of* times.'[21] A similar sentiment is shared by Henry Rousso when he describes the term 'contemporary extreme', as it was employed by Michel Chaillou:

> […] the notion was invented in the late 1980s by Michel Chaillou with a more sophisticated meaning: 'the contemporary extreme is putting all the centuries together.' Here the notion of the contemporary relies more on the Nietzschean position of

[17] Martin writes that 'Etymologically, *contemporary* first acquired a historical connotation (as a synonym for "modern" meaning "characteristic of the present period") at the end of the nineteenth century' (ibid.). Martin cites the Oxford English Dictionary.
[18] Paul Rabinow, *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Oxford & Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 2.
[19] Ruffel, p. 29.
[20] Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund, *Introductory Thoughts on Contemporaneity & Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), p. 9.
[21] Ibid. p. 11.

anachronism, and reflects the fact that modern fiction is marked by 'its revival with the cultural sediment of centuries and civilisations.[22]

The term 'contemporary' can therefore variously describe a temporal category, which would be defined by an agreed set of dates, and an aesthetic one, which describes a *particular relationship with the present* which would be considered as reflecting a 'contemporary' aesthetic. The terminological difficulties it poses – both because of its etymological 'baggage' and its conceptual fuzziness – also provide an interesting insight into the ways in which fundamentally temporal parameters also become bound up with questions of aesthetics or modes of experience. For the purposes of this study, it is worth bearing in mind that while all of the texts could be considered as *temporally* contemporary in the sense that they were published in the last two decades (though even this definition could be up for debate), they do not necessarily reflect the aesthetics of 'the contemporary' as a coming-together of times, as described by the likes of Lund, Cox or Ruffel. Emmanuelle Pireyre, cited in Ruffel's *Brouhaha: les mondes du contemporain*, could be considered 'contemporary' in both senses: publishing in the twenty-first century, her texts engage, aesthetically, with the kind of temporal pile-up that Ruffel or Lund and Cox describe. Conversely, texts like Montalbetti's seem initially to use the aesthetic conventions of bygone literary eras but are temporally 'contemporary'. Lenoir's œuvre, too, seems to recall the experimentations in phenomenological time of the *nouveaux romanciers* almost half a century ago, but they too are published in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (Lenoir's texts span the longest time period of all three authors). Contemporaneous with each other, then, and contemporary in the temporal sense, but not necessarily 'contemporary' in an aesthetic sense: this question of whether the texts are 'of their time' is not my primary concern in this study, but will be an inevitable part of getting to grips with the ways in which contemporary literature – however we may define it – engages with notions of time and epoch.

[22] Henry Rousso, 'Coping with Contemporariness', in *Being Contemporary: French Literature, Culture and Politics Today*, ed. by Lia Brozgal and Sara Kippur (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), pp. 15-28 (pp. 21-2). Rousso cites Michel Chaillou, 'L'extrême contemporain, c'est mettre tous les siècles ensemble', *Poésie*, 41 (1987), 16-28. He also cites Chaillou's contribution to the edited volume by Viart, Vercier and Evrard (op. cit.).

Historical time

In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to pin down what exactly we mean when we talk about our 'culture of time'[23] and our 'epoch' (a loose synonym for era), as well as outlining the related concept of 'historical time'. Jean-François Hamel suggests that our current methods of periodisation took root in the nineteenth century, writing that 'nos habitudes de périodisation [sont] nées […] de ce siècle'.[24] Hamel also implicitly draws out the ways in which questions of time culture and epoch are related, going on to suggest that:

> Depuis l'ébranlement de l'ère des révolutions, qui semblait ouvrir à l'Occident des horizons radicalement nouveaux, les poétiques du savoir ont été largement définies par un double intérêt, d'une part pour l'historicité du présent en ce qu'il marque une rupture à l'égard de la tradition qui le précède, d'autre part pour l'historicité propre aux époques révolues en ce que celles-ci possédaient une dynamique temporelle qui n'est désormais accessible qu'au prix de complexes médiations.[25]

I would like to insist upon the implicit distinctions drawn here: Hamel emphasises both the temporal conditions – what I will be calling 'time culture' – of the past epoch, and that epoch as a now elapsed ('révolue') period which we, living in our current time culture, can only access in limited ways through material traces or texts, for example (what I believe Hamel implies by 'complexes médiations'). The idea of epoch as a period in a historical progression raises the question, of course, of whether that progression is real or imagined, and what the terms 'historical time' or 'conception of history' mean anyway. In this study, I take 'historical time' to mean a shared understanding of events, unfolding through the chronological advance of time, on a collective level. In other words, it is about a collective understanding of the past and how it has shaped the present, and how that present may form a shared vision or visions of the future. The collective in question can, of course, be on any scale, but we might point to the shared history of nations as an example of a collective conception of history: as Terry Cochran writes, 'Since the advent of the modern state, every cultural and political economy has required a coherent and compatible sense of the past, present, and future.'[26]

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[23] This term, as employed here, was coined by Ursula K. Heise, in: Ursula K. Heise, *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 11.
[24] Jean-François Hamel, *Revenances de l'histoire* (Paris: Minuit, 2006), p. 11.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Terry Cochran, 'History and the collapse of eternity', *Boundary 2*, 22 (1995), 33-55 (p. 33). Cochran also states that 'A quandary in historical understanding occurs when disruptive change outdistances the capacity to integrate it […]', a notion which resonates with other arguments cited here about the collapse of long-term thinking, for example those of Bauman.

That is not to say that 'historical time' as a collective view of history is a fixed or clearly-defined concept: it would be worth taking a moment to consider the possible models of historical time that are being evoked when we talk about such concepts as 'epoch', 'our time' or 'our place in history'. Karen Hellekson convincingly identifies four 'models of history' which I believe are at play (though not always overtly) here; she writes of an eschatological model 'concerned with final events or ultimate destiny' opposed to a genetic model 'concerned with origin, development or cause'. There is also an entropic model, characterised by randomness, of which the opposite is a 'teleological or future-oriented history, history that seems to have a design or purpose'.[27] While Hellekson concludes that the genetic model is the most valuable to the subject of her study (fictional 'alternate histories'), it is the tension between all of these paradigms which I believe to be most interesting in the context of our present-day temporal anxieties. Our view of ourselves in 'historical time' is full of contradictions: we have lost the sense of a common destiny or purpose (either by an eschatological – and usually deity-driven – paradigm or a more vague teleological one which looks to a utopian future) in favour of a more entropic model of human history (we are not here by design but by a series of relatively unlikely cosmic events) and also a genetic one (the origins of our planet and our own evolution from early life forms) which points to our relative insignificance in the life of our planet and indeed of the universe. Simultaneously, a new – and somewhat eschatological – paradigm comes into view: our activities as a species are draining the resources of the planet and we are hurtling towards self-induced destruction of our own habitat.

While we take the notion of 'epoch' to mean 'our place in historical time' or 'the period of historical time in which we find ourselves' we must keep in mind the self-reflexive and somewhat paradoxical fluidity of these concepts: both the fact that our methods of periodisation are inherently influenced by the period in which they originate and also that the advance of historical time sees the ways in which we view 'historical time' change significantly. It also bears repeating that the notions of time and of epoch are very closely related and could be seen as overlapping or indeed interdependent: a radical shift in our 'time culture' might signal or be caused by a break with the previous epoch. That is to say that a (possibly only perceived) break with norms which seems to constitute a rupture, to use Hamel's expression, in the collective

[27] Karen Hellekson, *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time* (Kent, OH & London: The Kent State University Press, 2001), p. 3.

history of a group or society could cause a change in the way that we perceive time itself.[28] Equally, a change in the way that we perceive time could *be* the radical break with tradition that brings about the new cultural – or socio-political, etc. – epoch.

Time culture

Both of these elements are, I believe, at play in the most recent and dramatic changes in our temporal experience, what I am here calling our 'culture of time'. The rise of new information technologies in the late 1980s and 1990s, with the proliferation of personal computers and the increasingly widespread use of networks and the Internet, led to a dramatic increase in the speed at which data could be communicated and the ease with which it could be stored and recalled. Barbara Adams writes in 1992 that:

> [W]hen virtual simultaneity of communication and instantaneity of feedback are not only the accepted but an expected norm, then the speed of light appears to be the only absolute limiting factor to the transmission of information.[29]

With more than twenty years' worth of technological advances behind us since the time of her writing, this simultaneity and instantaneity appears more all-pervasive than ever before. The shift in time could signal, as Sven Birkerts suggests in *The Gutenberg Elegies*, a change of epoch characterised by the transition from print to electronic communication. Evoking the theories of information technology originally put forward by Marshall McLuhan, he writes that:

> […] we are in the midst of an epoch-making transition; that the societal shift from print-based to electronic communications is as consequential for culture as was the shift instigated by Gutenberg's invention of the movable type.[30]

New information technologies have therefore both had a profound effect upon our conception of time and also the way that we conceive of our *place in time*. Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund write that 'The internet in particular has produced an extreme spatial and temporal compression marked by a perpetual sense of dislocation that gives rise to new forms of experience'[31] while Lionel Ruffel comments in his book on 'the contemporary' that '"L'ethos contemporain" serait

[28] Examples could include the agricultural and industrial revolutions, the advent of the printing press, or the invention and use of steam and combustion engines to speed up production and transportation.
[29] Barbara Adam, 'Modern Times: The Technology Connection and its Implications for Social Theory', *Time & Society*, 1 (1992), 175-91 (p. 177).
[30] Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 192.
[31] Cox and Lund, p. 16.

[…] très largement dépendant du sens même de la contemporanéité, puisqu'il repose sur la capacité de partager un temps par-delà la présence physique. Il dissocierait présence (physique) et simultanéité (temporelle).'[32] This capacity to 'share time' without being present in the same physical space is, of course, facilitated by new technologies which allow us to synchronise our lives and work across the globe. Paul Virilio noted in 1991, long before online news took hold, how the role of mass media and its changing temporal parameters could shape individual and public perception of current events: 'Ce qui se jouait hier dans la journée avec la presse, puis dans l'heure avec la radio, se joue désormais dans l'instant, l'instant réel du communiqué télévisé.'[33]

These new information technologies, while changing the personal experience of time of the individual, have also had a significant effect on the time culture within the wider socio-political context, at least in neoliberal democracies. Gilles Lipovetsky writes that neoliberal globalisation and the technological revolution have together served to compress space-time.[34] With all sorts of exchanges (social, professional, and – perhaps most importantly – financial) now happening in 'real'-time thanks to digital technology and global networks, huge physical distances can be traversed by information, in the form of electronic impulses, in a matter of nanoseconds. Lipovetsky points out the buzzwords within today's corporations are often things like 'flexibility' and 'zero-delay', and this priorisation of speed and reactivity has started to produce real, tangible effects on the social structures and political discourses of neoliberal democracies. Turbocapitalism and its focus on profitability and short-term gain have, according to Lipovetsky, led to 'des réductions massives d'effectifs, l'emploi précaire, des menaces accrues de chômage'.[35] What is more, according to Lipovetsky, we live in a time of chronoreflexivity where 'la société hypermoderne apparaît comme celle où le temps est de plus en plus vécu comme une préoccupation majeure.'[36]

Our epoch & the question of the Anthropocene

Our time – our epoch – might well be chiefly defined, then, by worries about time and our lack of it. This in turn makes the 'spirit of the times' one of uncertainty and precariousness. We have lost faith in the slow march of progress towards the future, as Lipovetsky suggests: 'Nul doute que l'époque marquée par les peurs de la technoscience et la décomposition des utopies

[32] Ruffel, p. 62.
[33] Paul Virilio, *L'Écran du désert: Chroniques de guerre* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1991), pp. 40-1.
[34] Lipovetsky and Charles, pp. 60-1.
[35] Ibid. p. 61.
[36] Ibid. p. 73.

politiques ne soit celle de la 'crise de l'avenir'.[37] This view of an uncertain present, occupied or contaminated by worries of 'the future' is shared by Zygmunt Bauman, who, in the introduction to his work *Liquid Times*, writes of a

> […] collapse of long-term thinking, planning and acting, and the disappearance or weakening of social structures in which thinking, planning and acting could be inscribed for a long time to come, [which] leads to a splicing of both political history and individual lives into a series of short-term projects and episodes which are in principle infinite, and do not combine into the kinds of sequences to which concepts like 'development', 'maturation', 'career' or 'progress' (all suggesting a preordained order of succession) could be meaningfully applied.[38]

Both Lipovetsky and Bauman paint in broad strokes here the wider implications of what others – journalists, political scientists, sociologists, not to mention authors, film-makers and documentarists – have identified as a destabilising trend in the social and political structures of developed societies. Just as the clocking-in machine and Taylorist principles of management altered the temporal horizons of workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century,[39] the precariousness and temporary nature of employment in what Lipovetsky called a turbocapitalist economy has radically changed our conception of time and epoch: long-term planning, even on the level of a single human life, has been replaced by short-termism and reactivity. In Boltanski and Chiapello's major sociological text *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, the authors aptly summarise the situation in France at the end of the twentieth century as follows:

> [L]a restructuration du capitalisme au cours des deux dernières décennies, dont nous avons vu qu'elle s'était faite autour des marchés financiers et des mouvements de fusions-acquisitions des multinationales dans un contexte de politiques gouvernementales favorable en matière fiscal, sociale et salariale, s'est accompagnée également d'importantes incitations à accroître la flexibilisation du travail. Les possibilités d'embauches temporaires, d'usage de main-d'œuvre intérimaire, d'horaires flexibles, et la réduction des coûts de licenciement se sont largement développées dans

[37] Ibid. p. 64.
[38] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 3.
[39] Randall Stevenson writes a convincing account of literature's response to the temporal changes of the wider culture: Randall Stevenson, 'Greenwich Meanings: Clocks and Things in Modernist and Postmodernist Fiction', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 30 (2000), 124-36. C.f. in particular pages 125-6.

> l'ensemble des pays de l'OCDE, rognant peu à peu sur les dispositifs de sécurité instaurés au cours d'un siècle de lutte sociale.[40]

The implication of their last point – that the century-long fight for social justice is being undone within decades of unrestrained capitalism – points to a wider issue of the failure of ideology: a failure to present a viable alternative to our current models of political and social organisation.

This faltering belief in progress or indeed in the possibility of progress is, I believe, a major feature of our current epoch. One of the key shifts in our perception of our own place in history is the slow realisation among the world population that our current levels of production, reproduction and consumption are unsustainable. And yet despite the sounding of the alarm by scientists and journalists alike, the reaction among the political class as well as among the population as a whole seems to be one of continued inertia and short-term thinking. Dire warnings of 'climate tipping points' in major news outlets rarely make the headlines, while the political class in many western countries seem to be under the spell of either inertia or denial.[41] As Stephen M. Gardiner illustrates in a particularly pertinent analysis of the responses to climate change, part of the problem in effectuating a serious response to climate threat is the intergenerational nature of the problem and the long-term nature of the solution.[42] Additionally, climate scientists and stratigraphers are now debating whether we are moving into a new geological epoch (or, indeed, whether we have already done so) – the Anthropocene. Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and Francois Gemenne propose two definitions of this new geological epoch, firstly from the field of geology, which will only be able to 'diagnose' a change of epoch retrospectively:

> According to th[e] stratigraphic definition, the Anthropocene is, to date, only a potential geological epoch, not yet officially validated. As geologists need to agree on hard evidence, and the hard evidence will have to be found in sediments and rocks, official validation may take some years or decades.[43]

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[40] Boltanski and Chiapello, p. 20.

[41] Wouter Poortinga et al. cite a Eurobarometer (2009) poll which suggests that 30% of Europeans surveyed (the figure is higher, at 44%, in the UK) agreed that 'emissions of carbon dioxide have only a marginal impact on climate change'. Wouter Poortinga and others, 'Uncertain climate: An investigation into public scepticism about anthropogenic climate change', *Global Environmental Change*, 21 (2011), 1015-24 (p. 1016).

[42] Stephen M. Gardiner, 'Saved by Disaster? Abrupt Climate Change, Political Inertia, and the Possibility of an Intergenerational Arms Race', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 40 (2009), 140-62.

[43] Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne, 'Thinking the Anthopocene', in *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking modernity in a new epoch*, ed. by Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1-13 (p. 2).

A second possible definition comes from Earth systems scientists:

> With [a] wider lens, Earth systems science claims that the Earth as a system is experiencing a shift, leaving behind its Holocene state, characterised by several millennia of exceptionally stable temperatures and sea levels, to enter a new Anthropocene with far-reaching impacts.[44]

Being on the cusp of a new geological epoch – a change for which we are collectively responsible – has led to a strange dislocation in our notion of progress, of time and timescales, and of the future. To return to Hellekson's paradigms of historical time, our epoch now appears to us both as an insignificant blip on the vast timescale of an entropic universe, but also the moment of the 'fall' in an eschatological timeline of humanity, where our reckoning as a species is at hand. This idea of a stopping point or a cap on a teleological model of human progress is echoed in discussions of the Anthropocene and of climate change more generally. In a public lecture at Aarhus Universitet, French sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour comments that the 'globe, so to speak – not the real globe, but the mental globe of the modernising horizon – is much too big to be suddenly squeezed inside the planet'.[45] Latour's contention is that the limitations of the 'real globe' (finite resources and the threat of climate instability if growth continues at the current rate) exist in tension with a kind of 'imaginary globe' in which the modernising front could continue, and which is a construct: we now know that we cannot move forward in the way we had imagined (the planet cannot and will not support our projections for growth and human advancement) and we cannot go back. These projections are what Clive Hamilton has called 'the constant we have used to connect the past with the future'.[46] This is not so much the 'end of history' as Francis Fukuyama once heralded,[47] but the end of progress towards greater globalisation, greater growth. The problem is that Western neoliberal democracies have replaced utopian visions of the future with something more concrete: economic growth. Hamilton writes:

> Whatever the social problem, the answer is always more growth. […] Where once nations boasted about their great cultural achievements, their advanced state of knowledge or their military conquests, now the measure of a nation is the level of its

[44] Ibid.
[45] Bruno Latour, 'Why Gaia is not the Globe - and why our future depends on not confusing the two', Public Lecture: Aarhus Universitet, 2016 <http://cas.au.dk/aktuel/arrangementer/the-futures-lecture-series/bruno-latour/> [Accessed 27/02/2018].
[46] Clive Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species: Why we resist the truth about climate change* (London & Washington: Earthscan, 2010), p. 210.
[47] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

> gross domestic product or GDP per person, which can be raised by only one means, more growth.[48]

Growth may be more concrete, but it is a vision limited in scope. Political and corporate bodies make projections for growth and their success or failure is measure in end-of-year reports or at the end of a governmental mandate. In terms of sustainability and human progress, 'growth' is a short-term solution to long-term problems. As Hamilton succinctly sums up: 'Twenty-five September 2009 was World Overshoot Day, also known as Ecological Debt Day, the day on which humanity used up all of the resources generated by nature in that year and began living off the earth's capital […]'.[49]

There is also a degree to which the globalising forces of international markets reveal the tensions between different temporalities. Rob Nixon suggests that 'the exponential upsurge in indigenous resource rebellions across the globe during the high age of neoliberalism has resulted largely from a clash of temporal perspectives between the short-termers who arrive […] to extract, despoil and depart and the long-termers who must live inside the ecological aftermath and must therefore weigh wealth differently in time's scales.'[50] The growth of neoliberal societies appears predicated, at least for the time being, on using resources faster than they can be replenished, and exploiting the resources of those who rely on them and whose temporal models differ vastly from those of endless growth.

The growing ecological 'debt' puts our epoch at a unique point in the history of humanity: our current model of existence has proven unsustainable. This is both an ecological problem (the damage caused to our environment which may make it inhospitable to us) and a political problem (how to organise collective action of an entire species against an all but invisible long-term threat?). For Boltanski and Chiapello, the loss of faith in progress is seen as coupled with a decline of credible alternatives to the current capitalist model. They write that:

> […] force est de constater que la croyance dans le progrès (associée au capitalisme depuis le début du XIX[e] siècle mais sous des formes variables) qui avait constitué, depuis les années 50, le credo des classes moyennes, qu'elles se soient affirmées de gauche ou de droite, n'a pas trouvé de substitut hormis un rappel peu enthousiasmant

[48] Hamilton, p. 33.
[49] Ibid. p. 32.
[50] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (London & Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 17.

> ‘des dures lois de l’économie’ […]. Dans le même temps les vielles idéologies critiques antisystémiques, pour reprendre le vocabulaire de Wallerstein, échouaient dans leur fonction de déstabilisation de l’ordre capitaliste et n’apparaissaient plus comme porteuses d’alternatives crédibles.[51]

We are therefore at a strange juncture in human history, where our current, unsustainable system causes deep anxieties for the future but our loss of faith in progress, and in credible alternatives to the current model, maintains a kind of mass inertia among the world population. This dawning realisation that endless growth, and even continued growth, in the manner we have become used to, is neither sustainable nor possible on a planet whose resources are limited is, I would argue, one of the anxieties that underpins our conception of our time – and of historical time more generally – in the early twenty-first century. In this way our conception of time and ‘our time’ is increasingly oriented towards the future, even as our faith in the stability of that future diminishes.[52]

This question of the Anthropocene is destabilising for our perception of time and epoch in another way, too, because it invokes a completely different temporal scale from the high-speed, rapid-cycle temporality that seems to dominate our lives. Informational cycles, communication and transport have speeded up, while massive geological timescales loom in the background. These vast timescales – the Holocene epoch, which would end with the dawn of the Anthropocene, began approximately 11,700 years before the present day –[53] are suddenly being invoked not as an object of (pre-)history, but in the context of debate around very present problems. While, as Latour has pointed out, we were told to be ‘very impressed’ by the vast scale of the geological timeline, we now face the reality that over the period of a few centuries, humanity’s industrial revolution has – quite literally – changed the face and the future of the globe. Our time is characterised by this ‘mix-up’, to borrow Latour’s term, of timescales and the concept of the Anthropocene, as Heather Houser writes, ‘is both popular and controversial because it engenders complex time problems of the sort Niedecker pondered: how to think

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[51] Boltanski and Chiapello, p. 26.

[52] The idea that time, in technologically-equipped societies, is now coming from the future rather than being characterised by the primacy of human experience (the present) or the past is also raised by Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik: Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik, 'The Time-Complex. Postcontemporary: A conversation between Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik', Dis Magazine, 2016 <http://dismagazine.com/discussion/81924/the-time-complex-postcontemporary/> [Accessed 23/05/17].

[53] The Holocene is itself only a fraction of the Pleistocene epoch (beginning 1.8 million years ago), itself a part of the Quartenary period (2.588 million years ago) which is a fraction of earth’s third major era, the Cenozoic, which began 66 million years ago. William Berggren, 'Cenozoic Era (Geochronology)', *Encyclopædia Britannica*: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1999 <https://www.britannica.com/science/Cenozoic-Era> [Accessed 25/05/17].

humanity as geologic and vice versa.'[54] Vast geochronological timescales now see changes within a human lifetime; flora and fauna which have evolved over millennia face extinction within decades. What is more, we seem to be demonstrating the kind of 'collapse of long-term thinking' to which Bauman referred: the political classes seem incapable of reaching effective resolutions on climate change and overpopulation. Yves Citton writes: 'La maison brûle de partout, à tout moment, depuis les petites urgences quotidiennes jusqu'au dérèglement climatique […]. Et nous regardons ailleurs. Nous ne lisons pas les signes qui s'écrivent toujours plus gros sur nos murs.'[55] There is a sense of disconnect from our previously-held concepts of historical time as these vast timescales – along with existential threats to the human race – offer visions of distant pasts and worryingly close futures in which humanity does not exist. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes:

> […] the current crisis can precipitate a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility. The discipline of history exists on the assumption that our past, present, and future are connected by a certain continuity of human experience.[56]

This idea of a dislocation of past, present and future, as well as the notion of the clash of long and short timescales and the question of teleology or a kind of secular eschatology as the ruling paradigm for our conception of the future, will be crucial to my analysis of the works of the three authors in this study, and in particular those of Montalbetti. It is also worth keeping in mind this idea that the vast timescales of geochronology and historical time, as well as the existential threats faced by humanity, seems to have the opposite effect of the one we might anticipate. Pireyre's fictions avoid representing the real by creating a ludic, timeless universe – one of playfulness and 'féerie', as the title of her most recent novel suggests – one of resolute distractedness, while also touching upon these underlying anxieties by cataloguing responses to, for example, the ecological crisis or the financial crash. The radical insularity and overwhelming sense of menace in Lenoir's fictions seems to echo this mode of human existence whereby inertia and a focus on the quotidian is dominant, even in the face of serious collective or geopolitical events.

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[54] Heather Houser, 'Human / Planetary', in *Time; A Vocabulary of the Present*, ed. by Joel Burges and Amy J. Elias (New York: New York University Press, 2016), pp. 144-60 (p. 146).
[55] Yves Citton, *Pour une écologie de l'attention* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), p. 13.
[56] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (2009), 197-222 (p. 197).

Time and literature

Time and narrative today

How can we think of 'the present moment' or 'our time' when the very underpinnings of our historical and analytical methodologies are called into question by such existential threats? Again, this question is bound up both with our notions of *epoch* (a question of historical periodisation) and of *time* (the shift in our culture of time and our experience of it are the defining features of this new epoch). These changes in our relationship with time and epoch have had a profound effect on culture – both in the broad sense and more specifically cultural objects such as film, literature or poetry. Lund and Cox write:

> With accelerated globalisation, the concomitant ubiquitous influence of information technologies and spread of neoliberalism over the last three decades, after the so-called "end of history," disparate cultures and art worlds have become interconnected and contemporaeous with each other, forming global networks of influence.[57]

It is my contention that these changing conceptions of time (and the epoch-making shift brought about by new information technologies) will inevitably have some bearing on the literary-cultural output of societies affected by these changes. We might surmise that the effects will be twofold: firstly, that fictional narratives or other works produced in such societies will in some way either engage with the new conceptions of time and epoch at hand or reflect the new historical paradigms and temporal horizons that dominate the twenty-first century imaginary; and secondly, that the wider changes in such societies will bring about new conditions (by altering the literary and critical apparatus) in such a way that the books we read and films we consume (for example) are created, edited and published under vastly different material conditions, affecting the work itself. It is the first of these two effects that I am principally interested in engaging with throughout this study. In many ways it is a 'common sense' notion that time and narrative should be intimately linked. Paul Ricœur writes in *Time and narrative* that 'le temps devient temps humain dans la mesure où il est articulé de manière narrative; en retour le récit est significatif dans la mesure où il dessine les traits de l'expérience temporelle.'[58] In other words, we construct our 'realities' through narratives which make sense of events which are not, in themselves, structured as narratives with causality and succession (as Ann Jefferson deftly summarises: 'there is nothing inherently narrative about a series of

[57] Cox and Lund, p. 11.
[58] Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), p. 17.

events').[59] In the opening pages of his book *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*, Mark Currie makes two propositions, one of which is that 'the reading of fictional narratives is a kind of preparation for and repetition of the continuous anticipation that takes place in non-fictional life'.[60] For Currie fictional narrative is a 'playground' where one acts out the temporal constructions which form our conception of time. Currie's other proposition is that 'the place of fictional narrative in the world has altered since the beginning of the twentieth century, and that fiction has been one of the places in which a new experience of time has been rehearsed, developed and expressed.'[61] It is the second part of this idea – that literature somehow rehearses, develops or expresses our new experience of time – that will underpin much of my analysis. How might literature engage with our conception of time and of our own epoch, what we might view as our place in collective history?

It should be noted that the problem of literature and epoch raised here is at once a question of literary-cultural epoch (what movements or trends can we identify that situate literary and cultural output in a particular time or place?) and wider geo-political or societal epoch (what is our conception of that time and place?; how do we conceive of our place in collective history?). There is a degree of conceptual fuzziness which renders the first half of the question – about literary and cultural trends – difficult to extricate from the second half, which is concerned with wider societal and even geo-political changes. As Margaret-Anne Hutton suggests in her forthcoming book, a terminological distinction could be made here, with the first concept corresponding to *modernism* and *postmodernism*, and the latter to *modernity* or *postmodernity*.[62]

A precedent: cultural responses to time and epoch

There are, of course, precedents for this kind of question, as is demonstrated by the wealth of critical material on the ways in which modern and postmodern literature engaged with the changes in the dominant conception of time and epoch taking place at that particular point in

[59] Ann Jefferson, *The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 10.
[60] Currie, p. 1.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Margaret-Anne Hutton, *On Writing a Literary History of the Contemporary, or, What is, or was, 'the Contemporary', and should we keep calling it that?* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018).

history.[63] Let us take modernism, as a cultural movement, as an example of the interplay between time culture and conception of epoch. It has been suggested that modernism engaged with the changes taking place in humanity's temporal experience: at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, the daily lives of individuals were increasingly temporally regulated, for example through a brand of Taylorism which led to strict time controls in the workplace. At the same time, new methods of transport and communication brought about a kind of space-time compression, comparable to the later shift in our conception of time that came with the advent of information technologies. For example, Brian McHale and Randall Stevenson, citing 'high modernist' writers like Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries, suggest that such authors were 'committed to developing literary forms adequate to the demands of a new age of speed, fragmentation and uncertainty'.[64] The break with formal constraints in many modernist texts, as well as a rejection of the dominant ordered, universalising narratives that preceded them, reflected a wider shift in the culture of the time and in the culture's perceived place in history. David Harvey points out that modernist art and literature at the beginning of the twentieth century remained 'very much on the side of a democratizing spirit and progressive universalism, even when at its most "auratic" in conception'.[65] This notion of *progressiveness* – and by extension *progress* – will be important throughout this study: I believe that a shift in our perception of historical time is underpinned by this notion of progress, or indeed a failure of progress.

By the second half of the twentieth century, after two world wars, the holocaust, the crumbling (or bloody dismantling) of the old imperial powers, the dropping of the atomic bomb and the retreat into an uneasy peace balancing on the promise of mutually assured destruction, a shared pessimism about the possibility of a 'steady march of progress' gave rise to the kind of self-referential and fragmentary art and literature that appears to refuse both reconciliation of its composite parts and any kind of definitive interpretation or imposition of meaning. Postmodernism, according to this perspective, was a cultural (in the sense of literature, art and other cultural objects) *trend* that emerged as a result of the cultural (in the wider sense) *shift* that came with postmodernity; a loss of faith in our ability to reconcile narratives of progress

[63] As Mark Currie notes, examining one's own epoch – one's own place in time – involves adopting something of a 'future anterior' perspective, imagining looking back as a future historian on one's own time and its particular cultures. C.f. Mark Currie, *The Unexpected: Narrative Temporality and the Philosophy of Surprise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 7.
[64] Brian McHale and Randall Stevenson, *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Literatures in English* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 2.
[65] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford & Cambridge, MA: Wiley, 1992), p. 30.

or even of order with an increasingly complex and chaotic world. It is therefore bound up with both the changing conception of time, and the changing conception of the possibilities of progress through historical time. Jeremy Green defines postmodernism as 'a stylistic trend in art, architecture, and literature, typified by allusiveness, play, loose or arbitrary structures, fragmentation, wilful superficiality, and the collision or commingling of high and low registers'.[66] David Harvey writes that 'what appears to be the most startling fact about postmodernism' is 'its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic that formed the one half of Baudelaire's conception of modernity.'[67] Harvey goes on to suggest that it is the particular way in which postmodernism *responds* to these destabilising realities that that marked a change from modernism:

> It does not try to transcend it, counteract it, or even to define the 'eternal and immutable' elements that might lie within it. Postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is.[68]

It is clear that many of the wider geopolitical and cultural shifts that brought about these 'chaotic currents of change' are still in motion, or have simply been heightened since the terms 'postmodernism' and 'postmodernity' came into vogue. Joseph Francese writes in 1997, for example, that the term 'postmodernity' 'refers to the dramatic acceleration of the reshaping of structures of experience precipitated by the extremely rapid advances in information technologies during the past twenty-five years.'[69] Other features of late-twentieth century turbocapitalist economies which we, two decades later, would see as features of our own contemporary societies, are also linked to postmodernity in Francese's analysis: he refers, for example to 'the subject of postmodernity [who] is stripped of a traditional sense of place by postindustrial capitalism's ability to quickly relocate people and investments' and 'the weakening of the sense of belonging to a collectivity'.[70] He notes, too, that this spatial disorientation is coupled with temporal disorientation, writing that 'The loss of a sense of living and participating in a historical continuity (delineated by traditional values and beliefs) and the collapse of future expectations define the continuous present in postmodernity.'[71]

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[66] Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millenium* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 2.
[67] Harvey, p. 11.
[68] Ibid. p. 44.
[69] Joseph Francese, *Narrating Postmodern Time and Space* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 1-2.
[70] Ibid. pp. 2-3.
[71] Ibid. p. 3.

I believe that this absence of the sense of a collective 'historical continuity' remains in this second decade of the twenty-first century: rather than a total collapse of future expectations, however, we now see looming catastrophic events on the horizon. The cult of endless growth has, as we have seen, destabilised traditional ways of life (recent examples include the displacement of indigenous peoples who had previously lived in a cyclical temporality, cultivating and using only resources that could be replenished), family and generational structures (the 'flexibility' of the workforce requiring families to move often and far from one another) and even culture, as increasingly time-pressed individuals seek spectacle and distraction. It seems inevitable that our sense of historical continuity will have been destabilised by such radical changes in our culture.

Some critics have identified – in some cases perhaps prematurely – certain geopolitical events as ringing the death knell for a particular cultural movement, signalling a break in that very historical continuity. For modernism, this would be the shattering of notions of civilisation and progress as developed societies used their scientific and military prowess to wreak death and destruction on a previously unimaginable scale. For postmodernism, the demise of which has been the subject of much discussion among critics (only look so far as the titles of recent critical volumes on the subject, for example those published by Jeremy Green (*Late Postmodernism*), Patricia Mooney Nickel (*North American Theory After Postmodernism*) and Irmtraud Huber (*Literature after Postmodernism*)),[72] the alleged 'end' has been attributed to many different events and cultural shifts. Alan Gibbs notes for example that:

> Some critics have directly linked postmodernism's alleged demise with 9/11, David Wyatt arguing that on that day 'any reign of irony ended'[…], replaced instead by 'a return to feeling, an upwelling of unironized emotion that writing has attempted to honor, represent, and contain'.[73]

Gibbs goes on to discuss the ways in which such a demarcation of the end of an era or epoch may be problematic,[74] but it is clear that while historical periods (in the geopolitical sense) and

[72] Irmtraud Huber, *Literature after Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Patricia Mooney Nickel, *North American Critical Theory After Postmodernism: Contemporary Dialogues* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[73] Alan Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Scholarship Online, 2014), p. 117. Gibbs cites David Wyatt,'September 11 and Postmodern Memory', *Arizona Quarterly*, 65 (2009), 139-61 (pp. 139-40).

[74] Gibbs refers to 'this depoliticised construction of a sense of victimhood and epochal change' which is challenged by historicist approaches from the likes of Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek. Žižek, for example, asks why the events of 9/11 should be considered in this way whereas the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 should not, while Butler criticises a 'hierarchization of grief.' There is certainly now an awareness of the implications of

cultural epochs do not always fit neatly together, there are precedents for perceived changes in the former affecting the latter in such a way that the literary-cultural and critical landscape changes significantly. One might therefore expect literary fiction published in the twenty-first century to reflect, or to in some way acknowledge, the wider paradigmatic shifts in our conceptions of time and epoch.

Primary Corpus

Having explored the possible definitions and implications of the key concepts of this study, I would now like to focus in more detail on the three authors from whose works the primary corpus is drawn: Hélène Lenoir, Christine Montalbetti and Emmanuelle Pireyre. Selecting a corpus for a study into the ways that literature engages with such broad questions as those of 'time' and 'epoch' is a difficult task, since it is inevitably tempting to view *all* literature(s) through this particular lens. Doing so, however, would risk establishing a universalising dichotomy (either the text engages with our conception of time and epoch by representing it, or it does so by resisting or by *not* representing it, ergo all texts exemplify this particular conception of time and epoch) which misrepresents the scope of the theoretical basis of the question. It is therefore important to note that the primary corpus chosen for this study was selected in order to demonstrate several different ways in which contemporary literature might engage with or resist our time culture. Each author can be seen as representative of a particular way of responding to the current temporal conditions, but this study does not suggest that *all* literary texts must fit into this framework or these particular modes of engagement.

This thesis therefore offers a case study of these responses to what I argue is our conception of time and epoch. It explores 'the contemporary' as both an age of technology and an age in which the temporal parameters of human experience have been greatly altered, an area of research which, to date, has not been greatly explored within the field of French studies. In particular, the thesis seeks to work on opening up the question of a 'post-internet aesthetics' which has been applied almost exclusively to visual arts, and to suggest new ways of thinking about the influence of changing temporal paradigms on the literature produced and consumed by the cultures affected by them. The temporal changes brought about by climate degradation and fears of unsustainability have also received relatively little attention within the field of

demarcating our place in time according to certain political or world events, and the biases which often underpin or motivate those narratives. From Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 137. C.f. also Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 32. Both quoted in Gibbs, p.117.

French studies. The majority of edited volumes exploring contemporary eco-fiction and dystopian ecological collapse have had a distinctly Anglophone focus. Adam Trexler – whose own corpus draws principally upon Anglophone fiction and novels translated into English – notes in *Anthropocene Fictions* that 'climate fiction has slowly emerged as a phenomenon, with German, Norwegian, Icelandic, Spanish, Finnish and Dutch novels finding their way into English translation.' He further laments the difficulty in finding such novels, speaking of the 'vital need for the cross-cultural insight they could provide and a commensurate need for scholarship by critics specializing in other languages.'[75] Even the emergent research area of 'petrofiction' (fiction which focuses on the influences of and broad societal trends brought about by fossil fuel extraction and use), which draws from a geographically diverse 'world literature' perspective with a distinct post-colonial slant, has not, to date and to my knowledge, generated any published critical work on authors writing in French.[76] In using the works of three notable, but rather under-explored, French authors, the thesis seeks to contribute to the wealth of existing critical material and analysis on contemporary French fiction while also engaging with the wider interdisciplinary debates on these emerging and urgent areas of research.

Described as an 'écrivain-corsaire' by the publisher, the *Editions de l'Olivier,* of her acclaimed 2012 work *Féerie générale* which won the Prix Médicis that same year,[77] Emmanuelle Pireyre's hybrid works take the form of fragmented microfictions which, at first glance, seem to constitute completely disparate, unconnected elements in a chaotic and disordered universe.[78] While Pireyre's œuvre is diversified and includes prose, poetry and both live and radio performances, I will be paying particular attention to her prose works, and in particular *Féerie générale*, *Comment faire disparaître la terre?* and *Foire internationale.*[79]

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[75] Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2015), p. 10.

[76] Several informal attempts at creating a bibliography of petrofiction have been undertaken, including the follow list of novels compiled by graduate students at the Memorial University of Newfoundland <https://petrofictionary.wordpress.com/petrofictions/> [Accessed 02/08/18] and a list of critical material on the website of Amitav Ghosh, who originally coined the term <http://amitavghosh.com/blog/?p=6441> [Accessed 02/08/18]. Neither list employs French or Francophone novels as primary or secondary sources. For Ghosh's original 1992 essay 'Petrofiction: the oil encounter and the novel' and other writings on this subject, c.f.: Amitav Ghosh, *The Imam and the Indian* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publishers, 2002).

[77] 'Féerie générale: Emmanuelle Pireyre', Editions de l'Olivier website, 2013 <http://www.editionsdelolivier.fr/catalogue/9782823600032-feerie-generale> [Accessed 29/10/2016].

[78] The term 'Microfictions' is borrowed from Régis Jauffret's eponymous work, which experimented with a similar structure of short fictions about individuals which are taken 'out of time' and – it is implied – could be taking place simultaneously: Régis Jauffret, *Microfictions* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

[79] Emmanuelle Pireyre, *Féerie générale* (Paris: Editions de l'Olivier, 2012); Emmanuelle Pireyre, *Comment faire disparaître la terre?* (Paris: Seuil, 2006); Emmanuelle Pireyre, *Foire internationale* (Paris: Les petits matins, 2012). Herafter referred to using abbreviations 'FG', 'CT' and 'FI' respectively.

Féerie générale is described by *Le Monde* as a 'roman-collage, dans lequel réalité et fiction s'entremêlent'.[80] It touches upon the narratives of, among other things, a nine-year-old girl with a talent for equestrian painting and a distaste for financial analysis – the only subject under discussion among her peers –, a real-life murderer and his collection of violent manga, and a teenage internet user who is seeking advice about her boyfriend's bad kissing. While *Le Figaro* called the choice of the *Médicis* jury 'audacieux' given the unusual nature of the novel (still, interestingly, given the title *roman*) and the relative obscurity of the author,[81] their reviewer praises the 'satire enjouée de l'omniprésence des réseaux sociaux' and also the 'description parodique des stratégies de management mises en place dans les entreprises.'[82]

Pireyre's texts are innovative and ludic in their structures – despite formal play and innovation having been, one might imagine, almost exhaustively explored in the second half of the twentieth century. There are other contemporary texts written in French that engage in structural play and, in particular, seek to represent the fragmentation of experience and the overloading of information which dominates life in technology-driven societies of the twenty-first century. Other authors who could be included in this trend – though these suggestions by no means constitute an exhaustive list – are Patrik Ourednik and Philippe Vasset, whose *Carte muette* engages, like Pireyre's *Féerie générale*, with both the subject and the aesthetics of the internet.[83] Vasset's *Bandes alternées* is similarly declared as a novel but can be described as a series of intricate mediations on very particular aspects of our contemporary existence, while *Un livre blanc*, with its obsessive data-gathering on the blank spaces on urban maps (reproduced within the text itself), appears to engage in a similar way to Pireyre with the idea of collection and of raw data (as opposed to research and analysis).[84] Patrik Ourednik's *La fin du monde n'aurait pas eu lieu* is another example of this particular trend, with page-long entries intricately linked by theme or by another – often tenuous – association; Ourednik also employs a ludic style, with entries often bordering on the absurd or the 'fëerique', while incorporating

[80] 'Le Médicis est attribué à Emmanuelle Pireyre pour 'Féérie générale'', *Le Monde*, 6 November 2012, <http://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2012/11/06/le-medicis-est-attribue-a-emmanuelle-pireyre-pour-feerie-generale_1786421_3260.html#zVezxx7sfyekw2qK.99> [Accessed 20/10/2017].

[81] This is not entirely true; Pireyre had already published with Seuil and Maurice Nadeau, but was less well-known than some of the other potential candidates.

[82] Thierry Clermont and Dominique Guiou, 'Emmanuelle Pireyre décroche le Médicis', *Le Figaro*, 6 November 2012, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/livres/2012/11/06/03005-20121106ARTFIG00465-emmanuelle-pireyre-decroche-le-medicis.php> [Accessed 01/04/2015]. The *Cahiers des livres* supplement at the *Liberation* also ran an article about the Médicis win but chose to focus on another of Pireyre's works, *Foire Internationale*. Natalie Levisalles and Eric Loret, 'Emmanuelle Pireyre, "Féerie" félicitée', *Libération*, 6 November 2012, <http://www.liberation.fr/livres/2012/11/06/emmanuelle-pireyre-feerie-felicitee_858545> [Accessed 01/04/2015].

[83] Philippe Vasset, *Carte muette* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

[84] Philippe Vasset, *Bandes alternées* (Paris: Fayard, 2006); Philippe Vasset, *Un livre blanc* (Paris: Fayard, 2007).

fragments of the extra-textual 'real world'.[85] Pireyre was selected in particular due to the relatively large amount of primary material with relevance to the study of time, technology and contemporary society and the availability of her own critical material and reflective pieces on the subject of her own works.

What makes Pireyre's texts seem particularly 'contemporary' (her prose and non-fiction work has been cited by theorists of 'the contemporary' and of contemporary literature such as Lionel Ruffel)[86] is, I will argue, both the temporal construction of her texts, the fragmentary nature of which seem to engage with our current time culture of simultaneity and speed, and the way in which they engage with – and often parody – the societal changes brought about by new technologies. While new technologies have featured in the works of several well-known French novelists in recent decades such as those of Michel Houellebecq or Marie Darrieussecq, Pireyre's texts reflect some of the problematic aspects of our technological societies without engaging in explicitly dystopian fantasies such as those found in, for example, *La possibilité d'une île* or *Notre vie dans les forêts*.[87] To some extent, the construction of texts like *Féerie générale* and *Comment faire disparaître la terre?* could also be seen as representing an aesthetics of the Internet; loose, vast networks and information glut give a veneer of simultaneity to what is, in fact, a linear experience, just as our constantly-divided attention leads us to rapidly switch between tasks in a kind of faux-simultaneity. An analysis of Pireyre's works will therefore provide insight into the ways in which contemporary literature may engage with both the paradigm shift or epochal change brought about by new information technologies and our culture of speed, with its predilection towards simultaneity, instantaneity and distractedness.

Christine Montalbetti stands on both sides of the divide between literary criticism and creation: she is an established academic working at the Université Paris 8. She has published her entire œuvre with P.O.L., which, along with the Editions de Minuit (where Lenoir's works are published), is described by Warren Motte as one of the 'most forward-looking publishing houses in France.'[88] Motte has also referred to Montalbetti's works as 'critical fiction', writing that 'whatever else she may be up to in a given text, the gaze that she casts upon fiction itself is critical in nature, one which insistently calls into question fundamental assumptions about

[85] Patrik Ourednik, *La fin du monde n'aurait pas eu lieu* (Paris: Editions Allia, 2017).
[86] Ruffel, pp. 22-3.
[87] Michel Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005); Marie Darrieussecq, *Notre vie dans les forêts* (Paris: P.O.L., 2017).
[88] Warren Motte, *Fiction Now: The French Novel in the Twenty-first Century* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008), p. 12.

literature and its uses.'[89] The critical aspect of her fiction draws upon a range of theoretical and literary frameworks; the crossover between critical and literary practice means that there is, to some degree, a common corpus with which readers from within French academe will be familiar. The narratives are extremely self-reflexive, with long digressive passages dedicated to reflecting upon the literary project itself. Stéphane Girard, in his monograph on Montalbetti, talks of a 'méta-réflexivité qui serait caractéristique d'une littérature de notre temps';[90] though I would argue that it is precisely the heterogeneity of the French literary field in the twenty-first century that is its defining characteristic, this observation does bear some truth – the Montalbettian narrator appears to opt for a reflexivity more resembling that of Sterne or Diderot than the strict formalism of the texts' more recent predecessors.

Such an anachronistic choice of model is interesting, given the current trends in wider culture and society towards space-time compression, simultaneity and speed. There is an inherent tension in the way that Montalbetti's texts present themselves which make them difficult to classify: she is considered to be a 'contemporary' author in the temporal sense, she is published by a 'forward-thinking' publishing house, and she engages in literary practices considered by some (Girard, for example), to be 'of our time', but her texts resemble, aesthetically, much earlier works from a completely historical moment. Simon Kemp has cited Montalbetti as one of the few critics to explore digression 'both in her critical work and creatively in her fiction':[91] the self-reflexivity with which she does so is indeed reminiscent of eighteenth-century digressionists like Diderot. What is more, Montalbetti's texts, especially those that seem to play with Genettian notions of *vitesse* and *durée* like *Sa fable achevée, Simon sort dans la bruine* and *Expérience de la campagne*,[92] seem to require the kind of 'slow reading' that, some fear, is becoming a rarity in a world where attention spans are shortened to meet with increasing demand on work and leisure time and an increasing bombardment with sensory input.[93] This enforced 'slow reading' – brought about by narratorial digressiveness as well as the dilatory pace of the narrative – could be representative of a kind of resistance to our current

[89] Warren Motte, 'Christine Montalbetti's Engaging Narrations', *French Forum*, 32 (2007), 189-213 (p. 189).
[90] Stéphane Girard, *Autopsie de l'hétérogène chez Christine Montalbetti* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016), p. 24.
[91] Simon Kemp, *French Fiction into the Twenty-first Century: the Return to the Story* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), pp. 185-6. This assertion is made in an endnote.
[92] Christine Montalbetti, *Sa fable achevée, Simon sort dans la bruine* (Paris: P.O.L., 2001); Christine Montalbetti, *Expérience de la campagne* (Paris: P.O.L., 2005). Hereafter referred to using abbreviations 'SA' and 'EC' respectively.
[93] Nicholas Carr, for example, writes a convincing account of our difficulties with 'deep reading', citing recent research into neuroplasticity which suggests that our new ways of consuming culture could be – quite literally – changing our brains. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: How the internet is changing the way we read, think and remember* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011).

'culture of speed'. Texts like *Western,*[94] which takes a genre known for its high-speed and dramatic narratives and images and reduces it to an almost frustratingly slow pace, play with the readers' expectations of plot 'advancement' and a purposeful driving forward of the narrative. Perhaps it is even representative of what we might call an 'aesthetics of slowness' which explores the meaning of temporality and slowness in a high-speed world; the term has been employed by Lutz Koepnick, in his book *On Slowness*, investigating contemporary works of art which 'embrace slowness as a medium to ponder the meaning of temporality and of being present today in general, of living under conditions of accelerated temporal passage, mediation and spatial shrinkage.'[95]

Koepnick also identifies 'a contemporary preoccupation with the slow and the durational and with space as a site of open-ended stories and vectors of change.'[96] Montalbetti's stories are quite the opposite of the high-speed and high-action narratives that we might expect to be representative of our current culture of time; in addition to their digressive and dilatory narrative style, they also seem to be in a current state of waiting – the narrator often alludes to a *telos* which often does not even arrive within the narrative. The individual diegeses are often hard to place in chronological, historical time – while the various technologies or events mentioned give a hint as to the vague time period, it is often true that the texts could span long or short time periods and be placed over a span of decades – but they do show a high degree of consciousness of the kind of 'long-term' thinking that has collapsed within the culture at large. The historical novel *L'Origine de l'homme,*[97] for example, juxtaposes pre-history with human history, and in turn both with a narrator who is our contemporary, while *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses* evokes the long cycles of planet earth as well as a post-human future.[98] Montalbetti's texts provide a striking counter-example to Pireyre's engagement with our culture of speed. Her texts appear to actively resist the twenty-first century drive for acceleration, frustrating the reader's expectations with long digressions and an extreme slowing of narrative pace. This 'slow reading' appears completely at odds with what we would consider reflective of our contemporary society, but Montalbetti's texts do also engage critically with their own 'literariness' in ways that could be considered highly contemporary.

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[94] Christine Montalbetti, *Western* (Paris: P.O.L., 2005). Hereafter referred to using abbreviation 'W'.
[95] Lutz Koepnick, *On Slowness: Towards an Aesthetic of the Contemporary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 3.
[96] Ibid. p. 19.
[97] Christine Montalbetti, *L'Origine de l'homme* (Paris: Folio (Gallimard), 2006). Hereafter referred to using abbreviation 'OH'.
[98] Christine Montalbetti, *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses* (Paris: P.O.L., 2016). Hereafter referred to using abbreviation 'VF'.

Montalbetti is certainly not the only contemporary author to engage with questions of digression or slowness. Jean Echenoz provides another example of this particular trend towards digression; readings of Echenoz form the basis of Simon Kemp's chapter on digression in his book on contemporary French literature.[99] Digressiveness, which is described in detail in the second chapter of this study but which can generally be considered to be a question both of textual space/readerly time and of meaning (textual space is taken up by something considered not to be *relevant* to the narrative itself), is related to another phenomenon which has received significant critical attention within French studies – the notion of 'errance' or wandering. But while this notion of 'errance' implies the same kind of lack of progress, its particular brand of directionless sets it apart from the more wilful manipulation of time and narrative in digressive narrative. The very self-reflexive nature of Montalbetti's narratives – her narrator both engages in digressive meanderings and comments at length upon them – make them fertile ground for the study of digression and slowness as a resistance to speed and to readerly expectations of 'progression' or 'plot'.

Hélène Lenoir is the most prolific of the three writers treated in this study, with twelve novels published with the *Editions de Minuit* between 1994 and 2015. Like those of Montalbetti, her works seem reminiscent of an earlier literary movement: they are often likened to those of the *nouveau roman* author Nathalie Sarraute. Sarraute's focus on 'tropismes', or the invisible movements of the subconscious, on the narrative level, lead to an often violent and unpredictable narrative of the subconscious: a veneer of civilised restraint is maintained on the diegetic level.[100] Lenoir's works focus in on the subjective realities of their protagonists, often to the point of extreme claustrophobia, leading to a distorted, individual-focused temporality which is more reminiscent of the experimentation in phenomenological time of *nouveaux romanciers* like Sarraute than of the fragmentation and temporal dislocation common among many contemporary novelists of her generation, or indeed of the meta-reflexivity to which Girard referred. What is particularly interesting in her works is her distension of the narrative into the (subjective) past and hypothetical future: the texts often portray characters whose lives, in the diegetic present, are stagnating. In Lenoir's fictions, the notions of 'maturation' and 'progress' (to borrow Bauman's terms) appear to fail, as the protagonists wait in a (metaphorical or literal) liminal space, a notion which has been explored extensively by Jean

[99] Kemp, pp. 96-130. For the phenomenon of digressiveness, paired with the literal 'wandering' of the protagonist, see in particular Jean Echenoz, *Un an* (Paris: Minuit, 1997).
[100] These notions have been the subject of much critical analysis, not least by Sarraute herself. See, for example Nathalie Sarraute, *L'Ère du soupçon: Essais sur le roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).

Duffy.[101] For example, one of the protagonists of *Le Magot de Momm*, former housewife Nann, has lost her husband and returned to live with her mother – with no income, she has returned to a strange second childhood under the protection of an overbearing parent.[102] *Pièce rapportée*'s Claire suffers a brain injury which leaves her amnesiac and unable to create new memories correctly; figuratively and literally cut off from her past, she also returns to a childlike state, waiting for recovery.[103] In both *Elle va partir*, where the protagonists wait for the death of their neighbour (in the case of Matthias) and mother (to Camelin) Mme Camelin, and *Son nom d'avant,* where a bourgeois housewife sees the same tensions playing out generation after generation, either the past or future dominates the subjective temporality of the protagonist, while the present is seen as a trap in which they are stuck.[104]

The notion of stagnation and a 'failure to progress' underpins much of Lenoir's narrative, as well as a notion of 'human time' which sees the diegesis of the text slow, much like in Montalbetti, in favour of long passages relating subjective accounts of past events and hypothetical futures. Passivity and 'errance', two of the foundations of Lenoir's texts, are significant trends within contemporary French fiction. Warren Motte has explored the notion of passivity in a series of novels by 'young writers'.[105] Motte's corpus includes the likes of Marie NDiaye, Eric Laurrent and Belgian author Jean-Philippe Toussaint. Both NDiaye and Laurrent were initially considered as possible subjects of this study. The narrator of Laurrent's *Clara Stern* is, in particular, exceedingly inward-looking, and his short-sightedness (and, one might argue, self-obsession) are complemented by an extreme intertextuality that is similar to that found in Montalbetti's novels.[106] NDiaye's protagonists are in many cases victims of absurd circumstances which often border on the fantastic and the uncanny but, like Lenoir's protagonists, they appear to have little vision for the future or plans about how to react, instead simply 'suffering' the circumstances in which they find themselves. In *Mon cœur à l'étroit* the protagonist is rejected from society – she cannot think of rational explanation for her exclusion and harassment by, it seems, almost everyone she meets – and her confusion is mirrored by a physical fog which covers the whole of Bordeaux.[107] The Parisian progatonist of NDiaye's *Un temps de saison* finds himself alone when his wife and child suddenly disappear after they

[101] Jean H. Duffy, *Thresholds of Meaning: Passage, Ritual and Liminality in Contemporary French Narrative* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011). C.f. in particular the first chapter (pp. 29-71).
[102] Hélène Lenoir, *Le Magot de Momm* (Paris: Minuit, 2001). Hereafter referred to using abbreviation 'MM'.
[103] Hélène Lenoir, *Pièce rapportée* (Paris: Minuit, 2011). Hereafter referred to using abbreviation 'PR'.
[104] Hélène Lenoir, *Elle va partir* (Paris: Minuit, 1996); Hélène Lenoir, *Son nom d'avant* (Paris: Minuit, 1998). Hereafter referred to using abbreviations 'EP' and 'SD' respectively.
[105] Warren Motte, *Fables of the Novel: French Fiction since 1990* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), p. 3.
[106] Eric Laurrent, *Clara Stern* (Paris: Minuit, 2005).
[107] Marie NDiaye, *Mon cœur a l'étroit* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

overstay the end of the tourist season in their holiday home.[108] His efforts to recover them – his wanderings and fruitless attempts to gain information form essentially the entire narrative – are met with complete indifference by locals and authorities, as his wife and child fade from thought in the same way they appear to have faded from existence. In both texts, there is a similar undercurrent of short-termism and passivity to that found in the texts of Lenoir.

Lenoir's selection for the corpus of this study was due both to this engagement with a wider trend of passivity and 'short-termism' within French literature and to the uniquely anachronistic form of her novels, which appear to have more in common with previous generations of French literary experimentation than with contemporaries like Pireyre. The works of Lenoir therefore provide a valuable opportunity to both examine a significant trend within contemporary literature and question what it means to be 'contemporary'. Her texts reflect, as a result of their passive protagonists and meandering narratives, the kind of stasis we find ourselves embracing when faced with vast existential threats. The texts opt for an extreme focus on the quotidian and the mundane which sidelines what appear to be historically significant, or at the very least traumatic, events. The protagonists are self-obsessed to the point of extreme insularity, with important events in what we might refer to as 'collective history' brushed over in favour of a small-scale, personal or domestic drama; in *La Crue de juillet*, the displacement and death of refugees is rendered secondary to the ill-effects that the tragic accident has upon the middle-class protagonist.[109] Warren Motte writes that Lenoir 'reconfigures the conventions of the psychological novel, leading us through the labyrinth of a human imagination that is tortured in unexpected ways'.[110] While Lenoir focuses on the domestic setting as a particular battleground where individual 'realities' collide in the manner of tectonic plates – slowly, devastatingly – she recognises herself that these problems of the self and identity are more universal:

> En réalité, ce sont des situations que je transpose en famille mais qu'on peut vivre partout; quand on est inclus dans un système, un organisme avec des lois que l'on doit respecter, des choses à ne pas dire, des concurrences ou des rivalités…[111]

A key aspect of this Lenoirian 'tortured' imagination is the role that technology plays in both causing the anguish which dominates much of the textual space (what we might conceive of as

[108] Marie NDiaye, *Un temps de saison* (Paris: Minuit, 2004).
[109] Hélène Lenoir, *La Crue de juillet* (Paris: Minuit, 2013). Hereafter referred to using abbreviation 'CJ'.
[110] Motte, p. 14.
[111] Lucia Montaner Sanchez, 'Retrouvailles avec Hélène Lenoir', *Çédille; revista de estudios franceses*, 8 (2012), 384-92 (p. 388).

readerly time) and in itself short-circuiting the obsessive re-writings of past and future events (what might be construed as a representation of 'deep thinking') by disturbing the attention of the protagonist and therefore erupting, unannounced, into the narrative. Since Lenoir's texts span the rise of Web 2.0.,[112] there is a visible change in the kind of technologies that appear within the text: in *Le Répit*, the male protagonist is harassed by constant phone calls, while in *La Folie Silaz* Carine's madness is fuelled by a fear that others are conspiring against her using the internet, the use of which she has not yet mastered.[113] Lenoir's distortion and slowing of diegetic time as well as the overarching sentiment of stagnation and failure to progress renders her texts particularly relevant to the study of time in the contemporary novel. The narratives' extreme insularity provides a certain degree of insight into the 'short-termism' and head-in-the-sand discourses surrounding real threats and traumatic events, while the presence of new technologies in the narrative, often as a destabilising or disruptive force, mirrors contemporary anxieties about the widespread use and omnipresence of these devices.

Outline of thesis

This study will first focus on the ways in which the texts engage with the temporal aesthetics and anxieties brought about by new information technology, which is one of the major drivers and, I would argue, origins of the shift both in our perception of time and of our place in historical time. Chapter 1 will treat this question of information technology from two angles – firstly, how the texts directly engage with information technology and its effects on society. This part of the chapter will underline the ways in which technologies have caused a paradigmatic shift in human interactions and ways of living, and the ways in which that shift is represented or reflected in these literary texts. It is therefore concerned with the notion of epoch – how new information technologies are part of the origins of an epochal shift. It will demonstrate, for example, that the protagonists of Lenoir's novels often have a fraught relationship with new technologies, becoming obsessed with video games, television or the promise of a telephone call, while Montalbetti's narrator emphasises the mediating power of the screen and Pireyre's narrator depicts technology as omnipresent and a major source of

[112] The term 'Web 2.0' generally refers to a period of the development of the Internet, stretching from the early 2000s to the present. At this point the Internet moved from generally providing only static, information-based websites to also offering those which allowed user-generated content, for example blogging and social media. As Bjarki Valtysson suggests, the term 'does not represent any specific technological updates of the Web, but rather certain changes in web design which facilitate enhanced creativity, information sharing and collaboration amongst users.' Bjarki Valtysson, 'Access culture: Web 2.0 and cultural participation', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 16 (2010), 200-14 (p. 213).

[113] Hélène Lenoir, *Le Répit* (Paris: Minuit, 2003). Hereafter referred to using abbreviation 'R'; Hélène Lenoir, *La Folie Silaz* (Paris: Minuit, 2008). Hereafter referred to using abbreviation 'FS'.

destablisation. The second part of the chapter will engage with what we might call an aesthetics of technology, which would be a new or developing literary aesthetic which mirrors the temporal parameters and interconnectivity of the Internet. This will involve in particular looking at the spatiality and interconnectedness of Pireyre's texts as an aesthetic representation of the network, and considering whether the extreme intertextuality, cultural simultaneity or reference 'pile-up' in Montalbetti's texts could be seen as reflecting a cultural moment defined by instant-access online archives and the search engine.

The second chapter will examine resistance to and engagement with the dominant conception of time (in developed societies of the twenty-first century) in the texts. This chapter will question what we conceive of as 'speed' in narrative using the theories of Genette as a framework on which to map the temporal parameters of the texts. It will focus in particular on what we could conceive of as 'fast-moving' narratives like Pireyre's, and the ways that they might engage with the dominant culture of our time, as opposed to 'slow' texts like Montalbetti's which seem to resist the dominant temporal paradigms of our epoch. In particular, the chapter will break down Montalbetti's resistance to the high-speed temporality of the twenty-first century into *digression* and *slowness*, illustrating the ways in which the texts employ both, as well as self-reflexive observations on the texts' own temporalities, in order to frustrate the readers' expectations and explore – often in a quite critical way – the paradigmatic speed of our epoch.

Chapter 3 will focus on the texts' engagement with the broader conception of an 'epochal shift' which comes with our loss of faith in progress and abandonment of long-term thinking, combined with looming event horizons and increasingly urgent existential threats. It will turn to the ways in which the texts engage with historical time, looking in particular at the insularity of Lenoir's texts and the ways in which major historical events – or events which should be considered important for collective history – are side-lined in favour of the personal or the mundane. In its exploration of notions of time and epoch in the works of these contemporary authors, this study does not seek to provide a definitive or generalising account of literary responses to time in French, national or international literatures. Instead it offers a case study of how our altered conceptions of time, temporality and our place in history may be engaged in literary works published in recent years.

CHAPTER 1

AN EPOCHAL SHIFT: LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY

In the second half of the twentieth century a revolution of information technology began. Throughout human history, civilisations have developed increasingly sophisticated forms of recording, storing and communicating information. James Gleick's history of information technologies outlines their development from the written word to the telegraph to the computer and the internet. He writes that:

> [W]hen Claude Shannon took a sheet of paper and penciled his outline of the measures of information in 1949, the scale went from tens of bits to hundreds to thousands, millions, billions and trillions. The transistor was one year old and Moore's law yet to be conceived. The top of the pyramid was Shannon's estimate for the Library of Congress – one hundred million bits, 10^{14}. He was right, but the pyramid was growing.[1]

What we have seen over the last half-century is an exponential increase in the amount of information we are able to store: in libraries, in archives, but also on personal computers and storage devices small enough to fit in one's pocket. There has been a staggering increase in the amount of information available to the average citizen, and the speed at which this information can be accessed would have been unimaginable even three decades ago. A commonly-held view is that these new technologies serve as extensions of existing human capabilities. Mark de Vries attributes this view to Ernst Kapp, a nineteenth-century philosopher whose focus on the new technological developments of the time leads de Vries to consider him the first philosopher of technology:

> [All] technical artefacts can be explained as extensions of natural human organs, according to Kapp. At first sight this seems quite reasonable but as technologies get

[1] James Gleick, *The Information* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011), p. 393.

> more complex, it is more difficult to see in what sense they are extensions of our human organs.[2]

What de Vries is suggesting here, I think, is that at a certain point, these new technologies no longer extend a previously-held human capacity, in the same way that the bicycle or the engine allowed us to transport ourselves and goods faster than our own legs and arms, or the written word allowed us to archive more ideas than reciting oral stories and histories could have done. Instead, they have become so complex and so embedded in our societies that they begin to become a driving force of their own: one need only look to the 1990s to see how the rise of personal computing changed the social and economic landscape of developed societies. These changes spread quickly beyond the 'tech bubble' to wider society and to unrelated professional fields: in so doing, they rapidly altered the kind of work people did and required individuals to adapt to a completely different skillset. In this second decade of the twenty-first century, the technology we interact with on a daily basis is so complex and has become so embedded in our lives that it both generates and responds to the needs of society.

Early in their respective works on the history of technological development, James Gleick and Neil Postman evoke the invention of the written word in their histories of information technology; Gleick from Palaeolithic drawings to the first alphabet,[3] and Postman through the legend of Thamus (from Plato's *Phaedrus*),[4] in which the King notes the dangers of the written word as a technology, arguing that the availability of information in written form will only give an allure of wisdom, but that real wisdom is tied up with *knowing* in the sense of being able to recall them oneself.[5] Though this fear may seem absurd to us today in the twenty-first century, the argument is not far removed from the one we hear regularly about the use of the Internet: that despite (and perhaps due to) having access to an unprecedented amount of information, generations raised with this technology appear to have shorter attention spans and a reduced capacity for learning. As Nicholas Carr writes:

> Dozens of studies by psychologists, neurobiologists, educators and web designers point to the same conclusion: when we go online, we enter an environment that promotes

[2] Marc J. de Vries, 'Technology and the Nature of Humans', in *Teaching about Technology: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Technology for Non-philosophers*, ed. by Marc J. de Vries (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), pp. 53-68 (p. 54).
[3] Gleick, pp. 32-3.
[4] Carr also refers to the legend of Thamus: Carr, p. 55.
[5] Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), pp. 4-5.

> cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning. […] With the exception of alphabets and number systems, the Net might well be the single most powerful mind-altering technology that has ever come into generational use.[6]

We might view the exponential rise of information technology in the twenty-first century as an epoch-changing event, in the same way that the invention of the written word, the wheel or the printing press marked huge shifts in the functioning of societies and in the global order. Sven Birkerts writes in *The Gutenberg Elegies* of a change of epoch characterised by the transition from print to electronic communication, drawing on the theories of McLuhan. He writes:

> […] I believe that, as Marshall McLuhan originally theorized (and as Kernan has reaffirmed), we are in the midst of an epoch-making transition; that the societal shift from print-based to electronic communications is as consequential for culture as was the shift instigated by Gutenberg's invention of the movable type.[7]

Both of these shifts are fundamentally concerned with technologies which permit the spread of information through space, faster. The printing press allowed reproductions of written texts to appear faster and be delivered across far wider distances to a far wider audience; access to the vast global networks and archives of the internet is now easy, fast and relatively cheap, with 24/7 availability as the expected norm in many developed societies. I would argue that this technology – perhaps to an even greater extent than the others mentioned above – is inextricably bound up with our changing conception of time. Personal computers perform searches in a matter of seconds that could have taken hours or days for a researcher to complete in a physical archive. And while the Internet and in particular email and instant messaging appear to be 'time-saving' devices, the new norms that these technologies ushered in mean that the demands on our time are exponentially greater. Or, as Yuval Noah Harari writes in his best-selling *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*: 'We thought we were saving time; instead we revved the treadmill of life to ten times its former speed and made our days more anxious and agitated.'[8]

Increasingly, our relationship with physical distance and with the ticking of 'clock time' becomes eroded, as both our professional time and an increasing portion of our leisure time is

[6] Carr, pp. 115-6.
[7] Birkerts, p. 192.
[8] Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Random House, 2014), p. 99.

mediated by the screen. This radical change in the way that the average person – and the average consumer of culture in the form of literature or other art – accesses, receives and communicates information on a daily basis cannot leave unchanged the role of art and literature in the twenty-first century**.** For Birkerts, too, the effects of this new technology – which he believes to be chiefly corrosive to 'culture' (in a broad sense) – is also bound up with our conception of time, and favours the present over the 'deep time' of aesthetic experience. He writes that:

> Quite simply, inward experience, including all aesthetic experience, unfolds in one kind of time; electronic communications, of their very nature, depend upon – indeed *create* – another. The time of the self is deep time, duration time, time that is essentially characterized by our obliviousness to it. […] All circuit-driven communications, by contrast, are predicated upon instantaneousness. To use them, to interact with them, requires that we enter a kind of virtual *now* – the perpetual present tense of the impulse, of the beep, of the flickering cursor.[9]

He also specifically refers to the notion of Bergsonian 'duration', arguing that the 'deep time' we experience when reading literature (though he refers to any type of 'aesthetic experience', the focus of his book is fictional narratives and more specifically the novel) is at odds with type of temporal experience brought about by the computer and its electronic circuitry:

> Electricity – and the whole circulatory network predicated upon it – is about immediacy; it is in the nature of the current to surmount impedances. Electricity is, implicitly, of the moment – *now*. Depth, meaning and the narrative structurings of subjectivity – these are *not* now; they flourish only in the order of time Henri Bergson called 'duration'.[10]

Birkerts remains convinced that the net effect of new technologies is a loss of culture – both because the new forms of entertainment take time away from the activity of reading literature which once had a central role to play in the cultural lives of many, and because it may effect a change in the *way* that we think – and in particular our ability to experience 'deep' time or durational time, with a singular focus on the cultural object – the printed book. Writing over two decades ago, it seems that Birkerts anticipated the fears now echoed by others that the increasing mediation of our lives through ever-more-sophisticated technology will change the

[9] Birkerts, p. 193.
[10] Ibid. p. 219.

way that we think. Carr's *The Shallows* talks about the way in which 'deep reading' has been replaced by a new, more lateral way of reading – 'skimming' over the surface of a great deal of information rather than focusing on a linear text.[11] Our increased awareness of the plasticity of the human brain – and this is one of Carr's focuses – means that the fear that we are fundamentally changing our way of interacting with and interpreting the world (or, somewhat more dramatically, changing our way of being altogether) has some scientific basis.

But despite the so-called 'crisis of literature' the printed book remains, and it now coexists with the kinds of communication and entertainment devices of which Birkerts had only begun to see the emergence in the mid-1990s. Inevitably, given the ubiquity of these new technologies, they have been increasingly reflected in the literature of the early twenty-first century. Joseph Tabb writes:

> As literature inevitably reflects forms of power in the world (even to subvert them or to imagine alternative worlds), the sort of narrative that emerged as new and exciting, in the final decade of the millennium, was indeed capable not only of imagining networks, but of becoming itself a network: a virtual network of allusions, possible identities, embedded subjectivities, but also (in hypertext narratives) an operational network of electronic links extending to text fields and image fields throughout the Web.[12]

My focus in this chapter is on the way in which fictional narratives might reflect our entering into a new technology-driven epoch and on how the resulting changes in our ways of thinking may be represented in these texts. Inevitably, any close analysis of literary texts and their relationship with new technology will be twofold. Firstly, we must question how and if the texts directly engage with or represent the new omnipresence of these devices in our daily lives: how do the texts represent the anxieties and obsessions provoked by the constant presence of the screen? In what ways (if any) does technology drive the plot? I will first examine the ways in which Pireyre's texts engage directly with the kinds of discourses that are often employed in discussions about technology and its dangers in contemporary societies. For example, Pireyre's microfictions touch upon the changing social structures that have emerged in light of new web-based communication, with altered expectations for the development of

[11] It would be interesting to consider further the spatial metaphors used to describe the ways we read *through time* – 'deep' time and 'deep' reading versus 'lateral' reading and thinking, 'skimming', etc.

[12] Joseph Tabb, '1991, The Web: Network Fictions', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Literatures in English*, ed. by Brian McHale and Randall Stevenson (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2006), pp. 251-62 (p. 252).

relationships, new authority figures, and even changes in the way we conceive of the human body. In Lenoir's novels, we might note in particular the obsessive watching of television or playing of video games by some of her protagonists and other characters, or the ways in which missed email and telephone messages are central to the plot(s). In Montalbetti's texts, the narrators' obsession with screens is reminiscent of the ways in which our contemporary society values the image and the recording: the present itself is altered by the knowledge that the moment will eventually be a recording, a future memory. All three of the authors of this study therefore touch upon, in some way, the paradigmatic changes that new technology has effected in our lives and societies.

This leads us to the second aspect of our analysis. It follows from these major changes to our daily lives that our ways of thinking may have been altered by our use of technology – so can the indirect effects of these new technologies be observed in the texts? In the second section of this chapter, I will question how the modes of interaction and ways of thinking (networks, information overload, and multi-tasking, for example) facilitated by this technology might be reflected (or, indeed, rejected) in the ways that these contemporary texts are constructed. This chapter will therefore be divided into two distinct sections – firstly, the direct engagement with technology and, secondly, the ways in which aesthetic changes in the novel might reflect our new ways of thinking in our technology-dominated societies.

Direct engagement with technology

Technological anxieties

In *Féerie générale* Pireyre engages with the diverse tensions in our technology-dominated society – surveillance and anarchy, information and misinformation, virtual and real – with often ironic and self-deprecating humour. One of the users of technology represented in *Féerie générale* is the figure of the hacker. Through them, Pireyre brings into the narrative the issues of digital security, data encryption, online identity theft, and, on a more global scale, 'hacktivism' or cyber-terrorism. The hackers are also representative of the kinds of virtual societies which have formed thanks to the connectivity of the internet. The vast distances between individuals can effectively be erased by near-instant communication over the internet and the processes of forming a shared community and 'history' are speeded up by the new social structures created by the internet. In the text, the narrator meets the Californian hacker

who calls himself SunDog through her friend Sven Tikkanen – this episode is one of several in which the narrator (author-figure 'Emmanuelle') features directly. The narrator explains how Tikkanen became involved with the hackers while researching his doctoral thesis in philosophy, on the subject of contemporary heroism:

> Ayant prévu d'orienter ses réflexions sur l'héroïsme contemporain vers les nouvelles formes de pouvoir et vers l'hacktivisme, activité de résistance de ces nouveaux héros que sont les hackers, il s'était rapproché d'eux; puis il s'était pris au jeu (FG 134).

At one point in the text, the narrator makes what she thinks is a social faux-pas: jokingly offering Sven a photo of Veronica's green boots, which look like those of Robin Hood, in reference to Sven's thesis. He responds curtly that: 'sa thèse portait sur les figures exclusivement contemporaines de l'héroïsme' (FG 125). This turns out to be rather ironic, given that the hackers present their own destructive activities as a kind of contemporary Robin Hood story, stealing information or data from the rich and from faceless powers-that-be and giving something (though quite what is never clear) back to the people. As presented through these two characters – chiefly through SunDog –, the hacker is the centre of an alternative virtual society, complete with its own origin story, code of ethics and legends. The origin story features precocious child geniuses who wish to contact their pen pals in Texas:

> Entre copains d'école, ils rédigeaient un petit journal et avaient eu envie d'échanger avec des enfants du Texas […] A l'insu des parents, ils réussirent à passer clandestinement par le réseau de téléphone pour connecter leurs ordinateurs aux machines texans (FG 132-133).

Later, we hear, this community of hackers created a code of ethics in order to create a viable force which might counter the surveillance and control being applied to the digital world:

> Ils inventaient l'éthique de hacker, de plus en plus conscients qu'ils étaient l'unique contre-pouvoir crédible dans l'univers technologique où s'ancrent la surveillance et le contrôle généralisés menaçant nos sociétés (FG 133).

The hackers see their community as some kind of heroic force against a hegemonic power which presents a legitimate threat to 'nos sociétés' (but who, one wonders, is 'nous'?). They have a code of ethics, alternative names (SunDog and, later, Azurill) their own languages and distinctive behaviours ('cod[er], crypt[er] et attaqu[er] des sites' (FG 134)) and even a bizarre – though most decidedly tongue-in-cheek – form of deity: the 'Pingouin de Linus'

named after the creator of the Linux operating system, who dreamt of a 'grand Pingouin [qui] allait chasser et dévorer tout ce qui est trop compliqué, bidon et source de plantage' (FG 135).[13] The 'Pingouin', if Sven Tikkanen is to be believed, continues to exist as the symbol of some kind of greater principle ('Depuis sa lointaine banquise des années 90, le Pingouin continuait de veiller sur l'esprit hacker, sur le copyleft et l'approche ludique du code' (FG 135).) These lofty principles and the hackers' stated (but later implicitly questioned) status as heros reflect a real trend exemplified by the consistent visibility, both on the Internet and in the traditional media (television news, radio, press), of hacker collective Anonymous and other, more national groups (for example, the Syrian Electronic Army).[14] Sensationalised stories present them as heroic geniuses or vigilante anti-heroes, while political bodies tend to take a less generous view of their interference.

Pireyre's treatment of the hackers is a playful reflection of the mythologised status they hold in contemporary society; this in turn is a nod to the way the existence of a 'virtual world' easily accessible to most citizens has changed, even in small ways, the social structures of contemporary society. On the surface, Tikkanen seems to have taken seriously these notions of heroism. The narrator, already presented as somewhat naïve with regards to computers and technology, seems to accept unfalteringly the (mis)information he feeds her. She agrees to take part in what he calls a 'pause détente sur Internet' which involves hacking into the Crédit Agricole website (her only objection is 'Pas une banque, c'est sinistre' (FG 138)) and into a child's account on a 'Pokémon' forum in order to write obscene messages to disturb the other children. After turning Crédit Agricole's welcome message to an absurd image of Laetitia Casta swimming in a tank 'comme un fœtus à cheveux longs' with text revealing the credit card numbers of strangers, Tikkanen reassures the narrator that the credit cards belong 'exclusivement à des Finnois aisés vivant sur une île à côté de Helsinki' (FG 138).

Despite these justifications, *Féerie générale* ultimately shows the hackers to be motivated both by nihilist and anarchist tendencies (epitomised, perhaps, by SunDog's delectation in destroying physical computer units on stage, perhaps a nod to his perception of his own rock-star status)[15] and also by the same base desires as everyone else: SunDog uses

[13] The Linux logo was, for years, a penguin: 'Tux the penguin' became a popular mascot for the operating system.
[14] A case study of the 'Syrian Electronic Army': Ahmed K. Al-Rawi, 'Cyber warriors in the Middle East: The case of the Syrian Electronic Army', *Public Relations Review*, 40 (2014), 420-28.
[15] '[C]omme dit SunDog, "c'est génial d'être un hacker, c'est comme être champion de surf ou chanteur de rock, d'ailleurs il y a des points communs entre nos modes de vie"' (FG 128).

his fame to sleep with 'des filles superbes' (the narrator quips that 'Peu importe, l'adultère ne nous intéresse pas, c'est un sujet dont la littérature a déjà suffisamment fait la tour.'(FG 129)) and created a Trojan – a program whose core purpose is destructive – for money and recognition ('Ce logiciel lui a apporté mieux que l'argent: la gloire' (FG 129)). Despite their 'code d'éthique', he participates in a phone-in competition, which he duly hacks in order to become the winning caller, and wins a Ferrari ('le voilà parti en Ferrari avec encore plus de filles superbes' (FG 133)). While this episode in *Féerie générale* engages with the figure of the hacker in contemporary society, it also serves as a critique of their mythologised status: the hacker is a relatively new phenomenon, but their 'rock star' status – exaggerated to the point of absurdity by Pireyre – does actually correspond to exaggerated narratives surrounding them in real life, whether they are portrayed as heroes or villains.

The hackers also illustrate the increasingly blurry divide between the real and the virtual. Pireyre engages in many ways with the strange and often unsettling relationship between the individual and the 'digital prosthesis'[16] provided by a computer or similar device, which allows them to access vast stores of information, communicate with others across the globe and even take on an avatar which moves, on their command, around artificial environments. In many cases, this involves replacing face-to-face or real-life encounters with digital ones – with increasing focus on text-based forms of communication rather than oral ones such as telephone or video conferencing. Although the dating site might not be considered the most 'literary' of subjects, Pireyre returns to them several times, linking them directly with notions of writing and storytelling. In the first of the sections entitled 'collection de baisers', the narrator remarks that 'Le baiser a lieu dans la real life, alors que sur les sites de rencontres, la libido passe avant tout par l'écrit; le corps fait barrage avec son inertie bizarre' (FG 21). The notion that the body – that is, the very body that is operating the technology in question – comes to represent for the individual a kind of inert and obstructive mass, plays into many of the anxieties surrounding the internet, digital networks and all they bring with them (addictive gaming, dating websites). With Web 2.0, which allowed for user-generated content on platforms designed for ease of access, easy-to-understand user interfaces meant that adding information or conversing via the internet become accessible to anyone with an internet connection. When the product of the human mind (language, either in text or audio form) can travel at speeds limited only by the physical hardware supporting the formless, ephemeral

[16] For discussion of new media as 'extension' of the human body, see Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1964).

internet, the physical body seems slow, lagging behind by comparison. The gap between the digital world and 'real life' becomes wider as the technology becomes more efficient, and the development of personal and collective identities takes place almost entirely through constructed narratives – dialogue, repartee, stories. Terje Rasmussen, in *Personal Media in Everyday life*, describes the ways in which people use sites with 'user-generated content'[17] as follows: 'Users present themselves in distinct and purposive ways that in accumulated form appear as social databases.'[18] Within the sleek user interface of a dating site, one is *only* language (and, presumably, some carefully selected images); it is much more difficult, therefore, to control one's image in the real world.

This is highlighted in *Féerie générale* by the fragment concerning Mirem, the mother of Roxane (the little girl who hates playing the stock market – the vocation of her primary school peers – and does equestrian painting instead). Mirem has been single for several months, hopes for a long-term relationship, and, most importantly, 'comptait bien cette fois réaliser le délicat passage à la real life' (FG 15). Despite spending 'une bonne partie de ses jours et ses nuits sur un site de rencontres' (FG 14) and deciding to meet a man going by the name of Brian75, the jump to real life fails: when she goes to meet Brian75 at a Sofitel, he fails to show up.

> De retour chez elle, furieuse, elle s'était connectée pour s'apercevoir que Brian75, au lieu d'être dans le train, était simplement resté chez lui à chatter, promettant d'autres rencontres, faisant miroiter d'autres week-ends amoureux dans des Sofitel en région (FG 21).

While comical, the episode highlights the central importance of language in the digital world. The notion that one would forgo 'real life' pleasures in order to tell stories about them on the internet seems absurd, but in a world of on-demand services and communication via text and image (which allows for a carefully-controlled façade) it is the real, rather than the virtual, that becomes unsettling. This inability or unwillingness to leave the virtual for the real is taken to extremes in the figure of the 'otaku' who is treated in several fragments in the first chapter. The Japanese word, now a loanword in English, has developed pejorative connotations: the term is used to describe a young person with obsessive interests, usually referring to anime or manga or video gaming. In the text the otaku is described as 'à présent un garçon bien connu'

[17] Rasmussen cites websites like Livejournal, Wordpress, and Twitter.
[18] Terje Rasmussen, *Personal Media and Everyday Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 68.

in Japanese society (FG 23), who retreats from the real world into the world of fiction and – when the technology allowed it – virtual reality:

> Là où les parents zélés trottinent et s'activent, le jeune otaku refuse l'affairisme ambiant; il traîne en pantoufles l'air blasé, sort le moins possible, vit reclus parmi ses mangas et entretient dès les années 80 un rapport privilégié avec son ordinateur (FG 23).

The 'otaku' is described as a figure who is essentially harmless, but an obsessive consumer of fiction, who spends his time compulsively reading and watching ('qui lit et visionne obsessionnellement' (FG 24)) fictional narratives. The real child-murderer, Tsotumu Miyazaki, who appears in the text, was dubbed the 'Otaku murderer' by the press. *Féerie générale's* treatment of Miyazaki's murder of Mari Konno, Masami Yoshizawa, Erika Nanba and Ayako Nomoto, all girls aged between four and seven, alludes to his inability to distinguish the real from the virtual, reality from fantasy:[19] 'Il ne fit plus la différence robe/fille, ni le distinguo intérieur/extérieur, il ne fit plus aucun distinguo' (FG 24).

There are other instances of a technological 'extension' of the human body which, though less disturbing in content, also serve to demonstrate the ways in which human corporeality – and the role of the human body – is being disrupted. Take, for example, the well-equipped army referred to in *Féerie générale*: thanks to their sophisticated equipment, military service is no longer practical, as the equipment can only be operated by specialists:

> [L]e service militaire avait été utile à l'époque où des poitrines devaient être opposées à d'autres poitrines. Alors qu'à présent les armes récentes, lance-projectiles à détonateurs téléguidés, blindés amphibies évoluant en atmosphère contaminée, ne peuvent plus être confiées à des amateurs (FG 42).

In some ways, this is an inversion of the relationship between expertise and technology in civilian life: while, increasingly, we no longer need to be experts to operate complex technology which provides a clear user-interface we can understand, in other areas – such as the military – the technology has become so complex that it can only be operated by experts. Similarly, though, the human body has been superseded by technology: in the past, war involved human bodies facing with other human bodies ('poitrines […] opposées à d'autres

[19] The text itself, as we will discuss later, also makes no distinction between what stories are 'true' and what is fiction within the text.

poitrines'), while the technologically-equipped army can, theoretically, attack from a distance without ever having to put 'boots on the ground'. Anxieties about what has been called 'push-button warfare' have been discussed by many journalists and scholars (including Baudrillard and Virilio);[20] there are certainly specific ethical issues at stake in having an increasingly blurry line (for the operators of such equipment) between the real and the virtual when the impact will be very much grounded in the real world. A double blurring of the divide between fiction and reality can be seen in the way that the commands for these high-tech weapons systems come increasingly to resemble video games, which in turn resemble elements of the science fiction of previous decades: take, for example, Michael W. Fowler's account of the way in which US generals, while working on a (since scrapped) project for new command technology, referred to the 1985 science fiction novel *Ender's Game.*[21]

Some of the microfictions of Pireyre's *Féerie générale* therefore touch upon the ways in which new technologies have irrevocably altered the way that we – citizens of a globalised world with access to internet-enabled technology – interact with the world around us, and the ways in which we negotiate diverse situations, from personal relationships to military power. And while some of Pireyre's narratives (in particular those about dating sites or PowerPoint presentations) may initially seem banal, these elements still raise wider questions about the effect of new technologies and vectors of communication on our societies. What are the new ways of interacting with one another online, and the new boundaries and social codes being shaped by, but also generating, the habits of users? In an article entitled 'In the Habitus of the New: Structure, Agency, and the Social Media Habitus', Zizi Papacharissi and Emily Easton explore how Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus* might be applied to the world of social media:

> The habitus is perhaps one of Bourdieu's most popular ideas, developed to overcome a number of binary divisions in the social sciences and, in particular, to address the duality of structure and agency. In explicating this relationship, Giddens underscored that ''social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution''.[22]

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[20] Rachel Plotnick provides a thorough overview and analysis of the press' response to the idea of 'Push-Button Warfare' in the following article: Rachel Plotnick, 'Predicting push-button warfare: US print media and conflict from a distance, 1945–2010', *Media, Culture & Society*, 34 (2012), 655-72.

[21] Michael W. Fowler, 'The Air Force's Predictive Battlespace Awareness: The Siren Song of Ender's Game', *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 29 (2016), 98-109. For the original science fiction novel see Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game* (New York: Tor Books, 1985).

[22] Zizi Papacharissi and Emily Easton, 'In the Habitus of the New', in *A Companion to New Media Dynamics*, ed. by John Hartley, Jean Burgess, and Axel Bruns (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwelll, 2013), pp. 171-84 (p. 171). They

While Papacharissi and Easton's article focuses principally on the implications of viewing social media habits through the lens of the *habitus*, their ideas could be applied more generally to the kind of social structures created through 'internet life'.[23] The user-driven nature of the internet suggests that the codes of social conduct would be impossible to enforce, but it would seem that social behaviours are, as in 'real life', shaped by the (in this case virtual) environments one finds oneself in – environments which are themselves altered by the behaviours of their members: 'In mediated architectures of everyday sociality, such as those presented by social network sites, social beings' behaviors emerge out of the social context they find themselves in'.[24] These new markers of the development of social relationships – the need to move from text to audio exchange, from the virtual to 'real life', represent new (or, rather, altered) paradigms for social interactions. If we apply Easton & Papacharissi's idea of a social media *habitus* to other digital environments – hacker collectives, chatrooms, dating sites, etc. – we see that they develop their own social codes and hierarchies and even their own dialects.

This is exemplified by the story of Batoule's website. Batoule is another character who has 'met' the narrator ('je [la] croisais de temps en temps car elle était la fille d'une de mes anciennes camarades d'université' (FG 146)). In the chapter entitled 'Friedrich Nietzsche est-il halal?' there is a subsection called 'Fanfiction & Storytelling'. Batoule runs a website organised into two parts: a fanfiction site and a forum. Both parts of the site represent a shake-up of 'real life' structures of literary, cultural and social authority: in the fanfiction site, Batoule and her friends write stories using characters from published works (e.g. *Harry Potter*); in the other part Batoule positions herself as an authority on matters of morality and Islam. While the latter is very clearly a shake-up of authority and hierarchy, the former relates back again to questions of storytelling and narrative and the ways in which technology has changed them. Before the internet (and particularly the blog and the fanfiction site) the creation of characters was unilateral – a reader might be able to write about those characters in an informal way, but was unlikely to get the kind of readership offered by the most popular fanfiction sites today. The text can take on a life of its own, being written and re-written by large communities of

cite Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 121.

[23] By this I mean all forms of website, forum and application that allows an exchange between users or has users as content creators, and where a user might construct, over time, an identity based on these exchanges and on the nature of the content they have created or shared.

[24] Papacharissi and Easton, p. 172.

fans, often to the extent that the amount of fan-generated material far exceeds the length of the original text.

However, despite their rejection of modes of control, the site's creators and its users have clearly generated and observe a new hierarchy and clear 'work' structure (taken to extremes by Pireyre): the many categories and subcategories of fan fiction that users employ to classify their work is just one example. There is also a clear disruption of authority in the way that anyone can become a figure of authority on the Internet by creating a website and applying their own rules. For example, on the part of the site where Batoule gives her advice:

> […] le débat n'était pas équilibre, Batoule dominait largement. D'abord c'était son site; et puis elle était si sage et mastoura, que les sœurs étaient impressionnées, il était difficile de lutter. Aucun problème d'ailleurs, tout le monde s'arrangeait très bien de cette situation, car beaucoup de filles préfèrent questionner, quand Batoule, par-dessus tout, aimait répondre (FG 145).

The teenager's advice does lead to a few comical turns ('A propos de la mode, Batoule avait l'habitude de rappeler qu'Allah ne nous a jamais demandé de nous habiller comme des sacs' (FG 145)) but the more serious issue of the 'democratising' power of the internet – and the abundance of information and authority figures available – is quite clear. While Batoule's site is a harmless example of the phenomenon, the over-abundance of information (and mis-information) available on the Internet means that one can simply pick and choose figures of authority based on what one would like to hear – without ever being sure who that authority figure is in 'real life'. As Laurent Demanze writes:

> L'ère numérique compose en effet un nouveau partage des savoirs, qui tourne le dos à l'autorité des spécialistes et au cloisonnement des champs, pour élaborer un espace collectif de connaissance: Internet est l'espace privilégié de reliaison des savoirs, selon une pratique collective d'échanges et de conseils, comme Emmanuelle Pireyre le met régulièrement en scène.[25]

This breakdown of the old social markers signifying authority on a particular subject can be seen as parallel to the breakdown and re-generation of other structures: those of romantic

[25] Laurent Demanze, 'Les encyclopédies farcesques d'Emmanuelle Pireyre', *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 324 (2016), 105-18 (pp. 4-5).

relationships, for example, as seen through Mirem, or the overarching breakdown of the line between the virtual and the real.

This question of authority and information is another of the technological anxieties at play in Pireyre's *Féerie générale*, This anxiety is also rooted in the fact that while these technologies carry 'user-friendly' interfaces which allow the non-expert user to interact with them, only a relatively small fraction of the population understands the inner workings of these devices and the way that they may bias the information presented, fail to work properly, or be manipulated for nefarious ends. This notion of the naïve user of information technology also appears in *Féerie générale* in the form of an episode during which the narrator, presented as an author-figure,[26] enlists the help of Sven Tikkanen the academic, hacker, and, as it turns out, internet 'troll', while preparing a PowerPoint document for her poetry reading (FG 116), which coincides with the real-life author's literary activities. The narrator laments that her PowerPoint presentations are unprofessional: 'Il m'est arrivé de ne pas être suffisamment professionnelle avec mes PowerPoint et j'aimerais que cela ne se reproduise plus' (FG 115). Tikkanen will take care of the technical and computational side of the PowerPoint presentation ('se chargera des opérations informatiques et techniques') in order to help her achieve what she wants from the software: 'je désire de bons PowerPoint, des photos choisies avec soin, des vidéos bien coupées et projetées au bon format' (FG 114). This concern about professionalism foreshadows the comic episode during which, presumably thanks to Tikkanen, she displays a foul-mouthed tirade to her poetry reading audience (FG 140-1).

There is an imbalance of power here that becomes more and more obvious as this episode unfolds: feeling overwhelmed by technology (and what is, to 'digital native' readers, at least, a simple and user-friendly program)[27] the narrator turns to the young expert. His advice goes from the bizarrely sombre 'on doit toujours chercher à faire des bon PowerPoint' to the (seemingly) ridiculous: 'Les forces américaines en Afghanistan pâtissent en ce moment même de présentations PowerPoint trop lourdes, scolaires, qui plombent les gradés et neutralisent l'armée' (FG 115). Ironically, this brief episode about the US Army's PowerPoint presentations is actually an event which took place in the real world, and which drew concerns that

[26] The narrator is female, an author and poet, is called 'Emmanuelle' and intervenes every so often in a text generally made up of third-person mini-narratives.
[27] Mark Prensky coined the terms 'digital native' and 'digital immigrant', which are used to describe, respectively, the generations who grew up using digital technology and those who had to learn to use it as adults. Marc Prensky, 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants', in *From Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom: Hopeful Essays for 21st Century Learning*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2012), pp. 67-85.

PowerPoint is actually making us collectively less intelligent,[28] a sentiment that has been echoed by the press for some time since.[29] The PowerPoint has become synonymous with information overload and a stultified, disengaged audience. In James Gleick's *The Information*, the PowerPoint presentation is listed as one of the manifestations of our information overload:

> As the role of information grows beyond anyone's reckoning, it grows to be too much. 'TMI,' people now say. We have information fatigue, anxiety and glut. We have met the Devil of Information Overload and his impish underlings, the computer virus, the busy signal, the dead link, and the PowerPoint presentation.[30]

Perhaps the double irony of this episode is that the offending presentations do actually try to reflect something of the complicated nature of the realities of war, but the nature of the program is to bullet-point and simplify, and attempting to represent the kind of complex information – with the intricate relationships between tribal leaders, the narcotics trade, and the coalition – the army requires in this case leads to a ridiculous result:

> Un jour, on projeta au général McChrystal un schéma exhaustif de la situation afghane où des quantités de données – population afghane, pouvoirs tribaux, narcotrafic, infrastructures américaines, priorités de la coalition nationale, etc. – étaient symbolisées par des centaines de flèches rouges, vertes et bleues allant dans tous les sens. 'Quand nous aurons compris ce schéma, nous aurons gagné la guerre', commenta le général McChrystal d'un ton acide qui fit rire l'assemblée (FG 115).

The fact that both the general and the audience reject (with derision) the PowerPoint which attempts to show the reality of the Afghan war suggests that PowerPoint presentation, in many cases, is often used to attempt to simplify information which cannot and should not be represented in a 'bullet-point', easy-to-understand format, because the underlying concepts are too complex. This episode is important for two reasons: firstly, because Pireyre engages directly with the ways in which we (mis)use technology in order to try and manage what Gleick calls an 'information fatigue, anxiety and glut', and the ways in which our information societies

[28] Elisabeth Bumiller, 'We Have Met the Enemy and He Is PowerPoint', *New York Times*, 27 April 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/27/world/27powerpoint.html?_r=0> [Accessed 10/06/2016].
[29] See, for example, in the context of Higher Education: Andrew Smith, 'How PowerPoint is killing critical thinking', *Guardian*, 23 September 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/23/powerpoint-thought-students-bullet-points-information> [Accessed 02/02/2016].
[30] Gleick, p. 11.

fail to manage the flow of information or relinquish control to third parties,[31] despite our technological capabilities for processing and archiving data.

Emmanuelle Pireyre therefore touches upon some of the major cultural and societal changes that the arrival of the Internet and its generalised use precipitated; such changes constitute part of the epochal shift at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Notably, *Féerie générale* reflects the notion that the technology that is omnipresent in our lives can only be created and understood fully by experts while, conversely, anyone can set up online groups and become an authority figure. These machines have revolutionised everything from our social lives to our military operations but Pireyre ultimately shows these improvements to be a source of dislocation and anxiety: new vulnerabilities in advanced systems see innocent people exploited, harassed and robbed; war no longer takes place with armies facing one another but through the mediation of the screen; potential lovers spin stories on the internet without ever meeting in person; and violent fantasists see their desires indulged until they spill out from the virtual into the real.

Getting lost: Lenoir and the failures of technology

Published between the early 1990s and 2015, Lenoir's novels span the period which saw the rise of personal computing, mobile telecommunication and the Internet. Information technology, then, seems unlikely to be as pervasive in the diegesis as in Pireyre's later work. However, certain anxieties about technology can nonetheless be identified in her works, and especially in the later texts. It is interesting that despite the apparent goals of many of the new technological devices which feature in Lenoir's works (mobile telephones and computers) to orient, connect and inform, the characters spend a lot of their time lost and disoriented. This paradoxical situation is reminiscent of Peter Boxall's analysis of the experience of living in the technology-dominated twenty-first century. He writes:

> In the early years of the twenty-first century, many of the senses by which we orient ourselves have failed, or seemed to fail, leaving us uncertain both of our whereabouts, and of our heading. […] With the advent of global positioning systems and mobile phones and radio clocks it seems increasingly difficult to imagine getting lost; but it is partly the development of a new technological regime for the production of global time

[31] Examples would be the way that news applications, social media sites and advertising software suggest what they think people want to hear or read based on their previous online behaviour and purchasing history, among other data points.

> and space that has led to this disorientation, this apprehension of a new time in which it is impossible to find one's bearings.[32]

Despite mobile phones and email being easy, cheap methods of communication even across the globe, Lenoir's characters often behave in a way – or inadvertently find themselves in situations – which could be interpreted as a rejection of this constant interconnectedness: switching off their telephones, deleting voicemail messages left for others or only communicating unilaterally via email. In some of Lenoir's texts these communication technologies are either unavailable (e.g. in *La Folie Silaz*) or rejected, as in *La Crue de juillet*, where the protagonist turns off her phone so that neither her local contact nor her boss can get in touch with her. Often, the human messenger becomes the sole viable means of communication.

Since Lenoir's texts span the greatest amount of chronological time of the three authors studied here, and that this time period – two decades from the mid-nineties until the time of writing – covered the rise and permeation into the public consciousness of Web 2.0, smartphones and any number of other 'smart' devices, it is interesting to note that some of the anxieties about technology displayed in her texts exist even in those that predate the rise of ubiquitous personal computing. One of the earlier texts in Lenoir's œuvre *Elle va partir*, published in 1996, engages already with the pervasiveness of technology, here television, and the shaping of our individual thoughts. Geneviève Camelin, the elderly woman (she is often referred to simply as 'la vieille dame') hanging between life and death throughout the entirety of the text, does not appear directly in the narrative but her interactions with other characters are recounted as the text is focalised through her young neighbour, Mattis. Mme Camelin's obsession with television can be seen in the way that she repeats the contents of television programmes to her son (only ever described as 'Camelin'):

> Ils devraient venir faire un tour ici, les gens de la télévision, parce qu'ils ont montré là-dessus des choses, l'autre jour. Oh, c'était une bien triste histoire… Camelin: Mais oui, mais oui, je l'ai vue aussi, cette émission. Pas la peine que tu me la racontes (EP 23).

[32] Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction*: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 19.

She also links many topics of conversation back to what she has seen on television,[33] often summarising the topic in a way that suggests that she has not completely grasped the subject at hand. For example, she discusses how the younger generation are becoming less and less influenced by religion:

> […] si déjà ils ne croient plus au Bon Dieu à cet âge-là, ils l'ont dit d'ailleurs à la télévision, j'ai vu une émission très intéressante sur les enfants qui ne veulent plus aller au catéchisme et les parents ne le savent même pas parce qu'ils travaillent […] (EP 25).

There is a certain degree of irony here, of course, because the influence of religion in her own life appears to have been surpassed by that of the television. It is also unlikely that this was entirely the subject of the television programme, suggesting that her understanding of the programmes she watches or her memory of them is not entirely reliable. There are many other instances where her apparent confusion or memory loss is somehow linked to the television ('mais où est donc ma télécommande?' (EP 68)), and it seems to be implied that while watching the television has becoming a form of escape for her – it is described as a 'paradis' – her constant use of it is linked to her deteriorating mental health. For example, the following description of her watching the television shows her to be immobile, mouth agape, staring blankly at the screen: 'elle regardait l'écran bleu-mauve, l'œil fixe, la bouche ouverte, la mâchoire inférieure mobile, ce qui lui donnait l'air maussade et idiot' (EP 68). She also imagines seeing people she knows on television as her speech becomes more confused. Mattis recalls an episode where she believed she had seen the local baker on the television ('[…] quand elle a prétendu avoir vu la boulangère à la télévision ou lorsqu'elle a remué sa vieille marmelade pour mettre élégamment fin à un discours de plus en plus confus' (EP 86)).

What is perhaps most telling, however, is the way that television comes to mix with – and influence – Geneviève Camelin's reality. She describes her decision to not be resuscitated on her deathbed as being influenced by what she has seen on television: '– Qu'on me laisse mourir, vous comprenez, qu'on me laisse tranquille à l'âge que j'ai, qu'on n'essaie pas de me faire durer comme à la télévision' (EP 37). Her decisions in 'real life' are therefore affected by what she sees (presumably a mix of fact and fiction) on television, and her views shaped by the documentaries she takes as gospel (she does not believe the story of the stone crucifix being

[33] Two further examples: here, talking about Mme Petersen to Mattis: 'Est-ce qu'une fois elle n'avait pas pris un éclair aussi pour vous? C'est quand même gentil, et à la télévision…' (EP 88); and on the subject of premature babies: ' – Oh mais moi je change de chaîne quand on nous montre des choses comme ça!' (EP 57).

'swallowed up' by the tree leaving only the face of Christ visible, because 'la pierre était bien plus résistante que le bois, c'était une chose qu'on savait depuis des générations, qu'on répétait tous les jours à la télévision' (EP 129)). Mattis recalls telling her a story about seeing a young boy being beaten up by other youths, and she responds: ' – […] Mais comment se fait-il que je ne l'ai pas vu? C'était à quelle heure?', thinking that this was something that happened in a television programme. When Mattis clarifies that this was in real life, not on television ('Ce n'était pas à la télévision. C'était au square, en vrai. En vrai.' (EP 60)), she reponds: 'Ah bon, c'est pour ça alors, vous étiez obligé de voir. C'est quand même bien pratique, la télécommande […]' (EP 60). As in Pireyre's *Féerie générale*, the lines between the real and the virtual have become blurred for Mme Camelin, with the resulting confusion adding, it would seem, to her deteriorating memory. Mme Camelin begins to view the virtual as preferable to the real – interacting with the world only through a screen gives the opportunity for us to switch off from what we do not want to see.

This notion of television as escape is reinforced later when the narrative – focalised through Mattis – becomes more and more confused later in the text as he becomes more and more irate and anxious, he also turns to the comforts of television, using it as a reference point for what happens following a real death at the hospital in anticipation of Mme Camelin's impending death: 'Je veux bien voir la vielle dame dix ou deux heures après, tout seul, à la morgue de l'hôpital, comme je les ai vus faire à la télé […]' (EP 152). A breakdown in normal syntax signals that Mattis' thoughts are becoming increasingly erratic, and he tries to use the television set and his Walkman to calm himself:

> Essaya de se concentrer sur une série policière en mangeant de la crème de marrons, trois cuillères, écœurement, puis, sans éteindre la télévision, s'allongea sur son lit, les épaules contre le mur, prit son walkman, du blues, ferma un moment les yeux, agité… (EP 153).

This 'doubling up' of the television and the Walkman to distract his mind continues over the following pages: 'posant le walkman sur la table de nuit, d'ailleurs il n'écoutait même pas, repris par le zinzin des dialogues de la télévision sur fond d'orchestre doucereux […]' (EP 154), until eventually he sits down in front of the television and begins switching channels rapidly from one thing to the next, the narrative following his perception, listing each of the images he sees:

> Retourna s'asseoir devant la télévision sans remettre le son. La grange brûle. Joe traverse les flammes pour aller détacher les chevaux terrorisés, fous. Zappa. Guerre, sang, larmes, maisons effondrées. Zappa. Un couple au restaurant, la quarantaine friquée, manège de séduction plaisante. Pub pour, on ne sait pas: chinoiseries, laquais, perruques poudrées, falbalas. Zappa. Un gros homme assis qui ne veut pas qu'on le reconnaisse [etc.] (EP 161).

These fragments of what he witnesses on television – a kind of 'narrative of perception' reminiscent of the tricks of 'littérature objective' –[34] engages with the ways in which we perceive what is presented to us on television. While its presence in the narrative is pervasive and it is described in generally positive terms by the characters who use it, the television seems to present only an opportunity for increased isolation and disconnect from the 'real' and from the other characters within the text.

La Folie Silaz, while on the surface concerned solely with a family drama, touches upon this intermingling of the real and the virtual as well as the anxiety of being 'disconnected' in a hyper-connected world. The textual space is dominated by Georges Silaz and the possibility of him making contact despite his absence. The text itself begins with an ending – the death of Odette Silaz. Georges Silaz is her son, and he is omnipresent in the minds of the two characters through whom the essentially third-person narrative is focalised (chiefly Carine, his former lover and mother of his now 20-year-old son, Do, and his sister Muriel), yet entirely physically absent from the diegesis. Having left the country some time before the narrative takes place to join Zapatista groups in Chiapas, Georges' past (and, indeed, present) can only be reconstructed by the reader through the unreliable memories of Carine, whose obsession with her former lover despite the façade of a happy new family and life (she has married Jean-Luc and has two children with him) keeps her anchored in the past. The power that Georges Silaz exerts over the others – and his near-omnipresence in the narrative despite never actually appearing in the diegesis – may stem partly from his control over the means of communication available to them. He is always the one to initiate contact, and can 'disappear' despite all of the communication devices available. His absence therefore appears in the text through the obsessions of other characters, and this often takes the form of obsessive monitoring of electronic means of communication. Carine waits desperately for a phone call from him, during

[34] As defined in Barthes' eponymous essay: Roland Barthes, 'Littérature Objective', in *Essais Critiques*, (Paris: Seuil, 1964), pp. 32-43.

one episode even slapping and kicking her young son in order to wrench the telephone from him (FS 154-5), while every day Jean-Luc scans a website listing Zapatistas and their supporters killed in the armed struggle in order to see if Georges' name appears (FS 219).

Both Jean-Luc and Carine's monitoring of their communication devices does little to help them or other characters, however, as the text is punctuated by the absence of communication and by missed messages. There are several metadiegetic episodes which see the characters in situations where they are removed from all communication devices and have to rely on human messengers or letters. For example, at one point the text follows Carine's memory of a summer holiday in the Basque country. The holiday is organised by Odette, Georges' mother, and Carine (already estranged from Georges) and Do are also present. Georges is supposed to join them on a certain date, but the rental house does not have a phone – 'en cas de contretemps il promettait de les prévenir en appelant la propriétaire' (FS 153). The protagonist has to rely on an intermediary human messenger to deliver information which they will undoubtedly receive some time too late. Georges benefits from one-way communication and does not give them any way of contacting him ('la communication à sens unique comme d'habitude, car il n'avait évidemment aucun numéro à leur donner, même pas une adresse, une poste restante' (FS 153)). Similarly, when George's sister Muriel goes to Chiapas to see her brother; her long-prepared visit is called off after her arrival: Georges 'a fait savoir qu'il restait à Oaxaca' due to a dangerous mission requiring international observers to accompany witnesses, but presumably Muriel finds out some time later as the information is once again transmitted by human messengers: '[c]e sont deux jeunes Allemands récemment engagés volontaires qui [lui] ont transmis la nouvelle'. In the present of the diegesis, Silaz is again all but cut off from all means of communication in Chiapas, apart from when he chooses to make contact – he sends chain emails to acquaintances about the Zapatistas and the horror of the repression under the code name Ruben. Muriel describes his trips back from Oaxaca to San Cristobal as a return to civilisation, due to the availability of Internet, telephone and mobile phone reception listed, services which seem to be considered as signs of civilised life on the same level as a real bed and varied diet ('le confort d'un vrai lit, d'une nourriture un peu plus variée et d'un retour au "monde" (Internet, téléphones et portables qui marchent)' (FS 205).

The message recounting the episode of Muriel waiting for Georges in San Cristobel – an email from Muriel which is addressed to Carine but opened by her husband, Jean-Luc – also arrives too late for its recipient. In the email, Muriel recounts how, despite not seeing him in person, she has managed to get Georges to complete the necessary paperwork to divide the

family inheritance following the death of Odette (FS 208). In the meantime, however, Carine's son Do has been sectioned and sent to a psychiatric hospital, and Carine only finds out through an elderly neighbour ('une des vieilles de la rue' (FS 213)) – once again, technology fails to deliver and the message ends up being carried by a human messenger. The reader can infer that the version of the facts recounted by the 'vieille' involved Muriel arranging for Do to be sectioned in order to deny him part of the inheritance. The reader does not learn what this (mis)information actually is (the text only describes how 'Carine l'écoutait sans oser l'interrompre' (FS 181)) in the spirit of 'missed messages', the reader will only find out at the end of the text, through Jean-Luc's email to Carine. Carine's attempted suicide, which leaves her in a coma for six days (and, it is implied, suffering permanent brain damage), is recounted by Jean-Luc in his reply to Muriel.

According to Jean-Luc's version of events, Carine's mental state had begun to unravel, and she began to believe her own daughters – aged 11 and 12 – to be 'depuis longtemps de mèche avec [Muriel]' (FS 215). She believed this betrayal to be taking place 'par Internet interposé' a method of communication she did not understand, having never learned how to use a computer (FS 215). Even though Carine's use of the computer is limited to checking emails, she is convinced that her exclusion from the digital world means being 'out of the loop' and risking being misinformed. The anxiety of being disconnected in a hyperconnected world drives Carine's madness, and, like the narrator in Pireyre's *Féerie générale,* being excluded from the knowledge of how to use technology means that Carine is open to manipulation. Carine wonders why everyone – even 'anciennes connaissances' (FS 215) – receive Silaz's spam emails, leading to an outburst of emotion and confusion when she finds out that Muriel, too, has been receiving them:

> Le visage dans ses mains et les coudes sur la table, elle rit, au bord des larmes. Les spams… Ruben ou autre chose… on les repère toujours… mais comment?... et pourquoi moi qui regarde tous les soirs dans ma boîte, […] moi qui attends et guette depuis…? (FS 124)

The reader therefore learns, retrospectively, that Carine has been obsessively checking her inbox for the chain emails sent by Georges. Despite identifying them – as do other characters – as 'spam', she has been checking her emails every night. This compulsive checking for emails that are nothing but a nuisance (it is clear from the narrative that Carine cares very little for the plight of the Zapatistas) suggests that Carine seeks some kind of contact with Georges – even

if it is a general digital message, and even though she is but one name on a long list of addressees. And while Carine's paranoia appears initially to be the result of a fatal personality flaw combined with the anxieties one might rightfully have about new information technologies, someone *has*, ironically, been tampering with her electronic messages: it emerges much later in the text that Jean-Luc was deleting 'Ruben's' messages from the shared family inbox in order to prevent her reading them:

> Jusqu'à Noël dernier, je les effaçais aussitôt. Je n'en ai jamais parlé à Carine qui ne me parlait jamais de Silaz. […] [J]'ai decidé de mettre fin à ce jeu pénible et de courir le risque qu'elle les lise, c'est-à-dire affronter entre autres l'abominable 'chers amis' que vous connaissez désormais (FS 219).

It is telling, I think, that these two characters – the protagonist Carine and her husband Jean-Luc –, are described by the latter as having never talked about Silaz, since most of the content of the text, from the title itself to the very email that Jean-Luc is writing, centres around Silaz and his exploits. While Carine watches the telephone and the computer obsessively for communication with Silaz, she fails to communicate at all with Jean-Luc or adequately with Muriel. The final lines of *La Folie Silaz* hint at the idea that the inadequacy – whether through 'missed messages' or wilful manipulation – of the main vectors of communication used between the characters in the text are also keenly felt by Jean-Luc (whose voice only ever appears in this final email):

> Grâce à votre lettre, je vais enfin pouvoir supprimer cette adresse [e-mail] que j'utilise pour la dernière fois ce soir en vous priant de passer dorénavant par la première des deux figurants ci-dessous, à moins que nous puissions plutôt la prochaine fois peut-être nous parler de vive voix…? (FS 220)

Jean-Luc's desire to abandon the electronic and return to more direct, face-to-face communication perhaps sums up the underlying current of the whole text. While similar manipulations of technology take place in other texts (e.g. protagonist Thérèse going 'off the grid' by turning off her phone in *La Crue de juillet*, or character Gilles Harper deleting his sister's voicemail messages in *Tilleul*),[35] *La Folie Silaz* engages to the greatest extent with concerns about the effects of these new methods of communication on human interaction.

[35] Hélène Lenoir, *Tilleul* (Paris: Grasset, 2015). Hereafter referred to using abbreviation 'T'.

Another, more minor, character highlights a similarly disconcerting effect of the new technologies available to us. Georges' and Carine's son, Do, becomes a recluse and gains weight to the point of morbid obesity before eventually being sectioned and hospitalised towards the end of the narrative. Much like Mme Camelin who watches television obsessively in *Elle va partir,* and the figure of the Otaku discussed in Pireyre's *Féerie générale* who has a 'rapport privilegié avec son écran […] d'ordinateur', Do has an obsessive interest in his computer and the instant gratification that it provides. He binges on the constant stimulation of the screen and the video game in the same way he binges on food, to the point where he is unable to hold a conversation. When Carine, through whom, in this part of the text, the narrative is focalised, speaks to him on the telephone, he cannot concentrate on the conversation:

> – Qu'est-ce que tu fais, là? … je t'entends cliquer sur ta souris ou tapoter sur ton clavier…
>
> – Oui, je cherchais un truc (FS 149).

While there is nothing particularly unusual about this obsessive interest in his computer or the 'small screen' in general (Marc Prensky asserts that today's average university graduate has spent 10,000 hours playing video games and 20,000 hours watching TV),[36] Carine's analysis of the situation suggests that Do's obsessive video-gaming stems from a desire to escape the real and stay in the virtual, much like Mirem's 'Brian75' in Pireyre's *Féerie générale:*

> Cela signifiait qu'il devait jouer, qu'il était donc assis face à l'écran de son ordinateur et ne le quittait pas des yeux, ne risquait pas de regarder le mur, absorbé par la bataille que menait son espèce d'alter ego à ses ordres, un héros portant son nom et fabriqué à la ressemblance de tout ce qu'il n'était pas, d'après ce qu'il lui avait longuement et doctement expliqué un dimanche soir – absorbé donc par le décompte des points marqués à chaque victoire, toutes les dix secondes à peu près, la partie excitante et facile (FS 149).

Unable to take his eyes away from the screen, Do's alternative, digital life has become preferable to the real, physical world; his retreat from the real into the virtual is reminiscent of the character of Mme Camelin and her television in Lenoir's *Elle va partir*. And as in Pireyre's dating site scenario, Do's enormous body has become an obstacle, while his mind envelops itself in a world where he can move freely, with no constraints. This world becomes an object

[36] Prensky, p. 67.

of obsession to the point that it has crossed over and dominates real life – as he explains the workings of the game at length to someone who (we can infer from 'longuement et doctement') is clearly uninterested. In parallel with his binge-eating, his gaming has something of the compulsive about it – watching the points go up in a matter of seconds, the game always easy and exciting enough for maximum gratification. The video game offers a seductive alternative to other forms of entertainment which would require human interaction or prolonged concentration.

Nicholas Carr writes about the internet that it 'turns us into lab rats constantly pressing levers to get tiny pellets of social or intellectual nourishment',[37] an assertion which resonates with the depictions of various information technologies in Lenoir's texts. While Carine checks desperately for emails from Georges, Do's compulsive need for both figurative and literal nourishment leads to his binge-eating and obsessive gaming. Mme Camelin watches so much television that she begins to take on the view of the spectator in real life, while Mattis, in the grips of insomnia, flicks compulsively through telelvision channels. Communication technology often fails, leaving the protagonists reliant on the original form of communication: the human messenger with an oral message. Lenoir therefore also engages to a considerable extent with the ubiquity of information technologies in our daily lives, and the ways in which that ubiquity has altered the parameters of human interaction and experience.

The screen in Montalbetti

While Montalbetti engages to a much lesser degree with the questions surrounding information technology than, for example, Pireyre, her texts do show to an extent the changes brought about by the presence of new information technologies in our lives. In particular, Montalbetti's narratives engage with the presence of the screen and the recording device. Across several of Montalbetti's texts, the physical or imagined presence of screens influences the narrative, on the narratorial or the diegetic level. Put another way, this means that both protagonists and narrator appear to use the language of television or cinema in their interpretations of various 'real' (on the diegetic level) events; it also means that that audiovisual recordings – real or anticipated – play a role in the narrative and in the characters' fictional experiences and decisions. Montalbetti's 2016 novel *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses* presents a fictionalised account of the final NASA space shuttle launch in 2011; it is therefore expected

[37] Carr, p. 117.

that the text will be concerned with cutting-edge technologies. But aside from the expected screens in the text, for example descriptions of those present in the control room (VF 106), there are many instances where the narrative lingers over the use of cameras and other recording devices.

This physical presence of screens and recording devices on the diegetic level often signals a change in (the characters' perception of) the event: the characters in question anticipate the recording of the event, thereby changing their experience of the event itself. This is one of the ways, of course, in which technology has altered our conception of time in general – we are increasingly oriented towards the future, anticipating looking back on the present as a historical moment. As Mark Currie writes:

> It is easy to make the case that the contemporary world has enhanced a basic human faculty, the anticipation of retrospection, with an enormous technological apparatus of archiving machines, which contribute to a sense that the contemporary world increasingly experiences the present, both personally and collectively, as the object of a future memory.[38]

During the shuttle launch in Montalbetti's novel, for example, a child is depicted as filming the event, but her father quickly removes the camera from her in order to better capture the moment: '[…] on n'est pas sûr de leurs talents de photographes, et le père prend le téléphone de la plus jeune […] pour le brandir à son tour' (VF 98). Similarly, the man whose job it is to open the car door for the astronauts alters his behaviour in anticipation of the moment being recorded:

> Et c'est comme s'il était tout entier occupé à se gommer de l'image. Les caméras captent sa silhouette en arrière-plan, mais il sait qu'il n'est pas la vedette, et il reste en retrait, travaillant à se rendre invisible (VFT 56-7).

In this way, Montalbetti's characters appear to behave in anticipation of the future image: a nod to the altered perception of and interaction with reality brought about by the omnipresence of screens and recording devices in the twenty-first century. And this dominance of the screen can also be seen on the narratorial level: during a self-reflexive episode where the narrator (seemingly a double of the author) reflects upon her research for the novel, she

[38] Mark Currie, 'The Novel and the Moving Now', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 42 (2009), 318-25 (p. 322).

suggests that the nature of the episode depicted in the novel meant that she had a plethora of televisual, photographic and audio material on the subject of the launch.

> Je me retrouvais avec un matériel inouï, […] des dizaines de vidéos amateurs filmant le lancement, généralement maladroites, tremblées, des centaines d'images, fixes ou en mouvement, de la salle de lancement […] des milliers d'images de l'entraînement de nos quatre astronautes […] (VF 267).

Whether it is the poorly-filmed amateur clips ('bouts de films mal cadrés des spectateurs' (VF 267)) or television interviews with those involved (VF 268), it seems that the vast majority of information available to the author-narrator came in the form of audio-visual material. There are other indications that the author-narrator used this material to develop the text – for example when talking about one of the astronaut's mothers, she notes that the 'internet est plein de documents qui conservent la mémoire de sa voix joyeuse' (VF 61). It is implied that viewing or listening to these materials – and the recordings in particular – takes a considerable amount of time – a length of time that dwarfs that of the launch itself which, as the text demonstrates and as will be demonstrated in the following chapter, takes place relatively quickly compared to the slow, anticipatory build-up to the event.

The narrative itself betrays a clear focus on the screen and the camera: a reflection, perhaps, of the source material that inspired it. With the author-narrator informing herself through hours of audio-visual material, the narrative is inherently interested in the production of that material. The narrator describes the hundreds of cameras set up at the Media Center Viewing Site ('ce sont là des centaines de trépieds qui supportent caméras et appareils photos' (VF 67)). The astronauts and team themselves are also obsessed with taking photographs and filming ('Tant qu'on est là, on la filme' (VF 75)), as the narrator depicts the production of the images she credits with inspiring the novel. The obsession with filming also extends to the crowds ('ceux qui ont les mains libres applaudissent, d'autres brandissent leur appareil photo ou leur portable vers la fumée blanche […]' (VF 97)). Another amateur cameraman appears as the narrator describes the surrounding area during the takeoff: 'Sur la Causeway, approchons-nous d'un particulier, posté au premier rang devant le lagon (une place de choix), qui filme la navette au-dessus du flot rapide dans un tremblé qui signe le vidéo amateur' (VF 99). Even the crowds' reactions are being filmed: 'Décidément, les contrechamps font fureur […]' (VF 100). And much like these reverse angle shots, the narrator turns the camera back to those who are generating the very images by which the novel was inspired. This reflexivity highlights the

ways in which events – and particularly historical events – are altered by the presence of the recording device and the generating of images for future reference.

In another of Montalbetti's texts *Love Hotel*, we might observe a similar, though less pronounced, penchant for observing the world (as if) through screens. [39] Again, this begins on the narratorial level: the narrator of *Love Hotel* is an author, and details of his writing emerge throughout the text. We know this narrator, like the author-narrator of *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses* writes using a computer, suggesting that the entire story relayed to the reader is first mediated through a screen (VF 267, LH 69). The cinema and computer screen seem to be quite a preoccupation for him: for example, he is thinking about cinema ('je m'agenouille comme je le peux sur mon coussin en me racontant des histoires de films d'Ozu' (LH 40)) and then, in the following sentence, imagines the hatch of a Kyoto restaurant to be a 16:9 ratio cinema screen: 'Dans l'encadrement en format cinema seize-neuvièmes, la silhouette du restaurateur se perd dans les vapeurs de sa cuisine […]' (LH 40).

The narrator's use of cinematic terms to describe the events on the diegetic and narratorial level is certainly not limited to this text, but one might note the way in which these screen metaphors are incorporated into the narrative in this first-person text, suggesting that the protagonist's perception of reality is shaped by his viewing of (cinematic) fiction. A similar use of cinema as a recurring motif is present in *Journée américaine*.[40] One character, Keith, did a PhD on the subject of actors who die during filming and the methods used to address this in the final cut (JA 26); the narrator – this time a female author-figure – muses on this subject for some time and therefore includes the discussion of cinematic perspective within the narrative (discussing for example how 'des amateurs de gros plans étaient obligés d'utiliser des plans larges pour aller filmer tout au fond du plan une silhouette qui ressemblait à celle de l'acteur' (JA 27)). In this text, as in *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses*, the use of recording devices alters the characters' perceptions of real events – even those that they have directly experienced. One character's memories of a wedding have been overwritten by the images of the video that was taken that night, which had a particular discoloration due to the 'night-shot' option on the camera: 'Plus que du mariage lui-même […] Donovan se souvient des vidéos, sombres, grisées, blanchies et bleuies par l'option night-shot qui donnait à chacun

[39] Christine Montalbetti, *Love Hotel* (Paris: P.O.L., 2013). Hereafter referred to using abbreviation 'LH'.
[40] Christine Montalbetti, *Journee américaine* (Paris: P.O.L., 2009). Hereafter referred to using abbreviation 'JA'.

le teint de morts-vivants' (JA 150). In this case, the remembered experience of the event has been irrevocably altered by the repeated viewing of the recordings after the event took place.

Another, more interactive, type of screen also appears in *Love Hotel* – the touch screen. It appears physically in the narrative, first at the kiosk at the Love Hotel (LH 15, 21) and then as a tablet that Natsumi uses to show the narrator photographs:

> Les doigts de Natsumi se déplacent facilement sur l'écran tactile, maintenant c'est le pont de sable d'Amanohashidate, que les dieux autrefois empruntaient pour se rendre dans le ciel. Natsumi m'agrandit un détail, ses doigts pincent l'écran en s'écartant, à plusieurs reprises, et à chaque écartement le zoom avance d'un cran, tu vois, ce sont des cyclistes qui y roulent à présent (LH 72).

Later in the text, the touch-screen reappears, in a dream or day-dream the narrator has about a futuristic city composed of glass: 'la ville devenue comme translucide, vitrée, faite d'une succession de verrières que la lumière, presque horizontale à cette heure, transperce en tous sens' (LH 153-4). It is only on closer inspection that he realises the windows are actually giant touch-screens which he is unable to operate, and he is left confused and disoriented: 'J'avance encore et je comprends que toute la ville est faite d'écrans tactiles, et je contemple leurs grands plans verticaux, hébété, sans savoir comment m'en servir' (LH 154). This dream is evoked again later in the text: when he returns to the 'real' city, the narrator notes the absence of these screens (LH 165).

The screen in *Love Hotel* is what mediates the inner reality of the narrator and the 'outside world', whether it is through the images he views on a tablet, the imagined cinematic scenes or the events he sees on television. In fact, the whole *telos* of this text also revolves around a screen: this time of the television in the bar the narrator enters on the final page of the text. This will be, it is implied, the medium through which he will learn of the 2011 Japan earthquake and tsunami, the event foreshadowed throughout the narrative: 'Mon après-midi aurait pu s'achever sur cette sensation de douceur. Mais je pousse la porte du petit bar qui me sert de cantine: la télévision est allumée, ce 11 mars 2011' (LH 171). Once again, it is the television screen that mediates between the protagonist's inner reality – his introspections have taken up most of the textual space in the narrative – and the real, historical events taking place outside his subjective experience.

Montalbetti's texts do not engage with technology in the same way as those of Lenoir or Pireyre, and yet the screen appears frequently as a motif for mediation of memory and of reality. This obsession with screens, with filming and with photography also touches upon the contemporary penchant for (often excessive) documenting in the form of photographs and video recordings, which are now easy, fast and inexpensive to produce and store digitally. In summary, Montalbetti's depiction of the screen and recording devices takes into account, firstly, the fact that the consumption of audiovisual material and cinematic fiction can alter our perception of reality: while cinema finds ways to represent life, the avid consumer of cinematic fiction begins to see his or her own life through the parameters of the cinematic experience. Secondly, her novels highlight how the relatively new omnipresence of these recording and viewing technologies has led us to a strange temporality in which we experience and live events in anticipation of the recording: the present is lived as a future memory.

All three authors' texts therefore reflect the ubiquity of new information technology such as telephones, computers and cameras in our everyday lives in the twenty-first century. This new technology, I have argued, is one of the drivers of a major, epochal shift which has seen the parameters of human interaction and the fundamental tenets of our societies shift dramatically in the last several decades. Within the narratives themselves, these devices appear in many different contexts, but are repeatedly represented as a source of anxiety or as an outlet for compulsive or pathological behaviour. Other anxieties, such as the changing parameters of human interaction, also come to the fore in a more or less direct manner: a husband and wife who no longer communicate in *La Folie Silaz* but repeatedly check for the same emails, a father who does not let his young daughter film lest she ruin the recording in *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses,* or an academic who enjoys 'trolling' children's forums in *Féerie générale*. They also depict a blurring of the real and the virtual or even of a preference for the virtual over the real. We can see such a preference in Lenoir's Mme Camelin and Do, Pireyre's Brian75 and Otaku or Montalbetti's launch spectators: each elects to retreat from real events and interact with the outside world through a screen.

A new aesthetics? Post-internet cultures and information societies

What is a 'new aesthetics'?

These societal changes and the resultant altering of the material and cultural conditions under which literature is produced may affect not only the content but also the *form* of the texts. After all, and according to critics like Nicholas Carr, these technologies have changed the very way we think, not simply how we interact with other people and objects. The second half of this chapter will examine the form of these authors' texts in light of this notion. Can we talk about an 'aesthetics of technology' or of changing literary forms which reflect the ways in which we now live and interact with the outside world? As Lev Manovich points out, 'Information processing has […] become the key dimension of our daily lives,'[41] and, like the other major changes taking place in the early twenty-first century, we may assume that literature will in some way engage with those changes.

In defining a 'new' aesthetics for the age of ubiquitous technology, we might take three key features of new technology – networks, information overload, multi-tasking – and consider how these could be reflected in literature. In the article 'Introduction to Info-Aesthetics', Lev Manovich discusses the role that new technology plays in our lives and touches upon how that role might affect culture. He suggests that we 'turn our own lives into an informational archive by storing our emails, chats […] digital photos, GPS data, favorite music tracks, favorite television shows, and other "digital traces" of our existence.'[42] Manovich sees the 'exponential growth of the information available to us' as 'one of the main pressure points on contemporary culture'.[43] This sentiment is echoed by other theorists. James Gleick's *The Information* describes 'us' (those living in information-dominated societies) as suffering from information fatigue,[44] while Tiziana Terranova describes a '*network culture,* that seems to be characterized by an unprecedented *abundance* of informational output and by an *acceleration* of informational dynamics.'[45] Manovich's stated purpose is 'introduc[ing] a new paradigm for understanding contemporary culture';[46] he does not seek to create an 'all-inclusive' paradigm

[41] Lev Manovich, 'Introduction to Info-Aesthetics', *manovich.net*: Software Studies Initiative, 2008 <http://www.manovich.net/index.php/projects/introduction-to-info-aesthetics> [Accessed 20/10/2016].
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid. p. 5.
[44] Gleick, p. 11.
[45] Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), p. 1., emphasis in original.
[46] Manovich.

like modernism or postmodernism. His concept of 'info-aesthetics' should rather be treated as an extra lens, through which one might consider particular cultural phenomena. He points out that almost all white-collar professions now involve treating and manipulating data on a computer.

A related notion called the 'New Aesthetic' was put forward by writer, artist and publisher James Bridle, who set up a dedicated website to share images and text relating to this idea, which 'points towards new ways of seeing the world, an echo of the society, technology and people that co-produce them'.[47] Bridle also directly addresses questions of literature and technology on another website, 'BookTwo'.[48] Another term which has emerged to describe the kind of 'new aesthetic' we are seeing in the twenty-first century is that of 'post-internet' (or 'postinternet') culture. In 2013, the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing ran an exhibition entitled 'Art Post-Internet'. In the exhibition catalogue which, at the time of writing, is still available online, Robin Peckham and Karen Archey define the understanding of the term 'post-internet' that underpins the thinking behind the exhibition:[49]

> This understanding of the post-internet refers not to a time 'after' the internet, but rather to an internet state of mind—to think in the fashion of the network. In the context of artistic practice, the category of the post-internet describes an art object created with a consciousness of the networks within which it exists, from conception and production to dissemination and reception.[50]

If the ways in which we collectively see the world and conceptualise objects and systems are changing due to the expanding influence of the Web and other networks, this suggests that the individuals in a 'post-internet' society would be affected by the changes even if they – as individuals – are not regular Internet users. Hito Steyerl, a Berlin-based artist who also writes a number of theoretical texts on the subject of art and the internet, proposes that the internet has 'moved offline' into the real. She writes:

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[47] James Bridle, 'About The New Aesthetic', The New Aesthetic [Website], 2011 <http://new-aesthetic.tumblr.com/about> [Accessed 20/10/2017].
[48] James Bridle, 'BookTwo', 2006 <http://booktwo.org/> [Accessed 09/06/2016].
[49] The fact that exhibition catalogue remains online perhaps demonstrates the kind of digital 'pile-up' of information that leads to Gleick's 'information fatigue': even experiences which were fundamentally designed to be ephemeral now leave a digital 'trace'. The exhibition organisers have highlighted this: upon downloading the text in PDF format, the user's IP address and location and the date are added to a list on the right-hand side of the screen, highlighting the geographical and temporal reach of the text and number of downloads: http://post-inter.net/ [Accessed 08/04/16].
[50] Karen Archey and Robin Peckham, 'Art Post-Internet', Ullens Center for Contemporary Art [Website], 2014 <http://ucca.org.cn/en/exhibition/art-post-internet/> [Accessed 27/04/2016].

> So what does it mean if the internet has moved offline? It crossed the screen, multiplied displays, transcended networks and cables to be at once inert and inevitable. One could imagine shutting down all online access or user activity. We might be unplugged, but this doesn't mean we're off the hook.[51]

But what does it mean to 'think in the fashion of the network' or to have a 'consciousness of the networks within which [an object] exists' in the context of literature? How can literature represent the ways in which information processing has become our main way of interacting with the world? There are, of course, many possible responses to these questions, but we might observe two ways in which contemporary novels seem to venture towards an aesthetics of technology. Firstly, literature that lends great weight to representing or pointing out its own cultural context or literary-cultural heritage could be considered to be 'thinking in the fashion of the network'. This phenomenon can be noted in particular in the works of Montalbetti, where there is an extreme form of intertextuality which catalogues many literary and cultural references, often moving quickly on without expanding upon the reference or its significance. The following paragraphs will discuss the ways in which this extreme intertextuality resonates with Manovich's theories. This will be followed by a discussion of a second way in which a literary text may 'think in the fashion of the network': by employing a form or style which resembles that of the Web 2.0 'experience'.[52] In Pireyre's *Féerie générale* and *Comment faire disparaître la terre?*, for example, the various fragments of fact and fiction within the text are atomised and far-reaching, but there is a high level of interconnectedness within chapters and across the whole work. These connections are not necessarily organised or direct (i.e. one thing does not lead to another which leads to another – there are many instances of 'dead ends' or of multiple thematic or linguistic similarities for one element) but give the impression of an often tenuous whole despite the lack of a concrete plot.

Manovich's Cultural Interface & Montalbetti's extreme intertextuality

While other theorists do address the fact that the way that we consider, exchange and absorb information is radically changing and driving wider changes in society, Manovich's concept of 'info-aesthetics' is perhaps the most useful in identifying several specific ways in which culture (though not specifically print culture) is affected by this shift. I would like to focus on one of

[51] Hito Steyerl, 'Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?', *e-flux.com*: e-flux, 2013 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/> [Accessed 27/10/2017].
[52] 'Web 2.0' generally refers to the move from static web pages to more interactive sites which allowed user-generated content.

these aspects – the notion that the '[o]ur new standard interface to culture is a search engine.'[53] This is both relevant on the level of the consumer (reader or viewer) – i.e., one finds a novel or a painting first by searching for the author's or artist's name on Google, changing the politics of consumption – and on the level of the text itself. In many ways, access to the internet changes the way we might interact with a text, especially one where there is a great deal of intertextuality, historical reference or reference to current events. There is now a mass accessibility of culture and cultural artefacts on the internet, and especially through search engines like Google, who are also digitising and making available vast swathes of textual material via Google Books.

Montalbetti's impossibly expert narrator appears to be symptomatic of this idea: the level of detail in *L'Origine de l'homme* or *Western*, in many diverse domains which collide – often in a somewhat unnatural way – in the story, seems to recall to the kind of extreme – but blind – cataloguing of the internet search engine's algorithms. It appears as though the text brings together fragments of reality that, decontextualised, would resemble a collection of articles on history and literature generated by the algorithms of a search engine or social media site: thematically or lexically linked, meandering from story to story, fact to fiction. For example, extensive historical information about the Lewis and Clark expedition is given, and fictionalised, in *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent*,[54] or paleontological details in *L'Origine de l'homme*. In the text, however, they are strung together in a digressive, winding plot. The wealth and breadth of references also has a second effect on the reading experience: it means that the reader has to make a choice between accepting the feeling of not-knowing which will inevitably come at some point in the text, or attempting to understand each and every one of the diverse cultural, historical and literary references that her narrator makes.

While there is nothing particularly unusual about a fictional text employing extratextual units of cultural knowledge as building blocks for their own fictional worlds, Christine Montalbetti's texts take it to an extreme which reflects this notion of a 'post-internet' culture. This particular aspect of Montalbetti's texts appears, on the surface, resolutely postmodern: as Stephen Best and Doug Kellner write, postmodern writers 'implode[d] oppositions between high and low art, fantasy and reality, fiction and fact'.[55] Manovich sees this stage of

[53] Manovich.
[54] Christine Montalbetti, *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent* (Paris: P.O.L., 2014). Hereafter referred to using abbreviation 'VV'.
[55] Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York & London: Guilford Press, 1997), p. 132.

postmodernism as a step between modernism and what he calls the 'informational', suggesting that 'some of the new aesthetics of the 1970s and 1980s, which were at the time described as "postmodern", were in fact only an intermediary stage between the Modern and the informational.'[56] Whether one accepts Manovich's assertions or not, it is certainly plausible that the postmodern penchant for collisions of cultural objects from different geographical locations and times has been taken to extremes in the 'post-internet' age. Montalbetti's texts embrace everything from 'high' literature and literary criticism to popular culture (from Greek poets to MacGyver), with French, Anglo-American, Japanese and other influences permeating all diegetic levels of the narrative. This extreme 'cataloguing' of minute details and inclusion of historical and metafictional narratives within the diegesis is not necessarily innovative in itself, but the extremes to which it is taken could certainly be viewed as symptomatic of the frenetic, high-speed referencing and recycling of the postinternet age.

There are several examples of this collision of different types of art and literature in *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent*: Colter's battered station wagon is described as *'*comme le portrait de Dorian Gray, à porter les stigmates de sa vie intérieure*'* (VV 42). The bar in which the narrator spent his nights, and which frames the metadiegeses of the other characters' stories, is called the 'Retour d'Ulysse' (VV 21). The narrator finds a copy of Pliny's *Epistulae* in the town's 'miniscule' library (self-consciously remarking that it had 'arrivé là je ne sais pas comment' (VV 168)). At the moment that the 'villain' of the story (McCain) enters the bar, the reader is invited to play Beethoven's fifth symphony as a kind of soundtrack: 'là, franchement, si vous avez la cinquième symphonie, celle de Beethoven bien sûr, vous pouvez vous en passer les premières mesures' (VV 160). In *L'Origine de l'homme,* though the real historical figure Jacques Boucher de Crèvecoeur De Perthes died in 1868, the novel's 'Jacques' enters into a dialogue with the narrator, a self-described *'*sorte d'ange de Wenders' (OH 273), a reference to the 1987 film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (translated into English as *Wings of Desire*) by German filmmaker Wim Wenders. In the very much 'wild west' diegetic universe of *Western* the narrator informs the reader that if they wish to verify details about a character, 'vous n'avez qu'à jeter un œil sur son page facebook' (W 49). The richness of intertextual reference comes not only from the spatial vastness of the globalised cultural context and the collisions of popular and high culture, but also from the weight of a historical literary-cultural canon: in a world of archivisation, digitisation and one-click download, the literary canon itself has achieved a kind of simultaneity, at least in terms of its immediate accessibility. Again, these concepts are not

[56] Manovich.

new, per se, as a similar notion is touched upon in Charles Newman's *The Postmodern Aura,* which was published in 1985 – long before the rise of the likes of Amazon and Google books.[57] While Montalbetti's novels do not contain explicit explorations or critiques of these notions, they do play with the notion of a kind of 'cultural simultaneity' in the narrator's plane of existence whereby cultural references from different times and locations hold equal intertextual weight in the narrative. In this sense, the extreme intertextuality of Montalbetti's texts resonates with the notion of a 'post-internet' way of thinking.

Pireyre, the fragment and the 'small screen'

In Pireyre, the kind of 'network thinking' present in the text is twofold. Firstly, there is explicit reference to global, far-reaching networks in *Féerie générale* in the form of theatre-like 'cast lists' which often include, for example, one or two fictional characters, a real-life figure, and an entire population (e.g. of Japan) – this will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter. The second, more subtle, type of 'network thinking' invoves the texts reflecting, in some way, a consciousness of the networks within which we live, think and – in the case of the narrators of these texts – write. The following section will examine the ways in which the structures of Pireyre's most recent three pieces of print literature – *Féerie générale*, *Comment faire disparaître la terre?* and *Foire internationale* reflect this 'network-consciousness'.

The first two texts (*Féerie générale* and *Comment faire disparaître la terre?*) contain various fragments. Some of these fragments are related – thematically or directly – to the chapter within which they are contained, some are stand-alone 'micro-narratives' and some form part of a series which is repeated throughout the text (in *Féerie générale*, for example, these are the 'Collections de baisers' and the 'Rêves'). There is no overarching plot in either case, but there are running 'threads' or themes Similarly, *Foire internationale* is formed of a series of micro-fictions. The opening lines of the prologue declare that: 'Toutes les microfictions constituant *Foire internationale* se déroulent au fil d'une année, de septembre à septembre, dans la même ville du centre de la France' (FI 9). Within these temporal and spatial parameters, *Foire internationale* treats a wide range of individual stories and characters. In all three texts, decontextualised fragments (mostly text but some images – especially in *Comment faire disparaître la terre?*) are juxtaposed and seem to reflect the kind of atomised structure of loose or indirect connections that we experience when surfing the internet. In the virtual world

[57] Charles Newman, *The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985).

of the news feed, these disparate elements would be placed together in a linear 'feed' by the governing algorithm; here, it is the invisible strings of the author that place them together.

We might describe all three texts, then, as being made up of decontextualised fragments. But there are overarching themes or 'fils conducteurs' which run through the texts; in *Foire internationale* (which is the least complicated, structurally speaking) this might be the idea of internationalism or globalisation – almost each 'microfiction' contains some element of internationalism, despite the entire narrative being limited to one town. In the story about the little girl who is afraid of the dark, the parents have left her alone because they are selling their house in Toronto (FI 13). Alexia, a philosophy student, receives an Erasmus grant to study in London (FI 15) where she meets Brian, an Australian, but their love is doomed as both families are wine producers, and Alexia feels strongly about the effect of 'mondialisation' and the labelling of international wines. Giorgio is a trader who has just returned from London ('où il n'y a pas de problème avec la crise financière' (FI 63)). A 'New-yorkaise' shows her photos from France, having worked at the *Foire internationale* itself (FI 69). There are similar 'threads' in *Comment faire disparaitre la terre?*, often rather more arbitrary ('internationalism' seems like a reasonable underlying current in a text entitled 'Foire internationale'), like the idea of the Balzacian 'femme de trente ans', a concept which reappears several times throughout the texts (CT 24, 160, etc.) both directly and through allusion ('comédiennes de 30 ans' (CT 33)). We also see many references to an obsession with housing and property ('immobilier'; CT 37, 8, 144-5) and a sketched 'film d'Epicure' which develops as an image throughout the text, and is tangentially related to other fragments about 'la pensée Occidentale'.

Emmanuelle Pireyre has written several theoretical texts which provide some insight into the kind of aesthetics behind the texts themselves. In an article entitled 'Fictions Documentaires', published by literary-cultural magazine *Inculte,* Pireyre directly addresses the question of technology and culture:

> En quoi les textes énumérés plus haut sont-ils des structures de prose qui coïncident avec notre expérience actuelle du monde? S'il faut un trait distinctif de notre expérience du réel proche ou lointain, on peut partir de son fort taux de médiatisation par des écrans d'ordinateurs ou de télévision. Nous vivons de manière intensive dans la compagnie d'écrans de petite taille, et ces écrans déversent dans notre salon, dans nos chambres et

> sur nos bureaux un volume considérable de renseignements et/ou inepties concernant le monde […].[58]

One of the defining features of the 'screens' which have become such an intense part of our daily lives is the way in which they differ from the 'cinematic' screen:

> Nos écrans ne sont pas du type écran de cinéma; devant un écran de taille petite ou moyenne dont nous sommes pour une part nous-mêmes le projectionniste, nous nous oublions en fait assez peu, nous commentons à voix haute le spectacle au fur et à mesure de son déroulement, nous changeons le DVD, nous cliquons, nous retartinons un sandwich, nous répondons au téléphone.[59]

It would seem that this is exactly the kind of experience that Pireyre attempts to recreate in both *Comment faire disparaître la terre* and *Féerie générale*. We have both the decontextualisation and apparently arbitrary juxtapositions of the 'newsfeed' or twitter feed, the 'renseignements [et] inepties' in the form of coexisting (and poorly delineated) fragments of fact and fiction, and the constant distractedness and changes of perspective – sometimes a narrator intervenes, sometimes the story seems to have nothing to do with the narrator at all, some characters are real people the narrator has heard about (presumably from other sources; e.g. the Otaku murderer), sometimes they are people the narrator knows personally (she says Batoule is 'la fille d'une de mes anciennes camarades d'université' (FG 146); she recognises Sven Tikkanen who she had 'crois[é] une fois ou deux lors de son sejour à Bordeaux' (FG 113)). In many ways Pireyre's *Comment faire disparaître la terre?* and *Féerie générale* reflect the kind of window-switching experience that means we are almost simultaneously 'consuming' various different types of media. In both texts, various different formats are used for different fragments: news article-style stories, snippets from internet forums (FG 68-9 and 80-1), basic images (FG 200) or even small photographs (FG 137, 142). There are some repetitions, either in direct repetitions or in allusions. Sometimes a small part of text is decontextualised and reproduced in another part of the text, often before the 'full' text is made available. This is the case for two internet forum discussions. In the first instance, the reader sees the following excerpt (emphasis mine):

[58] Emmanuelle Pireyre, 'Fictions documentaires', *Inculte*, 2007, <http://www.emmanuellepireyre.com/theorie/> [Accessed 15/04/2017].
[59] Ibid.

Nous les Européens, nous avons changé.

14h 18 kalidouh > info ou intox?

14h 29 PJ > mdr[60] c'est excellent

Nous les Européens, nous avons changé. On dit souvent, ici et là par le monde, que nous les Européens, nous sommes à présent des personnes douces et gentilles. (FG 40)

The two lines of 'forum' dialogue here have nothing to do with Europe or with the narrator's musings on 'soft power' and the way Europeans are viewed abroad. They are both extracts from a forum conversation given in full (we assume) later in the text, entitled *'Le rappeur SoWhat en prison*?'. The 'info ou intox?' does not refer to Europeans having changed, but to the first post:

14h 17 imad 10 > On vient de me dire que SoWhat est en prison pour tentative de meurtre!!!! :-o C cho sa oooooo. J'esper ke c fo pk'il va me manké!! les mec de la défence c fini pour vous jlai di!!!!!!

14h 18 AraboSpiritual > Au moins il aura le temps d'écrire un album qui déchire cette foi.lol.

14h 18 kalidouh > info ou intox? (FG 80, my emphasis)

The second part ('mdr c'est excellent') does not even appear directly after this line, but after a brief interlude where the narrator intervenes:

Au fil du topic, les informations restaient contradictoires, on ne parvenait pas à démêler le vrai du faux. Tout le monde était soucieux, à part AraboSpiritual qui continuait à plaisanter. Personne ne voulait laisser SoWhat gaspiller ses forces dans une cellule de Villepinte.

14h 29 PJ > mdr c'est excellent qu'il squatte toujours aux puces (FG 81, my emphasis)

So why do these two lines, decontextualised, emerge in the narrative some forty pages earlier? This is not the only example of such decontextualisation taking place; a similar episode sees the section 'collection de baisers (3)' (the 'collection[s] de baisers' are a repeated 'segment'

[60] The expression 'mort de rire' in familiar language is abbreviated to 'mdr', the latter being a popular term in Internet slang. The loose equivalent of the term in English is 'laugh out loud', abbreviated to 'lol'; these two terms are used in similar contexts (informal, virtual) by similar .0demographics (generally young people).

which takes different forms throughout the text, up to 'collections de baisers (8)'.) begin with an online forum post (FG 47) then be interrupted by the first of the 'Rêves' (Rêve 1 – *Palmiers sauvages*), another repeated segment throughout the text, only to be picked up from the beginning again some twenty pages later (FG 68), still labelled 'Collection de baisers (3)' with the full series of responses:

> yria-yria
>
> Posté le 20-03-2011 à 22:34:05
>
> bonjour jai un copain ki sait pas embrasser, il embrasse très très mal c'est trop horrible ☹, mais je sais pas comment lui dire que j'aimerai kil sy prenne autrement, mieux quoi. Auriez vous une idée svp mais sans kil se vexe? (FG 47)

These sudden interruptions and the different formats present in the text (note that the two different internet forums have different layouts, suggesting that they came from different websites), reflect in many ways what we read when switching rapidly from one form of media to another on an internet-connected device. In one fragment entitled 'Ce moment où on a physiquement besoin de se connecter', the narrator refers to society's response to the 'Otaku' murders in Japan and how people discussed the incident, then swiftly moves to a passage narrated in the first person ('Bon, prenons un repas de fête, chez nous, en France. J'en ai vécu un, par exemple, la semaine dernière […]' (FG 28)). The ensuing discussion is centred on the topic of video games and violence. While the conversation in itself is nothing new ('nous connaissons par cœur les arguments, on les a déjà entendus cent fois', the narrator remarks), in the text it takes on a rather strange format: each entry is 'time-stamped', much like in the forums that appear in other fragments: 'Un parent, Audrey, a lancé la discussion à 14h51: les jeux violents accroissent-ils la violence de nos ados, ou sont-ils un exutoire permettant de réguler leur violence' (FG 28).

The whole episode is written much like a report; note the reported speech, and the relative formality of the language (e.g. the subject and verb are inverted for a question). The discussion continues in the same manner ('Ne t'inquiètes pas trop, a répondu Stéph à 14h53 […]'; 'D'après Sandrine, à 15h03, les développeurs devraient modifier les jeux pour les moraliser' (FG 29)). The result is that the whole conversation is not relayed to the reader, only these 'highlights' that the narrator picks up on, but the exact time that the information was given is mentioned. Perhaps the 'moment où on a physiquement besoin de se connecter'

referred to in the title of the fragment is not referring to the young people under discussion, but the narrator, who begins to see the real through the parameters applied to the virtual.

The narrating consciousness of Pireyre's text has the freedom of our own minds when faced with a search engine and a series of interlinked websites: any textual element, be it thematic, linguistic or conceptual, can lead to another, whether this is on the level of the diegesis (e.g. a familial link between characters, like Roxane and Mirem) or on a narratorial level, or somewhere in between (e.g. characters the narrator has met). But there are also explicit networks created in *Féerie générale* – the 'cast lists' which appear at the beginning of every chapter. An example from the first chapter is below (emphasis in original):

> **Avec:**
> Roxane
> Cheval
> Mirem et Malcolm
> Claude Lévi-Strauss
> Umberto Eco
> Tsutomu Miyazaki
> Les quatre fillettes de Tokyo
> Le futur mangaka
> Population japonaise
> (FG 11).

The links between these individuals is often an indirect or thematic one (a leap made by the narrator), but these lists are perhaps both a nod to the old concept of the 'world as a theatre' and also an explicit recognition of the global, far-reaching networks and vast distances one's mind can travel in the post-internet age. It is important to note both the collisions of high and popular culture (in the list above, we might take Umberto Eco and manga as an example) and also the ways in which some of the 'cast' are identified by name while others remain anonymous – the most interesting point in this particular example is that while the murderer Miyazaki is identified by name, his four victims remain anonymous. There is also a collision of micro and macro scales: while the horse Roxane paints is identified on the cast list as an individual, the entire Japanese population is identified as a whole.

We might conclude that what *Féerie générale* and, to a great extent, *Comment faire disparaître la terre?* reflect is the *human experience* of being connected to the network and

browsing the internet. Neither the 'rêves' nor the 'collection[s] de baisers' are listed on the contents page (which gives chapter titles and subtitles) at the beginning of the text – they might rather be considered as 'unscheduled interventions'. There is a further formal element in the text which would support this hypothesis: the fact that the links between the various elements in the text can be so far-reaching. Sometimes the links are between characters – the little girl Roxane who likes equestrian painting is in one segment, which links to another segment about her mother Mirem who uses internet dating sites, which is linked to the first 'Collection de baisers' which talks about the corporeal and the virtual, which then links to the Otaku murderer who failed to distinguish between the two – and killed four young girls, who might remind us of Roxane (the two stories are at one point directly juxtaposed (FG 22)). Later, a young boy holding a book entitled *Apprends à dessiner et devenir Mangaka* loses his parents and is consoled by Roxane, who helps him draw horses. Other links are superimposed onto this – both the story of the Otaku murderer and the story of Umberto Eco's stolen comic books at university come under the subtitles 'Etagères et Sauvagerie', as do the musings of the narrator as to the presence of a pile of duvet covers and a shelf (étagère) in her 'rêve de *Palmiers sauvages*' – linking it to yet another fragment.

If, as Pireyre suggests in 'Fictions Documentaires', we are the 'projectionist' who controls our own small screens, then the narrator of *Féerie générale* and *Comment faire disparaître la terre* could also be seen as the figure of the projectionist, switching between various snippets of film, commenting upon them, finding thematic links. I would suggest that these texts represent what we might call a new *internet aesthetics* (which would correlate to a great extent with the notion of the postinternet or Manovich's info-aesthetics). There are several possible objections to the idea that these texts reflect the experience of the internet; one is the very notion of simultaneity and multi-tasking that we identified as one of our three key features of new media in the introduction to this chapter – how can an 'analogue' text reflect the experience of having multiple programs running simultaneously (for example: a 24-hour news feed, a novel in e-book format, a social media site)? But the *experience* of 'window-hopping' is in itself a linear one – though the speed at which we switch from one to the other might make us think that we are experiencing everything at once, what we are actually doing is taking in a fragment here, a fragment there, pausing to think or to discuss it in the 'real world' outside the virtual. Nicholas Carr's analogy of 'jet-ski' thinking might be a good analogy to apply here, as we skim quickly across the surface of various topics, but – as Pireyre suggests in *Fictions documentaires* – the analogy only goes so far, as 'nous nous oublions assez peu' in

the presence of the 'small screen', instead interacting with the information we receive. Pireyre's texts, and primarily the two most recent texts, can be viewed as examples of what has been called an 'info-aesthetics' or postinternet aesthetics. But will this emerge as a significant trend in literary fiction? It is perhaps telling that despite *Féerie générale's* fragmented structure and its incorporation of 'unliterary' text like extracts from internet forums or low-resolution photographs, it won the Prix Médicis as a novel and has been categorised as such by the press.

Literature and technology: representing an epochal shift

Our analysis of the effect of technology on the texts in question has therefore been double: firstly, the ways in which questions of new technology are directly addressed in the text (whether as central plot devices or secondary elements); and secondly, the ways in which the texts might engage with a new aesthetics (whether we call this 'postinternet' or 'info-aesthetics' or a New Aesthetic). It is clear that both Pireyre and Lenoir engage to a great extent with the kinds of contemporary discourses surrounding new technology and its uses. Pireyre treats the new 'cyber-societies' that have emerged from Web 2.0 (for example hacker collectives, dating sites and fan fiction forums) as well as engaging with some of our anxieties about the way the ubiquity of technology might be affecting our everyday lives – questions of cybersecurity and data hacking, of an increasingly blurry divide between the real and the virtual, and of an unmanageable abundance of information and misinformation (which appear as equals) available to us. In Lenoir's later texts new technology is often one of the main vectors of communication between characters who are present in the diegesis and those who are absent from it (but who are very present in the narrative) – the most extreme example is that of Georges Silaz in *La Folie Silaz*. Despite the use of this technology the characters have trouble conveying information to one another.

The idea of a series of new aesthetic trends emerging in the wake of new technological advances and the increasing public use of computing devices in both work and the home (and particularly after the rise of Web 2.0) is a convincing one, though one must bear in mind Manovich's warning that his 'info-aesthetics' is but one of several analytical tools we might employ in approaching contemporary literature. Within our corpus of texts, it is clear that Pireyre engages with a new aesthetics both in her literary works and also in a series of theoretical texts, while Montalbetti's adopt several features which we have identified with the

movement – namely an extreme intertextuality which reflects the growing interconnectedness of both our everyday lives and our habits of cultural consumption, and a cultivating in the reader a sentiment of not-knowing, by including vast swathes of (often highly specialised) information in the text. The reader is forced to either accept this impression of 'not-knowing' and proceed with the text, or to pause her or his reading to follow this 'link'. Pireyre works in several mediums including poetry, live readings and performances, while Montalbetti is both a literary critic and a writer (of fiction and of theatre – see *Le Cas Jekyll*) engaged to a great extent in the Parisian literary scene, which may contextualise the extremely hybrid nature and formal play in Pireyre, and the high engagement with both contemporary authors and the historical canon in Montalbetti. One of the principal problems we face in examining the possibility of a 'postinternet aesthetic' or new aesthetics is the heterogeneity of the contemporary literary field, both on a national level and on a more global scale. French authors who could be seen as clearly embracing a new aesthetic would include (along with Pireyre) the likes of Nathalie Quintane, Patrik Ourednik and Philippe Vasset.[61] Others might engage with certain elements of postinternet culture (extreme interconnectedness, information overload, divided (narratorial or readerly) attention, etc.) without going to such extremes of play with form and the parameters of the novel (e.g. Houellebecq, Montalbetti).

Lenoir's texts, while engaging with the direct effects of technology, do not seem to adopt in any meaningful way the kind of aesthetic trends we have grouped together under this new aesthetics. Hélène Lenoir has often been likened to *nouveau roman* author Nathalie Sarraute:[62] many of the former's texts, published in the same decade as those of Montalbetti and Pireyre, seem to be 'out of their time.' Some of the stylistic devices deployed by Sarraute, as well as the underlying principles of her narratives, seem to correlate to a great extent with Lenoir's works. In particular, I refer to the use of a 'stream-of-consciousness'-style text in free direct discourse, as well as a focus on what Sarraute called 'des mouvements indéfinissables […] aux limites de notre conscience'[63] and also by the term coined in her eponymous text, 'tropismes', which describes a collection of narrative fragments. This focus on the 'inner reality' and the individual is a sharp twist away from the kind of extreme openness of Pireyre's *Féerie* or the literary playgrounds that Montalbetti constructs in her texts. The majority of Lenoir's texts are written in the third person with the narrative focalised through one or more

[61] See, for example: Nathalie Quintane, *Les Années 10* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2014); Vasset; Ourednik.
[62] Elin Beate Tobiassen, 'Lecture palimpsestueuse; de Nathalie Sarraute à Hélène Lenoir: filiation, réécriture.', *Orbis Litterarum*, 62 (2007), 89-109.
[63] Sarraute, p. 8.

protagonists, and beyond the immediate and subjective reality relayed to the reader through these narrative focalisers, there is a curious absence of allusion to a 'wider world' in the text. In this way, the texts opt to remain focused on the micro rather than the macro, and certainly do not place themselves in any kind of global network or context. Unlike Montalbetti's texts (and to some extent, Pireyre's) which seem to reflect upon their own place in a literary-cultural 'network', Lenoir's texts do not engage with their contemporaries or with their literary heritage.

In conclusion, while such changes in literary aesthetics are not necessarily the dominant trends in the field of contemporary French literature, a close analysis of these contemporary texts would suggest that these ideas are reflected – implicity or explicitly – within this particular corpus. Further analysis of a wider corpus is most certainly warranted in order to better establish the extent to which a postinternet aesthetics is taking hold (or not), but new technologies and media have, directly or indirectly, at the level of the narrative or of production, had a tangible impact on the current literary landscape in France.

CHAPTER 2

SLOW RESISTANCE: TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY TIME CULTURE AND NARRATIVE

In the previous chapter, I outlined the ways in which the works of Montalbetti, Lenoir and Pireyre engage with the paradigm shift brought about in contemporary culture by new information technologies. In this chapter, my analysis turns from questions of epoch to the question of time itself. How are time and temporality represented in these texts, and how does this engage with or reject what we might call the 'time culture' of our time? There is a certain degree of difficulty, of course, in establishing what we could call the time culture of the twenty-first century. The term time culture, as I am using it here, refers to the dominant conception and experience of time and temporality (loosely defined as being-in-time) of the epoch.[1]

In a world where time is measured and synchronised with increasing precision and on a global scale, it perhaps seems counterintuitive to suggest that our conception of time has become more unstable and less easily defined, or indeed that time should become a focus of our thoughts and anxieties to the extent that it would be reflected in the literature of the twenty-first century. Peter Boxall highlights in particular the ways in which the technological progress of our societies in the twenty-first century have destabilised our perception of time and temporality, with narrative forms struggling to articulate this altered experience of time:

> The increasingly frictionless synchronisation of global culture, rather than delivering an increasingly secure sense of location, of homeliness in our space and in our time, has delivered us to a condition in which the time, as in Hamlet's Denmark, is out of joint, in which the narrative forms we have available no longer seem to be well adapted to articulating our experience of passing time.[2]

While Pireyre's texts *Féerie générale* and *Comment faire disparaître la terre?* create an effect of simultaneity and of juxtaposition in time and/or space which reflects the rapid-switching concentration of the mind faced a search engine, reading is a still a fundamentally linear

[1] The term 'time culture' is borrowed from Ursula K. Heise's text *Chronoschisms* (described p.11), in which she outlines the time culture of the modernist period. In defining certain aspects of temporal experience as part of the dominant time culture I do not wish to suggest that this model of time is the only lived experience of time in the twenty-first century; given that the corpus of this study is drawn from French literature and the majority of the critical framework from European and North-American sources, the models of lived time I refer to in this chapter will inevitably be centred on the dominant conceptions of time in Western neoliberal democracies.
[2] Boxall, p. 21.

experience. Even at its most experimental, literature is therefore limited in its ability to recreate the kind of simultaneity of experience that exists in the real world beyond the screen. Since it is this very simultaneity (and the collapse of temporal structures of experience that govern our perceptions of past, present and future) that forms one of the fundamental shifts in our experience of time in the twenty-first century, literature may appear increasingly unable to represent the kind of contemporary temporal experience which dominates in twenty-first century developed societies. If we are to believe Nicholas Carr, concentrated, linear reading has become increasingly difficult due to real and tangible changes to the human brain, brought about by our increased use of new technologies such as search engines and the internet.[3] The fact that long, sustained or 'deep' reading of prose is now a difficult task for many may also contribute to the more generalised impression that literary fiction does not represent – or no longer represents – represents our lived temporal experience.

Underlying Boxall's assertion here is the assumption, with which I largely agree, that a shift has taken place in our temporal conditions. While literature is not necessarily mimetic, it necessarily engages in some way with the temporal conditions of the society that created it: either by, as Boxall suggests, 'articulating' our experience of time or by resisting the temporal model at the core of that experience. It is, of course, also difficult or impossible to measure the response of 'literature' (as a whole) to this societal shift, because the contemporary literary field is also constantly in flux, with too large a corpus to even possibly establish a representative sample from which to extrapolate clear trends. It is also relatively difficult to predict when – and indeed if – such a literary response to a particular societal shift will take place. Many of the phenomena indicated in this study as drivers in the most recent shift in our temporal experience were actually present in the public consciousness decades before they appeared to exert such a powerful influence over us – the internet has existed since the 1990s, we have been aware of anthropogenic climate change since the 1970s or earlier, and the financial markets of neoliberal societies were unleashed decades ago. It is the coming-together of these forces to disrupt the temporal parameters of our lived experience, I believe, that defines our time culture in the twenty-first century.

In literary history we might find several precedents for this type of societal shift in our conception of time and the response or engagement of literature and other cultural forms. High modernist experimentation with time, for example, coincided with wider turning points in

[3] Carr. C.f. for example p. 7 and p. 128.

humanity's interpretation of time and space, in the structuring of daily life but also in the scientific disciplines. Jago Morrison sketches out the paradoxical relationship between the increasing standardisation of time during the industrial revolution and a radical break with Newtonian, 'mechanical' time in the field of theoretical physics:

> […] Randall Stevenson draws out the struggle over time in this period […]. As he suggests, it is precisely at the moment when science and business interests begin to rigorously enforce a standardised time regime at both the local and global level, that in radical science, in philosophy, in sociology and in literature, many of the most profound re-evaluations of the nature of time are taking hold.[4]

Indeed, Stevenson writes that in the fiction of the early twentieth century, the idea of rebelling against the clock was a popular notion. This could be due to the fact, he suggests, that '[a] definitive, universal temporality had quickly enabled much more precise controls of time in the workplace, and firmer measures for its conversion into wages: time could be exactly commodified, and so simply equated with money. The use of clocking-in machines was widespread even by the 1890s'.[5] In this model, the increasingly rigid management of humanity's temporal existence, and the international standardisation of time that came with the Greenwich Mean, played a significant role in shaping the fiction of the time. Stevenson's argument is convincing, and lends weight to the notion that the time and temporality of literature is intimately linked to changes in the wider culture.

In these early years of the twenty-first century, we too have seen major cultural changes which alter our perception of time. My contention is that these shifts in our perception of time and our wider culture have led to a renewed focus, both in theory and practice, on the way that time is portrayed in literature and the ways in which we might respond to or perceive time in those literary works. Underlying this idea is the notion that literature inevitably acknowledges the cultural conditions under which it was produced.[6] The aim of this chapter is to examine how time and being-in-time (temporality) are represented in these works of literature, and how these representations may be linked to the wider cultural shifts taking place at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Inevitably, some novels, including certain texts in the corpus of this study, appear to be 'about time' more than others. Mark Currie suggests novels which are

[4] Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), p. 29.
[5] Stevenson, p. 126.
[6] I am using here the term 'acknowledges' to avoid suggesting that all works of literary fiction are necessarily mimetic ('reflects') or consciously commenting on the society which produced them.

considered to be 'about time' appear so because they present a model of time which is not consistent with the dominant one of our epoch. He writes:

> If time experiment in the novel is an exploration of the theme of time, or the nature of time, through the temporal logic of storytelling, it is only so because the temporal logic is unconventional. If we say that a narrative which obeys a more conventional temporal logic is not about time, we are merely succumbing to its naturalisation […], we are accepting the way that conventional narrative temporality has embedded a certain view of time in our universe.[7]

The idea that narrative temporality in some way acts to create (or 'embed') a particular model of time in the reader's mind is an engaging one; another reading of Currie's statement would be that fictional narratives reflect, and contribute to the naturalisation of, a 'certain view of time' that already exists in the extra-textual world. Both options appear to suggest that narrative fiction in some way acts upon those who consume it, either reinforcing their naturalised perceptions of the nature of time, or challenging them in some way; in the case of the former, the temporal mechanisms of the text would pass unnoticed, while in the latter, the text would be considered 'about time'. Currie goes further and, I would argue, overestimates the ability of narrative fiction to alter our views of time and temporality by suggesting that our perception of time may be directly affected by the narratives we read. In particular, he highlights the fact that the past is 'presentified' in narrative fiction, with what the reader perceives as the present moment of the text actually being the fictional past of a character or characters on the diegetic level. He writes:

> Put simply, it is possible that the reading of narrative fiction, in instructing us in the presentification of the past, also robs us of the present in that it encourages us to imagine looking back on it.[8]

This would suggest a bilateral relationship between time and narrative; instead of simply 'reflecting' or 'representing' our experience of time,[9] narrative fiction would also change or distort ('rob') our experience of time (here, specifically our experience of the present).[10] It

[7] Currie, p. 4.
[8] Ibid. p. 30.
[9] The terms 'representing' and 'reflecting' present another terminological issue: both imply – though the latter does so so to a greater degree – that the depiction of time in narrative is always mimetic.
[10] This is reminiscient of Ricardou's notion that writing 'produces rather than copies reality'. Jefferson, p. 4. Jefferson is paraphrasing Jean Ricardou, *Pour une théorie du nouveau roman* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), p. 9.

seems unlikely that narrative fiction was and is a driver – especially now, in a world increasingly dominated by other forms of culture – of our changing relationship with time rather than a cultural object shaped by it. In any case, it is clear that what Ursula K. Heise has called the 'culture of time' of an epoch,[11] however that may be defined, can both be reflected in the literary output of the period or serve as a model against which the text rebels.

If we were to define our current 'time culture' or the models which dominate our current conceptions of time and temporality in the same way that Stevenson highlights the time culture of modernity – and the shift brought about by the strict temporal controls that signalled a break with temporal convention in the early twentieth and late nineteenth centuries – we might begin with the notion of increasing speed at the turn of this century. There has been a general speeding-up of many temporal processes in our daily lives, from the individual level, with personal technologies which permit, and demand, faster and more efficient communication and sharing of information, to the macro level, where the economic processes of entire nations take place in transactions made every fraction of a second. This means that the vast majority of citizens of neoliberal democracies now find themselves driven by increasingly fast-paced rhythms of work and of change in the workplace, instant messaging and information-sharing in their personal lives and progressively shorter attention spans in their leisure and work time. This speeding-up can also be seen in the increasingly rapid obsolescence of cultural and technological objects (physical devices such as telephones, software, music, literature, etc.) and the collapse of temporal processes within the wider culture, such as that of parody. Mark Currie has referred to this speeding-up as accelerated recontextualisation, writing that 'this is perhaps most apparent in technological areas of commerce such as music, television or computing, in which the speed of recycling is unrestrained, so that, for example, the television advertisement can produce parodic representations of films which are on current release, or popular music can refer to current events'.[12]

As a result, there is a sense that things are moving too fast for us to comprehend, as Boxall alludes to in his assertion that time is out of joint. And in many ways, this vague sentiment of unease is not simply based in a culture which values speed and whose own temporal processes are relentlessly speeding up: the 'great acceleration' has its foundations in

[11] Heise, p. 11.
[12] In the case of parody, Currie suggests that this speeding-up has led to a decoupling of the act of recontextualisation from its original, ironic purpose: 'the acceleration of the cycle of recontextualisation in general must dispense with the ironic content of recontextualisation in general, so that the repetition of past aesthetic styles becomes value-free'. Currie, p.10-11

a much more concrete, material reality. The forces meant to stabilise global systems are now managed to a great extent by computers that can synthesise vast swathes of information and make decisions, based on their programmed logic, in milliseconds. This is true in transport, in military contexts but also in the ruling system – the financial markets. High-frequency trading means that increasingly 'intelligent' bots buy and sell in a fraction of a second based on the movements of the market. While removing the 'human' element from such transactions would seem to increase stability, recent events such as currency 'flash crashes' give a sense that real-world systems are increasingly moving at a pace beyond human comprehension and control.[13] This sense of being part of a vast, fast-moving network which is generally stable – but which always carries the threat of spinning out of control faster than its human subjects can control it – would seem to contribute to the kind of unease in our space and time to which Boxall alludes.

Defining 'slowness' and digression

It will be my contention in this chapter that the texts of this study, though radically different from one another in both form and content, provide rich insight into the ways in which we might engage with or resist the temporal forces that dominate human experience in the twenty-first century, particularly through narrative. Of particular interest will be the texts which, on the surface, appear to reject most completely the undercurrents of speed and simultaneity: those of Christine Montalbetti. Montalbetti's texts appear to adopt a kind of radical narrative slowness, with the dilatory pace of the texts stretching diegetic time to almost absurd proportions. Employing 'slowness' as a resistance to the dominant culture of speed and simultaneity has proven to be a rich source of creativity in both practice and theory, with theorists from various disciplinary backgrounds investigating the notion through their works.[14] Slowness as 'mindfulness' or resistance to a culture of excess can be seen in popular phenomena like the 'slow food' movement founded by Carlo Petrini in the 1980s.[15] A more general call for 'slowness' in our daily lives, where slowness is often a synonym for resisting the turbocapitalist penchant for excessive and rapid consumption and production, can also be

[13] Take for example the Knight Capital software which effectively lost its human 'handler' $440m in under an hour: Tim Harford, 'High-frequency trading and the $440m mistake', *BBC Magazine*: BBC Radio 4: More or Less, 11 August 2012 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-19214294> [Accessed 10/05/17].
[14] See for example Lutz Koepnick's *On Slowness* which sees slowness as a feature of the contemporary, and Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence* which examines the destructive potential of long-term, slow economic and social violence which is often ignored in a world dominated by spectacle and short-termism.
[15] See the Slow Food International website: https://www.slowfood.com/ [accessed 20/01/18].

seen in popular non-fiction such as journalist Carl Honoré's book *In Praise of Slow*.[16] Similarly, slowness as an aesthetics has been identified as a resistance to a culture which is dominated by simultaneity and 'noise'. Lutz Koepnick describes 'slowness' as 'a special eagerness to account for and engage with a present marked by such a seemingly overwhelming and mind-numbing sense of simultaneity'[17] and seeks to 'define slowness as a strategy of the contemporary.'[18] While the notion of the contemporary itself is, as I have argued, still contentious, Koepnick's centring of slowness in contemporary artistic practice is a useful starting point for an exploration of time culture and temporality within the texts of this study.

It is worth taking pause to consider first, though, what the rather nebulous concepts of 'speed' and 'slowness' look like in the context of a fictional narrative. The works of Gérard Genette, and in particular his notions of *vitesse* and *durée,* have provided extensive frameworks for the study time in narrative. In *Figures III* Genette offers the follow definition of *vitesse*:

> On entend par vitesse le rapport entre une mesure temporelle et une mesure spatiale (tant de mètres à la seconde, tant de secondes par mètre): la vitesse du récit se définira par le rapport entre une durée, celle de l'histoire, mesurée en secondes, minutes, heures, jours, mois et années, et une longueur: celle du texte, mesurée en lignes et en pages.[19]

What Genette calls the *durée* of the text refers to what we might also call diegetic time – the fictional cosmic time on the level of the diegesis and the ticking clock for the characters on the level of the story. Genette's *vitesse* describes the relationship between this duration, which is a temporal parameter, and the length of the text which, though inherently a spatial parameter (as Genette notes) can be and is often thought of as another type of time – readerly time – which would be the time it takes the reader to advance through the book. Of course, attempts to redefine *vitesse* as a purely temporal measure in this way are limited by the nature of the relationship between reader and text: some readers may advance more quickly than others, the reader might skip a page or turn back to an earlier episode.

The Genettian 'degree zero' of speed would be a narrative in which the time of reading is perfectly equal to that of the time of the story, with none of the variations in duration he

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[16] Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* (London: Orion, 2005).
[17] Koepnick, p. 3.
[18] Ibid. p. 5.
[19] Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 123. He also cites Müller and Barthes: Günther Müller, *Gestaltung Umgestaltung in Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahren* (Halle, Saale: M. Niemeyer, 1948); Roland Barthes, 'Le Discours de l'histoire', *Information sur les sciences sociales*, 6 (1967), 63–75.

highlights. These variations include pauses, where diegetic time appears to stop, usually focusing in on a detail or description that takes up textual space but does not advance time on the diegetic level; summaries in which large tracts of diegetic time are passed in only a few lines of text; and ellipses where a gap in the text (on the level of the paragraph or even sentence) represents a section of diegetic time that has passed between two episodes. In both Montalbetti and Lenoir, the passing of diegetic time compared to textual space is slower than this hypothetical degree zero, and, in Montalbetti in particular, often frustrates readers' expectations of advancement through plot.

This type of narrative slowness which finds its logical conclusion in the Genettian pause should, I think, be differentiated from another type of resistance to speed, which I am here calling *digression*. In many ways, digressiveness and slowness are overlapping concepts. Digression may complement the slow aesthetic of texts such as Montalbetti's, but the notion of digression implies that the text diverges from its implied or assumed aim or *telos*. In many ways, the presence or lack of a stated (or at least implied) *telos* in the text is central both to the reader's understanding of the temporality of the text and to the way that the text engages with or rejects the temporal culture of the twenty-first century. If we take the word 'telos' to mean, as the Oxford English Dictionary defines it, the '[e]nd, purpose, ultimate object or aim', it becomes clear that the texts of the three contemporary authors this study examines have a complex relationship with the *telos*, for several reasons. While some of the texts, such as Montalbetti's *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent* or *Love Hotel* and Lenoir's *Tilleul* do drive towards some kind of final defining moment or dénouement (the French narrator being rejected and beaten by American locals, the 2011 earthquake in Japan, and the female protagonist's 'escape' from her possessive brother respectively) which are alluded to throughout the texts, most do not have a clear progression from beginning to end – and those that do usually end with the text's initial situation unchanged or problem unresolved. Pireyre, meanwhile, though her *Féerie générale* is explicitly labelled as a novel, does not seem to seek any kind of resolution or *telos* in her texts at all.

It is also important to keep in mind the other meanings of *telos* – as 'ultimate object or aim' – because they raise important questions about the purpose of literature itself. Of course, such questions ('what is literature for?') are far beyond the scope of this study, but one might ask: are the texts in question somehow subverting the reader's expectation of a narrative advancing towards a clear end point? Of course, this begs the questions as to how we know whether a text is advancing or not, and whether 'advancing' means anything at all in the context

of a written text. Simon Kemp discusses the spatial metaphors often employed to discuss narrative:

> The question of why a line should be an appropriate representation for narrative, which, after all, has no existence in space, does not occur to writer or reader. In fact, the conceptualization of narrative as a line is so commonplace as to have become a dead metaphor.[20]

As Kemp points out, the narrative 'line' is not simply a chronological concept, but also one which relies on the notion of *meaning*: '[T]he metaphorical line of narrative […] does not stand in place of time alone: narrative line is composed of both chronology and signification.'[21] In this way, digression from the 'purpose' of the narrative is not simply something which takes up a lot of readerly time (textual space), but also, as Kemp continues with reference to Sterne's *Tristram Shandy,* is judged by the reader to be in some way irrelevant to the narrative:

> What makes Sterne's lines less than straight is the meaning of the story. If time is represented in the length of the line, then meaning is its direction. Specifically, it is the degree of relevance of a given episode to the story of Tristram Shandy's life that determines how close the line comes to the straight trajectory of "pure" significance.[22]

It is clear that texts like Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* had already explored the use of a self-reflexive narrator whose infinite digressions (and self-conscious remarks on his own digressiveness) take up more of the narrative than any plot on the diegetic level. As Simon Kemp points out, Montalbetti is one of the few contemporary theorists to treat digression both in her critical work and her fiction.[23] Her texts prove difficult to summarise precisely because the plot is given far less weight than the process of narration itself, and any kind of advancement towards a purpose is obscured by the narrator's irrepressible chattiness.[24]

This chapter will make a distinction between these two types of resistance to speed within the texts. My analysis of the complex chronologies presented in these works will begin

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[20] Simon Kemp, 'The Inescapable Metaphor: How Time and Meaning become Space When We Think about Narrative', *Philosophy and literature,* 36 (2012), 391-403 (p. 393).
[21] Ibid. p. 394.
[22] Ibid. p. 395.
[23] Kemp, p. 98 & 168.
[24] It should also be noted that Montalbetti's fictions often give a 'clin d'œil' to the digressionist texts she refers to in her critical works, for example the 'Jacques' of *L'Origine de l'homme* as Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste.*

with an exploration of Montalbetti's use of *slowness* on the diegetic level. I will then turn to Lenoir's use of a more phenomenological version of slowness, in which the advancement of the plot is slowed by a focus on the temporality of individual introspection. This will lead on to a discussion of the digressiveness of Montalbetti's texts, in which the narrative seems to follow the often unstructured rêverie of the narrator. This will lead into a discussion of how Montalbetti's narrator plays with these notions, often in a very self-reflexive way, creating a ludic temporality which resists notions of speed. Finally, I will discuss the notion of distractedness, digression and simultaneity with reference to Pireyre, raising the question as to whether it is possible – or advisable – to think of her texts in temporal terms at all.

Slowness in Montalbetti

The 'slowness' of Montalbetti's texts is one of their most salient features: interviewer Silvio Santini describes the most striking element of her texts as the fact that they are 'des histoires généralement très courtes dans la durée: 24 heures, 3 heures, quelques minutes […] des récits generalement très dilatés qui créent des effets de lenteur'.[25] In *Expérience de la campagne,* for example, we might note in particular an episode where the protagonist hears the doorbell ring, and answers it to find his friend, Hanz, there. When the door opens and the two characters see one another, the narrator stops the narrative: 'Immobilisons nos deux héros en leur amorce de retrouvailles et revenons si vous le voulez en arrière, histoire d'apporter encore quelques précisions' (EC 20). These 'precisions' take up a further ten pages. The narrator makes explicit the division between the temporal logic on the level of the narrative, where time is flexible and can be manipulated; and the diegetic level, where the characters are unaware of what is going to happen, or that time has slowed down or paused. This is highlighted particularly through the use of parenthesis: 'Simon (la minute à laquelle Hanz va sonner à sa porte se rapproche, mais comment pourrait-il l'anticiper?) du canapé se lève […]' (EC 30). The narrative has still not 'caught up' to the critical moment in the diegetic present yet (the moment when Hanz rings the doorbell).

> Le cocon, j'y insiste, car je ne voudrais pas que vous en minimisiez l'importance, mais il est une péripétie qui me bouscule, qui me presse, qui est sur le bord d'arriver et qui

[25] 'De la cinéfiction en littérature. Rencontre avec Christine Montalbetti', in *Mondes contemporains* (2014), interviewed by Silvio Santini <http://radiospirale.org/capsule/de-la-cinefiction-en-litterature-rencontre-avec-christine-montalbetti> [Accessed 02/08/2018].

> souhaite ici prendre sa place, qui joue des coudes, alors que je n'en ai pas tout à fait terminé avec cette histoire d'inapparence (EC 41-2).

And even further: '[…] on me houspille, on me serre, de trop près, je n'ai pas de place assez, je suis tout contre je ne sais quoi qui ne me laisse pas déployer ma parole à l'aise […]' (EC 42). And finally, after pages of time moving very slowly back towards the point where the diegesis left off, we're back to Hanz ringing the doorbell: '[…] allez-y monsieur Hanz faites votre incursion puisqu'il est l'heure de votre entrée en scène. Ding dong' (EC 43).

This metacommentary on the temporal parameters within Montalbetti's texts, and particularly in *Expérience de la campagne,* has the dual effect of 'taking up time' within the narrative, strengthening the aesthetics of slowness and digression, and of making time itself the central focus of the narrative. These self-reflexive episodes which play with the idea of the 'pause' – that is, a moment when the diegetic time does not advance at all, but textual space is taken up – are perhaps more obvious, I think, than the less self-reflexive moments of actual narrative pause in Montalbetti. One of the most striking examples of the 'pure' Genettian pause in Montalbetti is the moment where the protagonist stops to observe a painting, leading the narrative to 'pause' upon the image for some time. In *L'Origine de l'homme* the notion that this is a 'pause' in proceedings is implied by the narrator's announcement of it: 'Les moments oisifs et vaguement désabusés que Jacques passe actuellement dans ce cabinet de lecture seront occasion de vous décrire quelques-unes des gravures, aquarelles, huiles, photographies qui étoilent les deux autres murs, très chargés […]' (OH 200). The description of the paintings and photographs continues for some ten pages, when '[l]e regard de Jacques quitte les tableaux pour s'enfuir vers la fenêtre' (OH 210). In *Expérience de la campagne* there is a simlar episode: 'Tandis qu'il faisait cette petite plongée en lui-même pour examiner la teneur exacte de l'expérience de la campagne, d'un doigt, tenez, Simon avait commencé de suivre une ligne géométrique et coudée du motif de la toile cirée' (EC 53).

After considerable textual space taken up by descriptions on the paintings and digressions concerning their subjects, the narrator announces that Simon has stopped looking at the painting: 'L'œil de Simon quitta la toile cirée, et le reflux qu'elle portait avec elle […]' (EC 72). This kind of 'pause' is also present in Proust (for example the descriptions of Giotto's panels in *Du côté de chez Swann*) and is picked up by Genette in *Figures III.*[26] Montalbetti's fictional universes are inherently self-reflexive ones which draw upon literary criticism and

[26] Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 145.

history to make frequent 'clins d'œil' which signal, to some degree, what the text is doing. The description of paintings seems to be a nod to the experimentation with dilation of diegetic time (what we are calling 'pause', using Genette's term) of Proust in particular, whose works would later be the subject of Genette's readings and therefore indirectly affect the theoretical frameworks and terminology that the latter developed. While Montalbetti's texts do engage with Genettian and Proustian conceptions of time, they mark themselves out from previous experimentation with time or with digression (for example in Sterne or Diderot) by their resolute reflexivity: the texts not only acknowledge their own manipulation of diegetic time, but also nod to their own extensive literary heritage.

The aesthetics of slowness in Montalbetti's texts is therefore compounded by the self-reflexivity of her narratives and the use of extensive metacommentary on the temporal parameters of the texts themselves: there is an almost compulsive discussion of time and its passing. Time appears as rigid and fluid; strictly controlled and ungraspable. In certain texts, such as *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses*, time becomes the dominant paradigm within the narrative. It is a novel which (drawing upon Currie's assertion about all novels being to some degree 'about time') is ruled to a great extent by questions of time and temporality; it is no accident that the single permitted personal object that the astronauts choose to take with them is often a watch (VF 80). This novel portrays a situation of inherently strange temporality: there are moments of great speed (countdown and launch into orbit) interspersed between long periods of idleness as the shuttle and astronauts wait for launch or travel to the space station. The novel also touches upon the ways in which temporal conditions of human experience can be altered: the narrator remarks that 'Des choses simples peuvent réclamer, là-haut, un temps infini, à cause de toute cette attention qu'il vous faut porter à chaque geste,' (VF 195); an echo, perhaps, of the dilatory pace of many of Montalbetti's novels.

Additionally, and again due to the nature of the subject (a mission which must take place under strict temporal and spatial conditions), precise measures of chronological 'clock' time are omnipresent within the text. Rather than creating a rigid or rhythmic temporality within the narrative, this use of chronological time simply highlights the fluid, subjective temporality of the Montalbettian narrative: during periods of waiting or great stress, time slows, while during times of action it speeds up significantly. The text's focus on a technological achievement of the twentieth century – space travel – also captures the intense speed of our technologically-driven societies in the twenty-first century, a speed which is contrasted with the meandering, leisurely pace of the text itself. What is more, the narrator theorises this fluid

relationship to time within the narrative itself, again drawing attention to the constructedness of the texts' temporality:

> On fait, du temps, toutes sortes d'expériences. Parfois, l'espace d'une journée vous paraît trop exigu pour tout ce que vous avez à accomplir […]. Parfois, à l'inverse, les heures sont de gentilles choses molles, et vous y êtes comme enveloppé(e) d'un édredon, à les laisser simplement passer (VF 81).

In the text, this takes the form of alternation between an extreme consciousness of chronological time, where the narrative either 'jumps' to specific moments in chronological time which are significant (i.e. the clock is the ordering force of the narrative) or slows the chronological clock to focus in on each passing second (for example, the launch), and a 'timeless', meandering mode which resembles that of Montalbetti's other texts. For example, while the weather threatens to put back the launch time, chronological time moves forward in jolting saccades throughout the text.

> À 5 heures ce matin, les pluies menaçaient […]. A 5h24, les choses semblaient s'éclaircir, puis à 5h43 ces nuages lourds à crever paraissaient de nouveau prohibitifs. À 6h30, la perspective de l'annulation du lancement était quasi certaine, mais on s'était donné jusqu'à 7h30 pour prendre une décision. À 6h47, on se dirigeait de nouveau vers un *go*. Le suspense est épuisant (VF 20).

These periods of waiting for the specific, scheduled event lead to an obsessive repetition of very precisely measured chronological time, mirroring the time-consciousness of the protagonists and the strictly measured and regulated (temporally, spatially) scientific spaces they occupy: 'À 9h40, la météo s'oppose à un lancement. […] À 9h54, le risque que le lancement n'ait pas lieu est de nouveau évalué à 70 %.' (VF 84); and later: 'Vers 10h45, on penche nettement pour le *go*. […] L'horaire de lancement prévu était 11h26: il semble qu'on puisse le maintenir' (VF 85).

However, when the order is given to prepare for departure, and presumably the protagonists are preparing themselves mentally and physically for the launch, the measures of chronological time become significantly less precise: 'Il est quelque chose comme 10h55' (VF 86); C'est une affaire de minutes, maintenant' (VF 86). The narrator also theorises this kind of difference in our temporal experience, writing that:

> Et puis parfois il y a, sur la ligne ordinaire du temps, un événement prévu, à un horaire fixe, auquel il faut faire face. Ce temps tout serré, inextensible, qui vous sépare du départ d'un train, par exemple, et où d'un coup la forme ample et soyeuse des heures se transforme en un cadre contraint […] (VF 81).[27]

This notion of the 'normal line of time' being disturbed by a fixed event in chronological time over which one has no control (the narrator adds that 'l'heure où votre train démarrera est une réalité qui ne vous appartient pas, et comme le temps est étroit alors et ses arêtes aiguës et ses parois rigides' (VF 82)) theorises the very nature of the text, with its ample time for retrospection and anticipation punctuated by a series of events fixed in chronological time by outside forces (the launch and mission control teams). When the launch itself begins the movement of chronological time takes over the narrative completely for a brief moment in the form of a countdown of seconds: 'Le décompte de secondes commence. […] Plus que quarante secondes. […] 34, 33, 32. 31. Le chiffre se fige. Aië, il y a un problème' (VF 88).

I believe that the effect of this self-reflexive manipulation of the texts' chronologies and temporal parameters is to create an impression of *slowness,* which resists our contemporary penchant for speed and simultaneity, while maintaining a sense of unease or dislocation within the temporal logic of the text. The slowness of Montalbetti's texts is paired with an extreme degree of narratorial reflexivity about the temporality of the novel. In many ways Montalbetti's use of extreme narrative slowness in an age of simultaneity and speed – especially when those narratives describe subjects, such as space travel, natural disasters or westerns, normally associated with speed – can be seen as an act of literary resistance to the dominant culture of time. There are some ways, however, in which Montalbetti's texts do reflect our current time culture. There is a dual temporality in the Montalbettian universe: time seems to be at once more strictly controlled and measured than ever, but to the individual this control time means that the passing of time appears as a source of obsession and anxiety.

Slowness in Lenoir

[27] It is interesting that Montalbetti's narrator should mention the 'normal line of time' ('ligne ordinaire du temps') at all, given that the narrative certainly does not attempt to mimic, in its form, the steady advance of chronological (cosmic) time. It might mean 'closer to extra-textual reality' in the sense that the time of reading is roughly equivalent to that of the actions taking place in the diegesis, or Genette's 'degré zéro' of duration, but the narrative has already shown itself to be far from that, dilating time to an almost ludicrous degree.

Compared to those of Montalbetti, Lenoir's texts employ a more phenomenological model of time because the narratives are, on the most part, focused through one or more protagonists. The texts are generally temporally and spatially limited, focusing in on the protagonists' subjective realities: the novels therefore mimic the fluid temporality of introspection. This introspection, crucially, is dominated by repetition, temporal ellipses and rapid switching between recollected pasts and hypothetical presents and future, punctuated by incursions of the 'real' into the narrative. The collapsed temporal parameters of these texts create the effect of an obsessive, repetitive consciousness which, on more than one occasion, borders on madness. The notion of the breakdown or of burnout as a response to the contemporary condition is one which has gained popularity in recent years, not least in Pascal Chabot's *Global burn-out*, in which the author describes an epidemic of burnout and stress as 'cette pathologie de la civilisation moderne'.[28] It would not be a stretch to imagine that Lenoir's use of phenomenological time and the dislocated introspections of her protagonists might reflect, in many ways, the notions of burn-out, since nervous conditions or almost pathological obsessions appear as a motif within her œuvre. In *Son nom d'avant* Britt is plagued by a nervous condition and her late sister-in-law was medicated for (it is implied) a depressive disorder. In *Pièce rapportée* the protagonist's daughter had previously attempted suicide on several occasions. In *Tilleul* Gilles Harper's paranoia and obsessiveness lead to an increasingly erratic narrative and intrusions of past memories into the present, while *Le Répit*'s male protagonist obsessively returns to his own perceived emasculation throughout the narrative, which culminates in him sexually assaulting a fellow passenger.

Let us examine further Lenoir's use of pause and distorted diegetic time to mimic the strange temporality of introspection: as a result of the many forays into past events and hypothetical futures (or subjective pasts) in her texts, the relationship between the 'reading time' of the text and the time that has passed on the diegetic level is elastic. The effect of this elasticity is twofold: firstly, the temporal structures of the text reflect the temporal existence of the character through whom the narrative is focalised. While Montalbetti's texts appear more concerned with playing with the narratalogical foundations of fictional time, Lenoir's novels explore the inherently strange temporality of human experience (dominated by revisions of the past and worries of the future), altered further by the increasingly dominant time-related

[28] Pascal Chabot, *Global burn-out* (Paris: Quadrige, Presses Universitaires de France, 2013), p. 4.

pathologies in twenty-first century developed societies: anxiety, obsession, burn-out.[29] Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, what emerges are texts that are almost as 'slow' as those of Montalbetti's: the texts cover a very limited span of chronological time, often the course of a single day, but the divagations of protagonists' minds mean that the actual textual space is taken up by hypothetical futures or subjective – and often repeated – versions of the past. Somewhat counterintuitively, many of the texts are also peppered with references to chronological 'clock' time on the level of the diegesis. Not only does this highlight the elasticity of the narrative speed, but doing so also suggests that the protagonists themselves – through whom, as I have mentioned, the narrative is focalised – are obsessed with clock time and its schedules and restraints.

Take, for example *Le Répit*, one of Lenoir's earlier texts. The first section of the novel, which spans over thirty pages (R 7-46), makes up around a third of the novel and covers simply the protagonist's preparations to leave the house. The events this section recounts take place over less than two hours in diegetic time. The protagonist's anxieties and recollections about previous events, peppered with interruptions in the present (an unexpected phone call, for example), take up so much textual space that the advancement of the plot is slowed to a crawl. Though their respective narratorial styles are very different, I would note again here that, in this aspect at least, Lenoir's texts employ similar temporal structures to those of Montalbetti, especially in the latter's *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses*. Time initially appears to be completely fluid within the narrative of introspection, with little to no action on the diegetic level, but eventually events, often of an unintended or unexpected nature, disturb this fluid introspection and bring the narrative back to the diegetic present – the 'cadre contraint' that Montalbetti's narrator refers to in *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses*. We might also note that the example given by Montalbetti's narrator of a fixed event – that of a train departure, the time of which one cannot alter – has a special resonance within *Le Répit*, where the protagonist's complex train journey requires several changes and a detailed timetable, the negotiation of which punctuates the narrative.

Within the moments of introspection, though, there is not a stable relationship between diegetic and reading time. Though there are few direct markers of time in the text, it is indicated that at the beginning of this first section it is 5pm (R 7). Twenty pages later, it is ten to six (R

[29] As Chabot suggests, the 'global burn-out phenomenon' is related to the frenetic speed of our society: '[…] le burn-out est une pathologie de civilisation. L'époque aime l'intensité, le rendement et la mobilisation,' ibid. p. xii.

27). Sometimes diegetic time is even further dilated, for example at one point within this passage four pages reading time (R 27-31) sees ten minutes of diegetic time pass. Critically, the temporal and narrative structures of the text appear to become more chaotic as the protagonist becomes more and more agitated, culminating in his perpetration of a violent assault. For example, a somewhat garbled version of a recent memory – the moment the Danish passenger he assaults enters the train, which has already appeared in the text – reappears as he wanders the train corridors: 'ils ne s'étaient pas encombrés de politesses anglaises et compliquées, valise, gros seins, parapluie, canif, fruit juteux exhibé pour le faire saliver tout en mettant son sac en plastique hors de portée, il avait mal aux genoux' (R 84). The listing of objects (including, unfortunately, his fellow passenger) present here hints at the phenomenological foundations of Lenoir's narrative time: what is perceived by the protagonist, real or otherwise, take up textual space, what we conceive of as readerly time. The structures of the narrative therefore reflect the often pathological obsessions of the protagonist.

A similar structure can be seen in another early Lenoir text, *Elle va partir*. The text begins by declaring that the protagonist, Mattis, is immobile in bed: 'Allongé tout habillé sur son lit, les yeux ouverts, les bras le long du corps, les jambes tendues, il a froid, mais il ne bouge pas' (EP 7). On this opening page, we learn that he is listening to a storm which began one hour earlier ('le vent levé depuis une heure' (EP 7)). During the first half of the text Mattis remains immobile, but the narrative follows his thoughts as he contemplates recent events of the (fictional) past. Since the narrative is focalised through him, this section of the text is dominated by his memories of these past events, with the occasional fragment of the present moment – that is Mattis trying to sleep during the storm – making its way into the narrative ('Il se soulève pour s'enrouler grossièrement dans les couvertures' (EP 9), 'Voir le vent, voir comme il tord ou casse les ombres sur les murs (EP 35), '[…] le vent s'apaise entre deux rafales […]' (EP 53)'). It is punctuated, too, by indicators of clock time in the present: 'Il allume sa lampe: une heure vingt-cinq' (EP 54), which allow the reader to grasp, albeit to a fairly limited extent, the varying speed of the narrative. It is only more than half-way through the text (EP 93) that the 'present' time on the diegetic level becomes dominant in the narrative, when the storm ends and the next day begins. At this point we know that it is eight o'clock (EP 94) and when Camelin calls, expecting Mattis to come and help rake leaves for his wife Eliane at 8.30am as promised, he refers to the storm the night before: 'vous avez entendu la tempête cette nuit?' (EP 95).

All of the episodes recounted in this first half of the text are recounted out of their chronological order – the important ordering force in this part of the narrative is not the chronology of events according to the diegetic clock, but the significance afforded to them by the protagonist Mattis through whom the narrative is focalised. Some episodes are therefore repeated, recounted in part and picked up later, or brushed over according to the whims of Mattis: for example, we might note the repetition of small pieces of dialogue, which, while they only happened once on the diegetic level, appear twice on the level of the narrative. Here, Mattis challenges Camelin about having betrayed his promise to let his mother die at home, not at the hospital: '– Est-ce qu'on ne peut pas la ramener? – Mais comment?' (EP 10-1). The text then turns to another subject, going back in time to an earlier episode. And then the same piece of dialogue appears again, this time leading into the rest of the conversation: '– Est-ce qu'on ne peut pas la ramener? – Mais comment? D'une voix pointue, indignée […]' (EP 12).

In contrast to these episodes which are repeated or which, like the storm, take up a great deal of textual space, some events in this first half of the text are glossed over with short summaries or omitted altogether. For example, between two interactions between Mattis and Camelin, there is an ellipsis of two hours with only a paragraph break to indicate the 'lost time' in the diegesis: ' – Ah non! Non! Vous viendrez! Ça vous occupera […] Je compte sur vous!'; followed directly by a new paragraph which begins: 'Et il l'avait rappelé deux heures plus tard' (EP 17). These temporal saccades are all the more jolting given the large amount of textual space given over to seemingly insignificant details. A phenomenological time, that of introspection, is what dominates the texts; it is the anxious and erratic minds of the protagonists, through whom the narrative is focalised, that dictate the temporality of the narrative.

A final, and perhaps the most significant, example of this introspective and phenomenological temporality can be seen in *Pièce rapportée*. The first section of the text, labelled simply 'I' (PR 11-82), covers a period of time equivalent to roughly twenty-four hours or less: when Elvire arrives at the hospital to see her daughter Claire, a clock shows it is 4.22pm (PR 24) – a peculiarly specific moment in chronological clock time – one of many clocks and schedules within Lenoir's texts. The following morning she attends the hospital in the early morning but is told to return at 10am, when it is quieter (PR 51). In referring constantly to clock or chronological time while flouting its parameters in order to draw out the introspective temporality of the text, Lenoir highlights both the slowness of her narratives and the temporal anxieties that underpin them. The division between chronological and phenomenological time explored in texts like Michel Butor's *La modification* are brought to mind here, especially given

the relative dominance of the subjective past over an objective present. For example, Elvire, Claire's mother, sits on a train – almost certainly a nod to *La modification* – but her mind wanders back through various past events. Since the narrative is focalised through her, it 'follows' these thoughts back to a past episode:

> Tournée vers la vitre sale et peut-être bleutée du train, Elvire essaie de se souvenir, de reconstituer très précisément la dernière scène, gestes, paroles, et le lieu exactement, la lumière, le visage, la voix, non pas celle trop connue du téléphone, mais celle du depart, la voix de Claire s'en allant dix jours plus tôt, houspillée par son père qui avait décidé à la dernière minute de la déposer à la gare […] (PR 13).

The narrative shifts – even during this sentence – into being focalised through Elvire ('Je n'entends que ça, lui gueulant […]' (PR 13)) as her focus shifts back into the past; first the episode ten days earlier, then to the moment where Antoine called her from the taxi he was taking to the hospital (PR 15) then back to the preceding Christmas (PR 15) – the thematic link being Antoine ('Claire lui avait parlé pour la première fois d'Antoine à Noël […]' (PR 15)) – then back to her third suicide attempt at twenty-four.[30] Finally, we come back to the accident as Elvire asks herself whether Claire intended another suicide attempt, finally concluding that it must indeed have been an accident since the motorcyclist fled the scene (PR 20).

Throughout these temporal leaps, there are very few indicators of what is happening in the present, apart from the fact that the train is passing fields of rapeseed ('[…] sentir quelque chose là, là… Tout ce colza…' (PR 15), 'Pourquoi, se demandait-elle en regardant défiler les champs de colza alternant avec des étendues tout aussi immenses d'orge, d'avoine ou de blé verts […] pourquoi est-ce que j'ai dit ça dès sa naissance […]' (PR 18)). What we might call her 'rêverie' is interrupted by her phone ringing (in a single-word sentence in a new paragraph: 'Sonnerie.' (PR 21)) which breaks what has been almost seven pages of long, winding sentences with multiple clauses, lists and (occasionally) a breakdown of normal syntax as Elvire's mind wanders off ('Non. Frédéric ne bougera pas… il… Je ne veux pas penser à ça, je veux, je voudrais pouvoir pleurer […]' (PR 15)).

The narrative, as in many of Lenoir's novels, becomes more erratic, moving rapidly between various times and subjects as the protagonist becomes more and more anxious. It is this combination of narrative slowness (which appears, on the surface to resist the

[30] Another specific time is given for this: we are told that the preceding attempt was '[le] septembre précédent, à peine huit mois.'

contemporary penchant for fragmentary, 'fast' narratives) and rapid switching of tenses and subjects that makes, I would argue, Lenoir's texts such fertile ground for study into contemporary temporality. While chronological time appears slowed to a crawl within the diegetic universe, the protagonists' anxieties mean that their own experience appears overwhelming and incomprehensible. Another episode in *Pièce rapportée* of this anxiety and introspection combined can be seen when Elvire, having visited the hospital but unable to obtain any news of Claire, takes a taxi to the place of the accident. The episode begins in the present, initially portraying her feelings about the current situation: she is self-conscious about how she appears to the taxi driver ('Je suis folle, il doit le sentir, le voir dans son rétroviseur' (PR 26)) and then worries about a hypothetical future situation – that she will not be able to return in time if the hospital calls to say Claire is waking up ('je ne serai pas là, elle verra son père et ce sera…' (PR 26)). The narrative then switches abruptly to a past episode, the departure of Claire's sister, Anne, ('Le mépris et la rancœur d'Anne, qui, depuis son départ, cinq ans plus tôt, n'avait jamais donné signe de vie […]' (PR 27)) and then back to Anne's adolesence, then to her relationship with Claas (PR 28). Since the reader is not, at any given time, familiar with all of the characters and situations mentioned, the effect is one of further disorientation as the reader must attempt to piece together the disjointed 'story' that forms the protagonist's subjective reality.

The focus on this inner reality is often interrupted, however, by intrusions of present events – often unexpected, and surprising the character by how much time has passed while they were focusing on past or hypothetical events. The above reverie, for example, is broken by a sudden jolt back to the present, this time in the form of direct speech from Elvire herself: '– Mais c'est Péreire ici!, dit-elle brusquement au chauffeur. Oui je reconnais, on est allés plus vite que je croyais…' (PR 28). This disorientation that the protagonist feels ('on est allés plus vite que je croyais') reflects, in many ways, the readerly experience in Lenoir's novels: focalised through the protagonist, the narrative often elides huge portions of the diegetic present in order to focus on the past. The 'slowness' of this text comes from the fact that very little occurs in the diegetic present – but within that present, the subjective temporality of the protagonists is both chaotic and destabilising.

But the present is, in a sense, the *only* thing we see in the text: what takes up most of the textual space is not, in fact, the diegetic past in the form of a 'flashback' or analespsis, but reconstructed memories of the fictional past, about which the present protagonist ruminates at length. Complex temporalities are a feature of much of Lenoir's work; there are few temporal

markers in the text, but enough to make the reading experience disoriented – sometimes diegetic time slows to a crawl and in other cases it leaps forward. An additional layer of complexity is added by the subjective realities of the protagonists: often they are reflecting upon past events from vastly different moments in their own (fictional) chronological lifetime, meaning that events from various moments of diegetic time appear in the narrative and, occasionally, take on more weight than the present of the diegesis itself. After a night spent by the protagonist, Elvire, at her daughter's apartment and once her telephone runs out of battery, a new section begins: 'Huit heures moins vingt'. The narrative switches briefly into the preterite as we see her calling from a phonebox; this episode must take place before twenty-to-eight, since the 'present' of the text is generally recounted in the present tense (c.f. p. 53, 'Elle secoue la tête, s'essuie le visage et se redresse […]') and this episode is recounted in the past (though it switches very quickly into free direct discourse as Elvire 'hears' the sentence highlighted in bold below):

> Huit heures moins vingt. Elle tomba, comme elle l'espérait, sur Violaine qui s'apprêtait à emmener Frédéric à une station de location de voiture, il était en train de confirmer la réservation sur son portable, **si tu attends trente secondes, je te le passe**' (PR 55, my emphasis).

After hanging up to avoid talking to Frédéric, she reflects upon their meeting and courtship ('c'était le nom qui l'avait séduite. Elle n'avait attentivement regardé l'homme qu'après avoir entendu son nom: Bohlander […]' (PR 57)) and then recalls a moment with her cousin Claas ('Un soir de juin dans les rochers de Dinard, reposant un peu ivre dans les bras de Claas face à la mer.' (PR 57)), and then switches to what appears to be direct speech (but is in fact incorporated into the flow of free direct discourse), which, though written in the present, was taking place at the time that the narrative recounts ('un soir de juin'). She implores Claas to come to her wedding and meet Frédéric, then goes on:

> L'autre jour, Frédéric m'a dit qu'il trouvait que la façon dont je parlais de toi était un peu inquiétante et, après beaucoup de contorsions, il a fini par dire qu'il sentait quelque chose d'un peu malsain d'entre nous, bien qu'il ne t'ait encore jamais vu… Malsain. Tu te souviens que c'était le mot de nos mères et de grand-mère quand elles ont commencé à nous éloigner: On ne se marie pas entre cousins germains, c'est interdit! (PR 58).

In the present of the diegesis, there is little or no movement: both the physical movement of characters and the advancement of the plot are limited. The reader is not yet sure what Elvire is doing, but knows that it is 7.40am (PR 55), and later – much later in the 'reading time' of the text, almost 20 pages further into the text – a waiter asks if she would like anything else (PR 73) so we can assume she is sitting in a café. Since the narrative is focalised through her thoughts, it travels back to the June evening when she is drunk and talking to Claas. Her speech from that time then takes over the narrative, and moves back again to 'l'autre jour', a day which precedes the June evening, and a remark made by Frédéric that day reminds her of something even further back, in her childhood.

In this way, clock time on the diegetic level is almost completely decoupled from readerly time (textual space). Twenty-four hours of diegetic time pass in seventy pages in this first section, but then a temporal and physical ellipsis in the novel – the blank space between the first and second sections – represents a considerable gap in diegetic time. Around twelve weeks pass between the two sections, and, contrary to the clock-and-timetable-obsessed first section, the temporality of this part of the text is vague, with the 'gap' in chronological time only being partially and gradually 'filled in'. The contrast between the temporal structures of the first and second sections reflects, in many ways, the changed circumstances of Elvire, the protagonist. In the crisis-situation following the accident, in an urban centre (Paris) with its schedules of public transport and set times (the hospital visiting hours), time appears as an obsession, while the temporal structures of the text reflect the frantic to-ing and fro-ing of an anxious mind. In the retreat of the beach resort to which she has accompanied her convalescent daughter, whose amnesia requires her to write down events in notebooks in order to remember them, the present of the diegesis seems cut adrift from time altogether, with only vague indications of when certain recalled events – focalised, as before, through Elvire – took place. The pace seems altogether less frenetic – reflecting, perhaps, the advice given to Elvire about aiding her daughter: 'Maintenez le rythme, les horaires. Promenades, pauses, siestes. Tous les repères' (PR 88).

The opening lines of this second section show Claire and Elvire on the beach (it is immediately clear that Claire is still suffering the effects of the accident, given that she forgets that her mother is following her (PR 85)) and forgets the name of her doctor ('Rufa. Le docteur Rufa du Centre. Tu l'as vu hier matin' (PR 86)). Later, when Elvire is talking to a doctor, we see how long it has been since the accident:

> […] le nombre de gens auxquels j'ai dû raconteur depuis deux mois et demi, ça fait douze semaines, je le sais, je compte les semaines comme pour les nouveaux-nés [sic] (PR 95).

Adding to the sense of disorientation, there are also references to and recounting of a number of events have occurred before the narrative restarts in the second section. There is a long monologue from Elvire. This monologue appears to be addressing, imagining a discussion with, or remembering an encounter with a doctor who does not appear directly in the narrative. Throughout the monologue, she effectively fills in some of the events of the previous 12 weeks of diegetic time which have been elided in the narrative (PR 90-107).

This kind of temporal dislocation – events are skipped over in the narrative and only described in retrospect, there are few temporal markers to determine where or when the diegetic present is – adds to the sense of confusion in Lenoir's narratives, here echoed in the amnesiac condition of Claire. Sometimes temporal markers are added retrospectively, with memories recounted with no initial signalling as to their significance: a further section (PR 116-122) recounts a story when Frédéric comes to visit without any temporal markers, then at the end of the section a time is added retrospectively: 'C'était en juillet, le premier week-end avec Frédéric, elle en était sûre à present' (PR 123). Other events which took place in the 'omitted' twelve weeks are peppered throughout the narrative, interrupting – and overshadowing – the diegetic present. One such event is the moment when Claire insulted her mother, which is referred to retrospectively: '[…] il y a huit jours, elle a brutalement lâché sa main et l'a insultée […]' (PR 85). We also know that she assaulted a young waiter from the hotel during this time, but it is described in equally vague terms: this section is recounted in free direct discourse, but instead of Elvire's 'thoughts' the narrative repeats the doctor's instructions for Elvire, which the latter is presumably recalling: 'Quant au serveur de l'hôtel, vous ne pouvez pas demander à Claire de lui faire des excuses puisqu'elle ne se souvient pas de l'avoir agressé' (PR 89).

Compounding the disorientation of the reader is the fact that the narrator rarely, if ever, gives an overview of the situation. There is no 'summary' – what Genette defined as 'la narration en quelques paragraphes ou quelques pages de plusieurs journées, mois ou années d'existence, sans détails d'action ou de paroles'[31] – in the text, and, as in Proust, 'les anachronies […] sont presque toujours […] de véritables scènes, et non des vues cavalières du

[31] Genette, p. 130.

passé ou de l'avenir', instead opting for the 'ellipse pure et simple.'[32] Through this elision of twelve weeks of diegetic time, the reader finds him- or herself attempting to reconstruct a dislocated and destabilising time that echoes the strange temporality of the world occupied by Claire: unable to remember events soon after they have happened since her accident, Claire relies on another person's (Elvire's) subjective accounts of the past and on written traces (the 'cahiers') which the latter helps her write.

Later, another elision – this time possibly far longer, though little indication of the amount of time is given – sees the texts jump to a dinner party after Elvire has effectively been removed from her in-laws' family. This scene takes place in the form of a script complete with stage directions, turning to a completely different temporality; it should be noted that the 'scène de dialogue' with neither ellipses nor narratorial intervention was picked up by Ricardou – and then by Genette – as a kind of 'dégré zéro' in terms of both *ordre* (relationship between 'succession diégetique et succession narrative') and *vitesse*.[33] The opening directions give, in stark contrast to earlier sections, clear temporal and spatial parameters for this scene: 'Chez Bernard et Violaine à Versailles, le premier samedi de décembre, vers midi et demi. Grand salon bourgeois. Anniversaire de Gisèle Bohlander.' (PR 129). The fact that this decisive moment in the novel – effectively the moment at which Elvire realises that she is nothing but a 'Pièce rapportée' to the Bohlander family – is recounted in such a way has two effects. Firstly, the speed of delivery of the speech is vastly increased from dialogues in other sections of the text and the immediacy of the events is underlined. Secondly, presenting this as a text usually destined for theatre or screenplay – as a visual performance – might also hint at the process of narrativisation of events, or indeed suggest that this 'turning point' in Elvire's personal life has been a story so spun and re-spun that it now appears as a fixed, visual scene.

The temporal horizons of the text are therefore extremely limited: while the reader's present (the text they are reading) is taken up with a character's imagined past, the 'future' of the diegesis appears curiously absent – indeed, no-one seems to be able to envisage a future: the doctors refuse to give a definite prognosis. Like Claire, unable to remember even the most recent events and therefore unable to project into the future, the reader's impression is one of a perpetual present. Claire is cast adrift in this present; her only access to the recent past is through Elvire's words and through the 'cahiers' where she notes her daily activities.

[32] Ibid. p. 132.
[33] Ibid. pp. 122-3.

In all three of these novels, and in Lenoir's œuvre more generally, the obsessions and anxieties of the protagonists come to dominate the textual space, creating a jolting, rapidly changing narrative which is, paradoxically, coupled with extreme slowness on the diegetic level, with the entire novels often only covering a single day of diegetic time. Lenoir's texts are, in this sense, though in a different way to Montalbetti's, reminiscent of the *nouveau roman*: in particular, her works create similar effects to those of Butor's *La modification* and Nathalie Sarraute's *Les fruits d'or* and *Le planetarium*.[34] Lenoir's novels employ certain aspects of the spatially and temporally limited universe of Sarraute, using, for example, a seemingly banal domestic setting as the stage for the (often violently aggressive) psychological conflict of the protagonists. She also employs a fragmentary style, with the temporal dislocation we have seen, which is reminiscent of Sarraute's *tropismes*. Rather than simply showing the aggressiveness underlying the veneer of bourgeois respectability in, for example, *Les fruits d'or*, Lenoir's texts often take as their protagonist an individual who is in some way out of step with their surroundings, and whose anxieties and obsessions, often seemingly pathological in nature, become the drivers of the narrative and the sole structure upon which the novel's temporality hangs.

The texts – and particularly *Pièce rapportée* – create an impression of being cast adrift in time and space, only to eventually show that eventually those temporal and spatial horizons are very limited. *Elle va partir* would seem, by its very title, to be the most future-oriented of the Lenoir's texts, but in the end the entire narrative simply waits for a future event that never arrives (the death of Camelin's mother). Similarly, in *La Folie Silaz* the resolution of the situation presented in the beginning – the death of the head of the Silaz family, Odette – seems to be the only future anticipated by any of the characters. In *La Crue de juillet*, the past and future are delimited by Thérèse's arrival in and departure from the small town she visits in order to interview an artist: only scant detail is given about her life outside the town, and none of the protagonists seem to make projections about the future. In this way, Lenoir's texts, I believe, reflect a key feature of twenty-first century temporality: that of short-termism and loss of faith in progress and the future. Despite the characters' constant anxiety and impression that events around them are moving quickly and beyond their control, they are stuck in short-term

[34] Michel Butor, *La Modification* (Paris: Minuit, 1980); Nathalie Sarraute, *Les Fruits d'or* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963); Nathalie Sarraute, *Le Planétarium* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

loops or temporal purgatories, condemned to repeat the same behaviours or to wait for an ending that never arrives.

The introspective temporality of Lenoir's texts has two other main effects: the first is to do with *slowness* while the second is concerned with *dislocation*. The narrative might be called *slow* if we define 'slow' as the antithesis of Genettian 'speed', since the actual diegetic present advances very little in most of her novels while the textual space is dominated by analepses, prolepses and a form of introspective pause. Slowness can be, as we have established, a form of resistance to the culture of speed that dominates contemporary life. Equally, in a society which values productiveness (since time is increasingly equated to money),[35] slow is unproductive. The obsessive introspection of Lenoir's characters makes them not simply self-indulgent: in such a society, their resolute unproductiveness and ability to waste time makes them outsiders (one need only look as far as the attitudes displayed in the right-wing press about those perceived as unproductive members of society, such as asylum seekers or those relying on long-term state support, for a symptom of this phenomenon in European democracies). It should be noted, too, that few of the protagonists are gainfully employed, and none of the novels treated in this study show them working if they do.[36] The second effect of this introspective temporality is that the narratives appear – both in their objects and in their structure – to mimic a kind of pathological anxiety. This is visible both in the texts' often erratic temporal structures and use of repetition, as well as through the protagonists' often more overt obsession with time (we might note how many references to clock time there are in texts like *Elle va partir* and *Pièce rapportée*). This anxiety is in itself, as I have argued, indicative of the kind of response we are seeing, on both a collective and individual level, to our current culture of speed. Lenoir's protagonists might be seen, therefore, as both suffering the ill-effects of the twenty-first century time culture (through their various nervous conditions and maladjusted behaviours), and yet also resisting it (by wasting time and being economically unproductive).

[35] Yves Citton provides a compelling argument on this subject in *Pour une écologie de l'attention* (Citton.).
[36] One of the few employed protagonists, Thérèse of *La crue de juillet*, fails to complete her assignment and turns her phone off to avoid her superior; and in *La magot de Momm* Nann's attempt to get her financial affairs in order with the help of an accountant is revealed to be a front for a romantic relationship. We see a brief meeting between Justus Casella and the photographer Samek in *Son nom d'avant,* but even this is derailed very quickly and taken over by memory, once Samek realises he recognises Casella's wife.

Digression and distractedness

Digression in Montalbetti

Having established the ways in which Montalbetti's and Lenoir's texts resist our 'time culture' by employing a radical slowness within the texts, either in terms of an aesthetics of slowness (Montalbetti) or as a focus on the phenomenological, subjective temporality of the individual (Lenoir), it would be wise to examine digression as a more specific type of resistance to speed which differs, I believe, from the 'pure' narrative slowness described above. To reiterate the sometimes rather subtle difference between slowness and digression: slowness is a temporal measure, though it could be argued it is also a spatial one, since it is often measured by looking at how much diegetic time has passed in a certain number of pages or lines. The more textual space or readerly time taken up by a minute (for example) of diegetic time, the more one would consider the text to be 'slow'. Digression, on the other hand, often contributes to the slowing of the text, but it takes place on a narratorial, rather than a diegetic level. Digression, as Simon Kemp writes, is concerned with both time and *meaning* – the digressive episode must in some way be considered superfluous or peripheral to the central line of the plot. It would be wise, though, to caution against drawing concrete definitions of what is 'central' and 'peripheral' and to consider whether we should think of plot in such spatial terms at all: the use of such spatial metaphors to describe plot is precisely the subject of Kemp's article.[37]

This section will begin with an example – and a particularly lengthy one – of such digression from one of Montalbetti's earliest texts, *Sa fable achevée, Simon sort dans la bruine*. As in Montalbetti's other texts, the digressive narrative style of *Sa fable achevée* is combined with a more general slowing of diegetic time. The result is a narrative so slow that it is almost difficult for the reader to imagine the advance of 'clock' time on the diegetic level. The first bit of 'action' in the text (Hanz ringing the front-door bell of the protagonist's (Simon's) house – is recounted over three pages in a long, digressive sentence. It begins:

> Car lorsque Hanz vint sonner à la porte de la maison de Simon, modifiant tout à fait la composition du puzzle bichrome, herbe et ciel, que le fer forgé laissait apercevoir derrière le carré vitré de l'entrée, en introduisant bien au centre (un peu trop au centre peut-être, il aurait été plus habile de glisser un grain de fantaisie dans une légère

[37] Kemp.

> disproportion des parties droite et gauche de paysage qui encadraient sa figure) un visage chapeauté mal distinct dans le contre-jour, […] (SA 11-13)

Parts of this extract can be considered as pure, Genettian 'pause': the detailed physical description of the shadow patterns outside (another nod, perhaps, to the light patterns of Robbe-Grillet's *La jalousie*). Others, for example the part in parenthesis, are slightly different in nature – they are a self-reflexive aside, which add *something* to the narrative but which do not advance diegetic time. These asides might therefore be termed *digression*, since they move away from the ostensible purpose of the novel to tell a story (implied by the title's use of the term 'fable') but continues to 'take up' textual space with narrative discourse (rather than, for example, description of the diegetic universe). In the Genettian sense the diegesis is 'paused', but Genette's terminology is occasionally limited, especially in cases where, such as this, the advancement of the diegesis seems secondary to the meanderings of the narrator (i.e. discourse itself). The sentence continues:

> et que Simon, fort mécontent de la manière dont l'extérieur pouvait ainsi menacer de s'engouffrer dans son territoire propre mais ouvrant machinalement la porte (et sachant que lui-même avait dû présenter au visiteur le puzzle de son visage se détachant bien sur le fond uni jaune paille du couleur de l'entrée, de sorte qu'il ne pouvait pas, vraiment pas, ou alors au risque d'un éclat beaucoup plus fatiguant qu'un bonjour cordial, prétendre qu'il était absent), reconnut en cet anonyme visiteur de roman enfourragé dans sa gabardine ou informel manteau, […] (SA 11-13)

Again, there is an obsession with the visual aspect of the scene and a hypothetical projection about what his visitor *may* have seen and what the result *may* have been. The overall effect, though, despite all of this detail, is that the narrator is toying with us (the reader): note how the colour of the corridor is described in great detail but the narrator is not sure whether the visitor is wearing a raincoat or an 'informel manteau', and how they self-reflexively refer to the visitor as a 'visiteur de roman'. The sentence continues:

> et portant sur ses traits l'ombre oblique de son chapeau dans un mouvement d'un effet garanti, celui-là, Hanz, que nous avions nommé tout de même, et dont le nom lui revint aussitôt, Hanz, comme une petite fusée déchirant le plan de papier vertical qu'on avait mis entre soi et les choses et venant se ficher là, dans votre cou, l'extraire de votre encolure précautionneusement entre le pouce et l'index et accepter les effets de la

> tridimensionnalité, tendre la main dans l'espace ainsi accueilli et serrer celle de Hanz dans la vôtre, (SA 11-13)

The notion that the whole narrative is artifice is highlighted further by remarks by the narrator ('que nous avions nommé tout de même') and the long metaphorical asides and hypothetical passage, which continues for some time:

> cette peu oubliée refroidie par la route ou bien est-ce un gant qu'il enlève et là, la paume chaude et tous les sentiments d'un coup, revenus, vous affluant au visage, Hanz, vous prononcez son nom à haute voix sur le seuil tandis que vous ne percevez pas que le froid s'engouffre, benêt, oui, absolument stupide devant l'opération qui est en train de se produire et par où le temps se trouve mis sens dessus dessous, Hanz, toi, ici, maintenant, vous bafouillez, vous ne savez plus votre nom à vous, manière de parler, mais le jour, vous avez un petit doute, mais l'année, toi, Hanz, je crois que vous le prenez dans vos bras, que toute l'humidité qu'il a glanée dans sa marche et qui circule à la surface de sa veste entoilée d'un coup vient s'absorber dans les mailles de votre lainage, (SA 11-13)

Eventually this hypothetical digression ends, with a small amount of action on the diegetic level. The notion of the 'temps perdu' referred to by the narrator not only evokes the temporal experimentations of Proust, but is humorous given the length of readerly time (textual space) taken up with this initial meeting between the two characters:

> eh bien Simon de même, contre son costume folklorique, embrasse étymologiquement Hanz, et reçoit contre son corps le choc d'un temps perdu et qui d'un bloc se repose à lui.' (SA 11-13)

This example of the digressive narrative in *Sa fable achévée, Simon sort dans la bruine* demonstrates how Montalbetti's texts often display a degree of tension between the notion of progress and those of rêverie, or digression: with little or no action in the diegesis, the text appears to have no central purpose and no clear *telos*, yet the title itself implies some kind of conclusive dénouement or ending ('sa fable achévée'). In his book *Loiterature,* Ross Chambers suggests that digressive literature may in some way resist what he calls a 'culture of speed' and, citing Baudelaire, a 'culture of impatience':

> Citing Paul Virilio, Rey Chow has drawn attention to modernist writing as a form of resistance to the culture of impatience, and I'll follow suit by attempting to describe a

> complementary phenomenon, the emergence of "flâneur reading" as a critical practice that takes the culture of speed as its object.[38]

In many ways, and as we have seen, Montalbetti takes this idea of resistance to a culture of speed and impatience to extremes. Her digressive fictions subvert the usual teleological structures of the genre with which they appear to associate themselves (the western, historical fiction, etc). In *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent* we see more explicit digression with several nods to other digressionist texts. For example, the bar which is a location for much of the metadiegetic episodes is called the *Retour d'Ulysse;* in her theoretical work on digression Montalbetti describes Homer's *Odyssey* as a text where 'le dénouement est sans cesse annoncé dans le cours même du récit, soit par le narrateur, soit par les personnages qui se voient conférer un pouvoir de divination', which is almost a precise description of what she does in *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent*.[39]

This novel has something of the *One thousand and one nights* about it: the narrator is imprisoned (albeit here in a self-imposed way) and his storytelling puts off the violent telos, at least on the level of the narrative, though it has, of course, already passed in diegetic time. In the text, the male French narrator recounts details of his stay in Oregon (suggested by the appearance of Cannon Beach and Haystack Rock) leading up to the moment where he is violently assaulted by local men, without any intervention from the other townspeople he has spent much of his time with. He is hiding in a motel room and apparently recounting his story, constantly putting off the moment of violence by slowing the narrative and digressive constantly. The diegetic present of the motel room appears only through the various asides of the narrator and is not presented as a clear framing narrative. Indeed, the narrative only 'returns' to the diegetic present in a meaningful way once the narrator has recounted the assault: 'Je ne sors plus du motel. | Tous mes jours et toutes mes nuits, je les passe dans cette chambre, à dormir et à regarder l'océan' (VV 249). We do, however, see glimpses of the present throughout the text.[40] Just before an episode recounting the Lewis and Clark expedition (which is spread throughout the text), the author sees a figure outside his window: 'Quelquefois, sous

[38] Ross Chambers, *Loiterature* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 215.
[39] Christine Montalbetti and Nathalie Piegay-Gros, *La Digression dans le récit* (Paris: Bernard Lacoste, 1994), p. 25.
[40] Although the present tense is used fairly often throughout the text to refer to habitual actions or thoughts of the narrator, descriptions of actions taking place in the immediate present are far less common.

ma fenêtre, un promeneur, souvent avec un chien, deux parfois, et celui-là, tiens, je le reconnais, pour le voir passer presque chaque jour, avec trois setters […]' (VV 200).

It is, in that sense, a more explicit type of digression than that found in, for example, *Sa fable achevée, Simon sort dans la bruine*. In the latter text, there does not seem to be any central 'line' of narrative from which we are digressing: maybe there is no centre. In *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent,* there is an implied telos and references to the violent ending of the story, though they are generally not explained. For example, the narrator – for whom the violent ending to the story is already in the past, writes: 'Est-ce que ça aurait été différent si je leur avais parlé, si j'avais dit des choses, est-ce qu'on sait? Je n'ai pas de réponse à ça' (VV 83). In other episodes, the narrator explicitly refers to the 'story' he is recounting: 'Il y a encore tant de choses qu'il faut que je vous raconte, avant d'en venir à ce qui m'occupe depuis le début, tant de choses à vous expliquer […]' (VV 137). The effect is both a general sense of foreboding within the text and a clear notion that the text is moving in a particular direction – i.e. towards narrating this key moment in the diegetic chronology. This compounds the perceived digressiveness of the text, since it establishes a clear 'centre' and then deviates from it. In other words, the narrator makes explicit his intention to direct the narrative in a certain manner, but digresses, often quite overtly, from this 'line':

> Oh, c'est un incident qui en soi n'a pas de rapport direct avec mon histoire, mais Perry, après tout, vous en avez entendu parler, et ça vous intéresse peut-être d'en savoir un peu plus sur les émotions qui l'ont traversé (VV 143).

The *telos*, the violent assault, is the implied ending of his 'story', but his digression puts off the inevitable ending for a few more pages. The fact that the reader's attention is drawn to the digression, though, the effect is altered: the text appears anxiously, obsessively slow rather than leisurely or 'loitering' as Ross Chambers would describe.

The present of the narrative – that is to say the present of the narrator – takes place within an undefined time period in a very restricted space: between the four walls of the motel room. In this sense the novel really is 'about' discourse, because the entire novel is a series of analepses in the form of past episodes recounted not chronologically, but according to the whim of the narrator. In the case of *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent,* the digressiveness is something of a red herring. While some of the episodes appear to have little or no relevance to the text itself, some of them do serve to affect the reader's interpretation of the text as a whole, as a meandering tale overshadowed with a sense of foreboding. The digressiveness of the text may

be as self-conscious as the other types of temporal play we have observed in Montalbetti's texts: the rather incongruous placement of Pliny's *Epistulae* in the American town's miniscule public library, for example suggests the text has some significance to the narrative. The link is perhaps symbolic of the digressive nature of the text, since Montalbetti cites Pliny as an example in her critical work on digression.[41] Equally, a detailed map of the Lewis and Clark expedition reveals a meandering path of loops and turns, somewhat reminiscent of Sterne's narrator's exposition of his own digressive meandering.

Temporal play in Montalbetti: constructed chronologies

Since Christine Montalbetti is an established theoretician and academic as well as an author, it is clear that she is familiar with Genette's models of narratological time as well as more recent work on time and narrative and digression.[42] It is therefore unsurprising that her narrators, who often appear as author-figures with a high degree of knowledge about the literary and cultural context of the text they appear in, are depicted as wilfully and self-reflexively manipulating time on the level of the narrative. The following section will examine how Montalbetti combines these techniques of slowness and digression with a self-reflexive narrative, creating a ludic and extremely self-conscious temporality which acknowledges its own manipulation by the narrator (and, by extension, the author).

The text *Expérience de la campagne,* which I have cited in my descriptions of both slowness and digression, seems almost to be an exercise in narrative temporality. Let us examine again the moment Hanz rings the doorbell and enters the protagonist Simon's house, when the narrative is 'paused': 'Immobilisons nos deux héros en leur amorce de retrouvailles et revenons si vous le voulez en arrière, histoire d'apporter encore quelques précisions' (EC 20). This short extract provides rich insight into the temporal structures of the narrative. Firstly, the way that this particular manipulation of the chronology of the text is described points to a 'pause and rewind' – a technological metaphor which points to another medium, television, cinema and video recording. A cinematic motif also underpins Koepnick's notion of slowness in contemporary art: '[…] the central image that informs my understanding of aesthetic slowness in various media of contemporary artistic practice is technological in origin itself: the

[41] Montalbetti and Piegay-Gros, p. 18.
[42] Ibid.

operation of slow-motion photography in cinema.'[43] Secondly, the temporal parameters being portrayed here take the Genettian notion of the 'pause' quite literally, portraying it within the narrative as a visual phenomenon: the characters are immobilised, as if the medium is television and not text, so that further details about the past can be given.[44] Finally, the notion that the temporality of the text is somehow dislocated from that of the narration – that if we had not 'paused' the characters, they would have continued without us – is a recurring motif in Montalbetti's texts and one which is reminiscent of the temporal manipulations of the *nouveaux romanciers*, and in particular Alain Robbe-Grillet.

This first point – the use of slow motion as a motif throughout Montalbetti's texts – is most clear in the unsurprisingly cinematically-themed *Western*. The slowness and digressiveness of this particular text is, as Motte points out, somewhat ironic given the reputation of the Western genre as being filled with high-speed action:

> It is a very curious book indeed, presenting a story almost entirely bereft of event, a dilatory tale wherein narrative digression, amplified to maddening proportions, serves to furnish the text, while action is largely suspended. That effect is all the more astonishing, given the genre that Montalbetti takes as her model, and which she announces so frankly in her title. […] Of course, that genre is closely bound up in action, and typically of a most violent sort.[45]

The similarity of the above extract from *Expérience de la campagne* to the works of Alain Robbe-Grillet is also present across several of Montalbetti's texts. In particular, the relationship between each protagonist, who appears to be an 'actor' playing out a pre-prepared script, and the narrator, a director who occasionally loses control of the plot as the characters go 'off-script' is reminiscent of *Les Gommes*. We might note in particular the similarities between the ways in which the characters are described as performing actions which appear to be on the same temporal plane as that of the narrator, such that we (the reader) might 'miss' the action if the narrator pauses or digresses for too long. For example, from Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommes*: 'Wallas a déjà quitté le petit café pour rentrer en scène'.[46] In Montalbetti's *L'Évaporation de l'oncle*, the narrator similarly suggests that while they have been engaged elsewhere, a

[43] Koepnick, p. 12.
[44] It should be noted that this is not, in fact, a 'real' moment of Genettian narrative pause, rather an analepsis where the text jumps back to a previous episode.
[45] Warren Motte, 'The Critical Novel in France, Today', *World Literature Today*, 81 (2007), 50-53 (p. 501).
[46] Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Les Gommes* (Paris: Minuit, 2012), p. 157.

character has used the elapsed time to perform some kind of action that the text has therefore 'missed': 'Mais je parle, je parle, et nos deux hommes sont non seulement en position, mais ont déjà commencé leur affaire' (EO 221).

There is also a similarity in the language of theatre used to refer to the unfolding of the plot, as if the novel is, in fact, a choreographed play which relies on several actors respecting a precise temporal schema. Towards the end of *L'Origine de l'homme,* the narrator declares that this is the final time we will see the protagonist's love interest, Margot, in the text: 'on ne peut pas être toujours ensemble et les histoires continuent sans vous qu'est-ce que vous voulez que je vous dise' (OH 305). What is more, the narrator also suggests that the road Margot walks down could lead to 'la trappe où disparaissent les personnages' (OH 305). In both cases, it is implied that diegetic time will carry on regardless of the actions of the reader and narrator. This is obviously not the case, but the stating so creates a fictional world with an internal dislocation in which the diegetic time of the text is at odds with the linearity of the reading experience. Equally, the temporal structures are presented as being flouted or changed *despite* the narrator. In Robbe-Grillet: 'Il est dix heures, pourtant: Garinati devrait arriver. Il devrait même être là depuis près d'une minute; c'est déjà trop. Ces pas dans l'escalier auraient dû être les siens'.[47] A similar episode appears in *Western:* 'Vite, car si nous nous attardons bouche bée devant ces nouveautés, comment savoir ensuite où nous rendre, n'osant pas, dans notre anglais approximatif, demander notre chemin au ranch' (W 36).

While these similarities may be seen as throwaway moments of pastiche or even purely coincidental, Montalbetti clearly alludes to Robbe-Grillet's work within her texts. This meta-reflexivity – one of the reasons that Stéphane Girard sees Montalbetti's work as 'contemporary' – can be seen in the references to trapezoids of light in *L'Origine de l'homme* (a reference to Robbe-Grillet's *La jalousie*) and the millipede – a recurring object in the same Robbe-Grillet text – which appears in *L'Évaporation de l'oncle*.[48] This is a nod, I believe, to the peculiar temporality of Robbe-Grillet's texts and the innovations in literary temporality made by the so-called *Ecole de minuit* in the mid-twentieth century. Objects and events can recur again and again within the linear narrative, taking up narrative time (textual space) despite taking up relatively little 'clock' time in the diegesis, since it is the characters' perceptions and experience

[47] Ibid. p. 121.
[48] Alain Robbe-Grillet, *La Jalousie* (Paris: Minuit, 2012). For the millipede, see for example: pp. 46, 48, 100-101, 130. Christine Montalbetti, *L'Évaporation de l'oncle* (Paris: P.O.L., 2011). The latter is hereafter referred to using the abbreviation 'EO'.

that are represented in the text, even if that experience is subjective and, in many cases, imagined. In this way, *L'Évaporation de l'oncle* returns again and again to the morning of the disappearance and to the absence and the figure of the uncle more generally.

This rather postmodern notion – the reframing or pastiche of previous texts and a play with the conventions of the genre – is particularly visible in the final 'scene' of *Western*, which, true to the genre, is a shoot-out between the hero and the villain. As the former pursues the latter, who reins in his horse and turns to face him, the temporal parameters of the (already dilatory) text seem to slow even further. Several pages of the text pass as the villain, Jack King, searches his memories for the face of the other man:

> À rebours de l'ordre chronologique, il examine ce dont est faite chaque année, une à une, les situations qui la composent, et de chaque scène de bagarre […] Neuf années en arrière […] Jack King amorce en pensée la onzième année […] Passe la treizième année […] (W 208-9).

The scene of the shootout is described in distinctly cinematic terms: note in particular the way that the language of the narrative is similar to that of stage directions or screenplay, with short, nominal sentences:

> Jambes écartées. La main droite planant au-dessus de la crosse du revolver comme faucon qui s'apprête à s'abattre pour remonter aussitôt sa proie dans les airs.
>
> Champ: Jack King, le visage entièrement noirci par le contre-jour, mais c'est bien là Jack King.
>
> Contrechamp: dans un dernier et lent sursaut, le ciel qui achève de rougeoyer laisse filtrer un faisceau de lumière ambrée, flavescente, qui vient éclairer de face le visage de notre trentenaire (W 210).

It is interesting to note that the sentences following 'champ' and 'contrechamp' do not follow this screenplay-style syntax, but return to the more flamboyant linguistic style of the rest of the narrative. Despite the short, cinematic way in which this particular scene is described and true to the motif of 'slow motion', it is almost two pages later that the fatal shot is fired. While the action of pulling the trigger is delayed by another digression on the part of the narrator, this time an analepsis detailing the murder, by King, of Whitefield's father, the actual moment of

the shot appears quickly, and seems to restore the text's temporality to something approaching Genette's degree zero of duration:

> La main de notre trentenaire (combien d'heures était-il resté sous le lit, effaré, avant de courir vers la forêt) s'abat d'un coup sur la crosse de son Smith & Wesson. En un dixième de seconde, il tire sur Jack King, encore occupé à son rire, et qui, ayant à peine commencé d'empoigner son revolver, s'écroule sur le sable (W 212).

The manipulation of the texts' chronologies is therefore a highly reflexive exercise within Montalbetti's texts. *Western* in particular is a pastiche of a genre associated with dramatic action and speed; while all the traditional elements of the genre are in place (for example scenes of contemplation, a horseback chase, a general store, a shoot-out), the narrative is so slow that the *effect* of the genre is entirely different. Instead of being 'about' the action or the protagonist himself, the novel ends up exploring more the power of discourse, of contemplation and of slowness as a means to change our perception of reality.

A further extract from *Expérience de la campagne* makes clear the narrator's implied aim of destabilising the reader's perception of the chronology of the text. After 'freezing' Hanz and Simon, as we have seen, and moving back in diegetic time, the narrator makes clear that she is only talking about turning back the diegetic clock by a few minutes ('quelques minutes mangées au déroulement ordinaire du temps'):

> […] manière évidemment cavalière, autant que répandue, cela n'est pas exclusif, de manipuler la chronologie, bouleversant les séquences à un point qui distrait de tout réalisme et balade le lecteur si inconsidérément que le voilà tout secoué […] (EC 20).

It is worth noting the similarities, here, in the language used by Montalbetti's narrator and that used by Genette: Montalbetti's narrator refers to a 'manière cavalière [de] manipuler la chronologie' (EC 20), reminiscent of Genette's 'vues cavalières du passé ou de l'avenir'.[49] Montalbetti's work as a theorist almost certainly influences, and is most likely also influenced by, her creative practice. Her narrators note not only their role within the text but also refer to the wider literary landscape, noting that the trend of manipulating time and jumbling up the order of the text is 'widespread', as well as noting that such narratorial behaviour moves the text away from any sort of realism.

[49] Genette, p. 132.

As we have seen, Montalbetti's fictions also often adopt a dislocated temporality: one where the 'clock time' of the narrative keeps ticking despite the digressiveness of the narrator. In *L'Origine de l'homme,* where the narrator is particularly intrusive and self-reflexive, often interacting with her own characters and interacting with an imagined reader in the second person singular, the narrator chides the protagonist, a version of the real historical figure Jacques Boucher de Crèvecoeur de Perthes, for his lack of conviction. This monologue directed at Jacques, who is on the verge of giving up and not making the discovery that made him – in the extra-textual world – the 'father of palaeontology', implies a complex temporality with distortions of time on several levels. Most notably, the diegesis is recounted in the present with other metadiegetic episodes taking place in the past; the narrator is not limited to that present (he/she knows it is the 'big day' today, implying a knowledge of the future) but is somehow powerless within it (he/she has to negotiate with the very characters he/she is creating). Secondly, the future within the text that dominates the horizon of the narrative – Jacques' discovery – is actually, in the extratextual world, a historical event – that is to say an object of the past. Thirdly, this 'future' – the implied *telos* – never arrives within the diegesis, because the text ends before the discovery is actually made. A closer look at the way in which the narrator addresses Jacques in his/her monologue also reveals a conversational (and distinctly late-twentieth- or twenty-first-century) style, which switches rapidly back and forth between addressing the protagonist and making asides to the reader:

> [D]emain est the big day, le grand jour Jacques, celui que tu attends depuis tout enfant, […] tes recherches, ces silex, tu sais bien toi ce qu'ils valent, leur authenticité tu ne la mets pas en doute, continue, Jacques, demain tu vas voir, tu n'en croiras pas tes yeux, ni nous non plus, on sera baba, devant toi Jacques, tu entends – il m'énerve, il ne bouge pas, il est toujours prostré sur son seuil, avec les éboulements de son espoir autour de lui –, Jacques, arrête de faire la chiffe molle (c'est vrai quoi), arrête (je lui secoue un peu l'épaule, sans effet) (OH 274).

The narrator's foray into the diegesis itself, in an attempt to keep the course of events on-track with regards to the way things happened in extra-diegetic reality (keeping the *histoire* on the tracks of *l'Histoire,* as it were), leads her to encourage, cajole and then reproach the protagonist directly through the narrative and even to (physically) shake him to elicit a response. The narrator makes direct reference to the *time of reading* of the book which contains the story being narrated: Jacques' may have wasted time in the 'années d'investigations paléontologiques' (OH 273) but 'we' (the reader and the narrator, presumably) have also

wasted time, 'celui de notre lecture au terme duquel nous étions tout de même en droit d'espérer un dénouement un peu triomphant' (OH 273), a knowing nod to the disruption of readers' expectations of 'advancing' through a narrative. Going nowhere at all – and pointing that out – could be seen as a subversive act in a culture obsessed with novelty and speed.

It is clear, then, that Montalbetti's texts do not simply resist the dominant time culture by opting for slowness over speed: the narrators of her texts often refer to this manipulation within the narratives themselves, embracing the kind of self-reflexivity that Girard refers to in his monograph on Montalbetti.[50] The nods to other, major works in the French literary canon hint at the author's background as an established theoretician and literary critic, but also serve to highlight the ways in which dislocation and slowness are by no means an exclusively twenty-first century phenomenon. By highlighting narrative slowness and nodding to the dislocations of phenomenological time in Robbe-Grillet or the digressiveness of Diderot, Montalbetti's narrators point to the filiation of the very texts we are reading. The texts' preoccupation with their own temporality is therefore also coupled with a concern with their own place in literary-cultural history. And with the narrators' constant references to the temporal parameters, both on the diegetic and the narratorial level, of the texts, the temporality of Montalbetti's fictions is almost never presented as a 'natural' one – i.e. one that would go unnoticed – it is instead presented as manipulated and distorted by the narrator or by the protagonists themselves failing to carry out their role. They are, to borrow once again Mark Currie's term, texts which declare themselves to be resolutely 'about time'.

Pireyre: Embracing plurality of temporal experience

While Pireyre's texts are, in their form, radically different to those of both Montalbetti and Lenoir, I would like to establish two common aspects of their temporal structures. Firstly, the temporality of the texts is governed by a structure other than that of a fictional 'clock time' – we are far from achieving Genette's hypothetical degree zero of duration, and the temporality of the text is complex to the point that applying Genette's terms such as pause or ellipses becomes difficult. Secondly, Pireyre's texts are similar to those of Montalbetti, and in particular *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent*, in that the individual fictions that make up much of the text

[50] Girard writes of 'la méta-réflexivité caractéristique d'une certaine littérature de l'extrême contemporain' in Montalbetti. Girard, p. 47.

are not ordered chronologically or by any temporal measure, but by theme or by (it would seem) the whims of the narrator.

If we view Montalbetti's digressive and dilatory narratives as resisting our expectations of a teleological structure in the fictional universe, then Pireyre only serves to complicate matters. If, as Kemp states, 'the metaphorical line of narrative […] is composed of both chronology and signification',[51] then texts like those of Pireyre – and especially *Féerie générale*, which is expressly described as a novel – seem to have no line at all. Texts as digressive as *Tristram Shandy* can be said to have a 'core' plot with significant diversions and delays; the 'digression' is not simply diegetic time not advancing, but the episode in question having little significance for the core plot events – in this case, the life of Tristram Shandy.

But what if – and this may well be the case in Pireyre – there is no core significance to the novel? Though there are several narrative arcs that take place over several fragments, there is no central 'line' (to use Kemp's 'dead metaphor' once more) to which we can return in order to judge their significance. Currie describes two different accounts of time that are often used in conjunction in the novel – the 'A-theory' of tensed time in which 'existence is presence', and a B-theory of untensed time:

> [T]he tensed view of time into which we are locked in the living of life, and the untensed view of time as if it were a spatial landscape that accords no ontological privilege to the present, seem to be locked together in the novel.[52]

Of course, in most novels there is a degree of tension between time on the narrative level and time on the level of the diegesis, but Pireyre's texts seem to embrace the notion of an 'untensed' narrative where each fragment – past or 'present', fact or fiction – carries equal ontological weight. The texts do not seem to *go* anywhere, in terms of signification, but it would be difficult to see them as digressing or, as Ross Chambers put it, loitering, since to loiter connotes some degree of idleness (Chambers points to the intersection as a cover for dubious loiterers' 'apparent idleness').[53] Chambers sees resistance to summary and to criticism as a feature of digressive literature, writing that:

[51] Kemp, p. 394.
[52] Currie, p. 323.
[53] Chambers, p. 8.

> It can't be summarized or reduced to a 'gist,' whereas criticism depends, like social order itself, on the possibility of discriminating and hierarchizing, determining what's central and what's peripheral (this is more important, the point is such-and-such, the theme is so-and-so; the rest is 'just plot' or 'descriptive detail'). Supposing there *is* no centre though, and so no periphery?[54]

This does appear to describe much of Pireyre's prose work, but Chambers also indicates that while this 'literature of hanging out does not, and can't, stand still', it is also 'prolix and dilatory' –[55] which Pireyre's texts certainly are not. In fact, Pireyre's texts contain so much information (which spans documentary-style information on verifiable 'extra-textual' facts and also 'fictional facts', mini-fictions, images and narratorial interventions, to name but a few) that the effect is perhaps the opposite of that of Montalbetti's irrepressibly chatty narrator. Instead of introspection, here there are temporal and spatial horizons so vast that there is nothing to contain the text or set parameters. Instead of having the impression that we are somehow being made to wait, being subject to a delay or digression in the advancement of the plot, Pireyre's texts leave the reader constantly trying to catch up – microfictions begin *in medias res* and finish before the reader has a chance to establish the 'meaning' of the fiction (maybe there isn't one), detailed information about a real-world phenomenon or event is given, but the reader isn't sure how it fits in with the rest of the text, and in any case it moves on to a completely different theme (and format, and narration style) before he or she can establish how it fits in with the other fragments (spatially, temporally, and/or in terms of signification). If modernist writing was a resistance to a 'culture of impatience' as Rey Chow suggests,[56] then perhaps Pireyre's texts embrace or reflect the contemporary temporal culture, with its trends of high-speed channel-switching and information glut (to borrow from concepts related by Carr and Gleick).

But again, Pireyre's texts are not digressive in same way as those of Montalbetti. There is no intrusive narrator (though the text often does switch into the first person) who acts as a 'master storyteller', leading us astray and eventually back to the main purpose of the text. The texts are all fragmentary to some degree. In *Féerie générale* and *Comment faire disparaître la terre?* particularly, fragments are juxtaposed or thematically linked in ways that hint at some core meaning or purpose, but this is never articulated – and there are simply too many elements

[54] Ibid. p. 9.
[55] Ibid. p. 10.
[56] Referenced by Chambers: ibid. p. 215.

to combine into a single, overarching narrative that would summarise the entire book. Take, for example, the following series of fragments in *Comment faire disparaître la terre,* which begin the chapter entitled 'La Fiction, l'Analyse' (CT 62-77). The first section is subtitled 'Mon service information littérature – 2 – Les Souvenirs de collège'. This section is pure discourse – simply the narrator reporting on the genre of 'middle school memory literature' – for example, stating information about this type of literature, which she asserts is a genre in its own right:

> Les histoires de collège nécessitent que l'écolier observé soit immergé dans la vraie réalité du monde social et non au sein de sa famille et ce qu'elle représente d'oreillers sentimentaux (CT 62).

She also alludes to being a writer, suggesting that this first-person narrator – who appears periodically throughout both texts – is an avatar, to some degree, of the author:

> En ce qui me concerne, le Souvenirs de collège est un genre défendu, car trop difficile. Je ne réussis pas à décoller les phrases, elles s'écrasent tout de suite au sol, je ne peux pas badiner à propos des collèges (CT 63).

The following section changes tone completely: entitled 'Les cheveux ont un avis – 1 –', it begins as if it will be a mini-narrative in the third person:

> Le 10 mars, Irène B. (35 ans) revient d'une semaine idyllique de vacances avec son mari et les deux enfants qui lui a permis d'oublier les soucis se profilant au travail, elle a loué par l'intermédiaire d'une amie un chalet dans les alpes (CT 65).

It turns out to be a series of 'récits' and paired with 'constats' on the state of the person's hair ('Le coiffeur note le récit dans la Colonne Récit, et dans la Colonne Constat: 'Bon état de cheveu, cuir chevelu toujours souple, attention, quelques zones amincies') (CT 65). The second 'Les cheveux ont un avis' follows (CT 67), but the format is different – there is a first person narrator and she gives her thoughts on plaits ('[j]'appelle ces nattes les nattes à animaux', etc. (CT 67)). There is an obvious thematic link between the second two sections (and the following section, a 'récapitulatif sur les nattes'), and a link between the first and second due to the idea of the story or 'récit', but it is difficult to pin down any common feature of even this small segment of text.

In analysing this rather typical example of a series of interrelated microfictions from Pireyre's works, one is tempted to sketch out – literally, on paper, or metaphorically – a diagram of the interlinking episodes. Indeed, much of the difficulty encountered in analysing texts such as Pireyre's stems from the resolutely *spatial* nature of their structures: they force the reader into conceiving of the text as being organised spatially, rather than chronologically. Of course, it is no longer innovative to state, after the spatial turn in the humanities, that time can be envisaged in a cartographic sense. As Adam Barrows writes: 'despite Bergson's insistence on the fundamental incompatibility between mapping and temporality, time had been and continues to be wedded to spatial imagination and cartographic manipulation.'[57] But Pireyre's texts seem to go beyond a purely spatial imaginary, too: sometimes it *is* possible to reconstruct some kind of diegetic time within the very limited scope of that particular fiction and those to which it is linked. There are also ample references to real historical or extra-textual events which took place at a particular moment in 'real' chronological time, thereby placing that particular extract as representing a particular moment of extra-textual reality, as I will discuss further in the following chapter.

In this way, the narrative does not *progress* or *advance*, but it does build up a collage of sorts that hints at a bigger picture the reader is not quite able to grasp. The 'movement' of the text through time (throughout the length of the text) – constant changing to a new subject, with a new heading or subheading, based on a thematic link or on no link at all – gives the impression that the text is moving quickly, but in fact there seems to be no overarching temporal structure to the novel. This structure – more so than the content, which is very relevant to twenty-first century anxieties – is perhaps the most experimental aspect of the novels *Féerie générale* and *Comment faire disparaître la terre?*. In many ways the structure of these two texts reflects the kind of contemporary temporal experience described by Lionel Ruffel, who writes that '[l]a contemporanéité pourrait être comprise en un second sens, comme une contemporalité, comme une concordance de temps multiples.'[58] Instead of a singular (though fluid and heterogeneous) 'time culture', as I have described here, 'the contemporary' (as an experiential category) would be made up by various different times. Such temporal structures are also described by Lutz Koepnick in his book *On Slowness:*

[57] Adam Barrows, *Time, Literature, and Cartography After the Spatial Turn: The Chronometric Imaginary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 1.
[58] Ruffel, p. 20.

> Time today no longer follows one singular narrative and order, nor does it belong to specific and self-contained spaces. We instead live in multiple times and spatial orders at once, in competing temporal frameworks where time often seems to pull in various different directions simultaneously. Time today is sensed as going forward, backward, and sidewise all in one; it might often be perceived as chronological and cosmic; geological and modern, local and global, evolutionary and ruptured in one and the same breath. [59]

Since Koepnick's subtitle ('towards an aesthetics of the contemporary') is equally as centred on unpacking the question 'What is the contemporary?' as Ruffel's *Brouhaha: les mondes du contemporain* or Jacob Lund & Geoff Cox's volume in the *Contemporary Condition* series,[60] it seems fitting that Pireyre's texts, which mimic aesthetically this coming-together of spaces and of times, are seen as particularly 'of our time' (Pireyre is cited by Ruffel in his work on the contemporary).[61] While our contemporary 'time culture' and the aesthetic choices it engenders are perhaps resisted by texts that remain resolutely insular, such as those of Montalbetti and Lenoir, Pireyre's texts appear to take the chaotic, the simultaneous and the high-speed as their foundation, while forcing the reader to abandon preconceptions about the temporal nature of the novel and instead embrace a spatial imaginary which combines several different – often competing – realities and temporalities.

Time and literature in the twenty-first century: heterogeneity and resistance

This chapter has sought to establish a link between the 'time culture' of the twenty-first century and the literary production of three contemporary novelists. That 'time culture' is characterised by speed and dislocation: we feel increasingly as if time is moving too fast for us to comprehend, and that temporal processes in our professional, personal and political lives have been speeded up. It would seem that what Pireyre astutely refers to as the 'ambiance pressante de boîte de nuit' (FG 16), which underpins the contemporary human condition in a globalised, high-speed world, would certainly affect the cultural output of societies which are part of this system. Dealing with the radical heterogeneity of the different temporalities and of 'time

[59] Koepnick, p. 3.
[60] Cox and Lund.
[61] C.f. Ruffel, pp. 22-3.

cultures' that now coexist and come into contact with one another is not necessarily the role of literature: as the experimentation of postmodernist and *nouveau roman* authors suggest, literature does not *have* to say anything at all about the 'real' world or mimic our own temporal experiences. It is clear, however, that to some extent novels – and particularly the novels treated in this study – can be seen as either reinforcing or resisting the time culture of the period in which they were produced.

Lenoir engages with the notion of a personal temporal experience which resonates more with the experiments in phenomenological time undertaken by certain *nouveaux romanciers* than with what might be termed contemporary trends, such as collage, hybridity and self-reflexivity. Her narratives are almost always devoid of beginning and ending – starting *in medias res* and finishing without much progress having been made in the diegetic present. Temporal distortion on the narrative level echoes the kind of temporal anxieties felt by the characters on the diegetic level – in a world increasingly ruled by strict measures of time (written in *Le Répit*'s train timetables or Claire's 'cahiers' in *Pièce rapportée*) the characters still seem to find themselves lost and disoriented, while the reader must piece together scant temporal markers in order to figure out when (or where) to place each narrated episode within the 'story'. This focus on reconstructing a fictional diegetic past is the foundation of the unsettling temporality of Lenoir's texts: the fictions are devoid of futures (the protagonists, for whatever reason, never seem to plan beyond the immediate future) and the present is almost entirely taken up by the past. In this way, Lenoir's texts both resist the dominant culture of speed, fragmentation and openness by being resolutely insular, both spatially and temporally, but also embrace the kind of 'perpetual present' which dominates contemporary thinking around time.

While Lenoir's texts slow to the point of going nowhere, Montalbetti's explicitly and self-reflexively digress from their stated or implied purpose or move at such a dilatory pace that they appear not to move at all – an example, perhaps, of Chambers' idea of 'loitering with intent.' Through this manipulation of diegetic and narratorial time, the narrative becomes less 'about' the diegesis and more about the possibilities of narrative discourse itself. Such self-reflexivity not only harks back to earlier works (those of eighteenth-century digressionists such as Sterne and Diderot, for example), it also serves to highlight the false temporality of the fictional worlds they create. With the temporality of the texts explicitly controlled by Montalbetti's 'master storyteller' narrators, the manipulations of *vitesse* are clearly intended to disrupt the reader's expectations of a progression of meaning (plot) through time (the length of

the text). Not only that, but Montalbetti's narrator positively revels in the frustrations of the imagined reader, pointing out to them in *L'Origine de l'homme*, for example, that if the protagonist fails to achieve anything by the time the book is over, then *their* time has been wasted and they did have the right to expect something more for their temporal investment.

Pireyre does not seem to fit in to these questions of time and narrative or the models of slowness (drawing on Genette) and digression (for example those proposed by Chambers or by Montalbetti herself in her theoretical works). Her fragmentary texts operate in what seems to be a 'timeless' or 'untensed' universe where each fragment, whether past or present, real or fiction, appear to exist on the same diegetic level. Far from rejecting or resisting high-speed culture Pireyre seems to embrace the most criticised parts of it, from distractedness and 'channel-hopping' to an inability to discern what is important and what is peripheral information: in this sense, the texts resist analysis and critique.

The novelists therefore appear to resist or disrupt the temporality or culture of time of the twenty-first century. These three radically different approaches to time in 'contemporary' novels – all published within the last twenty years – might lead us to question whether one can actually talk of a 'contemporary culture of time' in the way that, for example, Heise does about the Modernist culture of time, and whether that culture can be said to affect the kind of fiction being produced. A comparison of the texts, however, suggests that they do each engage with – to some degree – our experience of time in the twenty-first century. The notion of 'wasting time' is common to all three authors: Pireyre's narrators may obsessively list and classify, but they do not seek to 'go' anywhere at all with this data; they simply wallow in it, creating a ludic (to echo Pireyre's title, 'féerique') alternate universe. Montalbetti's narrators gleefully point out the slowness of their own text and draw the reader's attention to their own 'reading time' being wasted, while it is Lenoir's characters – usually unemployed or stuck in a liminal time, waiting – who represent this kind of temporal counter-culture of slowness or idleness associated, in the capitalist model, with unproductiveness and therefore deviation from the accepted norm. Through this reflection and, in some cases, rejection of our epoch's valorisation of speed and productivity, the texts appear to engage with the temporal anxieties of the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL TIME IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Having illustrated in the previous chapter the ways in which the three authors of this study may engage with or resist what we might call the 'time culture of our time'– a culture dominated by notions of speed and simultaneity – the focus of this chapter will once again be the notion of epoch. While Chapter 1 investigated the literary response to the rise of new technology, as major driver of the epochal shift in this beginning of the twenty-first century, this chapter will explore the notion of epoch or 'our time' itself. How does contemporary literature engage with the notion of our place in time, or in history? How does it represent the current historical moment, if at all? The following chapter will examine several ways in which the texts represent historical time and our place in history.

Though, as we have seen, many of the features of our culture of time and perception of epoch are extensions or multiplications of the kinds of dislocations that began with postmodernity, there is a new looming event horizon in the second decade of the twenty-first century: climate instability. The threat of climate instability is inevitability also a question of epoch: it is inextricably tied up with questions of 'progress' and our place in history. That is not to say that we were collectively unaware of the threat of climate change in previous decades (the first World Climate Conference was held in 1979); rather that the increasingly urgent requirement to change our current trajectory means that the threat of climate change, previously seen as a long-term or background threat, has now entered into the immediate political and social discourses of post-industrial and developing societies alike. French sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour highlights the difficulties inherent in bringing about a collective awareness and action on the subject of climate change:

> […] people are not equipped with the mental and emotional repertoire to deal with such a vast scale of events; […] they have difficulty submitting to such a rapid acceleration for which, in addition, they are supposed to feel responsible while, in the meantime, this call for action has none of the traits of their older revolutionary dreams.[1]

[1] Bruno Latour, 'Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene', *New Literary History*, 45 (2014), 1-18 (p. 1).

There are three parts of this problematic and increasingly urgent horizon which now faces us, and which Latour touches upon above. Firstly, the vast scale of the time cycles in question, as discussions of the last ice age, for example, enter journalistic and popular discourse,[2] has now entered the public consciousness.[3] On the other hand the acceleration of events – with the situation changing significantly in the space of a single generation, seems only to underline the sentiment that things are moving too fast for us to comprehend. Finally, the discourse around climate change paradoxically involves, as Latour suggests, an individual call to action, but unlike the grand utopian visions of previous revolutions and historical shifts, the vastness and abstract nature of this threat means that even the most urgent recommendations by climate scientists and other experts seem to be met with collective (and often political) disbelief and inertia. Our consciousness of these long-term, vast timescales is contrasted by the short-term thinking that dominates our daily lives, cycles of consumption and even political discourse. As Jo Guldi and David Armitage adeptly summarise:

> We live in a moment of accelerating crisis that is characterised by the shortage of long-term thinking. Even as rising sea-levels threaten low-lying communities and coastal regions, the world's cities stockpile waste, and human actions poison the oceans, earth, and groundwater for future generations. […] What place will our children call home? There is no public office of the long term that you can call for answers about who, if anyone, is preparing to respond to these epochal changes. Instead, almost every aspect of human life is plotted and judged, packaged and paid for, on time-scales of a few months or years.[4]

How might the literature of the early twenty-first century engage with this paradoxical epoch in which we live? The first section of this chapter will consider the ways in which, in this beginning of the twenty-first century, it has become necessary to view our epoch in light

[2] See, for example, opinion pieces linking a series of tropical storms to climate change or the emergence of cartoons treating climate change shared many thousands of times between internet users: George Monbiot, 'Why are the crucial questions about Hurricane Harvey not being asked?', *Guardian*, 29th August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/29/hurricane-harvey-man made-climate-disaster-world-catastrophe> [Accessed 30/08/2017]; Lorraine Chow, "'Brilliant" Climate Change Cartoon Goes Viral After Elon Musk, John Green Share It on Twitter', Ecowatch.com, 2016 <https://www.ecowatch.com/xkcd-climate-change-2003991855.html> [Accessed 09/09/2017].

[3] It is important to note that these vast scales greatly exceed those of a single human lifetime, meaning that these 'calls to action' require long-term, multi-generational planning and acting. The inertia in the face of climate threat perhaps stems from this rather uncomfortable truth: that, as David H. Allen points out, 'we humans are relatively short-lived' in the grand scheme of geological, planetary and astrophysical history. David H. Allen, *How Mechanics Shaped the Modern World* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2014), pp. xviii-xix.

[4] Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 1.

of vast geochronological timescales that far exceed the span of a human lifetime. It will examine Montalbetti's motif of ancestors of the human race and of evolution, which brings into 'contemporary' texts the vast scale of our development as a species, as well as existential questions of survival. This section will also examine the ways in which these long time cycles are often juxtaposed, sometimes jarringly, with short ones (such as daily cycles) or human-imposed ones (dates or 'clock time'), creating an destabilising impression of being at once part of a vast onwards movement of History which dwarfs the scale of a human lifetime, and the fleeting, ephemeral moments of significance in that life itself.

Secondly, I will turn to one of the ways in which the individual experiences the movement of 'historical time' in his or her own life, and which remains fairly constant: the movement of successive generations. By 'historical time', I refer to the chronological advance of time on a collective scale; historical time is a human construct and a conception of time which is inherently narrativised. This narrativisation can, of course, draw conclusions of causation, inevitability or chaos from a series of events: historical narratives often take as their basis a particular conception of that historical period.[5] Reinhart Koselleck notes, too, that 'historical time' is a construct that does not exist in any meaningful sense in nature. We might identify historical time through material traces or successive generations, whether these be of families or in specific fields:

> Whoever seeks an impression of historical time in everyday life may note the wrinkles of an old man or the scars by which a bygone fate is made present; conjoin the memory of ruins with the perception of newly developed sites […]. Finally, and above all, the seeker will think of the successive generations in his or her family or professional world, where different spaces of experience overlap and perspectives of the future intersect, including the conflicts with which they are invested. Such preliminary observations make clear that the generality of a measurable time based on Nature – even if it possesses its own history – cannot be transformed without mediation into a historical concept of time.[6]

While it can be viewed entirely as a human construct, as Koselleck suggests here, having a sense of historical time and our place in it colours our entire worldview, both individually and

[5] We might be reminded of Hellekson's four models of history: teleological, genealogical, entropic and eschatological.
[6] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: on the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. xxii.

collectively.[7] This is a particularly pertinent concept at this time given the existential threats that may affect subsequent generations in ways our own will never experience; the concept of 'passing the torch' or securing better, more prosperous futures for one's descendants appears to have stalled with our faltering belief in progress. This chapter will also touch upon more direct ways in which the key anxieties of our epoch (such as the failure of political/financial systems and the ecological crisis) are represented within the texts, in particular in Pireyre.

The final section of this chapter will consider the ways in which collective history can be incorporated into, catalogued in or even deliberately ignored by literary works. I will examine at some length the ways in which collective historical events are portrayed within the texts, focusing in particular on the way that Lenoir sidelines significant events (where significant means viewed by historians past, present or future as important to the timeline of collective history) in order to focus on the personal stories of the protagonists; a reflection of the stasis and inertia, perhaps, that appears to dominate the psyche of contemporary societies in the face of climate alarm-sounding. A similar trend is to be observed in Montalbetti, where collective, historically significant events are approached from the angle of the personal, the hypothetical, or the fictional. It will also explore the ways in which Pireyre's texts opt for data-gathering and creating taxonomies of the present historical moment, rather than engaging in the creation of narrative (hi)stories, which is essential to a conception of historical time. In so doing, this chapter hopes to demonstrate that these radically different novels are all, in some sense, 'of our time'; they engage in some way with our conception of our own place in history, and the concomitant anxieties and failures of this particular moment in time.

The long view: Montalbetti's vast timescales

Prehistory and ancestors

Two of Christine Montalbetti's texts raise questions, by their very subject, of humanity's collective history and its existential precariousness. The first text is the doubly historical *L'Origine de l'homme*, which treats our changing perceptions of history and consciousness of our own past as a species. Montalbetti's portrayal of the massive scale of evolution as juxtaposed with a single life displays the distortion of historical time inherent in any attempt to

[7] In terms of the latter, one need only look at how nationalist movements employ visions of the historical past and of utopian futures in order to present their own views as the opportunity for a historical turning point.

comprehend our past, which usually ends up privileging the present. The second is Montalbetti's most recent novel, *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses*, which follows the final mission of the NASA space shuttle Atlantis. As well as being centred around an event which was, in itself, a significant moment in collective history, the text engages with questions of the intersecting of technology and ancestry, as well as imagining the present as the future 'ancestors' of a changed human race. The text, I will contend, is altogether more future-oriented than *L'Origine de l'homme*, but still touches on the same issues of the incomprehensibly vast scale of our collective past and imagined future(s). Both novels also juxtapose short temporal spans (movements of the sun throughout the day in *L'Origine de l'homme* or the countdown to launch in *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses*) with almost inconceivably long ones (the evolution of humanity, or a future for humanity beyond Earth).

L'Origine de l'homme is based on the life of the real historical figure Jacques Boucher de Crèvecoeur de Perthes, arguably the founder of the field of palaeontology, whose theories of prehistory and discovery of flint tools eventually served as the foundations of the discipline. Both the subject (Jacques) and the object of his work (the evolution of humanity) are therefore based in what we might conceive of, in the twenty-first century, as historical time, though on very different timescales. The narrator and the reader seem to be in 'our time', though the text is timeless in that, on the narratorial level, there are few markers of the historical moment – for example, it is rare that dates or concrete historical events are given on the narratorial level. We might establish through references to cars and other technologies, however, that the narrator is placed somewhere in the late twentieth or early twenty-first centuries. The narrator also refers to O. Tugenensis, one of the hominids described in the text, as existing six million years before our time (OH 22). In any case, we know that there is a significant gap between the historical moment of the diegesis and that of the narration: as Jacques is described walking around the town, the narrator adds in parenthesis that she is using a map from the time; this declaration, 'je m'aide d'un plan d'époque' (OH 27), may also display the degree to which the text knowingly plays with spatial and temporal shifts throughout the novel. In its opening pages, the text turns from describing in detail unremarkable scenes (Jacques swimming in the river or meeting a friend), before suddenly, without any indication of a break in the narrative or of a temporal shift or 'flashback',[8] one of the hominid 'ancestors' appears as a character in the text.

[8] This concept is usually related to memory, so can it really be used in a context where the subject of the 'memory' predates *Homo sapiens*? This notion is beyond the scope of this study, but is certainly worth considering further.

Within the text are a series of episodes where ape-like ancestors of humans – discovered through the work of archaeologists and palaeontologists, of whom De Perthes was (arguably) the first – appear in the text on the same level of the narrative as the other characters.

It is important to note the possible significance of the protagonist of this contemporary text being a palaeontologist, since the discipline of palaeontology, like archaeology, is based upon the examining of objects as the enduring legacy of previous epochs. What is more, it seems that archaeology has become the metaphor of choice for many contemporary theorists for the business of sorting out the various threads of time in our contemporary society.[9] Montalbetti's texts are obsessed with objects and with the possibilities of narrative through the slowing of diegetic time; the work of palaeontologists, like that of archaeologists, is fundamentally tied up with the existence of objects through time, and using objects to reconstruct narratives – in a broad sense – of the past. This recalls too Koselleck's assertion that historical time is constructed though our perception of changing man-made objects or environment (the ruins of old sites and the construction of new ones). Historical time in Montalbetti is fundamentally tied up with the existence of historical objects – and, in *L'Origine de l'homme*, the appearance of historical and pre-historical subjects.

The first of these ancient hominids to appear, Orrorin Tugenensis, is introduced into the narrative in a way similar to the presentation of other characters on the level of the diegesis (e.g. Jacques, his friend André or his love interest Margot). His pre-lingual thoughts are represented by nonsense words ('Craboudinage, craboudinage, songe à peu près Orrorin Tugenensis' (OH 21)). The Latin name Orrorin Tugenensis refers to an apelike ancestor of humans in existence some six million years ago; remains of one of these hominids were located in central Kenya. Though apelike, O. Tugenensis had some traits (for example femurs which hint at the possibility of bipedalism) that mean that it could be considered as one of the earliest hominids, a fact the narrator alludes to within the narrative: '[…] Orrorin, excusez-le du peu, signifie l'homme des origines en langue tugen' (OH 22).[10]

[9] This use of the term 'archaeology' is reminiscent of Foucault's 'archaeology of knowledge' and his eponymous work on the subect, but can also be observed in the names of new sub-disciplines like 'media archaeology': see for example Jussi Parikka, *What Is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012). It has also been employed in the contemporary theoretical texts such as: Lionel Ruffel, "'What is the Contemporary?" Brief Archaeology of a Question', *Revista de Estudios Hispanicos*, 48 (2014), 123-43.

[10] Henry McHenry, 'Australopithecus', *Encyclopædia Britannica*: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 2015 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Australopithecus> [Accessed 11/03/2018].

The word play on 'l'homme des origines' and 'l'origine de l'homme' highlights the double, liminal nature of this ape-like creature, at once the man of (our) origins or beginnings and the origin of man, not yet fully human as we understand it. It should be noted, however, that the teleological presentation of the process of evolution, with humans in their current form as the end point, lends perhaps undue weight to the present, and is certainly a distortion of the objective history of our species. Yuval Noah Harari's recent bestseller *Sapiens* discusses this very misconception: 'It's a common fallacy to envision these species as forming a straight line of descent […]'.[11] Within Montalbetti's text, the use of a linear model, with the ancestors juxtaposed to the present-day *homo sapiens*, suggests a teleological, rather than a genealogical, model of history, to recall once again Hellekson's terminology. This is important because it promotes a particular view of humanity, *homo sapiens*, as the 'end result' of a process of evolution. While we have undoubtedly become the most successful (in evolutionary terms) species on the planet, this version of our history lends undue weight to our development, which was in no way linear or 'progressive' in the way that is implied here. And what is more, as Harari notes, 'this linear model gives the mistaken impression that at any particular moment only one type of human inhabited the earth, and that all earlier species were merely older models of ourselves.'[12]

Within Montalbetti's narrative, the two timescales are juxtaposed: the six-million-year-old hominid Orrorin Tugenensis appears in the narrative on the same spatial plane as Jacques, the protagonist: '[…] Orrorin court en tous sens d'une branche à l'autre, au risque de s'en fourrer une dans l'œil, je l'aurai prévenu […]' (OH 21). As Jacques walks out into the forest, another hominid is again presented as being on the same temporal level as that of the 'story' (of Jacques and André):

> Une telle joie, ça vous ôte la parole, pense Jacques […] tandis qu'Ardipithecus Ramidus, dans le Middle Awash, à une quarantaine de kilomètres en amont de Hadar, teste la flexibilité des branches […]. André à l'inverse, volubile, enchaîne phrase sur phrase […] (OH 50).[13]

[11] Harari, p. 8.
[12] Ibid.
[13] The mention of the village of 'Hadar' is interesting, given that it is not clear whether the village of Hadar – where the remains of A. Ramidus were found in the 1970s – would have existed under this name in the nineteenth century at the time of De Perthes' discoveries.

Similarly, Jacques and André are on the terrace when a group of Australopithecus Africanus pass through the forest:

> Quelque chose s'en dégage, malgré tout, de vivant, surtout lorsque passent Little Foot, Miss Ples et l'enfant de Taung, avec leur gros orteil divergent, et leur posé varus (c'est-à-dire qu'ils avancent en plaçant leur pied sur son bord latéral) (OH 77).

There are many other examples of these hominids appearing in the text, including 'Kenyanthropus platyops' (OH 89), 'Abel, l'homme de la rivière aux Gazelles' (OH 73) and a 'homo sapiens ancien' (OH 260). The appearances of these ancestors of humankind are presented in chronological order, though the massive timescale of evolutionary change is somewhat flattened by having them appearing in direct opposition to 'Jacques' time' and 'our time'. This flattening of the (huge scale of the) past and privileging of the present – and humanity – is worth insisting upon. For example, take A. Ramidus: Ardipithecus Ramidus appears in the narrative in much the same way as O. Tugenensis and is presented in a similar fashion – engaging in tree-jumping feats of physical strength with basic emotional responses – but A. Ramidus existed 4.4 million years before our own epoch – some 1.6 million years after O. Tugenensis. The temporal gap between the two hominids is therefore many (over 8,500) times greater than that which exists between the 'historical time' of Jacques' exploits and the 'present time' of the reader and the narrator (who, it seems, is our contemporary). To see the novel as presenting three distinct 'timelines' – that of the narrator, that of Jacques, and that of the object of Jacques' discoveries (we might call them 'the ancestors') –, each possessing equal importance in the fictional universe, is therefore disingenuous, and privileges the present of the novel: while on the level of the narrative the three parts of history are equally weighted, the timeframes they represent are radically different. It does, however, reflect the ways in which we might approach and conceive of the development of 'humankind' from the viewpoint of the individual: the sheer scale of evolutionary development seems almost beyond human comprehension, the entirety of human civilisation existing as an infinitesimal fraction of a vast timeline.

It is also worth insisting upon the teleological view of the process of evolution which signals a second privileging of the present time; humankind is viewed as the 'endpoint' of the species studied by Jacques and described in the text. This is made explicit by Montalbetti's narrator in the way that the individual members of the species are described, for example O. Tugenensis striking an 'ancestral' pose: […] il prend pose d'ancêtre, comme s'il détenait le

savoir qu'il porte en lui toute la suite, premier protagoniste de la grande East Side Story […] (OH 22). The notion of an ancestral pose confirms that this hominid, though his actions are narrated in the present tense within the narrative in the same way as Jacques', is already 'the past': he is viewed by the narrator as a future ancestor of humanity. What is more, the mention of a twentieth-century, American cultural reference (East Side Story), a story of immigration, both indicates a (very simplified version of) the spatial journey this species will travel, as well as the notion of arriving at some kind of telos or 'promised land' – presumably the evolution of humankind. When Olduvai Hominid n°7 appears, described as a 'Homo habilis assez en forme', his actions are also interpreted through a teleological, evolutionary lens: 'Son pouce plutôt court, il le tient en suspens, au-dessus de la hanche, où il l'agite, en de petits gestes secs, comme s'il cherchait une poche imaginaire' (OH 164). Sometimes the narrator more explicitly draws a line of evolution from primates to the present human, for example in this 'parenthèse didactique', as the narrator refers to it, about the way in which the perception of colour played a role in the evolution of man: 'Il se produisait dans l'évolution des primates exactement la même opération que celle qui se joue dans cette aube balnéaire où Jacques reçoit vision de plus en plus distincte des paysages' (OH 220). This teleological model is a gross distortion – though a common one – of the process of evolution. The notion that we are the 'end point' for a complex and often entropic process spanning millions of years is a myth which provides the human species with evidence of its own exceptionalism: it is not far removed, in many ways, from theological accounts of history which privilege the creation of humans over that of all other species on the planet.

Both parts of the story are therefore 'historical' in that they take place in the past (relative to the narrator), and both are in some way represented as teleological: for the hominid 'story' the *telos* is the evolution of man; for Jacques' story, it is the discovery which changes humanity's perception of its own evolution. Both threads therefore employ a model of time which implies a kind of inevitability which is manifestly false in the 'real' world. But, as usual, Montalbetti's narrator is one step ahead of us: by having the protagonist briefly reject his historical role and risk not making the discovery which made him famous, the narrator turns that teleological model on its head, and the text implies that there is nothing inevitable in the advance of (even fictionalised) history – not even in a novel purporting to represent a real historical figure. The difference times and timescales in the texts are therefore not simply anachronisms or postmodern 'mash-ups' of time cycles, but juxtapositions of the various models of historical time that make up our contemporary conception of time and history.

La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses demonstrates, too, a certain degree of concern about the question of ancestry and the development, technological or otherwise, of the human race. As one protagonist completes the spacewalk, he thinks of his ancestors arriving in America. The story is stylised and biased, but it is the imagined history of an individual; the protagonist imagines his own ancestry as having created his present moment:

> C'est étrange, cet amour irréfléchi, irrationnel, et inconditionnel pourtant, que nous pouvons porter à ceux de nos ascendants que nous n'avons pas connus. Cette histoire, celle du grand voyage de ses ancêtres depuis les terres froides du Nord, Mike a le sentiment qu'elle coule dans ses veines, qu'elle le façonne, qu'elle participe de sa chair (VF 185).

In contrast to this emotional take on ancestry, the narrator also touches upon the signifance of new scientific advances for 'unlocking' history ('Plus besoin d'archives, pour écrire la vie de ceux qui nous ont précédés: il suffira désormais d'un cheveu, qu'on décryptera dans l'ordre […]' (VF 202)).[14] This ability to scientifically 'read' the secrets of the past also extends to pre-historical individuals: 'On avait pu raconter l'histoire des dernières années d'une jeune femme préhistorique, découverte dans le petit village danois de Egtved' (VF 201).[15] These techniques, which generally yield detailed information about the diet, living conditions, state of health and even movements of the individual under study, are described as allowing us to 'tell [their] story'. The techniques, the narrator points out, allow scientists to trace the geographic (spatial) movements of these individuals ('révéler la mobilité géographique d'un individu' (VF 201)) as well as situating them in time and history. As in *L'Origine de l'homme*, the narrator's impulse is to recreate narratives – at least partially fictional – from scant historical facts or scientific data points. Again, the key to unlocking the past is a physical object which has survived the long period of time which represents many human lifespans.

There are also instances of a more future-oriented notion of ascendants and descendants. Inspired by the fact that the astronauts must exercise on a treadmill to avoid

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[14] Emmanuelle Pireyre's *Comment faire disparaître la terre?* also treats this relatively recent ability to discern details about human lives from hair, in a subsection entitled 'Les cheveux ont un avis – 1.' (CDT 65-7) which imagines dedicated hairdressers inspecting their customers' hair under a microscope in order to give them lifestyle advice.

[15] The 'Egtved girl', as she is known, was a high-status 16-18 year old female buried some 3,400 years ago near the town of Egtved: a biomolecular study 'demonstrate[d] that she originated from a place outside present day Denmark (the island of Bornholm excluded), and that she travelled back and forth over large distances during the final months of her life'. Source: Karin Margarita Frei and others, 'Tracing the dynamic life story of a Bronze Age Female', *Scientific Reports*, 5 (2015), 10431.

suffering muscle wastage, the narrator imagines future descendants of contemporary humans, living on a planet with significantly less gravity than our own, whose legs are withered as a result:

> '[ils] regarder[ont] d'un œil rêveur les images numériques (s'ils sont parvenus à les conserver) de leurs ancêtres (nous, au fond), leur trouvant une allure massive […] en profitant sans doute pour y voir les raisons de nos limites' (VF 145).

Once again, the notion of pre-human (or in the case, pre-neo-human) ancestors is raised within a narrative set in our recent historical past. Imagined material traces of the present as pre-history (images) are what will allow these neo-humans to consider us as their ancestors. What is more, the narrator adopts their future temporal perspective, switching into the imperfect tense ('nous vivions dans un monde bien attardé au regard de l'univers dans lequel désormais ils évoluent' (VF 145)). Viewing ourselves as the past, as surpassed by our ancestors, who have evolved beyond us, constitutes a kind of existential threat that adds undertones of menace to this otherwise amusing speculation. What is more, she adds '[…] ils afficheront […] non seulement ces très fines gambettes mais une tête plus grosse que la nôtre, et dont la dimension raffermira leur certitude quant à la supériorité de leur intelligence. Mais chassons cette idée (VF 145). This hint at the discredited field of phrenology – the future descendants of man thinking that their head size represents superior intelligence to that of their ancestors – is an unsettling one, since it invites the contemporary reader to consider themselves as a future object of history. Any consideration of the long process of evolution inevitably invokes the mortality of the individual member of the species – it is the tension between the individual and the evolutionary timescales that is unsettling, which the narrator acknowledges with her pointed invitation to the reader to 'chass[er] cette idée' (VF 145).

Clashing timescales

There also exist – to some extent in *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses* and to a much greater one in *L'Origine de l'homme*, a tension as various timescales come into contact with one another, often 'constructed' timescales measured by humans and the 'natural' timescales of the planet. The narrative of *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses* follows the four protagonists travelling to the International Space Station. Orbiting the planet and viewing the cycles of day and night and the bustling of daily human life from a distance seems to allow for a certain detachment, with the temporal cycles which rule life on the surface of the planet visible, but not all-encompassing; the narrator describes the scene as a reflection – 'le reflet

bleu d'une journée sur terre' (VF 188; see also VF 191). However, the protagonists still keep to a strict routine ruled by the temporal cycles of the Earth, artificially maintained. The narrator, too, seems to inflect the narrative with the time cycles of the planet, which mean very little in orbit, writing for example: 'C'était l'automne sur Terre' (VF 299) or 'lundi de printemps sur la Terre' (VF 242). There is a constant preoccupation with maintaining the rhythms of life on Earth, whether it is sleeping and waking at certain times ('il est 17h59, l'heure, après cette grosse journée, de se reposer' (VF 209)) or running a marathon in real-time as it takes place on Earth (VF 242).

Conversely, the huge scale of space means that this time is only a construct brought and maintained by the astronauts themselves. The narrator notes that from up in space, observing the Earth's surface only reveals the structures humans have constructed; individual human bodies, even those encased within vehicles, are invisible – their movement leaving only a trace:

> Personne n'a l'air de remarquer que, vue d'ici, la planète a l'air vide. […] Les villes semblaient désertes, ou au mieux, d'ici ou là, balayées par un nuage blanchâtre, informe et transparent, la trace d'un passage, le halo d'un fantôme. Mais bon, ce que j'en dis, moi (VF 152).

The same notion of the individual human life being almost invisible when one observes the Earth from this distance is picked up later: 'Pour l'heure, on est loin de cette vie bruissante, visible et largement invisible, qui bat son plein sur la Terre' (VF 323). From a relatively short distance above the Earth's surface, the individual and even collective lives of humans, lives that seem to be moving at such high speed ('bruissante'; 'bat son plein'), a nod to the kind of high-speed temporality I explored in the previous chapter, are all but invisible. This idea of a change of perspective – of seeing the earth from above as a globe rather than the lived experience on the surface – is one of the shifts that Latour has raised in his 2016 Aarhus Universitat lecture 'Why Gaia is not the Globe'.[16] Latour's subject is inherently a question of spatial scale (the globe vs. the small slice of the surface and atmosphere that we live our lives upon), but one which is also useful in our consideration of temporal scales. A human lifetime is tiny on a geochronological scale, and altering our perspectives in order to account for these vast scales constitutes a major paradigm shift.

[16] Op. cit.

The question of space and time scale hangs over the texts in a more unsettling way, too, as in the following episode where the narrator discusses the participants in the Mars travel experiments. These experiments seem to be almost absurd exercises in the reversal of space-time compression – the participants must live within a tiny, fixed capsule which is stationary, but which simulates the reality of the spacecraft which will take astronauts to another planet. The time scales involved represent significant parts of a single human lifetime, as is evidenced by one of the participants' decision not to take part in the third one: 'Oleg n'avait pas poussé le bouchon jusqu'à participer à la troisième expérience, cinq cent vingt jours, […] ça ampute sacrément le capital d'une existence' (VF 259). With time seen as a resource ('le capital d'une existence'), the scale of distances and times involved in space travel involve significant human 'investment' of time and brings into play the question of human mortality and the relatively short timescale of our own existence (relative to that of celestial bodies and the solar system, for example). Participation in one-off or significant events in the collective history of space travel (e.g. the first manned Mars voyage) could, for the individual, represent a significant part of their own lifetime. For the last century our ability to travel quickly (spatially) has been vastly increased by new technologies; the notion of temporally massive voyages, juxtaposed with reminders of our own mortality, is a clash of timescales which adds to the (not insignificant) temporal *malaise* of our epoch. This anxiety has entered – or perhaps been propagated in – popular culture. Sleep capsules and cryo-sleep are popular tropes in science fiction, and even major Hollywood blockbusters such as *Interstellar* (2014), *The Martian* (2015), and *Passengers* (2016) evoke the massive time scales of space travel and the cost to the individual.

In *L'Origine de l'homme*, the huge timescale in question is, of course, that of the evolution of man, and, again, this is juxtaposed with many shorter cycles, some of them on the scale of the planet (the angle of the sun dictated by the cycle of the earth turning on its axis) or of the solar system (the time of year and seasonal cycle determined by the earth's orbit). The fluid relationship between different temporalities and temporal cycles in the text is also hinted at indirectly, as here when the narrator remarks upon the weather, saying that one thousand seasons could seemingly go by in a single day – a metaphor, of course, but one which, in the strange temporality of this text, could very well be taken literally, too: '[…]on sent la mer proche, songez-vous, vous souvenant de météorologies balnéaires, des ciels changeant de la Manche, où volontiers mille saisons défilent en un seul jour' (OH 20). This cycle – 'seasonal' time – is one that is beyond human control (i.e. it is not a pure construction, like clock time) but the concept of seasons is a human construct, which recalls Koselleck's notion of a mediated

'natural' time. Indications of passing time on both a daily and a seasonal level are present in the text. There are many descriptions of the angle of the sun, indicating the passing of the day: 'le soleil, encore très latéral, n'y entre pas' (OH 23). These mentions of sunlight often focus on descriptions of elongating rectangles of light caused by sunlight shining through the windows: 'La lumière gagne dans la pièce à mesure des heures, elle projette des rectangles de plus en plus larges et de plus en plus nombreux' (OH 68), 'ou bien c'était midi, la lumière traçait deux larges bandes parallèles qui venaient cogner en oblique le dossier du fauteuil […]' (OH 58) or 'voilà notre homme à présent éveillé bien que toujours en sa position horizontale et dont le regard erre sur le plafond, […] descend un peu vers le mur et la hachure de lumière trapézoïdale qui à ce moment s'y trouve.' (OH 238).[17]

On a seasonal level, there are similar indications throughout the text of time moving forward, primarily through direct references to the seasons: 'le sol couvert de feuilles automnales' (OH 35), 'cette grande dévastation de l'automne' (OH 131), 'on respire là une sorte d'été tardif […]' (OH 112). Secondly, there are indirect references to the changing vegetation: 'le frémissement des saules, des hêtres, des chênes, dont les feuillages filtrent l'air de la rivière' (OH 19) is later replaced by 'le désordre des feuilles […] qui s'étaient amollies à l'endroit du pétiole' (OH 77), with the leaves eventually falling, leaving some 'tas de feuilles encore suspendues, encore retenues par les branches qui les prennent en chaussent-trappe' (OH 83). Later, the trees are described as once again teeming with life ('des étourneaux passent en bande sotte dans les feuillages' (OH 88)).

Montalbetti juxtaposes these various cycles of nature and the constructed, modern notion of standardised time that is often imposed upon a pre-human epoch. For example, several cycles can be presented at once: 'C'est l'hiver, il est six heures, la nuit précoce […]' (OH 148). This example shows the different cycles being juxtaposed in a manner which is familiar to us (seasonal cycles dictated by the movement of planetary bodies, the cycle of clock time as determined by human instruments, and daily cycles as the earth turns). But some of the ways in which these cycles are presented are less familiar and – by extension – more jarring, for example here during the narrator's description of O. Tugenensis: 'et il y va franco, dans ce matin d'octobre moins six millions avant notre ère' (OH 22). The notion that the time of year in which these movements of O. Tugenensis take place could be called 'October' is a jarring

[17] There is a parallel again, here, with Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*. The *nouveau romancier*'s obsession with time – especially representing the phenomenological time of perception – is echoed in this text.

anachronism, and while the idea of 'morning' and 'year' have more basis in natural cycles than that of 'October', the use of terms created in relatively recent history to describe temporal cycles which predate them serves as an unsettling temporal glitch. There is also an idea of 'progress', of developing towards something, in the phrase 'moins six millions avant notre ère'. Through these clashes of timescales, the text therefore both touches upon teleological slant imposed upon prehistory and the notion of 'progress', or of disruption of natural timecycles in favour of human-imposed time. While the short and medium-term cycles that govern nature have existed for millions and millions of years, humanity has only existed for a very short fraction of time on a planetary scale.

The 'strange time' of Montalbetti's *L'Origine de l'homme* is, of course, further compounded by the fact that the anticipated *telos* of Jacques' life story – the discovery of the fossils which will have him 'go down in history' as the father of palaeontology – never arrives within the text. The planetary cycles referred to in the text (the daily and yearly cycles of the sun), it is implied, stay the same throughout the entire temporal span of the text (from many tens of thousands of years BCE to the days leading up to Jacques' discovery). The speed of evolution is glacial, yet the span of humanity's evolution from ape to hominid to *Homo sapiens* is covered in half of the text. Jacques is still unaware of the expanse of history behind him: it is only the reader who sees the sheer scale of humanity's evolution juxtaposed with the individual's discovery. The individual time represented in the text is – even when focalised through this character whose awareness of the 'weight of history' should be greater than most – passed on introspection, and concerned with the minutiae of his daily life. His relationship with Margot and his friendship with André, for example, take on an importance – in terms of textual space – equal to that of the entirety of humanity's development. The personal 'stories' Jacques tells himself take on a space equal to or greater than the vast history of the species.

Both texts deal with the natural cycles of the planet and the imposed 'clock time' of humanity. *L'Origine de l'homme* takes huge scales of history and pre-history that led to the present moment and juxtaposes it with a single human lifetime, while *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses* is significantly more future-oriented, imagining our present as a 'future (pre-)history'. Both texts evoke the massive scale of our collective past and imagined future. The long timescales involved in both texts, as well as the juxtapositions of these scales with significantly shorter ones, could be argued to evoke contemporary anxieties surrounding our place in history and our consciousness of both the speeding-up of our daily lives and the huge

temporal cycles (of geo-political history, of evolution and extinction, of climate change, for example) of the planet and beyond.

Generational time in Lenoir

Lenoir's protagonists, through whom the third-person narration is generally focalised, are often introspective, in many cases also demonstrating an obsession with the minutiae of their own lives to the point of self-indulgence. They too, however, feel the pressure of broader time cycles which exceed the spans of their own lifetimes. In Koselleck's account of historical time, which I evoked at the beginning of this chapter, he notes that 'above all, the seeker will think of the successive generations in his or her family or professional world'.[18] One of the principle cycles of time which situates the temporal existences of Lenoir's (usually European and upper or upper-middle class) protagonists – and which often fails to advance as expected – is that of successive generations. In a certain sense, as Koselleck has argued, generational time is the way in which the individual can seize the movement of (collective, chronological and long-term) historical time. The advance of generations can be considered both as cyclical and as symbolic of an advance from past to future. From the vantage point of the individual human being, generational cycles must have appeared as cyclical for much of human history: each generation replacing their parents and, in many cases, taking on their parents' professions or social status. At various points in our history, generational advance could also be seen as symbolic of advancing through history and towards the future. These conceptions of generational cycles and historical time are changing rapidly as overpopulation and environmental unsustainability loom.

These anxieties about the advancing of generations appear in several of Lenoir's texts. The generational cycles in Lenoir's *Son nom d'avant* appear to trap the characters in a purgatorial family home where the structure never changes. While the 'cycles of generations', with each new generation replacing the last, may seem reassuringly familiar – a harking back to a a more 'natural' or traditional way of living – for Lenoir's characters these cycles mean being stuck in a tortuous, and often decidedly uncanny, temporal loop. The protagonist, Britt, marries into a family with strict generational structures. Her personal identity is subsumed by that of her role as a wife and mother, reflected in the fact that it is only very late in the novel

[18] Koselleck, p. xxii.

that she leaves the family home and the reader hears her original surname – the 'nom d'avant' to which the title of the novel refers. Britt first appears in the novel as a twenty-year-old woman, but more than twenty years elapse in the fictional universe between this 'prologue' episode and the main body of the text, by which time she has become Mme Casella. Her husband Justus is heir to the Casella empire (the reader never finds out what services or goods the company actually provides), which has been in the family for generations. The roles of each individual within the family, too, are passed down through the generations, with the women who marry into the family becoming nameless 'daughters-in-law' ('belles-filles').[19] These cycles are restrictive and engender an odd sense of stasis – individually, the characters are moving forward, being prepared for and eventually taking up the roles destined for them, but the situation always remains the same, both socially – there is always a patriarch, an heir, a servile daughter-in-law, a second son, etc. – and spatially – the family home is passed down from father to son.

This repetition from generation to generation ranges from the slightly unnerving (the notion that the same 'personality types' reappear at each generation, for example, by design of the Casella patriarchs) to the uncanny (the fatal accidents befalling a male child in two generations, a risk the Casellas mitigate by having an 'extra' son who can take up the throne). The only individuals who seem to be aware of the restrictiveness of the cycle are those who suffer most because of it – the women of the family: a letter by Lorette, Britt's daughter, notes that: 'Ma mère dit que ça sert à rien parce que rien ne change jamais et qu'on répète chaque fois exactement la même chose' (SD 87).

The metaphors of a torch being carried throughout the generations and of a royal dynasty, both of which are employed by Lenoir's narrator, seem reassuringly familiar and yet give some insight into the odd temporality of the Casella family: they are at once ruled by the marching forward of time, concerned with marrying, procreating and raising children in order to ensure an heir for the family riches, and trapped outside it, doomed to live exactly the same lives as their forebears:

> […] Adalbert avait pu hériter du trône et de tous les privilèges, y compris celui d'appeler son premier-né mâle Justus, lequel, reprenant le flambeau qu'il transmettrait

[19] Interestingly, no examples of men marrying into the family and taking on a specific role are referred to within the text.

> à Junior destiné à lui succéder, c'est-à-dire mener exactement la même vie que lui, que son grand-père et tous les Justus qui avait précédé […] (SD 64).

Compounding the sense that the Casellas are living in some kind of purgatorial space is their outdated lifestyle. The protagonist's ailing father-in-law, Adalbert, a member of the oldest of three generations shown within the narrative, describes having lived through 'ces années de chien, toutes ces privations de la guerre et de l'après-guerre' (SD 147), which places the present of the diegesis somewhere in the late-twentieth or early twenty-first century, and yet the Casellas appear to be living exactly as they have done for some generations: in an enormous family home passed down the patrilineal line. The gender roles of the family appear to have remained untouched by societal change, though there is indication that this is taking place elsewhere: a member of the oldest Casella generation criticises 'les femmes d'aujourd'hui, les jeunes femmes, et quand elles travaillent', comparing them unfavourably to one of their own: 'Henriette, son dévouement, son abnégation' (SD 147).

A picture slowly builds throughout the text of wives coerced into waiting upon the men of the family at the expense of their own lives. The protagonist, Britt, rails against her role of 'bonniche' (SD 86), and her anger may be founded: the patriarchal structures of the Casella family are repeatedly indicated throughout the text, from her husband Justus' exasperated exclamation of 'les femmes…' (SD 108), to the fact that the birth of Lorette, the eldest child, is denied the attention received by her brothers, which she surmises is due to her gender:

> [S]i j'avais été un garçon, papa m'aurait aimée comme Junior ou plus que Junior à cause de mes bonnes notes et maman m'aurait aimée comme Tim et peut-être qu'ils n'auraient pas eu d'autres enfants (SD 88).

This account is reinforced when the narrative is once more focalised through Britt: '[…] comme si elle ne savait pas, elle, que la naissance de Lorette, l'interdiction de s'en réjouir, une espèce de honte…' (SD 132). It is implied that Lorette's aunt has suffered in much the same way. She is instantly dismissed by Justus when the question of who will look after Adalbert is raised: 'Quant à Lili, instable et dépressive comme elle est…' (SD 96). Symptomatic of this pressure to perform the anticipated role of perfect wife and mother, and the maladjustment that this engenders, is the nervous condition that plagues the protagonist, Britt, which she believed would dissipate as time advanced and as she fulfilled the role assigned to her when she married into the Casella family:

> Longtemps elle avait cru que ça se dissiperait avec l'âge, en grandissant, en vieillissant, en devenant madame Justus Casella, respectée, admirée, jalousée, courtisée, en mettant au monde une fille puis deux fils dont l'aîné, Junior, pourrait prendre la succession de Justus à la tête de l'entreprise Casella, comme Justus avait lui-même succédé à son père, Adalbert, lequel avait succédé au sien, Justus F. […] (SD 94).

The Casella wives' role is therefore to be looked at, admired and envied, but it should be noted that even on the level of the sentence, this thought – about the Casella wife as an individual, albeit framed through the perspective of outsiders – is quickly overwhelmed with details about her sons, husband, and father-in-law. A similar episode of her own identity being overwhelmed by that of her anticipated role occurs when she begins to feel unwell after catching sight of Johann Samek, a man she met twenty years ago in the prologue of the text:

> […] Justus lui a soufflé: Qu'est-ce que tu fabriquais?, mais elle a simplement haussé les épaules en lui souriant comme une femme sourit à son époux dans une église pleine un jour de communion solennelle, comme toutes les épouses Casella ont souri aux Casella à toutes les générations, soumise, admirative, confiante (SD 100-1).

This future based on traditional gender roles and marriages leads to each individual character's future being predetermined. Britt will take the role of a previous 'Casella wife', Henriette, and her husband Justus will take the role handed down from his father: 'elle qui prenait ainsi la succession de feu Henriette Casella aussi dignement que Justus avait pris celle d'Adalbert à la direction de l'entreprise' (SD 99). While Justus' lot seems to be the most advantageous of all the characters, given the power he wields within the family and outside it as director of the Casella company, it is clear that his life has been perhaps even more diligently planned out in advance according to tradition. His future is described as a book being dropped into his cradle ('un livre déposé dans son berceau' (SD 65))' where everything is written in advance. He is given great power over the family and material benefits (' l'argent et le pouvoir, la maison et l'entreprise Casella' (SD 65)) but this comes at the price of following the path set out for him to the letter ('pourvu qu'il remplisse point par point les clauses du contrat' (SD 65)).

The Casella family home therefore appears as a kind of purgatorial space in which characters wait to fulfil the role handed down to them (or indeed to be rejected from it). The temporal stasis that seems to govern the Casella family is complemented by the idea that the generational cycle, instead of being one of renewal and advancing into the future, has instead become a kind of trap, a temporal loop from which the characters cannot escape. There are

several patterns continuing from generation to generation, most notably among the males in the family: one brother is always considered unsuitable to be 'groomed' as a possible heir to the Casella empire, and is brought up in such a way ('selon une très ancienne stratégie qu'on retrouve à chaque génération' (SD190)) that he will not challenge this decision.

> [Bob] devait être né avec cette étiquette-là sur le front: Nul ou Sans intérêt. Et même pas, Bon pour la réserve, comme Max, le second, élevé dans l'ombre de Justus pour le cas où… qui sait?, on n'est jamais à l'abri d'un malheur, avait pensé son père dont le frère aîné le premier du nom, un Justus forcément, était tragiquement noyé à l'âge de six ans […] (SD 63).

With each son filling a predetermined role, it appears that even the personalities of the Casella males are fashioned according to certain 'types' which endure throughout the generations.

> [Cela] ne voulait pas dire qu'on ne lui ferait pas de caractère, choses qui se fabriquait dès le plus jeune âge selon des recettes familiales qui avaient fait leurs preuves sur plusieurs générations mâles (SD 65).

What further underlines this repetition is that a tragic death has also struck a Casella male in two successive generations: the drowning of the first Justus at a young age (SD 63) is echoed in the following generation, when the second son Max is killed while in the mountains in circumstances which are typically vague (SD 66).

Other smaller indications of the Casellas being stuck in a kind of temporal loop are present throughout the text. Over two generations, the husband, apparently absent during the birth of his child, brings flowers for his wife after the child is born. This act is repeated in two generations and in two separate parts of the narrative; Britt remembers Justus having done so: 'quand Justus est arrivé les bras pleins de fleurs, y en avait!, les infirmières étaient émerveillées' (SD 134). Justus' mother, after two pregnancies in very little time and a number of miscarriages (SD 64), finally gave birth to another son by caesarean and her husband Adalbert did the same thing 'Adalbert arriva une heure plus tard avec un énorme bouquet de roses rouges pour la remercier en pleurnichant dans ses bras de lui avoir donné un troisième héritier' (SD 65). These episodes take place in reverse order in the narrative to chronological time in the diegesis, and that they appear in the narrative in very different contexts, with a great deal of space in between: the effect is such that the reader, moving through the text chronologicially, may only have a vague recollection of the first mention of this repeated act.

The reader's vague sense of having 'heard this story before' echoes the half-memories of the strange, cyclical time the characters inhabit. The characters' lives are governed by time organised in cycles which extend beyond their own lifetimes, but there is still a sense of stasis, from the old-fashioned customs of the family who are, nonetheless, inhabitants of our contemporary world, to their monotonous daily lives and the unnerving repetitions throughout the generations.

The advance of the generations will eventually break down within the text, and both the metaphorical book of Justus' future and the real book we are reading will take an unexpected turn. Britt sees what awaits her through the servile, submissive life Henriette led ('Britt, ce sera ça, Britt aussi, elle y pense certainement, ça lui fait peur […]' (SD 66)) and eventually breaks out of the cycle. Strikingly, once she does so, the narrative ends. Beyond the confines of the Casella family's temporal trap, she has gone 'off-script', so to speak, and both the metaphorical book of the Casella empire and the real novel end at this point.

An earlier text, *Le Magot de Momm,* is also underpinned by the cycle of generations. Once again, a generational cycle ends up breaking down, but in this case the breakdown consistutes not escape, but the beginning of a similar purgatorial time and space to that of the Casella family home in *Son nom d'avant.* As in *Son nom d'avant,* two men in the family from two successive generations die young and unexpectedly: 'les deux hommes emportés à deux ans d'intervalle à des âges où c'est révoltant de mourir, Rémi à cinquante-neuf ans et Michel à trente-huit ans' (MM 22). In this case, the men appear to have been breadwinners for the family. Nann's mother, Momm, keeps secret from her the fact that Nann's husband was a compulsive gambler and has left her with significant debts. Nann also has only limited qualifications for work ('un mauvais bac en poche' (MM 27)) and three children to raise, and so she moves back to her mother's home. With the men of the family gone and the traditional format for generational advancement in their bourgeois world (career, marriage, children, house ownership) failing, Nann lives her life in a liminal space between adulthood and a second childhood. Now having taken on a lover, Vincent, she is the subject of her mother's suspicion, anger and, on occasion, pity; Momm seems to have taken the 'project' of taking care of her daughter to heart, spinning a tale of her own goodness and altruism throughout the narrative.

Focalised in turn through Nann, Momm, and occasionally Nann's teenage daughter who has left home, the narrative reveals how the characters view very differently the time they

have spent together, with a sense of stasis or stagnation permeating Nann's interpretation of the situation; the years begin to merge together in her mind:

> Quand elle essaie de se remémorer ces cinq années passées sous le toit de sa mère jusqu'à l'irruption de Vincent dans sa vie, elles lui semblent avoir déjà la même consistance que les douze années précédentes passées avec Michel, elles les ont rejointes, s'y sont collées en formant juste un renflement dans la baudruche ambrée: dix-sept années agglutinées maintenant (MM 57).

This notion of being stuck or stuck together ('collée', 'agglutiné') and the use of the term 'ambrée' the adjective for 'amber' underlines this sense of stasis. The narrator goes on to refer to all the arguments they have had over the years as 'bits' ('grumeaux') in a sticky, translucent substance, or like small creatures stuck there. They form

> une seule masse gélatineuse avec quelques grumeaux sombres qui diluent peu à peu, toutes ces blessures, ces rages impuissantes, ces gesticulations solitaires […] comme des petites bêtes pitoyables gigotant dans le magma translucide, solidifiées pour la plupart (MM 58).

Flora and fauna specimens can be found preserved in amber after many thousands or millions of years;[20] the image of bodies being perfectly preserved in amber is one of being frozen in time. Vast timescales are once again brought to the fore with the use of geological imagery in the term 'transluscent magma', and the narrative continues in this vein by referring to the imagined frozen creatures as fossils: 'fossilisées à présent dans des poses grotesques, elles pâlissaient inertes, dégageaient encore une vague odeur de viande avariée, mais ça aussi ça passait, ou on s'y habituait […]' (MM 58). There are two competing images at play here; one of being frozen or preserved for eternity (or near enough, given the timescales involved) but also of death, decay and decomposition. Initially fighting ('gigotant') against the stagnation that takes over her life ('dix-sept années agglutinées'), Nann's life eventually appears to have remained motionless through time ('fossilisées'). However, the counter-image of decaying meat suggests that this metaphorical preservation is countered by an awareness of time running

[20] The 'amber fossil record' goes as far back as the Palaeozoic era but is more common from the Mesozoic onwards (the Mesozoic era began some 250 million years ago), as in noted in a recent article on Lower Jurassic amber specimens: Mirco Neri and others, 'First record of Pliensbachian (Lower Jurassic) amber and associated palynoflora from the Monti Lessini (northern Italy)', *Geobios*, 50 (2017), 49-63.

out: the individual characters cannot escape the inevitable decay that comes with the marching forward of chronological time.

Other texts in Lenoir's œuvre engage with this question of generational time cycles to a greater or lesser degree; Jean Duffy writes that *Bourrasque*[21] is characterised by 'marked territorial tension and intergenerational conflict.'[22] Other texts are concerned directly with the question of inheritance: the dividing-up of Odette Silaz's estate in *La Folie Silaz* is a major driver of the narrative and a source of anguish for the protagonist Carine, and the anticipated death of Camelin's mother in *Elle va partir* is a central concern of the narrative, and is echoed by the previous suicide of Mattias' mother. *Tilleul* is another text where the generational cycle has been interrupted – this time intentionally by Gilles Harper, who tries to reconstruct the family with himself as patriarch and his sister and niece replacing the family he never managed to start. Gilles attempts to assert his position as the patriarch of the family, attempting to exercise parental control over his niece which borders on, and then tips into, the obsessive and the abusive. In this disturbed generational cycle, the letter which he leaves (he has written on it 'à ouvrir après ma mort' (T 132)) – excusing himself, Sophie imagines, for 'toutes les saloperies commises et à commettre' (T 136) – is a mockery of the notion of inheritance, whether material (money, objects) or more abstract (being prepared for a better, more prosperous future).

The anticipation of one's own death and the 'passing of the torch' from one generation to another is nothing new; in this second decade of the twenty-first century, it is the disturbance of those cycles – or the realisation that those cycles cannot continue without spiralling out of control – that underpins the anxieties about time and our place in history. Our conception of historical time on an individual level is inevitably shaped by the concept of passing generations (as Koselleck has argued). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, our previously-held conceptions of generational cycles have been altered. It is no longer possible to view generational advancement as an endless cycle of birth and death, with each generation perfectly replacing the previous one: we know that the world population is growing exponentially and that this growth will eventually be unsustainable. Neither is it possible to view each generation as passing the torch to the next, as humanity marches towards a more advanced, more prosperous future: we live in a world where the short-termism of previous and current

[21] Hélène Lenoir, *Bourrasque*, (Paris: Minuit, 1995). Hereafter referred to using abbreviation 'B'.
[22] Jean H. Duffy, 'Territoriality disputes, pollution and abjection in Nathalie Sarraute and Hélène Lenoir', *Romantic Review*, 98 (2007), 387-412 (p. 390).

generations could lead to a net degradation in living conditions for the generations who follow. The strange temporality of Lenoir's texts reflects, in many ways, the mood of the time: traditional generational cycles break down and fail, while those who attempt to maintain them (the Casellas, for example) end up stagnating, breaking down, or trapped in torturous temporal loops. Other characters, like Nann in *Le Magot de Momm*, see their advancement to the next or expected stage in the generational cycle interrupted, and become stuck in a liminal, purgatorial space between adulthood and childhood.

Collective history

Personal and peripheral: in Lenoir's La Crue de juillet *and* La Folie Silaz

While we are forced to view our own lives in light of these long timescales (from the relatively short generational cycles of humanity to the massive scale of evolutionary and even geochronological time), our societies and our politics appear to have retreated into short-termism and insularity. On a collective scale, this is observable in many developed societies through a recent surge in nationalist and isolationist sentiment. On an individual scale we might point to behaviours that do not aid the collective situation such as refusal to adopt more sustainable habits.[23] Politicians are preoccupied by the inherent short-termism of election cycles: delivering long-term solutions to future problems does not necessarily win votes in the present.

This short-termism is reflected in Lenoir's texts which tend to focus on the minutiae of the daily lives of the protagonists rather than the historically and politically significant events that are alluded to briefly throughout the narratives. These events are often implied to have been central in bringing about the current situation of the protagonists, and yet the events themselves only appear to concern the protagonists insofar as they directly affect their lives or pique their own morbid curiousity. In other words, Lenoir's protagonists, through whom her narratives are generally focalised, side-line events which would appear to be important in terms

[23] For a specific example of this individual short-termism in action, see how some residents of the Ile-de-France region reacted to Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo's proposed measures to reduce vehicle pollution which contributes to dangerous smog in France's capital and the surrounding area. She has been criticised as pushing a 'politque anti-voiture' and an 'écologie punitive'.C.f. Stéphane Mandard, 'Pollution: Paris ne veut plus de voitures à essence dans ses rues d'ici à 2030', *Le Monde*, 12 October 2017, <http://www.lemonde.fr/pollution/article/2017/10/12/pollution-paris-ne-veut-plus-de-voitures-a-essence-dans-ses-rues-d-ici-a-2030_5199792_1652666.html> [Accessed 12/03/2018].

of collective historical time in favour of focusing on those protagonists' own personal stories and lives. To reiterate, 'historical time' here means the advance of collective history (where the collective may be the inhabitants of a geographical region or ethnic group, for example, or humanity as a whole). It is, to a certain extent, a construct, because creating a linear 'history' of anything involves someone (an individual, for example a historian, or a group) deciding what is significant and what is peripheral.[24] Georges Perec's notion of a collective History – capital H – which erases or elides the individual stories – histoires – ('Histoire avec sa grande hache')[25] seems turned on its head in Lenoir's texts, at least for the (bourgeois, western European) protagonists at the centre of the narrative. These protagonists see their own concerns – usually a long-standing domestic dispute or family argument – presented as the central concern of the narrative, while other events – which could often be said to be significant historical events – are presented as being peripheral to the plot.

This ignoring of the exceptional in favour of the everyday in Lenoir might also be symptomatic of a wider trend, with the temporality of the exceptional and the everyday becoming conjoined. Ben Anderson writes that:

> Today, in fact, the time of the everyday and the time of the emergency are frequently conjoined in claims that in the midst of various ecological crises, the contemporary condition of human life is life lived in uncertainty.[26]

Anderson notes, however, that the temporality of the emergency has the qualities of 'unpredictable, rapid change and the time of a turning point,'[27] while the everyday 'is associated with the mundane, trivial and inconsequential.'[28] As we have seen, this paradoxical combination of urgency and passivity, of short-term thinking and long-term problems is both a defining feature of our epoch and fertile ground for literary engagement with twenty-first century temporal anxieties.

Lenoir's focus on the everyday over the exceptional is exemplified by the languid pace of change in her narratives and the often purely reactive modes of her characters could be

[24] For more on this, refer to Hayden White's Metahistory. Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2014). Deciding what is historically significant is also an inherently political act; at a societal level, the dominant group risks erasing or minimising the history(/ies) of less dominant groups.
[25] Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).
[26] Ben Anderson, 'Emergency/Everyday', in *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present*, ed. by Joel Burges and Amy J. Elias (New York: NYU Press, 2014), pp. 177-91 (p. 171).
[27] Ibid. p. 178.
[28] Ibid. p. 181.

considered as part of a wider movement in contemporary French literature which favours the unremarkable and the unexceptional: Warren Motte had already identified, in 2003, a trend in the new 'richly compelling models of the novel as literary form [that] have been proposed by a variety of young writers',[29] of passivity and a focus on the quotidian:

> The protagonists of these novels are for the most part diffident creatures, recumbent and essentially passive folk who grapple unequally with the vexations that quotidian existence imposes upon them. Narrative style has been flattened, as if these authors wished to suggest that in the novel (like in everyday life, as opposed to 'history') it is difficult to assign pertinence to any given event.[30]

The passivity of Lenoir's characters faced with their (often extremely vexatious) situations appears to resonate with Motte's description of a flattening of narrative style. The clear, decisive actions they take are generally reactive and rarely have an impact within the narrative itself (although it is sometimes implied that it will change their situation, the texts usually end before any real evidence of this is given). What is more, Lenoir's protagonists often treat the events of 'historical' time – political or collective events which are taking place around them – as peripheral, as background noise in the story of the individual. In this, Lenoir's protagonists could be considered as extremely short-sighted – absolute focus is given to their immediate surroundings, with only vague allusions to or dislocated accounts of the 'outside world' beyond this foregrounded story.

In *La Crue de juillet*, for example, the female protagonist, Thérèse, arrives in an unknown town in an unknown country (later various clues point to it being somewhere in the south of Germany) in order to interview a famous artist, a Mr Jung, for her employer. The textual space of the narrative is dominated by Thérèse's wandering through the town and her relationship with a man called Karl, who occasionally appears too as a narrative focaliser.[31] Once her ostensible purpose there is removed (the interview is cancelled) Thérèse's focus, and therefore the majority of textual space, becomes both her own past, for example her professional and personal difficulties, and her morbid obsession with the tragic event at the heart – but also relegated to the background – of the novel. The story taking place in the margins of the novel, that of the Chechen refugee family and the death of mother and child in the

[29] The authors he treats in this book are: Le Clézio, Chevillard, Lê, Laurrent, Jouet, NDiaye, Echenoz, Oster, Toussaint, and Salvyre.
[30] Motte, p. 3.
[31] It is interesting to note the two male characters are called 'Karl' and 'Jung'.

accident, is at once central to the events of the narrative and treated as peripheral to it. *La Crue de juillet* was published in 2013, meaning that the Chechen refugees referred to in the text could represent those people displaced by either the first Chechen war (1994-6) or the second, more protracted conflict (1999-2009) which was followed by unrest in the North Caucasus which continues until the present day. The Chechen war was one of the bloodiest conflicts of the post-Soviet era; Christoph Zürcher writes that since the Second World War only four civil wars (those in Afghanistan, Vietnam, Laos and Algeria) have caused more deaths as a proportion of the pre-war population.[32] The second war also marked a notable change, Zürcher argues, in the relationship between the Russian state apparatus and the media; in the context of this study, it is important to note the new ways in which media narratives were employed in wartime to marginalise and control:

> [T]his time Russian policy makers understood that the outcome depended not only on success in the battlefield but also on success in the information war. In the first war, the Russians almost completely ignored the informational side of the war. […] During the second Chechen war, journalists were 'guests' of the Russian army, they were witnessing 'police operations,' and the perspective of Chechen victims was virtually absent from Russian TV screens […].[33]

The strategic decisions of the belligerents (and particularly the Russian government) led to the representation and the invisibility of certain victims in the media representations of the conflict. This dynamic is echoed in the narrative, as the refugee family's initial trauma (their displacement) is entirely absent from the text, and their individual identities become completely subsumed by the story of their deaths which becomes a subject of conversation among the local people: for example the story told by the taxi driver (CJ 9), a conversation overheard between women chatting at a café (CJ 17), and the responses of a young waiter whom Thérèse asks to recount it, which appear as he periodically pauses between serving other customers (CJ 18-21)). Only once is the name of the mother who threw herself to her death to save her child mentioned – and even then she is only referred to by the name Madina S. The erasure of her personal identity (not to mention those of her unnamed husband and children) is summed up by the photograph accompanying the news item, which is a passport-style identity photo which has been enlarged. The photograph chosen is significant: it is not a personal or family

[32] Christoph Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict and Nationhood in the Caucasus* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), p. 70.
[33] Ibid. pp. 93-4.

photograph, but a piece of official documentation which comes to represent the deceased. Her only identity becomes that displayed on her passport – perhaps a telling indictment of the attitudes of European nations to those with refugee status, and an erasure which mirrors the very real problems of representation in the current refugee crises. The passport also highlights the strict regulation of movement in a world where goods and financial transactions are transnational and the right to travel appears stacked in the hands of the relative few, a fact highlighted by the constant passing of passenger planes from a local airport to other European destinations: 'Un avion survolait la pâté de maisons, en partance pour le nord, Londres ou Dusseldorf […]' (CJ 83).[34]

With the narrative focalised through Thérèse, the reader only catches glimpses of this story, and the entire plot focuses on Thérèse's own (perceived) misfortunes. It seems the whole town is talking about the accident, her friend Dora is nowhere to be found (Thérèse thinks she may have run off with her lover, Dragan), and the keys to Dora's apartment, where she will stay, have been left with unfriendly neighbours. The story of the refugee family is the direct cause of these events, which themselves are treated at length in the narrative, but this is only revealed towards the end of the text. The reader only finds out that Dora is in charge of a centre for refugees and that Dragan is involved in the response when they are described in a newspaper article as the 'responsable du Centre d'accueil des réfugiés [qui] suivait cette famille depuis son arrivée and 'Dr. Dragan Curic, psychologue spécialiste des traumatismes' (CJ 120). Thérèse is captivated by the story of the drowned refugees, but only in the abstract sense – it never enters her mind, and therefore never surfaces in the narrative, that the practicalities of dealing with the crisis have led to Dora abandoning their plans. Despite being told outright that the incident Dora referred to was a matter of life and death ('Des morts, Thérèse, il y a eu des morts!' (CJ 65)), Thérèse never makes the connection. It is telling that the revelation that Dora and Dragan are involved in the response to the drownings only comes when the narrative is focalised through Karl, who reads details of the tragedy in a news bulletin.

Reading through the text chronologically, the reader – whose only information comes from the narrative focalised through Thérèse (and later both Thérèse and Karl by turn) – is misled by the narrow focus of the protagonists. This focus is not simply within the 'stream-of-consciousness' of the narrative – Thérèse also displays remarkable self-obsession on the level

[34] The narrative regularly refers to planes arriving or leaving (e.g. 'le vacarme d'un avion prenant de la hauteur' (CJ 59)), the sounds of which regularly punctuate the narrative (CJ 86, 93, 103, 133, 145).

of the diegesis, and projects her own obsession with the quotidian and her own rather banal struggles with romance and social relationships onto Dora. Despite initially worrying that Dora might have been held up by an accident or dramatic event (CJ 13), she soon theorises that it may be that she has found a lover for the night and has consequently abandoned her (she refers to it as a 'conquête de dernière minute'). The voicemail she leaves for Dora demonstrates a degree of passivity and self-obsession which continues throughout the text ('Si tu pouvais au moins m'expliquer ce qui se passe et me dire ce que je dois faire, moi, là…' (CJ 12)).

It is this bias, which sees the phenomenological time of Thérèse's introspections dominating the narrative over the exceptional events taking place around her, which gives the text an odd sense of chaos. As a result of the confusing and fragmented narrative the reader is presented with, other characters appear to be behaving in an erratic or illogical way: despite apparently being the cause of Thérèse's problems (at this point the reader has no indication that she is in any way involved in the drowning incident) Dora suddenly loses her temper and essentially throws her out ('Dora qui d'ailleurs l'avait mise dehors ou lui avait du moins bien fait comprendre que si elle n'appelait pas madame Jung…' (CJ 106)). The text sees the protagonist behaving in a purely reactive, diffident (to borrow Motte's term) way and showing little to no direction in a confusing, chaotic diegetic universe; it is this confusion which gives the reader the impression that the narrative's main actors have been 'cast adrift' from historical time and are turning the narrative to (almost) pure introspection.

A similar instance of inward-looking protagonists is observable in *La Folie Silaz*, where two sisters-in-law navigate the aftermath of a death in the family, that of Odette Silaz, Muriel's mother and Carine's mother-in-law. Georges Silaz, the former lover of Carine and father of Do, is in Chiapas participating in the Zapatista movement. He is conspicuous by his absence in the text and yet, as we have seen, the other characters seem to be obsessed by him: he therefore 'appears' in the narrative through metadiegetic episodes and through speculation of other characters. Despite the fact that she has married another man and has what seems to be a stable family (supportive husband, two devoted daughters), Carine continues to revisit and relive her relationship with Georges, her obsession with this episode in her own life bordering more and more on madness as the text advances – the 'folie Silaz' to which the title refers. In this text, we see a major political event, the Zapatista movement, treated as a peripheral detail in a narrative focused on the subjective realities of the character, which is particularly significant given the movement's focus on protecting the interests of groups marginalised and rendered invisible by central government.

Georges Silaz's absence is apparently due to this work for the Zapatista movement under the code name 'Ruben'. When Muriel meets William, an old friend of hers with whom she had a short-lived romance, he recounts to her how he met Georges in Mexico, where he is apparently undertaking humanitarian work as a neutral observer of the repression of the Zapatistas – a role which he reports on in great length in emails sent to all of his contacts apart from, it would seem, his family ('[d]es immenses rapports, mails collectifs censés sensibiliser les gens à ce qui se passait à Chiapas…'(119)). The text's insularity would seem to be broken by this intrusion of the 'outside world' and of political and historical reality, but the characters, much like the text itself, turn inward and refuse (or are unable) to engage with these geopolitical events, even insofar as they affect their own relationship with their brother/the father of their children, as in this example where Muriel listens to William's (also sometimes called Bill) explanation of the situation in Chiapas:

> Elle le regardait les sourcils froncés, les yeux plissés, sans savoir si elle devait faire mine de le suivre ou lui avouer qu'elle n'avait jamais reçu de mail de ce genre, entendait pour la première fois ce nom, Chiapas, ne comprenait pas, rien, la lutte armée, soutien, pétitions, le cerveau en veilleuse, noir, comme un écran traversé de lentes bulles colorées qui se rejoignaient, éclataient, se recollaient, la révolution zapatiste, droits de l'homme, milices, arrestations, rien à bouffer, San Cristobel, Guatemala… (FS 119-20).

Muriel's reception of this information therefore does not go beyond simply 'hearing' the words which she does not wish to process ('le cerveau en veilleuse'; 'rien à bouffer') and the narrative repeats them as an unfiltered stream-of-consciousness. The political and historical reality of the text – the whirlwind ('tourbillon') of adventure which Carine imagines when talking about Georges' life in Mexico – only appears in the text in this incomprehensible, fragmentary form, while the inner workings of the Silaz family are repeatedly reworked and discussed. It should also be noted that Muriel is dismissive of further information given by Bill about the Zapatista movement and Georges' supposed impartiality, prentending that she knows it already when it is clear from the above extract that she does not ('Elle lui fait signe qu'elle sait tout cela' (FS 123)), suggesting that the inability to assimilate further information is at least partly a conscious choice on her part. Georges Silaz's obsession with writing and rewriting stories on both a personal and a professional level – a concern which echoes the structure of the narrative which does much the same thing – extends to his work in Chiapas as he creates and reworks a narrative

of his own humanitarian work and of the cause, which is received with scepticism by his readers:

> Bill […] revient sur les premiers messages de Georges et sourit en se rappelant avec quelle naïveté il avait lu ses rapports d'observateur ou de représentant soi-disant neutre d'il ne savait quelle commission internationale. C'était si fouillé et si bien écrit qu'on était forcément bouleversé et, tant qu'on n'y connaissait rien, on l'admirait, on prenait ça pour de l'humanitaire, alors que les choses était en réalité beaucoup plus compliquées … (FS 123).

Published in 2008, *La Folie Silaz* is a contemporary of the explosion of social media site Facebook and the rise of Twitter, but it predates by some time the difficulties caused by the propagation via social media of biased news and opinion sources masquerading as serious reports, what is now being referred to (though unfortunately also co-opted by its worst perpetrators) as 'fake news'.[35] Lenoir's character of Georges in *La Folie Silaz* seems to anticipate this kind of individual exploiting the media available to them to reach a large audience – in Georges' case, mass emailing. The reports he sends rely on the naivety of the receiver ('tant qu'on n'y connaissait rien'), they are presented as a legitimate source ('rapports d'observateur ou de représentant') and masquerade as such by giving themselves official-sounding names ('il ne savait quelle commission internationale'). Once again, though, the text mirrors reality in that certain information and certain individuals are side-lined in favour of a simplified narrative that serves as a background for the domestic concerns of bourgeois, European protagonists. Bill's criticism of Georges also seems to be anchored in the idea of the Zapatista movement as an armed revolution – and it is really only this interpretation, of pure violence, that appears in the text. However, the conflict itself has much less to do with military conflict that it would first seem – Rodolfo Stavenhagen writes that:

[35] The term 'fake news' has entered journalistic discourse since the successful 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump in the United States, and describes the phenomenon of false or heavily biased stories – and even conspiracy theories – being published on websites which often appear to be official or edited news sources and propagated through social media. A piece by journalist and *New Yorker* staff writer Adrian Chen notes that 'the Internet didn't just give [Donald Trump] a megaphone. It also helped him peddle his lies through a profusion of unreliable media sources that undermined the old providers of established fact.' Adrian Chen, 'The Fake-News Fallacy', *New Yorker*, 93 (2017), 78-83. France is not immune to this phenomenon either, with *Le Figaro* picking up on the Anglophone term after the 2017 presidential election in France: Alexis Feertchak, 'Les cinq "fake news" qui ont pollué la campagne présidentielle', Le Figaro.fr, 22 April 2017 <http://www.lefigaro.fr/elections/presidentielles/2017/04/22/35003-20170422ARTFIG00048-les-cinq-fake-news-qui-ont-pollue-la-campagne-presidentielle.php> [Accessed 17/07/2018].

> The Chiapas uprising is essentially an expression of a deeply-rooted social and political conflict, and the violent or military aspect of the rebellion is not its most essential feature, much less the cause of it.[36]

None of the details of the conflict's causes or of the problems faced by indigenous peoples of Mexico and South America ever make it into the narrative: despite Muriel waiting a significant amount of time in San Cristobel to meet Georges, her account of the time she spends there focuses on her arrangements with him and her organisation of the trip itself. It should also be noted that the people she meets there are never described in detail by Muriel in the email she sends to Jean-Luc (which is the reader's only source of information about this episode) apart from the fact that they are happy to welcome a relative of 'Ruben'. The people she describes speaking to directly, the two people who bring her the message that Georges is not coming, are also (Western) foreigners who are participating in the movement.

Georges represents an obsession with 'telling tales' on two levels – he not only wants to 'get the story out' about the repression of the Zapatistas by writing these long reports, he also skilfully deploys language and storytelling to present a subjective past to other characters, who in turn 'write' their own versions of the story. Silaz and Carine edit out the inconvenient truths of their personal lives – incarnated in their son Do –, removing the unsavoury aspects of their stories or presenting a simplified version of the truth – in Georges' case, both in terms of his own personal story and the political events he recounts, presenting himself as the heroic humanitarian in the midst of an armed conflict. This touches, perhaps, on contemporary anxieties about how to sort the real, verifiable facts from false information and biased narrative in our information-saturated society.

History in Montalbetti's Plus Rien que les vagues et le vent, *and* Love Hotel.

In Montalbetti's texts, much like in Lenoir, historical events are often an important driver of the plot while also appearing as marginal in terms of textual space. In the case of *Love Hotel*, the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan is alluded to throughout the text but only mentioned directly in the final lines (and, even then, only by reference to the date, which the reader is assumed to know), and in *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent*, several historical events are depicted (the Lewis and Clark expedition, the eruption of Mount St. Helens, for example). A

[36] Rodolfo Stavenhagen,'Mexico's Unfinished Symphony: The Zapatista Movement (2000)', in *The Emergence of Indigenous Peoples*, (Berlin & Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), pp. 121-36 (p. 122).

traumatic personal event in the latter text which befalls the narrator - the attack he suffers at the hands of a group of Americans – is linked to a major political event, the Iraq War, which is taking place (it is implied) analogously. In both this case and that of the tsunami in *Love Hotel*, the major political event is not mentioned in the title, nor does it feature throughout most of the body of the text: it is moved to the periphery of the narrative, both figuratively and literally, as the sense of foreboding in the fictional universe is only explicitly linked to the 'real' historical event in the final lines of the text.

Love Hotel appears at first glance to be the meandering tale of the narrator's relationship with a married woman, Natsumi, while living in Japan. Instead it is an anticipatory, foreboding tale which eventually ends with the narrator learning of the real-life tsunami which took place in 2011. From the opening pages of the novel the first-person narrator evokes an urban landscape which seems to anticipate the tsunami – it is described as both damaged and looking abandoned, for example ('paysage presque abîmé'; 'petit air à l'abandon' (LH 7)). More explicit foreshadowing of the novel's final revelation is also present in the form of the legends the narrator recounts which were told to his lover Natsumi as a child. For example, there is the legend of the sleeping dragon under the surface of the earth whose movements can cause the earth's crust to move ('[le dragon] est pris parfois d'un léger soubresaut qui se répercute jusqu'à la croute terrestre' (LH 77)). There are already small earthquakes ('petits séismes') which are described as tolerable and the dragon of the legend is considered to be a kind of tame animal or pet ('animal familier' (LH78)).

It is important to note that this 'final revelation' takes place *after* the end of the narrative and is simply alluded to in the text itself: the narrator recounts that '[il] pousse la porte du petit bar qui me sert de cantine: la television est allumée, ce 11 mars 2011' (LH 171). The aftermath of the final revelation on the diegetic level and the reconsideration of the entire text in light of the new information, added retrospectively, are left for the reader to 'insert' at the end of the narrative. While the narrative takes place almost entirely in the present tense (aside from metadiegetic episodes), the penultimate sentence ('mon après-midi aurait pu s'achever sur cette sensation de douceur' (LH 171)), coupled with the foreshadowing of the disaster throughout the narrative, suggests that, for the narrator, this may be a retrospective re-construction, rather than a retrospective re-telling, of his movements leading up to the moment he became aware of the 2011 tsunami. The text therefore does not opt for the kind of extreme fragmentation or distancing often associated with postmodern trauma narratives, but it does avoid representing the tragedy itself by focusing on the reconstruction of a *personal* story over the narration of the

event itself. It should be noted, too, that in this case the personal story is fictional: rather than treating the 'real' historical event, either on a collective or an individual level, the text instead diverts to the *possibility* of a personal experience of the narrative.

The narrative in *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent* employs historical fact and legend in rather different ways. The narrative is principally set in a bar, where the French narrator listens to the stories told by the Americans he meets there. These stories appear as metadiegetic episodes in the narrative. The bar is called the 'return of Ulysses' (*Retour d'Ulysse*) which seems incongruent in the universe occupied by other establishments like 'The Bluebell' and real-life, visually-oriented names such as Haystack Rock.[37] It seems that all of the stories told in the bar somehow make their way into the narrative, with equal weight being given to historical fact – whether this is on a grand scale or a personal one – and fictional narrative. A relatively minor character, Perry, brings with him to the bar two books on the subject of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and this moment in collective history becomes a recurring episode within the narrative – they are described as 'spectres fatigués' wandering around the bar (VV 76). The text's initial treatment of the expedition seems flippant, addressing the reader in an informal, conversational style ('[…] vous en avez peut-être entendu parler, deux sacrés cocos, c'est le moins qu'on puisse dire (mais on va essayer d'en dire plus)' (VV 46)), but quickly turns to giving historical details about the expedition (dates, details about the involvement of president Jefferson, etc.). This maintaining the kind of 'oral storytelling' tone of the rest of the text – for example paraphrasing Jefferson as saying 'Les gars, si vous voulez bien traverser l'Amérique d'est en ouest et consigner tout ce que vous voyez sur votre passage' (VV 46) –[38] has the effect of conveying not the 'pure' story or history itself, but the distorted version, probably recounted in conversation at the bar of the *Retour d'Ulysse*.

In this sense, it is not the real historical event, but rather the way that the historical event is experienced by the narrator within the four walls of the *Retour d'Ulysse,* that filters into the text. These stories are also generally interlinked in a way that is suggestive in the meanderings of an informal conversation, incorporating both historical narrative and the narrative of legend. For example, a detail in the fictional narrative is superimposed onto the documented historical

[37] It might be said to evoke two things: Homer's *Odyssey,* a pertinent reference in light of the temporal arrangement of the narrative, with its constant analepses and prolepses, and the focus on the perpetually delayed *telos*; secondly, Joyce's *Ulysses,* a highly experimental text which has both been lauded as one of the great modernist texts and considered one of the most difficult texts in the English language.
[38] The narrator seems particularly taken with this final detail, noting that in their 'chariots et bateaux [ils ont] emporté de grands carnets où ils noteraient tout' (VV 46).

narrative of the Lewis and Clark expedition: 'Tous les soirs où Harry passait chercher Colter au *Blueberry* et où il le conduisait jusqu'à bar de Moses, il reproduisait l'itinéraire des hommes de l'expédition Lewis et Clark' (VV 75). This idea that all of the narratives – personal, historical, fictional – are interlinked is also reinforced by the kind of narrative digression, explored in the previous chapter, which is present throughout Montalbetti's texts. The narrator starts recounting a story about when Clark scouted ahead of the rest of the expedition ('Parfois, Clark partait en éclaireur' (VV 76)) but the story goes off on a tangent when he begins discussing which mountain Clark saw – Mount St Helens or Mount Adams. This in turn is linked back to Cannon Beach ('la province ignée, vous vous souvenez, forgée par la lave' (VV 77)) which was described in detail earlier in the text.

A later chapter of the text, entitled 'Johnston, Blackburn et les autres' treats the story of the eruption of Mount St Helens in 1980; it should be noted that the chapter title does not refer to the eruption, but to two individual victims of the natural disaster. Unlike in the natural disaster of *Love Hotel*, this metadiegetic episode is explicitly linked to 'real' historical fact, as from the outset, the narrator refers to the fact that the 'real story' has been brushed over by the local residents ('Voici ce qui s'était réellement passé ce jour de 1980 dont personne ici ne veut vraiment parler' (VV 94)). The narrator recounts an Indian legend, which serves to explain the geologic formations and volcanoes. This reimagining of the geologic as supernatural is echoed by the modern-day reimagining of the volcanoes as familiar – a mixture of superstition and complacency which is similar in many ways to the 'sleeping dragon' legend of *Love Hotel*. The fact that the people who live in the shadow of Mount St Helens do not fear it ('Celui-là, comme les autres, avait su tisser avec les habitants une relation de confiance et de familiarité' (VV 78)), it is implied, is linked to the fact that they have lived their entire lives without the volcano erupting; the scale of the volcano's activity far exceeds those of a human lifetime – the narrator comments on its neighbour that a millennium has passed since it caused incident to humans: 'Le mont Adams? Cela doit bien faire dix siècles, allons, qu'il n'a pas fait parler de lui' (VV 77).

But the story, which begins with the failure to predict the disaster, and the tremors which should have alerted scientists that an eruption was imminent ('Il faut dire d'abord qu'il y avait eu pendant deux mois des petits séismes qui aurait dû donner l'alerte' (VV 94)), occasionally slips into a strange style, echoing the legends of native Americans described earlier in the text: it frames the mountain itself as an actor within the story, focalising the narrative through its (imagined, clearly) 'thoughts'.

> Pas de risque d'éruption vous avez dit? Le mont St. Helens s'était occupé de faire mentir les experts. On aurait dit que ça l'énervait un peu tout ça, cette façon condescendante de parler de lui, de minorer ce qui était en train de se passer. […] Pour commencer, on va leur faire quelques éruptions phréatiques […] Ils en veulent plus? Fractures, et, de fil en aiguille, formation d'une cratère supplémentaire, ce qui n'est quand même pas bon signe – mais les scientifiques s'entêtent (VV 95).

There is also, it would seem, a certain 'moral' to this particular story in the way that it is recounted by Montalbetti's narrator – that failing to grasp the insignificance of a human life (both in terms of meaning and in terms of time) in the cycles of nature and geological movements will only end in human tragedy:

> Petit homme assis dans le paysage, installé là avec son savoir, ses calculs, et qui considère la bête dans une étrange face à face: quel bras de fer tente-t-il avec la montagne? (VV 96).

This is reminiscent of the clash of vast geochronological timescales and human lives in *L'Origine de l'homme:* it is only when faced with the huge timescales of the planet that we appreciate the relative precariousness of our lives and the short-termism of our conceptions of historical time (the volcano may not have erupted for generations, but this is no time at all on the scale of geochronology).

It should also be noted that during the description of the eruption itself, the narrator mentions a scientist, Fred, who arrives at the office and tries to contact Johnston, the volcanologist who perishes on the mountainside. The narrator admits that Fred is invented:

> Fred, je l'invente, il ne s'appelait peut-être pas Fred, mais il y avait forcément au moins un type là-bas qui avait des pensées proches de celles de Fred, la même inquiétude, la même urgence, et qui cherchait à joindre Johnston (VV 99).

Here, again, the narrator brings the focus to a *potential personal story*. Once agan, historical fact (the real eruption), legend (the Native American account of the formation of the volcanoes) and pure fiction (the invention of new characters like 'Fred') intermingle within the narrative. The relationship between historical fact and fiction in Montalbetti's texts is distorted by this constant use of hypothetical detail – often given in the conditional tense but sometimes, as here, offered as part of the historical 'story' and then quickly revised by the narrator – which serves to make connections between otherwise disparate parts of reality; the narrator's own

storytelling and the history of Mount St Helens, or, as in another example, the narrator's own life and the major political events ongoing at the time in which the book is set. The final *telos* of the text - the narrator being beaten by some of the regulars at the *Retour d'Ulysse* – is linked by the narrator to the Iraq war – a personal trauma linked in the narrator's mind, somewhat tenuously, one might argue, to a major political event.

The link between this event and the Iraq war begins with the story of Shannon's (one of the men the narrator spends time with at the bar) late brother Rick, who does not appear directly in the narrative, only in this metadiegetic episode which is recounted, presumably, by Shannon to the others. Within this metadiegesis, the foregrounding of a violent end is everywhere: the narrator remarks that the way that Shannon pronounces the name 'Rick' makes it sound aggressive and warlike ('ça faisait un son hostile et guerrier dans la bouche de Shannon' (VV 220)). The description of Shannon's pronunciation also evokes both drums (associations with the army) and a violent death: 'avec son "r" roulé dans la bouche comme battement de tambour et puis ce "ick" propulsé et aigu comme si on lui tordait le cou' (VV 220).

In perhaps the most politically charged episode of Montalbetti's œuvre to date, the narrator engages with the notions of a 'mediatised war' and the increasingly porous divide between fiction and reality. It is not simply on the level of the narrative that historical fact and fiction intermingle: the characters, too, begin to see reality through the lens of fictional stories. Rick, the narrator recounts, sees himself as being in a film:

> […] la sensation, parfois, à courir sous les rafales, de jouer dans un film, le tournis de la fiction qui les prenait alors (ce qu'il faut se dire, pour tirer, ou ne pas se dire, surtout ne pas se dire, appuyer sur la détente et se concentrer seulement pour encaisser le recul); et lui, Rick, sous les projecteurs soudain, sous les projectiles aussi, mais les projecteurs, il se disait, il devait se dire, comme tous ces autres, qui pour faire ce qu'ils ont à faire se persuadent que c'est un film et cavalent comme de bons figurants et s'imaginent que la caméra les suit, et puis chacun, en particulier, chacun se croyant le héros et on y a, c'est parti, caméra à l'épaule le chef op doit bien être sur vos pas avec son steadicam, et on court, et on tire, en on est bien, j'étais comment? (VV 225)

Montalbetti's narrative here engages with the relationship between the personal and the historical – what has been referred to as *histoires* vs. *Histoire*. On the level of the individual, the geopolitical reality of the event is impossible to seize – the (American) participants are

shown to be incentivised by far more personal concerns. The Army prospectuses for recruitment described in the text acknowledge this: they show the possibilities and opportunities given to soldiers that would otherwise be closed to them:

> Des ciels chauds, des soleils puissants, qui le changeraient des pluies de l'Oregon. C'était ce qu'on voyait sur les prospectus, des hommes en tenue de combat devant des fonds exotiques – des endroits où, sans l'armée, il ne pouvait pas même rêver d'aller (VV 223).

The deception inherent within the system of Western military intervention is also demonstrated within the text: the universalising, simplified narratives communicated to the soldiers do not match up with the individual reality they experience. They are told to frame their victims as combatants even when they suspect they may well be civilians:

> […] les habitants de l'Irak (ou non, il ne fallait pas dire les habitants, il ne fallait pas dire les civils, qu'on était censés être venus aider, il fallait dire les combattants irakiens) (mais on savait, on voyait bien que c'était aussi les femmes et les enfants qu'on tuait) (VV 227).

The result is post-traumatic stress ('tout soldat est victime de bien autre chose que des tirs de mortier') and the ultimate failure of the project, both on a personal level for Rick, and for the American invading force as a whole: 'Il [Rick] avait été arrêté en plein mouvement dans cette terre d'Irak sur laquelle la greffe des soldats américains ne prenait pas, non, qui faisait rejet sur rejet' (VV 227). Throughout all of Montalbetti's texts, this episode depicting the Iraq war and the narratives surrounding it is perhaps the most openly engaged with historical reality and political fact: again, though, the point of entry for the narrator into the subject is a (presumably fictional) personal connection to the historical event through the protagonist's acquaintances.

The intersection between this geopolitical event and the small-scale, fictional story of the unnamed French narrator becomes even more apparent as the text progresses. The narrator's country refused to participate in the war which first corrupted Shannon's brother then killed him ('Là-bas où les Français n'avaient pas voulu aller […] là-bas, son frère avait trouvé la chaleur, le soleil dardant et le goût de torturer, mais la mort aussi') (VV 228). It is mentioned again on several occasions, once directly referring to the falsehoods about weapons of mass destruction: '(les Français avec leur scepticisme, leur petit air supérieur, quand Rick, lui, il y avait cru, aux armes de destruction massive, parce que tout le monde, ici, en Amérique,

y croyait)' (VV 228). On another occasion the narrator refers directly to the ending at the end of this chapter: 'Shannon pourrait vouloir que je paye pour cette mort, pour tous les Français qui n'avaient pas été là à se prendre une balle à la place du frère' (VV 228).

This desire for one person to pay for the perceived betrayal of an entire nation is, of course, irrational, but at the *Retour d'Ulysse,* where all stories bear equal weight, the narratives surrounding the chilly relationship between France and the US after the former refused to participate in (and later condemned) the 2003 invasion of Iraq,[39] which were prevalent at the time of the Bush administration (it is not clear when the text is set) come to determine the actions of the other characters and result in the act of violence towards the end of the text. The narrative also seizes upon a decisive historical moment – a change in Franco-American relations during the Iraq war, when emotions were running high and the kind of violence described in this fictional account was entirely possible.

At the moment the narrator is beaten up, many of the individual stories fold into one – 'Shannon avec son frère en Irak, et les Français qui n'avaient pas levé le petit doigt, les Français qui avaient laissé mourir son frère, et moi avec eux, dans l'esprit de Shannon [...]'. He also mentions space travel ('le drapeau planté par Armstrong en l'honneur de toute l'Amérique')' (VV 240) and when he refers to Harry he comments:

> […] et ce soir-là tout ce qu'il savait sur les volcans, ou encore sur l'expédition Lewis et Clark, grâce à Perry, tout ça, ça ne lui avait servi de rien: il était resté comme les autres, témoin, debout et passif, et comme absent à la scène (VV 240-1).

This could be said to simply represent the increasingly jumbled thoughts of the protagonist as he loses consciousness; on the other hand, it also seems to resonate with the structures of scale in most of Montalbetti's texts, where distant and recent histories of epic proportions clash or combine with stories of the individual or pieces of fiction. While Montalbetti's narrators engage to a far greater extent than the third-person narrators of Lenoir, it is clear that on the level of the diegesis, the characters are often equally as skewed in their perceptions of historical events and of timescale as those of Lenoir. Unable to comprehend the vastness of the events taking place around them, as in the case of the Iraq war, they often only relate to these events insofar as it concerns them directly: Shannon interprets a moment in collective, political history

[39] See, for example, vitriolic Op-Eds published in 2003 in the New York Times: Thomas L. Friedman, 'Our War with France', *New York Times*, 18 September 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/18/opinion/our-war-with-france.html> [Accessed 13/09/2017].

– the Franco-American clash over the Iraq war – through the lens of his own brother's death and the perceived culpability of the only (one might assume) French person he has met. The inhabitants around Mount St Helens perceive it to be safe since it has not erupted in several human lifetimes – a fatal failure to assess risk based on a skewed temporal perspective, since on a geochronological scale the volcano was still active. The Lewis and Clark expedition is a story romanticised and retold by the narrator himself – he often superimposes this historical moment onto his own present, imagining, for example, routes taken by his acquaintances as retracing the explorers' route, or imagining them entering the bar he frequents.

A similar focus on the personal aspects of historical events is present in Montalbetti's most recent novel, *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses,* despite a real historical event taking centre stage within the narrative. The event itself is, the narrator claims, the signifier of the end of an era ('la fin d'une ère' (VF 189)): the final NASA Space Shuttle mission which signalled the end of their 30-year programme and the retirement of the last remaining shuttle, the *Atlantis*. Unlike the other novels in Montalbetti's œuvre which are generally fictionalised to such a degree that the status of 'novel' is not called into question, this text overtly questions its own status as a work of fiction. While the author notes in the acknowledgements that the personalities attributed to the astronauts are the product of her imagination, the narrator also notes within the text itself that Sandra, one of the astronauts, was concerned that the novel should be clearly marked as such in order to prevent any confusion. The narrator also describes the work as having become a historical novel ('roman historique' (VF 266)).

As in *Plus rien*, the narrator of *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses* often sidelines the narration of the real historical event on the 'macro', collective level in order to focus on small details of the mission or of things going on in the periphery – quite self-consciously, it would seem, given the title of the text. For example, real historical details of crew members are given within the text (VF 15-16, for example, where they give details on their early life and family members) but the focus is always on some strange, peripheral detail, as in the following section on Doug Hurley:

> Doug Hurley, je continue, est le pilote. Le visage aussi rond que Fergie a le sien émacié, et de cinq ans son cadet, Doug est né à Endicott, dans l'État de New York, mais a surtout vécu à une dizaine de kilomètres de là, dans la ville d'Apalachin, restée célèbre, je vous le rappelle en passant, pour avoir accueilli dans la maison de Joe le Barbier, à la fin des années 1950, occasion alors d'un sacré coup de filet, toutes choses qui, au moment de

> la naissance de Doug, relevaient déjà de l'Histoire; et Apalachin devait plutôt lui apparaître comme une succession de petits restaurants facile à vivre, sans compter son parcours de golf […] (VF15).

This extract is indicative of the kind of tangential information which Montalbetti's narrator so readily provides instead of focusing on the ostensible subject of the novel. What is more, her notion of the story 'becoming History already' is also symptomatic of the kinds of temporal tensions within the Montalbettian universe and particularly within this text. The narrator refers to certain events as History (with a capital H) while also conveying the consciousness of narrating a future 'Historical event.' The text itself is inflected with the knowledge of the historical-event-in-the-making, with previous missions referred to as History within the narrative: 'Le premier piéton de l'espace (j'ouvre une petite page de l'Histoire) était un Russe, un certain Leonov, Alexei de son prénom' (VF 170). This knowledge that they are a 'part of history' extends to the characters themselves. The narrator notes that being involved in the last space shuttle voyage provokes in Michael, the launch director, 'cette sorte de nostalgie par anticipation' (VF 23). This is indicative of the temporal tension within the text: it is at once obsessed with history and therefore the past, but also fundamentally concerned with the future: how future generations will look back upon this event. The narrator notes the way in which history becomes 'fixed' while the future is seen as open:

> Un parcours prend fin, là, dans ce matin tout gris […]. Cet enchaînement d'années qu'on n'avait pas vues filer, et auxquelles cette matinée va mettre un terme, reléguant tout ce temps, qui était mobile et vivant perpétuellement actif, au statut des choses passées, rigides et mortes (VF 23).

This notion of the event 'becoming history', and of that 'becoming' as being a transition from life and movement to death and rigidity, is reflected in the reaction of the spectators after the launch. While moments before they have been obsessively filming the event and applauding, they seem unsure of what to do once it is over. In the Media Center where the photographers are dismantling their tripods, for example, the mood is sombre: 'Les gens sont lents, presque hésitants, comme après un traumatisme' (VF 103). Interestingly, moments before there was little or no confusion about what to do: the spectators seem to have certain movements – presumably those they have witness through archive material of other historical events, which they perform in order – the narrator suggests – to feel more like the witnesses of a historical event. The narrator refers to it as a 'choreography': for example, they look up to the sky and

shield their eyes with their hands in a symbolic 'witnessing' pose, knowing that they too are being filmed (VF 97), and the same word, 'choreography', is used for the ways in which the various members of mission control hug and congratulate one another after the event (VF 104). These movements, the narrator expressly tells us, come partly as a result of the consciousness of fact that they are ending a symbolic chapter of history ('clore un chapitre') – though this assertion is also tongue-in-cheek, since it actually falls at the end of a chapter (VF 105).

This second type of approach to historical events in Montalbetti focuses on the character's own experience of living through an event which they know will be the object of future retrospection on a collective scale. It is, in that sense, also a way of interpreting historically significant events through personal experience. The characters behave in a way which they see as fitting for a historical event, based on images and accounts of other historical events they have viewed in the past: *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses* in particular touches upon this temporal feedback loop which is fed, to a great extent, by the availability of such images on the internet and during every significant collective event – at least those which the partipants and witnesses believe will be historically significant in the future.

Pireyre's taxonomies of our time

While it could be argued that Emmanuelle Pireyre's texts *Féerie générale* and *Comment faire disparaître la terre?*, due to their hybrid nature (relying heavily on poetic conventions and less on prose and narrative) are so resolutely anchored in an imagined present and in the 'fëerique' that they do not bear any relevance to a discussion of historical time at all, it is important to consider the ways in which such texts – particularly since they are considered 'contemporary' in their outlook – might indirectly engage with collective, historical events. In many ways, of course the texts reflect the current historical moment: as the first chapter explored, these works engage to a great extent with questions of technology and technological 'progress', and also embrace the kind of new aesthetics that is emerging in various creative practices in the wake of information technology's almost complete domination of both our work and leisure time.

Pireyre's two hybrid novels, *Féerie générale* and *Comment faire disparaître la terre?*, present a kind of phenomenological outlook upon a world of information overload. As I have argued, her works reflect in many ways the rapid movements and associations of a human consciousness as it scans the web, clicking hyperlinks through to thematically similar material, pausing, skimming, and moving on rapidly to another (often only tangentially related) subject or piece of media. Despite the texts' apparent openness to the outside world, the texts are in

some ways quite insular: they do not engage with 'real' events, only reconverted, decontextualised fragments of the real world. In many ways it seems counterintuitive that texts with such vast spatial, temporal and intellectual scope should be insular, but it is less surprising given the author's assertion that a basic part of being human is 'être seul(e) dans son corps et dans sa pensée'.[40] A similar analysis has been put forward in Laurent Demanze's analysis of these two works:

> De telles fictions documentaires disent l'hébétude devant la profusion des discours et des données, elles saisissent le mouvement même d'une pensée à la recherche d'un ordonnancement possible au chaos documentaire.[41]

In this way, Pireyre's texts embrace a view of the current historical moment as chaotic: events are taking place and documented far faster than we can comprehend, and it is all but impossible (and, perhaps, inadvisable) to establish any kind of narrative order. It is the action of attempting to find order in chaos – Demanze's notion of a 'pensée à la recherché d'un ordonnancement possible' – that is reflected in the text, rather than elements of reality itself.

Instead of imposing a narrative order, then, Pireyre's narrator creates a collage of various fictions. But that is not to say that the fictions within the texts are random or unrelated or 'fragments': the motif of the collection or the taxonomy is present across both *Féerie générale* and *Comment faire disparaître la terre?*. As Demanze argues: 'Classements et taxinomies sont saisis dans *Comment faire disparaître la terre?* et *Féerie générale* comme une manière de tenir à distance la séduction des narrations et la puissance de captation des histoires'.[42] We also see collectors, taxonomies and collections within the narrative itself: from the 'collections de baisers' which are never analysed as a whole, to the various 'rêves', the analysis of hair samples, Miyazaki's excessive manga collection, and Umberto Eco's stolen comics collection (CT 67, FG 31 and FG 27 respectively). The idea of collection instead of research and analysis is symbolic, perhaps, of a shift in our culture too: unable to make sense of the chaotic currents of events around us, we turn to data analysis, to lists, to numbering and classifying without analysis. As Demanze continues:

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[40] Le Transfo, 'Rencontre avec Emmanuelle Pireyre: "J'écris toujours des livres qui ont un socle poétique..." ', Le Transfo - Art et Culture en Région Auvergne, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6QNaREI0Xw> [Accessed 23/01/18].
[41] Demanze, p. 3.
[42] Ibid. p. 6.

> Cette profusion et cette proximité du matériau numérique imposent une pratique du classement et un exercice de la taxinomie : les enquêteurs d'archive et les chasseurs d'indices, au centre de bien des fictions contemporaines, sont peut-être en train de laisser place au classeur de datas et au collectionneur de données.[43]

The resistance to story-telling would therefore be, in Demanze's view, a reflection of the decontextualisation and information overload taking place in real life. But while the texts resolutely resist all types of generalising or universalising narratives, on the 'macro' or collective level (it should be noted that this approach is, though very differently executed, not too dissimilar in its foundations from that of Montalbetti), the texts seize upon tiny details of our historical moment and present them, decontextualised, in a collage of microfictions.

Féerie générale indirectly engages, for example, with the socio-political reality of the current financial system. One fragment notes the increasingly target-driven economic policies of modern-day corporations that underlie individual malady and alienation, through the story of two individual characters:

> [L]a direction de leur usine instaura le modèle japonais de management dans les ateliers. Tout le monde était contre ces methodes qui vous aliènent sous prétexte de rendre le travail plus intéressant. Le toyotisme avait fini par causer des dépressions et trois suicides (FG 195-6).

This critique of managerial discourse is a very contemporary concern; new methods of management have been criticised by the likes of Pascal Chabot, who refers to the 'hypocrisie de nombreux discours managériaux qui enrobent de grands mots leur objectif cupide, à savoir repousser toujours les limites des individus, pour extraire d'avantage de profits de leurs efforts'.[44] Another fragment also nods to the chaotic and incomprehensible currents of economic precariousness which have become the norm for many individuals within turbocapitalist economies:

> Un jour, le groupe pharmaceutique où François était chimiste raconta une histoire : il raconta qu'il publiait des bénéfices records. La semaine suivante, il raconta qu'il licenciait 10% de ses effectifs. La plupart des observateurs trouvèrent que ce n'était pas une bonne histoire. […] Une histoire aussi mal ficelée ne marcherait jamais (FG 171).

[43] Ibid. p. 7.
[44] Chabot, p. 48.

What is more, the narrator addresses directly the fact that this story, though it appears incomprehensible on the level of the individual, makes sense on the macro level of the economy and on the ledgers of corporations: 'L'histoire, qui n'était pas incompréhensible pour tout le monde, s'adressait aux actionnaires, aux banques, fonds de pension et compagnies d'assurances. Eux la comprirent très bien et l'apprécièrent beaucoup' (FG 171).

Similarly, the texts nod to the anxieties of a world seeking a solution to existential threats and the failure of current economic models to respond to changing conditions though, of course, the execution is tongue-in-cheek. The unlikely heroes of another scenario are a group of virtuous squatters who have constructed a house opposite the apartment belonging to a friend of the narrator. The house is a 'modèle d'autoconstruction écologique', which presents a problem for the authorities who wish to demolish it. The narrator continues

> Il est toujours malaisé pour les autorités de s'opposer à ce genre de squatters irréprochables: les squatters sont désespérément vertueux et pendant que le reste du monde s'occupe à rendre possible l'avidité infinie de quelques-uns, ou dans le meilleur des cas à augmenter l'injustice en baissant les impôts, ils réfléchissent, eux, à l'organisation d'un monde meilleur (FG 123).

In many ways, this episode combines several elements of extra-textual reality that have already appeared in *Féerie générale*: a veiled criticism of the current financial systems ('avidité infinie de quelques-uns'), a set of people who are considered marginal or deviant within those systems (like the hackers or the workers who cannot handle the new management system) and a lofty plan for a better world, reminiscent of Tikkanen's 'Robin Hood' credit card hacking.

These questions – of ecology, of the crushing power of financial markets – therefore often appear in the text in incongruous ways, combined with other elements of cultural or historical memory in highly inventive ways. For example, the anxiousness with which people participate in an online forum about dry toilets ('forum toilettes sèches' FG 229-30) reflects a wider anxiety about our current trajectory, while the movement for individual ecological responsibility (in the face of inertia from governments and corporations) is manifested in the character of Géraud: 'Géraud adorait ce calcul des choses de la nature, un calcul simple à très longue portée, calcul élémentaire où, en poussant des brouettes, on résout les choses à l'échelle planétaire' (FG 234). Another episode shows barbecue invitees asking what is 'behind the house' (the answer is 'the garden', 'the hedge' then 'nothing, nature'), only for the narrator to continue that debt is what is behind the house:

> Or, plus tard, en 2008, on comprit enfin ce qu'il y avait derrière l'arrière des maisons: il y avait le crédit bancaire de Propriétaire. On le savait certes, mais lors de ces insouciantes années 2000, personne ne s'en préoccupait […]

The narrator then suggests that while the popular imagination envisaged these debts as being immobile, in the bank,

> […] la réalité est toute autre: ces crédits immobiliers sitôt accordés étaient en fait transformés par les banques en produits financiers; dès lors, ils se revendaient, s'échangeaient sur le marché financier et nourrissaient l'un après l'autre l'accélération de la spéculation financière (FG 221).

This linking of the a fictional, personal and quotidian situation (curious invitees making small talk about a property at a barbecue) to the socio-political upheaval of a major financial crisis, which brought with it renewed anxieties about the stability of our current system, is reminiscent of Montalbetti's linking of the personal and the mundane to the historically significant and collectively important. In Pireyre, however, the sheer breadth and number of events in the text – whether they be fictional, historical or somewhere in between – leads to the kind of 'chaos documentaire' referred to by Demanze.

Pireyre's texts therefore engage to a great extent with the three main drivers of the epochal change taking place at the beginning of the twenty-first century – the voracious power of financial markets, the looming threat of climate disaster and the revolution in information technology (as I argued in chapter one). But while the texts reflect these anxieties back at the reader, they do so in the form of decontextualised fragments: far from engaging directly with the 'historical events' (events that are important on the level of the collective) the texts often seize upon a decontextualised fragment of that event – the effect upon an individual or a particular, often bizarre, detail (for example the emergence of the online toilet forums in the ecological living movement) – and present it in its collage of the present moment. In this sense, there are no reflections of 'real' historical events in Pireyre. The narrator appears to make attempts at some rather tongue-in-cheek classification (through the absurd section titles, collections and associations of various fragments) of these elements but always stops short of explicitly creating a narrative to link them together. In this sense, both *Féerie générale* and *Comment faire disparaître la terre?* utilise the notions of data collection and taxonomy to great effect, creating a kind of absurd taxonomy of the contemporary, what Demanze calls, in his article title, a 'farcical encyclopaedia'.

The three authors' treatment of collective history within their texts differs greatly, but it is possible to draw some similarities in the way that historically significant events, and their interpretation, are portrayed within the narratives. Though the texts themselves engage with historically significant events by representing or alluding to them within the narratives, on the diegetic level the personal story is often prioritised over the collective history. In Lenoir, since the narratives are focalised through the protagonists, this means that little textual space is spent on events that do not directly affect the characters themselves, no matter how significant or pressing that event. Her characters appear to wilfully ignore much of what is going on beyond their own immediate problems: a short-termism which complements the generally very limited spatial and temporal focus of those characters. Pireyre's narrator obsessively documents elements of historical significance on the same level as fictional or personal stories. Montalbetti, too, presents the historical through the lens of the personal and the individual human lifetime – a perspective which, as we have seen, may reflect the short-termism and insularity which seems to be the mood of the time.

Historical time and time scales: some conclusions

Montalbetti and Lenoir's texts engage with what we might conceive of as an increasing awareness and intrusive presence of the many time cycles that shape our lives and our experience of our own epoch. Montalbetti's texts – *L'Origine de l'homme* and *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses* in particular – explore both the long cycles of humanity's existence, on scales that almost defy comprehension, and the personal experience of historical events of real or imagined protagonists. The former text offers a vision of humanity's development which seems to suggest a teleological model of history, with the last few centuries of human history as the 'end point' towards which a long process of evolution was working. A similar idea underpins much of the narrator's meandering discussions of ancestry and of humanity's future in *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses* – the idea that everything has led up to the present moment. It is a reassuring notion which places narrative order on what was most likely a chaotic process which led to our current state by chance, but one which has long been discredited. This existential question and a loss of faith in a 'purpose' for humanity's existence is important in the twenty-first century, since believing ourselves to be the 'final product' of an evolutionary process (or, indeed, the product of an intelligent creator) has a great deal of bearing on the way that we interpret the existential risks to humanity in the twenty-first century. Though both of

these texts present massive timescales which have entered the public consciousness – that of evolution and that of space travel – it should be noted that both texts ultimately focus more on the minutiae of a single human lifetime.

Somewhat in contrast to the incorporation of these vast timescales into several of Montalbetti's works, Lenoir's texts opt for insular narratives which privilege the subjective reality of one or a few protagonists, often making what seem to be major historical events peripheral to the narrative and centring instead the mundane and quotidian concerns of the (usually middle-class, well-off and female) protagonists. The paradoxical experience of time and history represented within the texts – where protagonists and narrators alike are subject to the effects of historical events but seemingly loath to focus upon them – reflects in many ways the odd temporality of 'our time': we are at once moving faster than ever before thanks to new advances in information technology, and also experiencing a sense of stasis or stagnation as the grand narratives of progress we previously held have failed us. Even one of the clearest, most universal ways in which 'historical time' could be experienced in the everyday – the passing of the torch from generation to generation and the drive for individual prosperity and progress – has become distorted, as current modes of consumption outstrip the regeneration of the natural resources of the planet, a 'debt' which will be paid by future generations. This anxiety surrounding generational time and being trapped in the cycle – or left destitute or alone when in breaks down – is reflected in Lenoir's works and in particular *Le Magot de Momm* and *Son nom d'avant*. Those who attempt to subvert the general breakdown of generational structures – for example the Casellas who continue to adopt a strict generational and patrilineal family structure – end up stuck in uncanny temporal loops or suffering unidentified nervous conditions.

Emmanuelle Pirerye's novels, though they appear to remain coolly detached from extra-textual reality, engage with some of the major historical shifts taking place at the beginning of the twenty-first century, including a growing ecological awareness and the deregularisation of the financial markets leading to precariousness, as well as the dominance of new technologies as we explored in the first chapter. The decontextualised fragments of this reality are never narrativised, however, and since only partial or fictionalised accounts of these historical moments ever appear in the texts, it is impossible to say that Pireyre engages with 'real', collective historical events. Despite their apparent spatial and temporal openness, the texts are therefore quite insular – they reflect the individual act, as Demanze has suggested, of trying to bring order to the chaotic currents of the real.

The collective or individual traumas that Montalbetti's *Love Hotel* and *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent* engage with are often approached indirectly, focusing rather on a (sometimes imagined) individual actor in the tragedy and addressing this from the perspective of an outsider (the narrator of *Love Hotel* is not aware of the tragedy until he sees it on the television, the narrator of *Plus Rien* is from a country which did not participate in the war). The texts do not really engage, however, in the techniques of postmodern trauma narratives, which Alan Gibbs has referred to as 'familiar techniques such as fragmented chronology and splitting of the narrative voice at moments of thematic crisis'.[45] Instead, they avoid the central issues of the crisis by turning to (what would normally be considered) the peripheral details of the trauma, the various small personal stories making up the 'historical account', and make them the central focus of the narrative.

With anxieties about our collective and long-term future dominating academic, journalistic and even scientific discourse and short-term thinking dominating political movements in Europe and beyond, it is unsurprising that contemporary literary texts might choose to turn to the personal over the political, the everyday and the mundane over the exceptional and the historically significant.

[45] Gibbs, p. 34.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from examination of these three authors of contemporary French fiction that our time culture, dominated by questions of speed and simultaneity, and our epoch, which has seen a paradigmatic shift in our conception of historical progression and of time itself, is reflected – if not explicitly represented – in the literature of the twenty-first century in myriad ways. Throughout this study, I have drawn a distinction between the notions of time and of epoch. The umbrella concept of 'time' includes our experience of being-in-time (temporality) and the way that we conceive of time passing in our immediate, daily lives (or indeed in exceptional, emergency situations). Epoch, on the other hand, is concerned with our impulse to periodise and to view ourselves as part of a historical progression: it is shorthand for the way in which we see our 'place in time' or 'place in history'.

Time culture and temporality

Our time culture is, as I have argued, one of speed. Time-space compression – that is, the exponential reduction in the amount of time it takes people or information and data to traverse space, either through new transportation or communication technologies – is a major feature of our time. There are two identifiable ways that the texts of this study engage with this wider culture of speed. The first is by representing the ways in which speed – in our daily lives, but also in the workings of global systems and even politics – makes the current moment appear incomprehensible on the level of the individual. This means that in our daily lives we experience time as moving very quickly, perhaps even too quickly for us to comprehend. Texts like those of Emmanuelle Pireyre, which present many fragments of events taking place on an undefined temporal plane, seem to engage with a notion of simultaneity, reflecting the experience of 'everything at once', on a narratorial level. Pireyre engages in a kind of extreme cataloguing of the present moment – gathering data, but never drawing out grand, universalising narratives which make sense of that data.

The second way in which the texts engage with our culture of speed is by embracing slowness as resistance. Lenoir's texts seem to resist our current culture of time. Her novels often take place in liminal spaces or times, as Jean Duffy has highlighted, and remain there throughout the bulk of the narrative. Often the problems posed or situations described at the

beginning of the narratives are not resolved by the time the reader reaches the final page. While the characters wait for an anticipated *telos,* the narrative fails to progress towards it. But on the other hand, the protagonists often appear to be obsessed with the advance of chronological 'clock' time, with many mentions of the precise (diegetic) time appearing within the narrative.

Christine Montalbetti's novels are perhaps the most 'extreme' in their temporal aesthetics, actively disrupting the reader's expectations of progression within the narrative. The initial impression of 'slowness' Montalbetti's reader experiences is not without clear foundation: Montalbetti, as both a theoretician and a writer of fiction, plays expertly with Genettian notions of speed, duration, and pause. In this way, diegetic time is stretched over pages of textual space (what we can also conceive of as 'readerly time'), often in a self-reflexive way, with nods to passages from previous literary works. A slightly different type of slowness, but one which is exploited to similar effect, is digression: that is, textual space taken up by information which is, the reader perceives, only tangentially related to the plot. In stark opposition to the trend of what Nicholas Carr has called 'jet-ski thinking', skimming over the surface of ideas, Montalbetti's narrator seems almost impossibly expert, pausing to expound – often at great length – upon topics of history, culture, language and engineering, to name but a few. The digressiveness of Montalbetti's texts is as self-reflexive as its dilatory pace: some of these indications of the text's consciousness of its own games are explicit – the narrator commenting regularly on their own distractedness, for example; or implicit – for example the fact that the main character of one of the most digressive texts is called 'Jacques' is a nod to Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste et son maître*. The leisurely pace of her texts is often frustrating to the reader, but this effect is not only carefully orchestrated, but also commented upon by the narrator.

A different take on digressiveness can be seen in Pireyre's texts, which give an insight into the ways in which an illusion of speed, in their rapid switching between fragments, may actually also resist notions of 'progression', since, in the end, her texts simply build and build upon the network with no teleological structure. This failure (or rejection) of a teleological model in favour of a chaotic or disordered model of historical time is reminiscent of Hellekson's models of history, which, I have argued, can be applied in various ways when considering our current conception of epoch, as our previous teleological or eschatological models give way to a more entropic view of human (and non-human) history.

The overall effect of Montalbetti's temporal games appears to reflect both what Ross Chambers has called 'loiterature', a literature which 'loiters with intent', and what Lutz Koepnick has called an aesthetics of slowness. Koepnick notes that this slowness would not be a purely reactionary resistance to the fetishisation of speed in our contemporary culture, but rather a mode of drawing out the possibilities inherent in slowing down in our high-speed world.[1] Montalbetti's texts are also those that have attracted the most attention from literary critics (though Pireyre's *Féerie générale* is arguably the most critically lauded text of the corpus, having won the Prix Médicis and garnered attention from journalists and academics alike), which may in part be due to the critical nature of the texts themselves. Stéphane Girard, in his monograph on Montalbetti, cites the 'meta-reflexivity' of Montalbetti's texts, while Warren Motte indicates his belief that Montalbetti's texts are 'critical fiction', and that this is where French fiction will renew itself.[2] This idea that Montalbetti's texts are at the cutting edge of the renewal or regeneration of French fiction places them squarely in the category of 'contemporary' literature despite their very active resistance to the aesthetics of speed and fragmentation that seems to define the contemporary aesthetic.

An epochal shift

As I have suggested throughout this study, a shift in our conception of history, and our place in it, is currently taking place. Many commentators and cultural critics have seen recent decades as a new moment in history – a new epoch. This represents both a shift in our society which can be periodised as a new epoch, and also a fundamental shift in our relationship with history itself: instead of viewing ourselves as part of a humanity marching towards a more advanced society (if not a more prosperous one), the previous grand ideologies have failed in delivering on their utopian dreams, and have been replaced by political short-termism and collective inertia in the face of major, existential threats to humanity.

One of the major drivers, I believe, of this paradigmatic change, is the rise of new information technologies which have fundamentally changed the cultural, social and informational landscape of our societies. The revolution in information technology which has taken place from the late 1990s to the present day is, I have argued, one of the major drivers of the current epochal shift. It has fundamentally changed the way we interact with one another, the fundamentals of many professions, and the ways of life of most citizens of developed and

[1] Koepnick, p. 9.
[2] Motte, p. 189; Girard, p. 24.

developing societies. Several of the texts of this study engage with ways in which new information technology, and particularly Web 2.0, has changed our outlook on the 'real' world. The most overtly 'contemporary' of the three authors, Emmanuelle Pireyre, employs in her prose works an atomised structure. While similar in their initial appearance to the rather postmodern concept of the mash-up, the connections between these fragments – lexical, thematic, tangential, often ludic – mean that the text forms, through these decontextualised texts, a coherent, if complex, 'whole'. The text itself seems to mimic the aesthetics of the network or the internet, with rapid switching between various elements and the lexical or thematic jump of the hyperlink. In their content, too, the texts – and especially *Féerie générale* – treat the strange linguistic turns of Web 2.0, with the internet forum, the dating site and fan fiction groups brought to the fore. We might tentatively call this trend towards an engagement in *literary form and content* with the experience of the internet user an aesthetics of technology – what has variously been called a post-internet aesthetics, new aesthetics and aesthetics of the internet.

In a technological world of high-speed work and leisure, in which multi-tasking and window-hopping is the norm, it could be argued that most of the information we consume is now fed to us in fragments. As Nicholas Carr argues in *The Shallows*, it is becoming less and less common to engage in 'deep reading', as we instead find our attention divided between various tasks. Not only is it less common, he insists, but the Internet is changing the way we think, making us less able to concentrate for long periods on a single task and instead adapting – physically adapting, thanks to the inherent plasticity of the brain – to skim-reading a great deal of information without thinking or reading deeply.[3] It is, in that way, a form of 'short-term reading'. Yves Citton suggests an economic drive to this increasing demand on our attention.[4] The *time of attention* (paid to advertising, for example) is now increasingly being given a monetary value as can be seen, for example, in the phenomenon of pay-per-click advertising. The fragment as part of a loose network, which – thematically, linguistically or by some other means – forms an almost-coherent whole, is therefore inherently reflective of our contemporary experience of (white-collar, for the most part) work and often also of leisure. In the Lenoirian narrative, which is focalised through one or more protagonists, the information relayed to the reader is always fragmented and often decontextualised: often clear information about who or what is being referred to only appears later in the text, and the relationships between various

[3] Carr, p. 7.
[4] Citton, p. 19.

people or characters is not clear. This fragmented thought often borders on madness in its obsessive reiterations of the same idea, increasingly dislocated ideas and even sentence structure. Pireyre's atomised structure similarly displays decontextualised fragments of information, some of which the reader might fit into a clear pattern while others remain difficult to place within the network. The rapid switching between ideas, and that fact that we often return to the same notion again and again, seems to be a way of representing simultaneity – one of the key features of our current culture of time – within a necessarily linear text.

Another factor which differentiates 'our time' from previous epochs is the existential threat that comes with the instability of our current global systems in the face of limited planetary resources (and the concomitant failure of geopolitical and financial systems to adapt to this new reality). The term 'epoch' also nods to the scientific debates over the possible start of a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. Combined, these two factors separate our epoch from those that came before: they drive in various ways the changes in our culture of time, our views of the future, and the systems we use to govern our lives. This is where time culture and epoch intersect: our time is underpinned by both an impression of speed and precariousness in the everyday and the constant threat of long-term, vast planetary timescales that may not come to bear within a human lifetime, but which need drastic action within the present and are often met, conversely, with inertia on a national and international scale. Our relationship with historical time could be summarised thus: we are increasingly asked to be conscious of long timescales which far exceed that of of a human lifetime despite the increasing speed of our daily lives; collective short-termism and insularity appear to have emerged despite (or due to) this need for long-term planning.

This juxtaposition of vast geochronological and planetary timescales with the daily tribulations and successes of a single human life is brought to the fore in Montalbetti's texts, with the historical *L'Origine de l'homme* and the almost documentary-style *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses*. The disconcerting pressure of the advance of historical time is also explored in Lenoir: one of the ways in which we can detect the advance of chronological, historical time in our daily lives is, as Koselleck has highlighted, the passing of generations. But these structures often break down in Lenoir's texts, leaving the protagonists either trapped in a temporal loop, as in *Son nom d'avant*, or in a strange, liminal space between adulthood and childhood, as in *Le Magot de Momm*. Within these liminal spaces and times, the time of the diegesis is often slowed while textual space is taken up by the 'deep time' of introspection in the form of the protagonists' thoughts. In its aesthetics, the Lenoirian narrative seems a

throwback to an earlier literary era – the experimentation in phenomenological time of the *nouveau roman* – but in its content, it certainly engages with the temporal anxieties of our contemporary culture. While temporally contemporary, one might argue, the texts in themselves do not seem to reflect 'the contemporary': I would argue that the resurgence of these particular trends, in particular the notion of the 'tropisme' which seems to pick up a frenetic pace, often representing a mind bordering on madness and spiralling obsessively around the problems at hand, seems to represent the individual victims of a wider, societal malaise, as Pascal Chabot describes in *Global Burn-out*.

As the world seems to open out spatially, with digital networks and globalisation eroding the barriers to movement of (certain) people, goods, data and money, the Lenoirian penchant for insularity may seem counterintuitive. But it is this very insularity and short-termism which seems to be emerging as a contemporary trend in political and journalistic discourses in Europe and beyond as a reaction against increased globalisation and planet-wide threats. Additionally, the focus on the individual rather than the collective history points to the dislocation of our ideas of historical time and a focus on the individual and the immediate. It is, we might surmise, a breakdown of the way that we usually construct and separate our notions of time between the short-term and the personal, and the movement of collective history. This division, as Craig Callender highlights, is a central part of our cognitive development as children: 'Soon we distinguish the history of the world from the history of the self. We decentre from our own temporal perspective and adopt others.'[5] The focus on personal and domestic problems at the expense – in terms of textual space or 'readerly time' – of events significant for the collective (as opposed to the individual protagonist), reflects the breakdown in historical perspective as well as the inertia that seems to dominate our culture in the twenty-first century in the face of (increasingly visible, thanks to new information technologies) traumatic and historically significant events. Additionally, we have seen a trend towards 'turning inwards' in the context of rising nationalist sentiment in Europe and elsewhere as a reaction to the movement of peoples (refugees and migrants) and the increasingly globalised world we live in. It is telling, I think, that in the text in which the protagonist's refusal to engage with the wider traumatic narratives over their own personal life is most apparent, *La Crue de juillet* (2013), the event at the heart of the text is the drowning of a refugee woman and her child.

[5] Craig Callender, *What Makes Time Special?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 1.

Short-termism and insularity

It is curious that the notion of turning inwards, or insularity, should have emerged as a trend in the texts' exploration of time and epoch, since the very notion of 'turning inwards' is itself a spatial metaphor. It is important to note that this trend, both in the content and the form of the texts in the corpus, seems to evoke both a resistance to the globalising forces and a reflection of the somewhat reactionary trends towards isolationism and protectionism. In their form, the short experimental texts *Sa fable achevée, Simon sort dans la bruine* and *Expérience de la campagne* are extremely spatially and temporally limited. Many of Lenoir's texts also correspond to this model, with the majority of the 'action' taking place in a very limited spatial scope, often over only a period of a few days. Their narrow focus on the inner lives of the protagonists excludes, to a great extent, description of the rest of the diegetic universe from the text. Emmanuelle Pireyre's texts generally cover a wide spatial and temporal area, but *Foire internationale,* somewhat ironically given its title, is very spatially limited (to one town) as well as setting strict temporal parameters (one year) with intervals clearly conveyed throughout the text.

This notion of insularity is also reflected in the content of the texts, with Lenoir's somewhat self-obsessed narrators ignoring the (often traumatic) events taking place around them. The figure of the Otaku or the obsessive gamer or consumer of fiction, who returns several times in Emmanuelle Pireyre's *Féerie générale*, is perhaps the epitome of this condition. Similar figures appear in Lenoir's *La Folie Silaz* and *Elle va partir,* with the obsessive gamer Do becoming fat and living in squalor until he is eventually placed in a psychiatric hospital, and the elderly Geneviève Camelin continuously watching television until she begins to confuse televised truths and fictions with her own reality. The choice to isolate oneself physically, cloistered in a limited space and ignoring the physical needs of the body while moving in entirely virtual spaces, is also reflected in the narratorial voice of Montalbetti's *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent,* who secludes himself in a motel room after suffering a violent assault: though his situation is only revealed to the reader at the end of the text, the entirety of the narrative has been recounted from this limited space, with the narrator living exclusively in his (quite possibly subjective) accounts of the past while neglecting his body and abandoning his previous attempts to integrate with the local community.

Perhaps loosely related to the inherently spatial term 'insularity', another term which has emerged in my analysis of these works of contemporary fiction is that of short-termism and

stasis, which is itself both temporal and spatial in nature. The notion of stasis evokes physical (spatial) immobility, but also a temporal 'pause'. Stasis is also, somewhat paradoxically, a feature of our time, as our notions of a historical progression become dislocated and fragment in the face of ecological crises and increasingly unsustainable modes of living. Thinking back to Hellekson's models of history, we might equate this notion of stasis or a failure to progress with the failure of a teleological model of history: there is certainly a failure (or a rejection) of a teleological model within the narrative of Montalbetti's and Lenoir's texts: Lenoir's protagonists seem constantly trapped in liminal spaces and times (exemplified best by a metaphor employed by one protagonist, who describes her situation as being preserved in amber), while Montalbetti's narrator constantly hints at an anticipated *telos* before which, in many cases, the narrative appears to stop short.

Contemporary fiction and the contemporary imaginary

This thesis has examined the various ways in which contemporary literature may engage with, or resist, or reject, our current culture of time and our conception of our own epoch. While some key notions have emerged in the analysis of the primary corpus, drawing these together to establish a clearly-delineated 'trend' is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to perform without first setting somewhat arbitrary and narrow parameters. This is due to several factors: firstly, the heterogeneity of the contemporary literary field, as well as the increasingly rapid publication and production of titles each *rentrée littéraire* and throughout the year, means that it is all but impossible to establish what trends are taking place in 'French literature' as a whole at any given moment. We cannot, for example, state that resistance to the culture of speed, a tendency towards insularity or an engagement with notions of simultaneity are features of the contemporary literary field in the same way that we see Modernist writers as rebelling against stricter measures of time, or *nouveaux romanciers* of rejecting clock-time in favour of experimentation in phenomenological time.

But a second reason for the impossibility of drawing clear conclusions about trends in the contemporary literary field may also be that things are never quite as simple as they appear in hindsight: such generalisations about what modernism or postmodernism did are only possible after the end of the period is declared, and the temporal loop closed. The term 'contemporary' as a periodising category is vexatious in this respect, because like 'modern', it connotes newness and has no anchor in a particular historical moment and so, as Theodore

Martin writes, can 'drift' across history.[6] Since many view it as a temporal and not a periodising category, the designator 'contemporary' is difficult to declare 'over', though the emergence of the term 'post-contemporary' suggests that this might soon be the case. Martin is, to a great extent, correct. The journal *Contemporary Literature* currently takes the Second World War as the starting point for 'contemporariness',[7] and the editors of the recent French Studies volume *Being Contemporary* acknowledge that another book of the same title was published some twenty years earlier.[8] Any scholarly journal in literary studies will see the adjectival form of 'contemporary' used regularly across article titles, but T.V. Benn's bibliography of contemporary French literature, published in 1947, is also returned by search engines as being 'contemporary',[9] as is a magazine article on the same subject published in 1869.[10]

Drawing clear conclusions about trends in contemporary literature is therefore disrupted by the difficulties in establishing a clear definition for what the term 'contemporary' actually means. The terminological troubles begin, of course, with the two broad and general definitions of the adjective 'contemporary' (the notion of being *contemporaneous with* someone or something, and signifiying 'newness' as a loose synonym of 'modern') and certainly do not end here.[11] Aside from the terminological slippage between *contemporary* (the adjective) and *the contemporary* (what would seem to be a successor to, interchangeably, both postmodern*ism* and postmodern*ity*), there are also varying interpretations of the contemporary as an experiential category or a temporal one. The filiation of this question 'What is the contemporary?' could be traced back to Giorgio Agamben's *What is the contemporary?*:

> Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. […] But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time.[12]

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[6] Martin, p. 2.
[7] *Contemporary Literature's* submission guidelines are available at the following web page: <https://uwpress.wisc.edu/journals/journals/cl_contributors.html> [Accessed 26/01/18].
[8] Lia Brozgal and Sara Kippur, 'Being Contemporary, Then and Now', in *Being Contemporary: French Literature, Culture and Politics Today*, ed. by Lia Brozgal and Sara Kippur (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), pp. 2-12 (p. 2).
[9] T.V. Benn, 'Bibliographical sources for contemporary French literature', *Journal of Documentation*, 3 (1947), 69-80.
[10] 'Contemporary French Literature: II', *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of Literature, Science, Art, & National Interests*, 4 (1869), 693-97.
[11] C.f. Margaret-Anne Hutton's forthcoming book in The Contemporary Condition series (Hutton, 2018).
[12] Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?', in *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 39-54 (p. 40).

Despite the vagueness of this statement (how exactly can one be 'disconnected' from one's own time while living in it?) the notions which underlie Agamben's thinking (that 'contemporaneity' or 'contemporariness' are impossible to fully categorise since they are, by nature, always changing) have given rise a great deal more work on the contemporary as an experiential category rather than a periodising one. But can we apply these theories of 'the contemporary', as a noun, to contemporary (adjective) literature? It is possible to see how, broadly, the texts of this study resist or engage with the contemporary time culture – or the time culture *of our time* – but does responding to a contemporary problem or reflecting a contemporary anxiety make the texts 'contemporary'?

At the very least, it is clear that literature can be, as Mark Currie has suggested, a place where the temporal structures of everyday life can be played out in fiction.[13] It can also be, as Pascal Chabot implies, a good place to take the pulse, so to speak, of the current culture in order to establish wider trends.[14] We might conclude that the texts of this study are certainly *temporally* contemporary, published in the last two decades, and that they also engage with – even if simply to resist – the current culture of time and conception of epoch. Though the texts respond to contemporary anxieties and are contemporary in the temporal sense, it is more difficult to establish whether the texts are examples of a clear trend, if we are to view 'the contemporary' as an aesthetic or experiential category.

Throughout this study I have sought to explore the ways in which literature might engage with our changing conceptions of time and epoch in the twenty-first century. Throughout this case study of the works of three contemporary French authors, it has emerged that notions of time, temporality and our place in history may be engaged with in texts which, on the surface, do not seem to be explicitly about time or about 'our time'. It has been my argument that all literary works are necessarily affected in some way by the cultural conditions under which they have been produced, and that in turn, though perhaps to a limited extent, they provide insight into ways in which we may embrace or resist that culture. In this way, contemporary fiction provides a valuable resource for exploration of our conceptions of time and our perception of our own place in history, in the wake of the troubled dawn of the twenty-first century.

[13] Currie, p. 1.
[14] 'Poètes et écrivains œuvrent souvent en éclaireurs pour les sciences humaines'. Chabot, p. 27.

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