

The Aesthetics of Post-Realism and the Obscenification of Everyday Life: The Novel in the Age of Technology

Madelena Gonzalez

This article will examine how a post-realist aesthetics situated within a Baudrillardian realm of simulacra has come to dominate much of contemporary fiction. The excessive consciousness of the “real” as mere artifice leads many serious authors to engage in an ongoing mockery of mimesis. *Yellow Dog* (Martin Amis, 2003), *Fury* (Salman Rushdie, 2001), *Dorian: An Imitation* (Will Self, 2002), and *The PowerBook* (Jeanette Winterson, 2000) are all works by major, well-established writers with international reputations, and they have been chosen in an attempt to illustrate some of the dominant tendencies in the British novel today. They all seek to renew a doubting diegesis through constant self-reference, whether it be to their own status as texts or through recourse to a perverted and ironic intertextuality which is used to bolster up their beleaguered poetics. As they engage in the cloning of creativity in order to produce the endless replicas and debased imitations of compromised originals, which they make available to their readers as examples of a late postmodern and, usually virtual, “reality,” the very medium or mode of expression of the novel is put into question. The rampant technophilia which characterizes these examples may be representative of a wider tendency in the twenty-first century novel for which technology constitutes both an opportunity for experimentation but also an essential threat to its future.¹ In competition with the

World Wide Web of stories, the networked environment of the internet, many writers feel the need to flex their literary muscles, committing their texts to excess and the extreme, not only thematically, but also formally and linguistically. By “blinding” the reader with their own form of “science,” reinventing literariness as demotic ornamentation, these novels are in the process of re-appropriating the space usurped by the contemporary technoverse with its leveling impulse. The symbolic poverty caused by the spread of industrial technology to all spheres of human conduct is thus being challenged by a desperate attempt to re-aestheticize our so-called post-real experience and thereby reconnect us to a consciousness of the political and the ethical.

After the Last Post

“Apocalypse is already here”

— Jean Baudrillard, *Requiem for the Twin Towers*

Is a post-realistic mode the most viable way of writing about 21st-century experience, or even the only way? The writers examined here obviously think so. According to Jeanette Winterson, television and cinema have taken over the narrative function of the novel, which leaves it “free for poetry and for language that does more than convey meaning” (“The Powerbook”). This questioning of the relationship between language and meaning goes hand in hand with the problematic status of the real, as explicated by Jean Baudrillard and other proponents of ultra-postmodernism. Even Terry Eagleton, hardly a champion of postmodern thought, is ready to concede that the disappearance of the real has in itself become a cliché of contemporaneity: “Yet what nobody could have predicted was that Western civilization was just on the brink of going non-realist itself. Reality itself had now embraced the non-realist, as capitalist society became increasingly dependent in its everyday operations on myth and fantasy, fictional wealth, exoticism and hyperbole, rhetoric, virtual reality and sheer appearance” (67).²

We undoubtedly live in an age which either prides itself on, or has scared itself into, being “post-everything.” As Anne McClintock explains, “The recurrent, almost ritualistic incantation of the preposition ‘post’ is a symptom, I believe, of a global crisis in ideologies of the future, particu-

larly the ideology of ‘progress’” (93). This epoch of “urbi-postness” is thus also one of disillusionment and crisis, catastrophe and ongoing apocalypse, artificially enhanced but also trivialized by incessant mediation, by its daily performance on our television screens, via radio waves or the internet. The now all-pervading self-consciousness of the Western world, engaged in incessant contemplation of its own (not very glorious) doings, has invaded contemporary fiction, which is likewise characterized by an obsession with overexposure. Hence the thriving industry in metafiction and general self-reflexiveness which has now long been mandatory in the market for all genres of serious fiction. Within this context of compulsive, if critical, narcissism, the ordinary and the quotidian endlessly contemplated take on the lurid detail of the pornographic. The obsessive description of everyday life such as is witnessed on reality TV, for example, pressurizes many novels into adopting ever more explicit positions and poses in attempts to redeem themselves from banality and to recapture a lost originality. However, this only vitiates intercourse between medium and spectator, making a mockery of mimesis and replacing it with an obscene, if interactive, peepshow.

Contemporary novels and, indeed, art in general participate in the loop of repetition, imitation, and fascination with banality. The specter of Andy Warhol’s soup cans haunts representation with the threat of endless reproduction instead of infinite creation. Playful self-consciousness is intended to provide absolution from the crime of copying, as if the meta-import of any work of art could make up for the lack of originality. The phrase “obscenification of everyday life,” a quote from *Yellow Dog* where “Dick-head” is the latest in fashionable cocktails, is a leitmotif in all these novels (Amis 11, 35). Most obviously and predictably, it appears in the frequent portrayals of particularly explicit and, at times, outlandish or unsavory sex: a princess being serviced by a tulip in *The PowerBook*, incest in *Fury* and *Yellow Dog*, the “conga line of buggery” in *Dorian*, a phrase, significantly enough, already recycled from a television review of *Big Brother* (*Dorian* 68; *Feeding Frenzy* 208). More interestingly, it is patent in the way that the characters depicted in these fictional worlds have lost touch with authenticity. They are mere replicas, but not even of themselves, for all identities are borrowed and may be shucked on or off again at a moment’s notice, as the following quote suggests: “Remember, Dorian can be whatever you want him to be—a punk or a parvenu, a dodgy geezer or a

doting courtier, a witty fop or a City yuppy” (108). In *Fury* this tragic lack of originality is actually materialized through the conceit of masks which are used to effect a coup on an island in the South Pacific. All that is said and done carries the painful stigmata of several layers of *déjà vu*: an abortive knife attack is the replay of memorable scenes from Quentin Tarantino films and, in the same novel, murderers dress up in Disney costumes to perpetrate their deeds. These “individuals,” if they can be called such, are presented as clichés of their own making who are easily reduced to specific traits: the Earl-Grey-sipping Dorian, wistfully and nostalgically nodding at Oscar Wilde one moment and shooting up the next; the supposedly Kray-like Joseph Andrews, about as convincingly terrifying as a villain from *EastEnders* as he slumps over his Zimmer frame; the embarrassingly amorous narrator of *The PowerBook* with ambitions to join the top ten of “great and ruinous lovers,” but who makes love to her keyboard alone (Winterson 77).

The literary hangover from the great works (Wilde, Woolf, Kafka, Nabokov, Swift, Dante, Boccaccio, Malory, Donne, and Shakespeare) experienced through the bloodshot eyes of the overdosers contributes to the impression that readers have of witnessing something illicit, of being party to a sacrilegious textfest, accentuated by the *risqué* subject-matter: sex, violence, crime, deviancy. However, more disturbing than this is the jaded experience of life, the constant “in-yer-face-ness” of the daily violence of existence, which progressively loses its power to shock. It is worth noting here the convergence between this tendency in the contemporary British novel and what is happening in the theatre, where recent plays dealing brutally with similar subjects in a similar mode have contained health warnings for the spectators.³ When all is bared and no holds are barred, horror is so predictably horrible that it becomes a pose rather than a reality, a cliché instead of an authentic emotion—“Horrorism” in the words of a character in *Yellow Dog* (Amis 150). When everything is made visible, but unnecessarily so, without desire and without effect, torpor has a tendency to triumph instead of excitement. As Jean Baudrillard explains, the obscene is what is made unnecessarily visible without giving rise to any desire or effect (*Cool Memories IV* 59–60).⁴

The lives lived in these novels are in thrall to the contemporary technoverse, where human beings are imprisoned within, as much as liberated by, a mobile network of cell phones, iPods, and laptops, the battery of

technology which is now part and parcel of everyday life and contrives to furnish our twenty-first century bodies with an array of artificial limbs, allowing us to experience nostalgically the occasional twitches and tremors of real feeling. The anxiety permeating these narratives is a love-hate relationship with the contemporary technology-led world and the writer's place within it. As Self explains, "The writer in an age of mass standardization, corporatism, stereotypy, and the remorseless eradication of any meaningful individuality . . . represents the promise of an untrammelled life" (*Feeding Frenzy* 140). This is an example of the way in which writers' perceptions of their craft is challenged by the increasingly wide access to technology that dominates society's account of itself, in relation to which fiction must constantly and anxiously situate itself as a rival narrative. The question seems to be, how does the novel, a traditionally low-tech form, requiring only pen and paper, interact with this new state of affairs or state of the art? One of the answers lies in the relentless questioning of the medium in which any author worth his postmodern salt must indulge so as to make patent his awareness of the flawed nature of representation. Despite the obsessive invocation of "storytelling" by such writers as Winterson and Rushdie, and the number of times that the word "story" actually appears on the page, the focus is more on the telling as an event than on the event *per se*, as the preposterous plots of these novels bear witness. The reader, on the other hand, must be satisfied with fragmented "storyettes" rather than with full-blown tales.

However, the excess of questioning, self-awareness, and self-consciousness which has penetrated these fictional organisms also endangers their already fragile credibility, at least in the examples chosen here. Thus, one wonders at times if an object such as *The PowerBook* is really a novel, or even a book at all, or merely a literary gadget or gizmo:

The PowerBook is not methodologically new. Except that it isn't really a novel anyway. It's more like a set of short stories being marketed as a novel. . . . Except that it isn't even a set of short stories. It's more like a bundle of bits and pieces, nicely laid out, signed, numbered and bound in home-splodged cardboard and sold as an artist's book at a private gallery in the West End. It's a half-finished, collectors-only artifact which has somehow stumbled into mass-

market circulation. It's close, in fact, to not being a book at all. (Turner)

More than simple suspension of disbelief is now required of the reader of this kind of text: we are being asked for a willingness to face head on the rampant technophilia of novels which are straining to construct a new techno-poetics out of their (frequently exaggerated) claims of interactivity and technological know-how, "digitally" enhanced by typeface gimmicks, jacket graphics, and iconic chapter headings. These strategies boil down to more than mere genre-bending and more than a mere questioning from the inside of the novel as medium; they are attempts to integrate new media into its very fabric. However, the technical and technological possibilities for the novel are limited, which is precisely where language and form come into their own.

The fascinated horror with other modes of being and writing blend together in the ever more *recherché* poetics of these novels, for one of the ways to win back a lost originality from the standardization of thought is through linguistic and formal experimentation and daring, an excessive literary quality which exhibits in full view the exacerbated utilitarianism of the language of technology and fashions out of it an ornamentally demotic architecture to ensure relief from homogenization. These authors plunder both the treasure trove of great works and the resources of technology, fabricating a discursive space where constant interference disturbs the inevitability of reproduction. The spectral soup tins are replaced by spam as a postmodern pyrotechnical virus pollutes all systems of representation. It is a case of over-writing in order to write over.

In expressing themselves thus, these self-created technicians of the telling may have found a way of reclaiming the original meaning of *techné*, that is to say, of "art." The novels under examination here are both complicit with the technological age and revolting against it. By situating themselves on the cusp of this ambiguity, they make valid statements about our postmodern condition, however much opprobrium their excessive subject-matter and style may occasion. The baroque elaboration of the banal is a challenge for the literary, but also a way of putting into question a simplified vision of "society" as information superhighway stretching into the classless, stateless, genderless distance. It acts as a powerful and obvious simulacrum aiming to compete with and outdo its technolog-

ical counterpart, the networked storyworld environment of the internet. For as these complex word games enable such writers to prove, precisely by foregrounding language and its power structures, the impression of leveling to be had through unlimited access is mere illusion.⁵

The arcane erudition of contemporary vulgarity of Self and Amis, as well as the neo-romantic, neo-poetic hyperbole of Winterson and Rushdie, make them members of a techno-elite of contemporary word-engineers. The simultaneously reactionary and revolutionary tactics of these writers are strategic attitudes towards the commodified condition of aesthetics, especially in a world in which we are no longer individuals but consumers, or even objects of consumption ourselves. Kazuo Ishiguro's latest novel, *Never Let Me Go* (2005), depicting the lives of human clones raised solely for their organs, provides a melancholy metaphor for this condition, as does reality television offer a ludicrous illustration of the same tendency. The impending but aborted disaster of our condition is a feature of all these novels, a state that Self describes as a "profound sense of unease about the non-appearance of the apocalypse" (*Feeding Frenzy* 236). The reverberating echo of the last trump which goes on trumping *ad nauseam* pushes poetics beyond the pale, as novels seek to produce tirelessly, and with ever more sophisticated variations, the horror of our condition in full view in the hopes that a liberating catharsis may be effected. Faced with the contempt and indifference that familiarity breeds, these writers are engaged in an ongoing struggle to reaestheticize our existence, albeit negatively, in order to challenge the symbolic poverty caused by the spread of industrial technology to all spheres of human conduct.

Mocking Mimesis: The Interactive Peepshow

"Perhaps this is the style of the new millennium,
A pre-Enlightenment sense of linguistic formality
Coupled with post-post-industrial virtual reality"

— Martin Crimp, *The Misanthrope*

All of these writers indulge energetically in the acrobatics of stylistic and narrative surrealism in order better to mock mimesis. The realist aesthetic is displayed, only to be surpassed; it is fawned on and then held up to ridicule as pastiche slips into parody. The main protagonists chosen by

these authors are all “mimetists,” addicted to imitation and manipulated by ventriloquist narrators whose original premise is the insincerity of the copy and the poetics of consumption. Such is what various paratextual elements imply: the subtitle of *Dorian*, which reads “An Imitation,” the jacket of *The PowerBook*, designed to resemble a portable Apple PowerMac computer, the tabloid chapter-titles of *Yellow Dog*, or the different typefaces used in *Fury*. These hollow men and women are exposed as frauds by the very narration of their “stories” and fail to believe in themselves sufficiently to be able to give a convincing performance of a stable identity from the start. Xan Meo of *Yellow Dog* plays at being the “Sensitive New Age Guy” until a bump to the head reveals him as MCP *extraordinaire*, while the effete, mannered, and professorial Solanka in *Fury* turns out to be an intellectual and emotional charlatan who finds himself at first standing over his sleeping spouse with a kitchen knife, then playing out incestuous fantasies with his nubile neighbor, and finally peddling philosophy for the masses in a cheap internet saga. As for Henry Wotton and *Dorian*, they are such sublime caricatures of campdom that they may very well be, by their own admission, mere fictions within fictions within fiction: “we’re all inventions of one sort or another” (276). The implication is that the manuscript has been written by Wotton and that the characters about which we have been reading have been merely living out his fantasies. Such layering and *mise en abyme* is typical of the “technological” sophistication of these writers. *The PowerBook*, on the other hand, is peopled by marvelous virtual creations, including the unreliable narrator, a veritable technological transvestite who refuses to distinguish reality from the fantasies circulating in cyberspace and fabricates new identities at will.

As already suggested, all this is par for the course and can easily be construed as part of the great anti-realist project of the High Modernists, echoed in various pronouncements by Winterson: “I am not interested in realism for its own sake. The point of fiction is not to mirror real life but to set out from it, to alter our viewing angle and perhaps even the world we are viewing” (qtd. in Showalter). In other words, and with a nod to Oscar Wilde, it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors, and the self-conscious poetics of these novels plunge the reader into a veritable abyss of “specularity.” Whether it be formally or linguistically, or both, they are all narratives operating against themselves and thrust an awareness of artificiality on their audiences at the same time as they continue to

embroil those audiences in the preposterous “fiction” of their chaotic and sprawling stories. They create and undermine at the same time, deconstruct and reconstruct in the same breath.

Each is characterized by multiple plot strands and by difficulties for the reader in distinguishing subplot from main story, a paradigm which is relevant at all levels of these narratives which insist on mixing up the momentous with the banal. Endless punning and wordplay, technical trickery, frequent changes of point of view, and the saturation of the text with images and metaphors of vision and sight oblige readers to ceaselessly contemplate themselves in the act of looking. The incessant pointing to the frame in which such writers indulge, deconstructing and foregrounding everything in advance, makes us only too aware that we are stationed on the other side of a two-way mirror from whence ironical glances can be exchanged with the narrator. The mirror held up thus becomes a mockery of mimesis and an excuse for a pantomime of verisimilitude, as we are taunted with parodic suggestions of plot and storyline and presented instead with endless reflections of reading, writing, and interpretation.

Lured into a series of virtual worlds—Baz Hallward’s video installation, *Cathode Narcissus* (Self), Clint Smoker’s e-mail correspondence (Amis), Solanka’s websaga (Rushdie), *The PowerBook*’s internet surfing—readers are doomed to become the celebrities of the texts that they are reading, the complicit doubles of narrators whose refusal or incapacity to produce the true and the beautiful obliges them to go shopping for transcendence in the debased mall of consumer culture via the hypertextual links provided by an excessively fragmented diegesis: “Click on the links for more PK info or on the icons below for answers to 101 FAQs, access to interactivities, and to see the wide range of *PK merchandise* available for INSTANT shipping NOW. All major credit cards accepted” (Rushdie 168, emphasis original). Slaves to the ubiquitous screen, of the already-seen, readers, like the protagonists, inhabit an uncanny present where, in the words of Baudrillard, “the media have put an end to real event” and individuals ape the watered-down performance of reality which is all they have access to, fashioning themselves into the stars of their own lives, gods by proxy (“Toward a Principle” 358).⁶

To some extent one might suggest, much like Self and Wilde, that the modern internal “I” has taken the place of the voices of the gods in our consciousness (*Feeding Frenzy* 209). The hall of fame is in fact a hall of

mirrors and any pleasure or interest derived comes from watching oneself in the act of watching, as the frontiers between outside and inside become increasingly blurred. The deliberate confusion of “I” and “You” in *The PowerBook*, of “I” and “he” in *Yellow Dog*, and the technique of multiple focalization which all of these novels tend to adopt destabilize representation once and for all. The willfully corrupt aesthetic at play here partakes of a fetishistic and shameless obsession with the fragmented multiplicity of the self as it goes through the motions of desire:

“Let’s start. What color hair do you want?”

“Red. I’ve always wanted red hair. . . .”

“So what shall I wear?”

“It’s up to you. Combat or Prada?”

“How much can I spend on clothes?”

“How about \$1000?”

“My whole wardrobe or just one outfit?”

“You’re the writer.”

“It’s your story.”

“What happened to the omniscient author?”

“Gone interactive.”

“Look . . . I know this was my idea, but maybe we should quit.”

“What’s the problem? This is art not telephone sex.”

(Winterson 27)

As we catch a glimpse of the misshapen reflections of humanity that the texts’ distorting mirrors produce for us, we break into horrid laughter at the grotesque replicas which have replaced the aspiration to perfection of true art, now no more than a temporary commodity of the imaginary, chained to the immoral principle of the spectacle: “The monitors fizzed into life. On the screens the naked Dorians effervesced. Helen stared at the glorious bodies. Baz Hallward’s piece was most cunning; it forced all who looked upon it to become involuntary voyeurs, Laughing Cavaliers, compelled to ogle the young man with eyes pinioned open” (*Dorian* 42). Nothing exists in these fictional worlds if not to be seen and seen again.

Although claims for interactivity can never signify more than a tricky pose for the novel, which is by its nature incapable of authentic interactivity despite such experiments as B. S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* (1969), the moral responsibility denied by the narrators is shifted onto the shoul-

ders of the readers, who in the words of one critic of *Yellow Dog*, “cannot but see” and are obliged to confront themselves in the act of confronting the horror (Ganteau).⁷ Like spectators at an interactive peepshow, they are no longer merely observers but profoundly and morally implicated by the very performance of watching in which they are engaged. Indeed watching itself becomes the single most significant act of the twenty-first-century post-reality deployed with such perverse glee.

There is indeed something disturbing about the involvement of readers in texts where they are cast as both victims and perpetrators by proxy, responsible for textual antics: “What is it you want? Freedom for a night” (Winterson 3–4). The mixture of *Verfremdung* (alienation) and intimacy which these writers practice, as well as their consummate ventriloquism—Self’s cod Wilde, Rushdie’s tongue-in-cheek Kafka, Amis’s gallery of gangsters and porn stars, Winterson’s Malory, Shakespeare, and Oasis, all products of linguistic sophistication—make it difficult to establish a moral or textual hierarchy with which to judge events. Readers have trouble positioning themselves in relation to what is shown, as emotion is lost behind a series of screens and layers, for the excess of prosthetics separates them from a reality that imitates the alienation which may result from the culture of technology. As Terry Eagleton explains,

There is another sense in which culture can interpose itself between human bodies, known as technology. Technology is an extension of our bodies which can blunt their capacity to feel for one another. . . . Technology makes our bodies far more flexible and capacious, but in some ways much less responsive. It reorganizes our senses for swiftness and multiplicity rather than depth, persistence or intensity. (156)

Where culture has become technology and technology culture, the integrity of the body and the integrity of the text are compromised, leaving both in pieces yet longing to be whole.⁸ Readers who search for depth are invariably brought back to the surface, for the consciousness of mediation, of an outside agency fragmenting perception, means that the only revelation to which they can have access is the hollow infinitude of irony: the awareness of their role as part of the creed of self-reflexiveness. How then

should we judge these authors: as passive chroniclers of decadence, vicious satirists or cynical pornographers cashing in on a post-permissive society from which taboos in art and life have disappeared? How can we come to terms with the mixture of junk, gimmick, and literary sophistication which is pushing such novels into our faces and “out of their heads”?

**An Excess of the Real:
The Novel “In-Yer-Face” and “Out of Its Head”**

“When we are out of our body, we are out of our mind”
— Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*

All of these novels are based on an aesthetic of the extreme, both in subject matter and in language. As well as attacking modern-day myths by subjecting them to overexposure—the Royal family and the Princess Diana cult (*Dorian*, *Yellow Dog*), fatherly and motherly love (*Yellow Dog*, *Fury*, *The PowerBook*), freedom of the press (*Yellow Dog*), racial and sexual equality (*Yellow Dog*, *Fury*, *Dorian*, *The PowerBook*)—they subject to pitiless scrutiny the art of fiction itself. The shibboleths of good writing are materialized and wheeled out on stage like the giant phalli in the comedies of Aristophanes. Once before our eyes, they are deconstructed by ridicule and lose the power of mystery through over-familiarity. There is nothing like rubbing shoulders with the forbidden for it to lose its totemic power. The hard and soft porn which operates on the level of theme, what is shown and what is left to the imagination, is thus also relevant on the metaphorical level of the writing itself. However tolerant the enlightened reader may be of the experimental in literature, it is difficult to accept the way in which these writers draw attention to stylistic strategies in order to mock them. If *Yellow Dog* is drunk on the demotic, adopting tabloid parlance, East End underworld slang, a corny e-mail idiom, as well as inventing countless stylistic subtleties for the language of the porn industry, *Dorian* raises the stakes of expression to a climax of aesthetic excess where Huysmans meets Burroughs in an overdose of mind-altering poetics. Self piles metaphor upon metaphor and selects the rarest of archaisms to conjoin with contemporary slang as a collective heroin orgy is performed to a recitation of Donne’s “The Flea.” This intercourse between the learned and the vulgar may be secretly admired by readers, but it may

also cause them to recoil in distaste, for there is more than an element of the unseemly to a technique which involves the indecent exposure of the truth and beauty of art as mere technical wizardry, an ostentatious display of language skills and poetic range in the service of special effects.

As for *The PowerBook*, it leaves no escape from its hysterical and hybrid “sur-romanticism” and its undignified a-genericism, creating an indigestible mixture of the elaborately metaphysical and the cornily obvious as it militantly contests conventional fictional mores.⁹ Heroic mountaineers, explorers, and legendary lovers rub shoulders with the mysterious, but somewhat repulsive, inhabitants of a “Muck Midden” (137), as well as with contemporary bourgeois adulterers, caught in predictable love triangles; poetic flights of fancy modulate into pornography and the marvelous segues into a crude parody of realism. *Fury*, an undignified techno mix of Disney, science fiction, and Shakespeare, exhibits a distinct penchant for the vampiric, for it feeds off a visibly weakened and disadvantaged reality in order to strengthen the all-pervading fictionality which is destined to replace the host culture by the end of the novel. Thus an imaginary internet saga becomes the disquieting mirror image of the anti-hero’s everyday life, which is already saturated with excessive reference to a contemporary culture of the hyperreal and unable to distinguish between the true and the false.

The point of such techniques is to take formal and linguistic mastery to the limits of what is acceptable in print, not merely on the literal level of the number of expletives and explicit references to sex and violence, but by putting to the test and to the text the shock value of a poetics which revels in radical and disturbing incongruity: the incessant juxtaposing and conjoining of different registers, worlds and levels, the surfeit and mixing of minority idioms (a result of a consumer-based culture where we are all part of some focus group, yet disenfranchised from the larger culture), and the disrespectful intertextual sampling which compulsively exceeds its own sources.

This heretical and inflationary poetics disturbs because of its failure to keep faith with a single identifiable mode or style which might ground it in a recognizable fictional reality or convention. Neither can such a poetics be explained by, or reduced to, any particular conceit, strand, school or influence, for it has that all-inclusive quality of the World Wide Web, where everything is apparently on show and for the taking, but at the same time

paradoxically ungraspable. There are few limits to the crimes which it will commit against literary decorum or the violation of codes in which it is ready to indulge. These tendencies are particularly noticeable when dialogue intervenes. Episodes of direct speech, the function of which is to provide a coded comment upon the conventions of dialogue in fiction by using a strategy of hyperrealistic imitation, have a disconcerting effect on the reader:

“Chicks like salad.”

“What?”

“Chicks like salad. That’s a real difference between the sexes. Chicks like salad.”

“You eat salad.”

“Yeah but I don’t *like* salad. No man likes salad. Chicks like salad. And I can prove it.”

She waited. “How?”

“Chicks eat salad *when they’re stoned*. A bloke would want his chocolate bar or his sugar sandwich. Not some bullshit tomato. A chick’ll eat salad in the *morning*. From the fridge. Only a chick would do that. That’s how sick chicks are. Christ, is that the phone?”

“It’s the fridge.”

“The fridge?”

“It’s new. Haven’t you noticed? It makes a noise if you leave the door open. You left the door open.”

“Fuck off!” he called out to it. “I wonder. Am I the first man on earth to tell his fridge to fuck off?” (Amis 93)

If we are ready to accept a certain dose of poetic license, the fact, for example, that people do not really speak like this in real life (suspension of disbelief), it is more difficult to accept that they should not even be speaking like this in a novel, unless it is indeed a very lame parody of the script of an appallingly bad film. In order to comment upon the irrelevance of verisimilitude, Amis feels obliged make a mockery of it by self-conscious imitation, to rub the reader’s face in his novel’s compulsive self-parody. Every text is no longer just a text, but a hypertext projecting its reader beyond conventional fictional limits.

However, when, as is frequently the case, hardcore erudition meets the

soft porn of facileness, it is not merely the reflection of the multiple and mixed aesthetics of postmodernism, but, for these authors at least, a way of staking out new territory for the novel, pushing out the boundaries of what it is possible to say and represent in fiction. The stylistic shock value of such an aesthetic exceeds that of the actual events depicted, horrible as they may be, for they are also excuses for increasingly baroque variations on the same themes, equally significant as pretexts for elaborate experiments with demotic expression as for their content-value. These novels may indeed deal with incest, violence, pornography, deviancy, and so on, but all of these characteristics apply equally to the poetics that they inflict on their readers, reflecting the anxieties of a post-experimental age where incessant linguistic play and *bricolage* are the tools required for the expression of contemporary technological reality. In such a climate these writers, it would seem, feel the need to flex their literary muscles and compete with the World Wide Web of stories by putting into play their own versions of technological know-how. Of course, by trying to go one better, they commit themselves to strategies of excess, as a very brief analysis of the comic impulse in their work will prove.

Although there is nothing intrinsically comic about any of these novels, the poor joke, the indigent pun, and bathos infect them at every level. This is hardly surprising, considering that they depict a world in which tragedy is unrecognizable, a mere momentary virtuality, and where the truth of the actual is supplanted by the way that it is perceived and reacted to, or re-enacted by its audience. Everything becomes mildly amusing, whether it be rape, exploitative relationships, sex between father and daughter, or violent death, for everything works on the principle of equivalence. The provocation is obvious, but compulsion also plays a part, as if, like word-junkies, the authors cannot resist a quick linguistic fix, a self-indulgent proof of the indigence intrinsic to the world with which they engage. However, it is not so much that these writers suffer from the inability to write well and tastefully, but from an addiction to hype and over-the-topness, the desire to crank up their writing a notch, the temptation to use all of the toys as they play their dirty game with the novel. Thus Amis, Rushdie and Self commit themselves to crass puns, tasteless wordplay, and sick jokes, the latter reveling in *fin de siècle* ribaldry, while the linguistic playfulness of Winterson takes us beyond the cringe in its kitschy corniness. Readers wince as they are shown what should remain

hidden: the mechanics of language and story in which these writers openly glory, the dirty laundry of the intricacies and intimacies of their craft shamelessly aired in public.

The mixing of categories and registers and the crashing obviousness of the writing strategies are more shocking finally than the events portrayed, for they provide the crude special effects of a vitiated poesy. Narrators turn pornographers, destroying their texts' mystique by overexposure and overkill, imposing an excess of the real (which is really a loss of the real) and vouchsafing unlimited access to that which should remain hidden. It should be remembered that, according to Baudrillard, "pornography is baroque over-signification" (*Seduction* 28). A poetics of saturation, a linguistic glut or smog, envelops all levels of the diegesis, making it impossible to see the story for the language or, indeed, to recognize any story at all, as if the novel were constructed around special effects and secondary to these. The repetition of motifs and metaphors is intentionally heavy-handed, and the conceits to which the authors have recourse are all excessively self-conscious. These texts do not stop at the recycling of other texts, but have no scruples in quoting themselves as well since they are devoted to making a spectacle of themselves. Both enchanted and disgusted by their own simulation of the narrative art, searching for the sublime through the ridiculous, refusing to separate the readerly from the writerly, they teeter on the brink of schizophrenia and psychosis.

Ultimately, such exhibitionism means that they risk hoisting themselves with their own petard. In fact these novels might be considered as formal experiments in literary *hara-kiri*, an hypothesis borne out by the mostly negative reviews that they have received in the press. Some of the titles will suffice to give an idea: "Someone Needs to Have a Word with Amis" (Fischer), "Confusion in the Doll's House" (Tandon), "Outdoing Wilde in Sex, Excess and Snobbery" (Canning), "Eternal Triangles: Jeanette Winterson's *The Powerbook* is Lost in Cyberspace" (Showalter). Junk literature is one thing if it stays in its own little ghetto, but serious writers recycling its well-tryed formulas in order to reinvigorate the fictional organism is quite another.¹⁰

It is also possible to level a charge of mannerism or exacerbated aestheticism at these writers, and both these accusations are in themselves a comment on the dissenting tendencies at play in novels which flirt with, and flit between, high- and low-cultural references and style. However, be-

hind their seeming loss of integrity, their abandonment of the ethics of story, and their eschewing of the saving technicality of the pre-established rules of the telling is the growing confusion between the human mind and the virtual world of computer technology that they enact comment upon, illustrating the indiscriminate all-at-onceness, the wired-upness, and wired-inness which is characteristic of contemporary life. Thus, in *Fury*, a website saga gradually becomes indistinguishable from the “real” story, one which itself takes place in a curiously artificial environment resembling a film set, where people direct their own lives in accordance with the scripts on offer. Winterson’s narrator suffers from similar existential and aesthetic confusion, trying to be both man and woman at the same time, to control her fictional world and also share responsibility for it with her readers.

The body and the mind are shown to have willingly and compulsively delegated their functions to machines and technology in an orgy of biological and organic confusion, as Clint Smoker’s aborted internet affair proves when his virtual dream girl reveals herself to be a transsexual. Significantly, this incident precipitates the crisis of the novel, the road accident in which Joseph Andrews dies. In *Dorian*, as in Wilde’s original, the artifact, in this case the video of Dorian, ages rather than the character, but Self adds a twist: not only is the content affected by decadence, but the medium also, for the cassette predictably wears out. In both *The Power-Book* and *Fury*, computers are virtual substitutes for sex, replacing human interaction and, in the latter at least, signaling the commodification of artistic creation: “The computer screen burst into life. Images raced towards him like bazaar traders. This was technology as hustler, peddling its wares, Solanka thought; or, as if in a darkened nightclub, gyrating for him. Laptop as lapdancer” (Rushdie 179).

By submitting to the electronic colonization of the senses, synchronizing with what Steven Connor calls the “culture of interruptions,” borrowing the “total flow and flickering of attention of television and visual media,” these writers destroy the integrity of the novel as we know it and willingly sabotage the conventions of the reading pact (77, 78). Connor maintains that developments in technology, such as digital reproduction, make it more difficult for authors to control response and interpretation in an audience. The writers discussed here encourage, as well as fear, what Connor calls “over-reading” and “under-reading” as a way of focusing at-

tention on the dynamics of the reading act in the technological age. In a similar way, according to some, technology has challenged the instrumental pact between humankind and machine and thus the integrity of both. Technological metastasis looms over these texts as the virus of linguistic and technical one-upmanship and showmanship seeps into all areas of the fictional system, overloading it and threatening it with shutdown. Henry Wotton, the flamboyant character dying of AIDS in *Dorian*, himself a writer, provides a metaphor for this critical condition in which the novel finds itself. Flirting with textual death by excess, these authors seek to reinstate aesthetic involvement at the heart of an artificial cultural landscape, a place where everything is possible and nothing is ever fully realized, where consumption currently stands in for consummation.

Escaping from Cyberia: The Dangers of the Post-Real

“The endless beginnings, the infinite endings”

— Mark Ravenhill, *Some Explicit Polaroids*

Commenting on *The PowerBook* and fiction-writing at the turn of the twentieth century, Elaine Showalter describes contemporary novels as “all dressed up and nowhere to go,” resorting to the “small change of romance” instead of the big subjects: “They are measuring out in *latte* spoons the greatest social material offered to fiction since the 1840s.” Certainly it would seem at times that these novels, a cross-section of turn-of-the-century fiction, have been absorbed into a universe of indiscriminate “kulchur” and pop, which lulls itself into complacency by imagining that virtual space is far richer and more interesting than real space. The excitement of playing with and borrowing from new media, what Connor describes as a process of “cultural impingement,” should not, however, obscure the awareness that these works show of the way in which the aesthetic sphere has been absorbed by the economic sphere of production. The globalization of the market, the perpetual flux of money, the promiscuity of all signs and of all values, the global diffusion of anything and everything via communication networks constitute the real pornography of our times. Sexual obscenity is a mere bagatelle in the face of this corporate copulation, a fact which these novels attempt to illustrate graphically.

One of the consequences of this triumph of consumption is the loss of individuality, as well as of a wider solidarity, the fragmentation of society into separate groups and tribalized entities: the gay clique in *Dorian*, the gangster underworld and porn fraternity in *Yellow Dog*, the rich and famous in *Fury*, not forgetting Winterson's "rich-enough-to-live-like-a-poor-man Eurochic" set with their weekends in Capri and Paris and their recipes for "*salsa di pomodori*" (Turner). As Naomi Klein suggests in her book *No Logo*, this fragmentation has important political ramifications, for the drift towards identity politics of the 1980s may have played into the hands of corporate power. According to Klein's analysis, campaigning for better representation of marginalized groups was very appealing to sectors of the advertising industry, while a recognition of diversity was easily transformed into a form of niche marketing, a point of view that Self echoes in a discussion of his novel: "Being gay is a lifestyle option. . . . Capitalism's won" (qtd. in Yeh).

In his introduction to the first volume of plays by "In-Yer-Face" playwright Mark Ravenhill, Dan Rebellato describes the political consequences of the fading of the subject and the evasion of the corporeal in contemporary society:

The claim that there are only mini-stories that we carry around with us, that reality has ended, that progress has been discredited, of course, makes resistance to the grand story of globalization impossible. It makes our experience of reality impossible to share; we move, once again, from members of a common society, to individual consumers of individual story-portions. (xv)

According to the French thinker Bernard Stiegler, the distress of the individual which results from this state of affairs may translate itself into neuroses, obsessional behavior, rationalizing logorrhea, or even collective suicide—all of which are glaringly in evidence in contemporary theatre and fiction.

It is in this light that we can understand the literary reaction of Amis, Rushdie, Self, and Winterson to the symbolic poverty of our age, the appropriation of the symbolic by industrial technology, which has made aesthetics both a theatre and a weapon of economic conflict. With the

nostalgia and conviction of latter-day Romantics, they are waging a war of words against a process of global commodification which appears to democratize art, but which instead proposes merely yet another flattened version of culture. By making deviancy their creed, they seek to liberate the libido which has been captured and channeled into production, and to resist aesthetic conditioning, whatever form that it may take. More hyper- than post-, they recognize the aporia or lack that characterizes late capitalism: an empty space or cyber wilderness, our atomic winter of feeling where affect has been bypassed by technology. It is not to unroll the scroll of the much-delayed apocalypse that they indulge in the exaggeration of effects—the anti-climactic and even lame endings of their novels prove as much. What they are aiming to impress upon our minds is an aesthetic consciousness of our dangerously post-real condition, a consciousness which may eventually reconnect us to the political and even the ethical. This may be the most valuable lesson taught by the novel at the beginning of the 21st century and the catharsis which it so ardently seeks.

Notes

1. A similar trend can be seen in contemporary American novels by authors such as Bret Easton Ellis and Richard Powers.
2. For political scientists such as Francis Beer and Robert Hariman, the “linguistic turn” of post-realism which sees everything in rhetorical rather than real terms, contains no sinister undertones, but involves instead “an emancipatory dynamic,” a “renewed emphasis on agency, action, and freedom,” and finally, the belief that a “post realist can affect his or her world” (4).
3. For an in-depth study of the “In-Yer-Face” phenomenon in theatre, see Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).
4. See also Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (London: Macmillan, 1990).
5. In “Science, Technology and Postmodernism,” Ursula K. Heise explains how the internet at first seemed to promise greater democratization, as well as empowerment for marginalized individuals and the transformation of social structures, but finally only served to reinforce social differences and to bolster up the corporate empire of consumerism.

6. It is worth noting that Self includes an amusing passage in his novel where Dorian explains Baudrillard's theories concerning the loss of the real to a fellow dinner guest (143).
7. Jean-Michel Ganteau also evokes the tendency to "enforced scopic activity." This obsession with seeing and watching speaks of a desire to reproduce in the novel the quality of film. Indeed, at times, these novels partially resemble film scripts and seem to strive for visual, as well as mental, impact on their readers.
8. Of course, the interface between technology and literature can also be seen as an opportunity for the novel to suggest an infinite number of open readings when it takes the form of the hypertext computer novel. (See Steven Connor, "Postmodernism and Literature" in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004], 62–81.) It is precisely this kind of form which the writers discussed here seem to want to copy, but also to mock; hence, for example, the incursion of extracts from a commercial web saga in *Fury* or the parody of internet surfing in *The PowerBook*. These contradictory strategies obviously evince an ambiguous approach to technology which represents an opportunity for their art, but also a threat.
9. I use the term "sur-romanticism" in imitation of Raymond Federman's *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow* (1975). It is also worth remembering the ambitious claim made by Winterson in her volume of essays, *Art Objects*: "What I am trying to do in my work is to make a form that answers twenty-first-century needs. A form that is not 'a poem' as we usually understand the term, and not 'a novel' as defined by its own genesis. I do not write novels. The novel form is finished" (191).
10. Elaine Showalter has no scruples in referring to Winterson's novel as "literary junk food."

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