Context in Literary and Cultural Studies

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Edited By
Jakob Ladegaard
Jakob Gaardbo Nielsen

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Series Editors
TIMOTHY MATHEWS AND FLORIAN MUSSGNUG

Comparative Literature and Culture explores new creative and critical perspectives on literature, art and culture. Contributions offer a comparative, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary focus, showcasing exploratory research in literary and cultural theory and history, material and visual cultures, and reception studies. The series is also interested in language-based research, particularly the changing role of national and minority languages and cultures, and includes within its publications the annual proceedings of the 'Hermes Consortium for Literary and Cultural Studies'.

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Introduction: the question of context

Jakob Ladegaard
Jakob Gaardbo Nielsen

We rarely leave works of art or literature alone. Our ways of presenting and interpreting them almost always rely on our knowledge about the artist's life, the historical circumstances surrounding the work's production and reception, or comparisons with other works of art or literature. The question of context, then, is at the heart of any critical engagement with art and literature. And context really *is* a question – or a series of questions – that determines the scope and methodology of literary and cultural research on a given object. On some fundamental level, of course, we can all agree that works of art and literature do have relationships with the surrounding world. Art and books are material objects in a material world; they exist because of the creative work of artists and writers; and they are produced and consumed by people with certain foreknowledge and expectations shaped by their social and cultural backgrounds. But the question is: how much weight should we attach to such contextual matters in our efforts to engage with art and literature in meaningful ways?

One strong tradition in the humanities maintains that contextualisation can deepen our experience and understanding of an artwork; but other scholars worry that too much emphasis on context will make us lose sight of the unique features of a work of art or literature – that which makes it art or literature and not some other thing. In their view, there is a risk that the process of contextual analysis will dissolve the object of study, making it disappear in the tissue and noise of history. Art, they might say, echoing Susan Sontag's famous essay 'Against Interpretation' (Sontag 1966), is meant to be experienced, not explained. Instead of worrying about what we can learn about the past from historical works of literature, Rita Felski says in her *Uses of Literature* (Felski 2008) that we should focus on what such works can teach us about our own present.

In the last decades, this long-standing debate between what we might roughly call historicist and formalist schools of criticism has been re-invigorated by the advent of 'new aestheticism', 'new formalism' and 'postcritique'.[1] While the emergence of these movements has not made the editors or contributors of the present volume abandon contextualisation, it certainly poses a healthy challenge to our critical practices. This book is motivated by the desire to meet this challenge and come to terms with what it means to study art and literature in context today.

Despite the controversies between historicists and formalists, the statement that art and literature must be studied in context says very little. Indeed, it immediately raises a fundamental question: what kind of relationship exists between a work and its context? One way of thinking about this is in terms of determination. This is how contextualisation is sometimes portrayed by its critics. For example, in her essay 'Context Stinks!' (Felski 2011) Rita Felski argues that context most often functions as a box in which texts are 'encased and held fast'. According to Felski, historicists, even new historicists, have not yet found a way of connecting work to history that does not 'incarcerate' artworks or literary texts 'in the past', condemned to remain 'haplessly and hopelessly entangled in fine-meshed filaments of power, one more social text among others' (577). One interpretive method in particular has become a target of criticism for this reason, the so-called *symptomatic* or *suspicious reading*, a method influenced by Marxism and psychoanalysis and emblematically practised by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* (Jameson 1981). One example of this criticism can be found in Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's introduction to the special issue on 'surface reading' in the academic journal *Representations* (Best and Marcus 2009). Symptomatic reading, they argue, locates the 'deep' truth about a text beneath its surface structures, in that which it represses and fails to say about its own historical and ideological determination. The task of the symptomatic reader is then to reconstruct this context and expose the hidden truth about the work. In Felski's words, this implies that 'a text is being diagnosed rather than heard' (Felski 2008, 6).

This is what Felski, Best and Marcus want to get away from. But one wonders if what they are so eager to escape is not in some measure a straw man of their own creation. Has symptomatic reading of this kind really been such a dominant trend in the decades following the publication of Jameson's book? Surely, we can find examples of readings that reduce texts to historical symptoms and evaluate them simply in terms of their 'affirmation' or 'subversion' of social power structures, however they may be defined. But both before and especially in the almost 40 years that

have passed since the publication of *The Political Unconscious*, more nuanced and dynamic ideas about the relations between texts and their contexts have developed in the fields of postcolonialism, new historicism, affect history studies, book history and so on. Indeed, as Marjorie Levinson shows in her essay 'What Is New Formalism?' (Levinson 2007), what most critics of reductionist historicist interpretation argue for seems to be more in line with these developments, especially new historicism, than against them. One does of course encounter more radical anti-historicist and anti-hermeneutic stances in what Levinson calls 'normative formalism' (559); in Felski's call for a phenomenological approach to reading as an 'emphatic experience' (Felski 2008, 20) in the present; and in Best and Marcus's description at one point of 'surface reading' as a practice that simply 'strive[s] to describe texts accurately' (Best and Marcus 2009, 16). But in spite of the polemical rhetoric of 'Context stinks', Felski does not argue against historical contextualisation *tout court*, but against a loosely defined 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Felski 2011, 574) and in favor of a different, ontologically 'flatter' relationship between text and context inspired by Bruno Latour's network theory. Similarly, the term 'surface reading' as it is generally introduced by Best and Marcus and practised by the articles in the special issue of *Representations*, is not just about accurately describing texts (whatever that means), but covers a variety of critical approaches that do not dispense with historical contextualisation but seek new ways of dealing with it. One of the central characteristics of these practices is an attention to literary and artistic *form* in the widest sense (style, materiality, genre, structure) and to its aesthetic but also historical, social and political meanings. Theoretically speaking, there is little novelty in arguing that artistic form mediates the relationship between an artwork and its historical context. This was – in different ways – a core idea for influential Frankfurt School critics like Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, and more recently for philosophers like Jacques Rancière. In this sense, new formalism in particular seems to be less of a radical break with the historicist tradition than is sometimes claimed. So, the primary value of the new 'isms' may lie less in their effort to radically reorient criticism, and more in their attempts to explore new avenues in the relationship between text and context in critical practice.

Following this lead, the collection of articles in the present volume all contain methodological and theoretical reflections about the relationship between works and their context. But with the exception of two articles of a more metacritical nature, these reflections arise from and apply to specific cases of critical engagement with historical and

contemporary works of art and literature and their contexts. There is no one way of doing contextual analysis that fits all cases; the approach needs to be attuned to the particularities of the objects of study. This is clearly illustrated in this volume, where the analytical material ranges from the realist novel and prison writing to rave culture and performance theatre. What matters for the critic is to let the work speak; and contrary to the idea that this can only happen if context is silenced, the articles in this volume demonstrate that works of art and literature speak most clearly to us if they are allowed to maintain a dialogue with their surrounding world.

The volume is split into three parts.

I Contexts of production/producing contexts

The first article, 'Cosmopolitanism and the historical/contextual paradigm', is one of the two metacritical essays in the volume. Bruce Robbins continues and expands the critical dialogue with some of the critics of historicism mentioned above, notably Rita Felski. Robbins sees Felski's position as one among several in the current literature that exhibit a resistance to historical contextualisation. In particular, Robbins focuses on the field of world literature. The concept of world literature initially designated a canon of (mainly Western) masterpieces from antiquity onwards that somehow communicate with each other and with us across time. This is how world literature is sometimes still taught in 'Great Books' courses. No historical context is needed here – indeed, as Robbins says, it would be regarded as an inconvenience. More recently, however, world literature has not only expanded its canon to include more non-Western literature, but has also sought to provide more historical contextualisation, often relying on the field of global history for this end. Using several examples from recent publications in the field, Robbins' article discusses what it means to take the world as the context for literary history. He argues that in many cases so far, this has involved an idea that literature is almost detached from its *local* context, and a model of historical development that implicitly privileges pre-modern empires with their alleged embrace of cultural diversity over the conformity imposed by the modern nationstate, the advent of which is thus seen as a historical decline. Against this version of history, which according to Robbins risks glossing over the violence of pre-modern empires, the author argues for a different global context for world literature. Not in the shape of the anti-historicist 'universalism' of Felski or the post-critical aesthetics of

other scholars (or the older 'Great Books' tradition), nor in the shape of a return of empire, but in the form of cosmopolitanism.

Robbins' article also touches on several principal aspects of contextualisation. Firstly, context involves a question of scale. One might think of historical context in local, regional or even global terms. Ideally, a history of literature and the arts should be able to move between these contexts; but for practical purposes, choices must be made. Inevitably, in choosing a context, something else will be left out. This, secondly, points to context as a construction. Historical contexts are not simply *there* to make sense of our objects of study. We have to create them, and this entails prioritisation and abstraction. This is true of any scientific creation of knowledge: the important thing is to be as explicit as possible about the choices and their implications. This involves reflecting on the context in which one writes and reads. For example, it is hardly a coincidence that global history has evolved as a field of research in a period of globalisation, so the question that both researchers and their readers in the field must ask is how their evaluation of our present condition shapes what they see in the past. This is a hard question, and the answer – as Robbins' article shows – involves not only strictly epistemological criteria, but also ethical and political commitments. Constructing and reading historical contexts is not just a tedious task reserved for those who wish to bury their aesthetic objects of study in the supposedly neutral ground of history to avoid art's capacity to touch us in the present. Context calls for a creative and critical engagement with the work and its context – one that involves us fully as thinking and moral beings with an ideal of doing justice to the dead as well as the living.

In the two articles that follow, Ana Ashraf and Elisa Scaraggi provide readings of two types of texts that it would be difficult, perhaps even unethical, to separate from their context: witness narratives and prison writing. In her article, Scaraggi argues that political prison writing is fundamentally shaped by its original context, both in the sense that it conveys a particular personal experience decisively shaped by historical forces, but also in the sense that its form and content reflect the material conditions of production in prison. To illustrate this, Scaraggi reads *Memórias do cárcere* by Brazilian novelist Graciliano Ramos and *Papéis da prisão*, the prison memoirs, and the philological edition of the notebooks kept by Angolan writer José Luandino Vieira during his imprisonment under the Portuguese colonial regime. Both these writers tell stories of violence; but according to Scaraggi, the analytical framework of trauma studies that has so often been brought to bear on witness narratives and prison writing is insufficient to capture the full meaning of these texts.

To do this, one needs to recapture the historical context in which these texts saw the light of day as modes of personal identity construction and as ways of continuing the political struggles that got their authors imprisoned in the first place.

Ashraf's article also focuses on political violence in a global context by analysing Pakistani writer and activist Fatima Bhutto's *Songs of Blood and Sword: A Daughter's Memoir* (2010). This memoir recounts the history of her family's involvement in Pakistan's modern political history. In particular, the work commemorates her father, Mir Murtaza Bhutto, explores the circumstances of his violent death and denounces what she sees as the political motives behind it. Although Bhutto's memoir necessarily reflects the historical events it narrates as well as the personal consequences of those events for the writer, the relationship between the text and its contexts is not one of simple reflection. Instead, Ashraf argues, Bhutto makes use of various formal and stylistic strategies to persuade her reader of her version of history and thereby intervene in the immediate context of contemporary Pakistani politics.

II Interventions in context

Symptomatic reading, as presented by its critics above, involves a deterministic idea about historical context. In this perspective, history determines the work of art and literature to the degree that the true nature of their utterances can only be located outside them, hidden in the clutter of their historical situation. The relationship here is a one-way street, where political history and ideology influence art and literature, not the other way around. But such crude determinism is outdated. Art and literature are not only shaped by their historical context – a context which is already a construction – but also in their turn intervene in and shape their historical situation. This idea has been repeated so often since the debates between Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Adorno and Benjamin in the 1930s that it has almost become a truism. But the way in which this dynamic relationship between text and context can best be grasped and converted into analytical practice remains open to contention. This section of the book presents three different approaches to ways in which literature and film can intervene in their historical contexts.

The first article in the section is Aude Defurne's 'Between the *Audienzsaal* and the bedroom: a feminist-narratological reading of female sovereignty in Caroline Auguste Fischer's *Der Günstling* (1809)'.

This article investigates how nineteenth-century German women writers engaged with questions of gender and political power in the aftermath of the French Revolution, in particular with the idea of female political sovereignty. Defurne invokes feminist narratology and Jacques Rancière's reflections on the politics of literature to tease out the political implications of Caroline Auguste Fischer's relatively neglected and ostensibly conventional epistolary novel *Der Günstling* (The Favorite). At the level of plot, the novel seems to reproduce the dismissive contemporary discourses on the political participation of women; but through a close feminist-narratological reading, Defurne argues that the political exclusion of women is challenged on the level of form.

The second article is Jakob Gaardbo Nielsen's 'Literary form and limited liability: it-narratives and the context of corporate law in the British public sphere, 1860–1880'. This article discusses the relationship between corporate law and literary fiction in the context of late Victorian finance. It takes as its point of departure Laurence Oliphant's 1876 short story, 'Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company (Limited)'. This often overlooked piece of writing builds on the tradition of it-narratives to tell a story of corporate misconduct from the perspective of a joint-stock company. Oliphant's text responds to cultural anxieties about joint-stock companies, limited liability and financial capital in a way that uniquely combines narrative, paratextual and contextual form. The generic and narrative structure of the text is thus modelled on the form and *modus operandi* of the joint-stock company. With reference to Caroline Levine's *Form: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Levine 2015), the article argues that an expanded definition of form can help reorient and qualify the role of context in literary studies of finance.

Defurne and Gaardbo Nielsen's articles share two features related to context that illustrate wider tendencies in contemporary literary historical studies. One is their focus on literary form as a mediator of the text/context relationship. Defurne draws on Rancière for her theoretical inspiration; while Gaardbo Nielsen draws on Levine (who references Rancière as a source of inspiration), one of the exponents of neoformalism. The point in both cases is that the formal properties of literature are not only (as believed traditionally) the mark of its autonomy – that which makes it into art and not some other kind of writing – but also the place of its heteronomy, the point of its connection to the historical forms of social life. In effect, these articles show, it is precisely the simultaneous creative freedom from and inscription in the forms of social life that gives the texts in question the ability to not only reflect but also intervene in their historical context.

The other shared feature is that the articles both study marginalised literature, pieces of writing that would formerly have been relegated to being part of the historical context for canonical works from their period. This signals that the relationship between text and context, foreground and background, canon and archive is dynamic and historically mutable, and that this dynamic is a vital part of the life of our disciplines. It also illustrates a more general tendency in recent years to delve into what Margaret Cohen in *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Cohen 1999, 23) termed 'the great unread'. In her article in the special issue of *Representations* on 'surface reading' mentioned earlier, Cohen provides us with an excellent example of how paying attention to 'forgotten literary forms' (Cohen 2009, 51), neglected popular genres and dated forms of literature can fundamentally alter our perception of canonical works like Joseph Conrad's novels by reconnecting them to their original literary and historical context of obsolete seafaring manuals and adventure novels. This reattachment gives us, in her view, 'a somewhat different account of this [Conrad's] modernism than that usually given by Marxian literary history and symptomatic reading specifically' (Cohen 2009, 68). Moving texts or works of art from the archive to the canon, in these cases, highlights the fact that the theoretical artifice separating canon and archive in different periods and contexts is often in itself a historicising claim – one that remains open to questioning or falsification, and one that resists dualisms such as 'form' and 'content'.

The third article in this section continues this preoccupation with form, but applies it to film and the context of globally circulating political terms in the twenty-first century. In 'Homeland(s) in comparison: contexts of reterritorialisation', Susana Araújo explores ideas of context by dwelling on a specific term that has re-emerged in contemporary political culture in different geopolitical settings – the word 'homeland'. Her article investigates changes in the recent re-employment of the term, and reveals how these adjustments reinforce, change and expand its original connotations and how they have gained particular currency after 9/11. Araújo goes on to give a comparative analysis of two recent contexts in which the word 'homeland' came to the fore: the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in the United States, and the discussion of 'EU territory' in the European Union. The article concludes by examining Michael Haneke's film, *Hidden* (Caché, 2005). By linking the 'War on Terror' with the history of terror that shaped the European colonial legacy, the film invites viewers to interrogate the ongoing circulation of securitarian definitions of 'homeland' across the Atlantic. The concept of 'homeland', Araújo concludes, has come to dissociate

ideas of 'home' and 'land' from their historical and political specificity, thus reorienting the ways in which notions of hospitality and citizenship are perceived globally. Araújo's article thus highlights, once again, the bilateral logic of how aesthetic objects, even single words, are entangled in the discursive landscape from which they gain meaning and significance, and how they exert influence on that context in turn.

III New contexts

We rarely leave works of art alone, and art tends to return the favour. Throughout history, political, economic and technological changes have gradually (or suddenly) changed the relationship between artworks and their context, developed new criteria for attributing authorship and valuation, and shifted the productive agency of creation to and fro between collectives and individuals. Emergent art forms and changing aesthetic paradigms periodically introduce new contextual relationships to audiences, places and institutions. The rise of the novel, for example, has been linked partly to a gradual reduction in paper and printing costs in the eighteenth century (Watt 1993, 35–37, 41), much in the same way that Elizabethan theatre enjoyed a popularity that arose partly from affordable admission prices. In the twenty-first century, digital technology has carried art and literature into global networks and diffusive information systems and opened new avenues of aesthetic experimentation with augmented or virtual reality constructs. Podcasting has created new global networks for disseminating narratives and knowledge in genres that blur the line between factual and fictional discourses, while contemporary conceptual art and participatory sound art, often in public installations, challenge the boundary between production and reception. Straining the vocabulary of traditional criticism, such technological acceleration calls for methodological innovation, and the recent surge of interest in new or alternative ways of contextualising art seems to owe its existence, at least in part, to a technologically occasioned change in the way we think about art and literature as historically and politically situated cultural artefacts. In this section of the book, the first three articles illustrate how various new technologies and epistemologies of artistic production pose a challenge to existing distinctions between work and context, while the final article discusses the implications of the advent of new computational methods for the question of context.

The first article in this section is Oliver Klaassen's 'Swimming against the hetero- and homonormative tide: a queer reading of Wolfgang

Tillmans' photo installation (2004–2009) in the Panorama Bar at Berlin's Berghain'. Klaassen's article deals with the problem of meaningfully analysing context-specific artworks, i.e. works of art that can only be experienced and understood 'in their place', in this case a popular Berlin nightclub. Because of the formal features and physical installation, Tillmans' camera-less photographs and their juxtaposition with queer iconography in the club, Klaassen argues, mediate a heterotopic playground – one that, in turn, resists traditional form/content binaries, because the bodily presence of the audience is built into its form. The work *is* its own context. Starting from queer art studies and its critique of identity and visibility politics, Klaassen's article sets out to discuss the extent to which (and how) the photo installation intervenes in normative discourses of sexuality, gender, and desire. In the subcultural context of the techno and rave club culture, Tillmans' ambiguous installation becomes political in the sense that it allows norms of visibility to be negotiated in ways that elude hetero- and homonormative modes of representation. In this way, Klaassen argues in favor of paying greater attention to physical context in the study of the subcultural politics and ideologies of gender.

Moving into contemporary experimental theatre, the second article continues the focus on physical presence in modern audiovisual art practice. In 'Performative contexts in contemporary theatre: towards the emancipation of the relational sphere', Belén Tortosa Pujante analyses how two contemporary plays actively collapse the distinction between context, artist and audience and discusses the methodological implications of this for contemporary theatre history. Starting with an overview of the 'performative turn' in contemporary theatre, Tortosa Pujante engages with recent work by Erika Fischer-Lichte and Jacques Rancière in asking what context is 'from a performative point of view' and how plays that 'cannot be separated from their context' should be analysed. She analyses two plays that variously highlight the role of context in contemporary theatre studies, *El triunfo de la libertad* (2014) by La Ribot, Juan Domínguez and Juan Loriente, and *The Quiet Volume* (2010) by Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells. Tortosa Pujante argues that these works and others like them explore 'new ways of interacting with each other and the world' in order to resist the traditional aesthetics of the 'society of spectacle'. The spectators and the physical context of the plays thus become 'the actual dramatic events'. Therefore, she concludes, experimental contemporary plays are no longer 'locked inside the realm of their own aura', but are free to explore and deconstruct their own contextuality, the role of their audience, and the 'relational context of the event'.

Klaassen and Tortosa Pujante's articles thus throw our most prevalent notions of context into the deep end of contemporary multimedia art forms, showing what happens to the theoretical framework of contextualisation when the physical setting of the works in question becomes a *formal* component of artistic expression. In some cases, artworks function only as such within the parameters set forth by their installation in a certain physical location with its own cultural and historical specificity; whereas in other cases, the artwork itself is more a set of curated procedures or actions that manifest themselves only in transient contexts than a self-contained object. In any case, technology and the rise of global capitalism have transformed the conditions for artistic production and aesthetic interpretation, and increasingly highlighted the potential of contemporary art and literature to create their own ephemeral contexts and to challenge the ability of the reader or viewer to interpret them in a traditional sense.

The third article in this section, Ana Calvete's 'I object to your position: hyperreal decontextualising of objects', engages philosophically with the context problem, showing how postmodernity as a historical era seems more generally to have loosened the relation between work and context and changed the conditions that allow cultural objects to appear as such to consumers. Echoing Walter Benjamin's argument that 'the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition' in 'Work of Art' (Benjamin 2010, 1054), Calvete asks how interpretative practices are affected by hyperreality, the late-capitalist aesthetic condition that Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard defined as a 'simulated reality deprived of origin', which then masquerades as authentic. Starting with an analysis of Umberto Eco's description of this condition in *Travels in Hyperreality*, Calvete examines the impact of hyperreal decontextualisation of objects on the theory and methodology of aesthetic interpretation, noting how notions of authenticity, origin and physical contextuality are challenged by the latent tendency in capitalist society to replace originality with accumulation, thus effectually dislodging objects from cultural and historical specificity. How should we analyse and understand objects that do not properly 'belong' anywhere, even while they remain saturated with meaning from their surroundings? Working with theories by Baudrillard, Foucault and Deleuze, Calvete argues that Eco's text anticipates the contemporary methodological schism regarding context in literary and cultural studies, and that the condition of hyperreality, in theme parks, museums or elsewhere, creates a condition that discourages creative interpretation when this is exactly what is most necessary.

Technological changes not only affect the conditions of artistic and literary production and interpretation, but also make it possible to use new methods of studying works of art and literature and (re)constructing their historical contexts. In the past twenty years, burgeoning fields such as digital humanities and cultural analytics have developed new ways of analysing large corpuses of data and text with quantitative methods. The work of Franco Moretti, Frank Fischer, Ted Underwood and others has pioneered computational research into fields ranging from 'the great unread' to contemporary social media and visual culture in the age of machine learning and Instagram. While computational criticism poses as many methodological problems as it solves, particularly in relation to context, it has become a provocative and influential interlocutor in literary and cultural studies today. Computational analyses of large segments of data have the potential to reconstruct much larger contexts around a work of literature or an aesthetic practice, but also operate with a large margin of error compared to the classical formalist close reading to which some critics today urge us to return, as well as requiring additional layers of contextual analysis in order to qualify what exactly the numbers tell us about a certain context.

In the fourth article in this section and the final one in the book, 'From data to actual context', Mads Rosendahl Thomsen surveys different approaches to computational analysis in literary studies and reflects on its significance with regard to the methodological and theoretical question of context. Thomsen sets out by discussing how the data richness of the twenty-first century has changed general ideas about culture and opened new areas of research and continues to survey examples from recent research that have furthered the contextual understanding of art in literature through computational approaches. New quantitative methods for analysing the historically variable distinction between canon and archive, the usefulness of trend lines in conceptual history, and the explosion of available data concerning the circulation of literature are, Thomsen argues, hard to ignore when dealing with a particular subject, even if their usefulness remains contingent on qualitative analysis and extensive contextualisation.

As early as the 1940s, Walter Benjamin emblematically described any historical 'document of culture' as a 'document of barbarism', hinting at the obscuration of the 'anonymous toil' of the people and institutions exerting hidden influences around the 'geniuses' who are credited as the creators of cultural artefacts (Benjamin 1992, VII). Benjamin's historical materialism builds on a reparatory impetus, a desire to do justice to material and social contexts, even if the discipline's condition

of possibility is the failure of that compensation. *Objects* of culture, as Benjamin concluded, never fail to disrupt the *concept* of culture (Caygill 2004, 94). This seems to be as true today as it was in Benjamin's time. The question of context has not been resolved by any means and the thematic breadth and theoretical diversity of the articles in this book indicate that it is not likely to be resolved any time soon. Whether it is rejected as a violation of aesthetic specificity or lauded as its final condition of possibility, or nested somewhere in-between the two, the context of a work of art or literary text is likely to remain at the heart of literary or cultural research questions in the future.

Note

1 For introductions to these movements and some of their main exponents, see for instance Joughin and Malpas (2003), Anker and Felski (2008, 2011, 2015), Levinson (2007), and Levine (2015). See also North (2017).

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Part I
Contexts of production

1
Cosmopolitanism and the historical/contextual paradigm

Bruce Robbins

I take the phrase 'the historicist/contextualist paradigm' from Joseph North's new book, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (North 2017). North is one of a number of recent scholars who are impatient with this paradigm – impatient with hearing, in North's words, 'what the text has to teach us about histories and cultures' – and who are looking for ways of breaking out of it. North lists, as one way of breaking out of it, the emergence of world literature as a new disciplinary formation working in a new and enlarged temporal scale. World literature has been willing to link texts that are widely separated not just in space, but also in time, and this means that criticism's usual choice of context, the local context of a particular period, becomes less decisive for any given act of interpretation, and may even be totally irrelevant. In leading with the term 'cosmopolitanism', which I understand as a moral and political engagement with the world, or rather with the worldliness of the world, I was trying to signal my disagreement with this line of argument – with world literature as an escape from historical context. My main focus here will be on answering the question of what kind of world history world literature needs, the assumption being that it does need one, and not the one (such as it is) that it already has. But I will also want to say some more about North's book and about controversies over context that are not specifically about world literature.

In the days when world literature began with the ancient Greeks and bounded forward athletically across the centuries from (Western) masterpiece to (Western) masterpiece, it was taken for granted that the field did not need world history at all. History in almost any extra-literary sense would have been an inconvenience. Great writers were assumed to

sit on figurative mountain tops communing by unspecified means with other great writers on other distant peaks. To have insisted that each masterpiece must be understood in terms of the ordinary life of its time, conducted as that life was far below (in more than one sense) on the farms and battlefields, in the streets and workshops and bedrooms, would have undercut the field's unspoken premise: that literary greatness, defined by transcending time and space, makes its own history by addressing eternal human themes and dilemmas – that it *is* its own history. Pedagogically speaking, it makes sense that in so-called 'Great Books' courses, much class time has never been devoted to context.

How much has changed?

The new world literature, which has shifted away from the field's old centre in Europe and therefore also away from its old origin in classical Greece, has done so in large part because of its sensitivity to its own historical context, which is of course postcolonial and highly suspicious of Eurocentrism. That sensitivity makes its way into its self-presentation. *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* (Damrosch et al. 2004), for example, of which I am one of the authors, declares in the general introduction to its first volume: 'One important way to understand literary works in context is to read them in conjunction with the broader social and artistic culture in which they were created' (Vol 1, xxi). One notices, however, that while the anthology is enthusiastic in its pursuit of transnational comparisons and the displaying of global connections and cross-currents, here the 'broader social and artistic context' offered is strictly local. What counts as context is only the society in which a given work was created. Actually, it is more the *culture* than the society. This is a context that any traditional history could have provided. One thing that is *not* meant by history here is the new scale or kind of context that might help explain, say, where the global cross-currents and connections come from, what significance they have, for whom, and so on – the issues raised in particular by historians working over the past two decades to create what is sometimes called global or world history.

It is theoretically possible, of course, that the new world literature has no real need for the new world history. That would follow from the assumption that literature by its nature enjoys considerable or even absolute autonomy from history. If the field's practitioners believe, say, that literature is sufficiently autonomous of history so as to make historical contextualisation seem like a category mistake, then perhaps,

so the argument would go, the new world literature should continue to resist contextualisation in much the same way that the old world literature did. This line of reasoning would make sense of some of the Longman's preliminary contextual materials. If 'ancient writing is urban in origin' (1), it says on page 1 of volume 1, even if 'the great majority of all people in antiquity were engaged in growing crops and raising livestock', then in a sense the point has already been made. How the majority of people make a living is something that can be safely ignored; it has nothing useful to tell us about writing, and the history of writing that will follow. From the first page, literature therefore disengages from how livings are made. Like pastoral, the first genre mentioned, literature may gesture back across the divide, but we are reminded that in pastoral it's not shepherds who are doing the writing. The genre of pastoral has never been a genuine expression of material life. In this sense pastoral seems to stand for literature in general.

The reader of the Longman is then informed that creation myths, the first genre of which textual examples are given, tend to see their own age as 'modern' and as 'sundered in basic ways from an earlier age when gods and goddesses walked the earth, people lived to great ages or never died, cities were not yet established, and humans and animals lived together on different terms' (11). In this sense, the volume proposes, *all* ages are modern. If all ages are modern, if that is the premise of the new world literature, or to the extent that it is, it makes sense that, like the old Western masterpieces format, the new format too will resist at least a portion of the new world history – specifically, that portion that takes the modern as a real and significant break in values and attitudes and, depending on how one interprets that break, perhaps even as cultural progress. The Longman takes modernity as a construct or periodising fiction; it sees all period designations as fundamentally arbitrary. To reject these assumptions, insisting that modernity is real, anchored in material reality, and perhaps in some ways (one says this with hesitation) even morally and materially superior to the past, would be to open up a possibly subversive conversation about the benefit for modern readers of reading pre-modern texts. This is a conversation that literary criticism has never been eager to host.

The danger that what used to be called a 'modernisation' narrative will subvert the whole literary-critical enterprise is right up front in Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (Pinker 2011). In his first chapter, Pinker offers a selective survey of the old world-literature canon beginning with Homer and the Bible, in each case highlighting 'the depravity of our ancestors' way of life' (1).

The depravity centres on violence: it involves divinely sanctioned or officially legitimised slaughter, pillage, rape, and other forms of mass cruelty, cruelty that even ingenious readers would be hard pressed to claim is questioned in any fundamental way by the texts themselves. The ethnic cleansing visited upon the Midianites in the Bible is one example. Another is the Homeric exchange of women as sexual booty. It is easy to pick holes in Pinker's metanarrative of progress away from violence. It is less easy to know how to teach these texts if one does not decide to suspend one's natural ethical concern, today, with the inflicting and suffering of violence. I suspect that Pinker's book is not often taught in world literature classes. Perhaps it should be. The conversation might be about whether there is a history we can't do without, and perhaps also about the history we have without acknowledging we have it. It's a conversation worth having.

A second reason for assuming that world literature might have no need of world history is the further assumption that what the field is doing now, in its anti-Eurocentric moment, that it was not doing before is simply letting a hundred literary flowers bloom. Allowing for diversity of cultural self-expression, especially self-expression coming from outside Europe, is something so self-evidently desirable that no further justification seems called for. Indeed, from the moment when one rejects the concept of modernity as merely a periodising fiction, diversity comes to seem like its own justification. For some time now that has been the widespread public view, however self-contradictory it may prove on private inspection: modernity is a self-flattering European construct that unjustly consigns non-European cultures to backwardness and that therefore must be jettisoned in order for those cultures to be permitted to express themselves as equals. Jettisoning modernity is a shortcut to cultural equality, and that is an unquestionable good.

It *is* a good. But perhaps it is also a historical narrative. The achievement of greater diversity could of course be seen as progress, if somewhat disguised: a narrative of the increasing democratisation of cultural expression. And one speculates that it is in fact the version of world history – thin, culturalist, and heavily weighted towards the present, but a historical narrative nonetheless – to which practitioners of world literature may be most instinctively attracted. But it does not seem to have been embraced as an explicit version of history.

Ironically, literary critics who reach out to the new world history often seem to do so in the belief that they can thereby escape from history altogether. In *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time*, for example, Susan Stanford Friedman references a number

of historians, including André Gunder Frank, William H. McNeill and the team of Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, in making an argument in favour of breaking 'away from periodization altogether' (Friedman 2015, 7). What these historians tell us, as she reads them, is that there has been a world system for many millennia, in Asia as well as the West, and therefore it makes no sense to organise a history around, say, the putatively recent rise of unequal core-periphery relations. Modernity is a recurrent phenomenon. It is defined by nothing more than moments of accelerated change. It too has happened outside as well as inside Europe. The idea that, thanks to a unique evolutionary trajectory, the West became even for a time the exclusive possessor of modernity has always been a myth, Friedman argues, though a myth that has found support in the everyday infrastructure of Eurocentric concepts, including the concept of periodisation itself. In Friedman's view, periodisation must go.

I'm not sure that this slogan accurately reflects the new world history or indeed that the new world history can be lumped together in this way as a single entity. Just as different literary critics have their different takes on world literature, so different historians have their different takes on world history. Laura Doyle calls on literary critics to 'incorporate the new historical scholarship on early world systems and states' (Doyle 2015, 336), as if this scholarship possessed a collective unity and, accordingly, an unquestionable authority, so that the only thing for literary critics to do with it is to 'incorporate' it. None of this goes without saying. It might be preferable, therefore, to begin taking a closer look at the particular histories on offer and to evaluate them critically rather than citing them as authorities who must be obeyed. In any event, we certainly do not gain anything if we announce our rejection of triumphalist Eurocentric narrative, congratulate ourselves on a job well done, and stop there, proud to have demonstrated, say, how much change came from outside rather than inside Europe or simply that things were more diverse, complicated, and heterogeneous in pre-modernity than we used to think. As an answer, 'it's more complicated' is always right and therefore always extremely inadequate. The next step, and it is a very necessary one, is to consider with a critical eye what has taken the place of that triumphalism or is being proposed to fill the gap. As with the subterranean narrative of cultural democratisation that, as I suggest, is secreted within much allegiance to diversity, it seems likely that the refusal of triumphalist metanarrative or of narrative as such will often replace these with other narratives, just as problematic and perhaps even just as triumphalist. These other narratives will not

appear to require or elicit critical concern because they do not seem to claim European centrality, superiority, or exceptionality, or simply because they are still invisible.

Resisting one particular historical context, which is usually what is happening when one says no to historical context as such, does not preclude a disguised embrace of another historical context, one that perhaps doesn't look like historical context at all and therefore can pass without scrutiny. Consider Alexander Beecroft's summary of the relation between world literature and empire:

> The prestige of Akkadian and Greek as literary languages in the eastern Mediterranean so long outlives the conquests of Sargon and Alexander as to undermine the role of political hegemony in establishing that prestige, while the enduring and complex status of Chinese literature in Japan, Korea and Vietnam, like that of Persian literature at the Mughal and Ottoman courts, can again hardly be explained in terms of conquest, colonization or trade alone. The cultural prestige of Latin in the European Middle Ages likewise has little to do with imperial power (Beecroft 2008, 95).

Here Beecroft, inspired by Sheldon Pollock on the Sanskrit cosmopolis, is both making a valuable observation about several world literatures and also, for better or worse, reproducing an ideological tenet of literary criticism as a discipline: that literature enjoys a certain independence from the societies in which it happens to emerge or be received, not total of course but nonetheless decisive, and that what it conveys (to put this crudely) cannot be reduced, therefore, to the time-bound values of those societies, for example violent and anti-egalitarian values.

This looks like the same freedom from historical contextualisation that would result, without all the research that went into Beecroft's elegant ecological classification of scales and his account of world empires in particular, merely from adopting the standard view of literature as decisively if incompletely autonomous. But it's not hard to see another historical narrative peeking out from behind it. The empire is the historical context Beecroft is discussing. Is literature equally insubordinate when it is created and received not in empires but in modern nation states? Or does Beecroft think literature's remarkable independence from material power holds true only when the society around it *is* an empire? If literature is less independent from power when it inhabits the modern nation state than it is under an empire, as one might conjecture, though the point is not made explicitly, then in fact

we seem to have a history here after all – one in which literature, proudly independent when nurtured by pre-modern empire, fatally succumbs to the characteristic historical context of modernity: the nation state. In other words, the nation state serves in modern times as the vehicle for 'political hegemony' that literature had miraculously avoided succumbing to before. Here world literature is in fact generating a world history for itself: a narrative of decline into modernity, or modernity as decline.

If we were to replace a narrative of progress with a narrative of decline, would we gain by the substitution? I don't see how. One is not more open-minded or open-ended than the other. I note, however, that the nation state is not the terminus for Beecroft. He leaves open the enticing possibility that today's 'global literature', arising on the far side of the nation state, will reproduce the same freedom from 'political hegemony' that literature enjoyed under pre-modern empire. The narratively pleasing *peripeteia* may not be verifiable or even plausible history, but it does have the effect of enabling neo-medievalism, with its regression from secular to religious values and its backhanded rationale for the value of the canon, to seem both up to date and trendily transnational.

It may be that the only world history world literature wants is one that reinforces its sense of literature's autonomy from the social, economic, political and military structures around it – its autonomy from context as such. I hope not. This is why. To make literature autonomous of context is to make literature seem innocent while making all social structures seem irredeemably guilty. The effect is to make social structures seem incapable of performing any positive service for humanity; it is to make those structures seem unworthy of investing ourselves in. In that case, all human efforts that have gone into changing these structures for the better would of course have been wasted. And the moral would be not to waste any more effort on them. Don't act on the world; instead, spend your time innocently reading and writing. Reading and writing are excellent activities, but we should not make the case for them by denigrating all others. The history implicit here is pleasantly self-serving for literary critics and impossibly bleak for everyone else. Does the field really want it? Whatever we think we want, what the field *needs* is a history that makes our work more intimate with the work of others – in other words, one that rejects or compromises literature's autonomy. It is the compromises with and contaminations by historical context that demonstrate why people who are themselves structurally constrained, contaminated, and compromised by the contexts in which they live should care about literature in the first place

– why they should think literature can understand *them*. Otherwise, why bother? But that is an argument for another place.

The case for literary autonomy that underlies Beecroft's ambitious and indeed unrivalled synthesis has its true centre in the nation state. It seems worth generalising this logic to world literature as a whole, at least as a hypothesis: it is the context of the nation state that organises the field, but it organises the field *negatively*. What world literature generally seeks and what it generally values is anything and everything that is *not* the nation state. The rule seems to function equally well in time and in space: literature that crosses national borders today has the same presumptive virtue of worldliness as literature that emerged before national borders in the modern sense had come into existence. This virtue of course depends on the assumption that the nation state is, if not evil, then some secular equivalent of evil. Why else would the avoidance of nationality be instinctively accepted as a precious commodity?

Wai Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*, a valuable meditation of the expanded temporal dimension of literary studies, spells out the link between special pleading for literary autonomy, on the one hand, and a special animus against the nation state, on the other:

> Literature is the home of nonstandard space and time. Against the official borders of the nation and against the fixed intervals of the clock, what flourishes here is irregular duration and extension, some extending for thousands of years or thousands of miles, each occasioned by a different tie and varying with that tie, and each loosening up the chronology and geography of the nation (Dimock 2008, 4).

Nothing is said about why we should prefer to have the chronology and geography looser rather than tighter.

There is more of an explanation in Jane Burbank and Fredrick Cooper's *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, which offers a rationale for the new world history's impulse to revalue empires, typical inhabitants of Dimock's looser and deeper time, over modern nation states: 'the nation-state tends to homogenize those within inside its borders and exclude those who do not belong, while the empire reaches outward and draws, usually coercively, peoples whose difference is made explicit under its rule. The concept of empire presumes that different peoples within the polity will be governed differently' (Burbank

and Cooper 2010, 8). What is distinctive about empire, in other words, is that it accepts diversity as its very substance, not as an anomaly that must be rejected, and therefore finds ways of managing that diversity. Burbank and Cooper are trying to get away, as they write, from 'the usual – and we think misleading – shorthands and signposts: a transition from empire to nation-state, a distinction between premodern and modern states, a focus on Europe and the west as uniquely powerful agents of change, for good or for evil' (xi). To value the empire as a distinct mode of governance, for them, is to avoid Eurocentrism. Unfortunately, it is also to take the focus off imperial violence. As in the passage above, Burbank and Cooper know that empires cannot be made or sustained without violence. 'Empires, of course, hardly represented a spontaneous embrace of diversity. Violence and day-to-day coercion,' they recognise, 'were fundamental to how empires were built and how they operated' (2). But that is not their emphasis: 'as successful empires turned their conquests into profit, they had to manage their unlike populations, in the process producing a variety of ways to both exploit and rule' (2). Yes, there is both exploitation and coercion, but their real point, looking forward to the present, is successful management of difference.

In effect, this history is based on an ethical contrast between empires and nation states in which empires are assigned the moral high ground: they embrace heterogeneity, whereas nation states insist on homogeneity. It's a fascinating and valuable argument. But to be responsible about the ethical contrast, one would have to pursue it further. For example, by comparing their characteristic recourse to and need for violence. Burbank and Cooper don't appear to concede that nation states, however much violence they may be guilty of, are not *forced* to use violence by their very principle of being. For empires, on the other hand, they admit that violence is constitutive; the law of survival of the empire is expansion. Is it irrelevant that, though the nation state excludes, by their own admission it need not exploit, enslave, or massacre those it excludes, as empires do? Isn't it at least worth fleshing out the implicit comparison between the ethics of the two social units and weighing up the pros as well as the cons?

Some readers who are drawn to world literature have no doubt lost patience with the sanguinary aesthetic of postcolonial studies, which of course makes frequent and not always instructive use of the violence and suffering involved in modern European imperialism. Still, this is not a sufficient reason for neglecting the violence of either pre-modern or non-European empire-building. I note, for example, the relative absence

of piled-up corpses and burned and pillaged cities from Susan Stanford Friedman's programmatically non-Eurocentric account of world history. Talking about the Mongol Empire with only the barest mention of massacre is like talking about *Lady Chatterley's Lover* without the sex. The closest Friedman comes to a statement on imperial coercion is as follows: 'empires typically intensify the rate of rupture and accelerate change in ways that are both dystopic and utopic' (337). What she calls 'brutalities' (337) can of course be recognised, but only as a general phenomenon that 1) is balanced in advance by the 'utopic' aspects of empire and, in part for that reason, 2) is not especially interesting or worthy of being investigated.

Friedman's case against periods is a case against the single violent rupture by which modernity has heretofore been defined. It can also be seen as a case against violence as such. The assumption seems to be that to pay too much attention to bloodshed can only be provincial, the result of an uncritical embrace of values like democracy and human rights that seem to be universal but in fact are centred in the West and in the present. But this assumption is highly questionable. Surely there are less provincial, more polyphonic grounds for attending to the large role violence plays in so much world history and in so much world literature. Whitewashing history by leaving its violence out is not the only alternative.

The anti-periodisation argument is also incoherent in its own terms. Friedman tells us that there are multiple modernities, each of them a moment of accelerated technological and social change. If so, doesn't each of her modernities transmit exactly the same disrespectful or denigrating message to its own 'before' that Friedman finds unacceptable when transmitted to non-Western befores by the West's modern 'after'? Wouldn't each moment that was *not* designated modern have exactly the same grounds for complaint, grounds for complaint that Friedman otherwise accepts as legitimate? Pluralising the problem of modernity doesn't solve it. If Friedman wants to defend the existence of multiple modernities, she is committed by definition to positing the existence of multiple traditions. But each tradition would have the same right to demand a better grade – that is, a grade higher on the scale of modernity – that she acknowledges in relation to countries and cultures. No matter how many modernities you posit, there will be a tradition it is defined against, and that tradition's feelings are going to be hurt. Everyone cannot always be above average.

Modernity, supposed to be the highest state achieved by human society, is generally understood as a source of cultural capital for the

West, a reason for envy on the part of those anywhere else in the world who see themselves, or feel they are seen by others, as not yet having achieved it. Friedman's argument is a grand gesture of Western self-divestment. It surrenders that prestige, or at any rate makes a good-faith effort to surrender it – one might argue that the gesture itself can't help but retain some of the prestige it tries to push away. In my own view, it is better to ignore everyone's feelings, whether hurt (tradition) or puffed up with false pride (modern) and instead try as hard as possible to ascertain *what has actually happened* in history, for better or for worse.

The premise that modernity has always existed reposes, Friedman says, on historian André Gunder Frank's hypothesis that there has always been a world system – 'always' meaning for 5000 years. No one disputes that there has always been some degree of commercial and cultural connection across borders. But how much? If you want to describe these interactions as instances of modernity, as Sebastian Conrad argues in *What Is Global History?*, you have to show that their effects went deep – that there are not just connections, but genuine *integration* (Conrad 2016). It is true that Periclean Athens imported much of its grain from the tribes north of the Black Sea. It is very uncertain, on the other hand, that this commercial exchange produced significant cultural impact on either population. One of Friedman's examples of modernity is the Tang and Song dynasties in China between 618 and 1279 CE. Socially and culturally this was clearly a period of great dynamism. But what proportion of the inhabitants would have been affected by it? What percentage of the Chinese population would have been literate during those 600 years? Let's suppose it was somewhere between 5 and 10 per cent (1 and 2 per cent for women). In Europe, the 500 years from 1500 to 2000 saw a precipitous rise from somewhere between 10 and 20 per cent literacy in around 1500 to nearly 100 per cent today. If the term 'modernity' is not to be so broad as to be useless, it must refer to this sort of change: a wholesale transformation of society from top to bottom. There is no disrespect to the social, cultural, and technological innovations of any other time or place to say that otherwise the term modernity no longer makes any sense.

Does a properly non-Eurocentric world history have to proceed without reference to modernity as a reality or to breaks of similar magnitude? This is by no means the assumption made by all practitioners of the new world history. 'I focus on population growth', David Christian writes in *Maps of Time*, 'in the hope that a successful explanation of the astonishing population growth of modern times may also help to make clear many other aspects of modernity' (Christian 2004, 362). Like its

astonishing population growth, modernity does indeed have other aspects for Christian:

> It is important to remember that even in the seventeenth century, just 300 years ago, state systems controlled no more than one-third of the lands incorporated within states in the twenty-first century. Even if they had come to dominate networks of exchange throughout the world and include most of the world's population, they never *controlled* the world in the way of modern capitalist states (304).

The fact that there are firmly established characteristics of modernity, like a more intensive and intrusive mode of rule or for that matter rule that requires legitimation, takes nothing away from Christian's (Malthusian) model of recurrent or non-linear change: populations outrunning the available resources, as for the Mayans or on Easter Island.

Why should literary scholars need to deny that ruptures in history can be as real as populations outrunning their resources? We seem to have no trouble accepting the linearity of history when the subject on the table is climate change, whether conceived as a resource problem or not, or when we discuss other sorts of environmental damage. But if linearity is acceptable in the case of climate change, surely one of the most important contexts for the understanding of literature and art in our own time, why reject linearity elsewhere? Unlike Friedman, Dimock, Doyle, and others, many of the new world historians not only embrace periodisation but provide it with a solid material basis. For Christian, a good deal of history's epoch-making bloodshed has occurred at the fault line between populations utilising resources differently, like pastoralists and agriculturalists. Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* follows a series of revolutionary ruptures and is confident, as Christian is, that they happened because they corresponded to a history of violence (Harari 2015). For Harari, the determining gift that language bestows on humankind is a vastly multiplied capacity to commit violence, initially in arranging the extinction of other species and then, of course, against other humans. Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (Beckert 2014) is animated by a desire to show how modern capitalism continued to depend on violence and coercion, but also by some doubt as to whether that dependence could ever be overcome. The fact that some of the global historians, like Jared Diamond, prefer an explanatory scheme centred on disease (Diamond 2005), which is to say on *unintentional* violence, does not disqualify the

method but merely underlines, for the present at least, the persistence of controversy within the field about the causal significance of organised violence.

Over and over, the critique of Eurocentrism serves as an excuse for evading the particular context of coercion, for marginalising concepts like power and domination. Some world historians are apparently prepared to see these concepts as provincially presentist and Western – in other words, concerns that are merely masquerading as universals, even when they are invoked against the misconduct of the West. Unlike those who focus on 'dominance', Patrick Manning writes in *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past*, he prefers to look for 'system':

> I find more interesting and more representative the tales of more complex interactions. Even for stories of popular culture in our own century, I prefer versions that stress the interplay of musicians in the Caribbean, Central Africa, and South Asia with those in Paris, London, and Los Angeles, rather than assume that a US-based juggernaut of MTV is carrying all before it (Manning 2003, xi).

The example is not neutral, of course. It usefully reminds us of non-Western origins for important zones of Western culture, thereby reversing the old assumption that influence flowed uni-directionally from the European centre to the non-European periphery. But notice how, in so doing, it also dissolves anyone's dominance over anyone else by speaking of 'interplay' and 'complex interactions' in which no one seems to lose and perhaps everyone can be assumed to win. What 'system' means to Manning is interconnection *without power* (xi).

Fortunately, a younger generation of world or global historians (there is some uncertainty as to the terminology) seems to be saying no to this laundering of history so that contexts of power and domination are washed away. In *What Is Global History?*, Sebastian Conrad argues that the field has been too caught up in making 'token gestures towards connectivity' and needs to pay more attention to what he calls integration (Conrad 2016, 6). This means that the 'infatuation with connectivity' (6), with exchanges and networks as such, has to give way to the study of exchanges that were 'regular and sustained, and thus able to shape society in profound ways' (9). Conrad is emphatic: most exchanges and networks, including those that both historians and literary critics are spending much time on, did *not* shape society in profound ways. The key to global history is not merely 'interactions' (67) but 'structured

transformations on a global level' (62). 'A global history that aspires to more than an ecumenical and welcoming repository of happy stories of cross-border encounters […] needs to engage systematically with the issue of structured global transformations and their impact on social change' (70 –71).[1]

The fashion for talking about interactions and, in literary studies especially, about *networks*, a fashion obviously influenced by digital technology and perhaps also buoyed by a certain techo-optimism, is a way of fudging the all-important question of causality. Conrad writes:

> Usually there is little systematic reflection on what actually constitutes a network and distinguishes it from a loose sequence of contacts. How dense need the web of interactions be in order to qualify as a network? What level of consolidation and stability can be observed? What is the frequency and duration of interactions? […] Such studies do not always pay sufficient attention to the fact that networks are parts of broader power structures. The remote outpost of an empire still draws its authority from contexts that cannot be satisfactorily characterized as simple network effects: differences in military power, market-induced dependencies, or discursive structures that legitimize and shore up the hegemony. (126)

Bruno Latour, he notes, 'sees networks as operating from the bottom up' (127). Thus Latour and his followers willingly blind themselves to world-scale power that, old-fashioned as it may seem, works from the top down.

Conclusion

I want to turn in conclusion to the issue of context outside the specific area of world history – to context as a general issue, and as an issue in particular for literary studies, where Bruno Latour has had considerable influence. There is a whole chapter on context in Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (Felski 2015). The chapter takes the metaphor of the network as its alternative to contextualisation as it is popularly practised. The title of the chapter (borrowed from Bruno Latour) makes Felski's position pretty clear: 'Context Stinks!' I will not say anything more about the metaphor of the network, about which I think I've said enough already. What I'm interested in is why Felski, Latour, and their allies

dislike and distrust context so much – what context is or does that makes them so angry.

Felski's account of how historical context has been functioning goes like this: 'After a long period of historically oriented scholarship, scholars of literature are returning to aesthetics, beauty, and form. Are we not missing something crucial, they ask, when we treat works of art as nothing more than virtual symptoms of a historical moment, as moribund matter immured in the past?' (Felski 2015, 154). Virtually everything that can be wrong with a statement is wrong with this one. But most obviously this: there *was* no long period in which works of art were treated as moribund matter immured in the past. How could it have been so treated, when there is no more universally honoured principle in the profession than the principle that the literature of the past remains capable of speaking to readers in the present? I would challenge Felski to produce even one critic of any reputation at all who has in fact treated literature as 'moribund matter immured in the past'. In order to make her case, she would need not just one critic, but a *majority* of critics.

As a longtime member of the discipline, I admit I'm personally bothered by this wilful misrepresentation of its common sense. Consider, for example, as Felski does not, the old deconstructive argument that yes, of course, there is context, but who is to say where context ends? And if contexts are infinite, then of course no one context can ever be final or definitive. A similar point was made many decades ago by the historian Hayden White, who said that literary critics should not pretend that history is not as full of controversy about the past as literary criticism is (White 1978). Again, the moral is that historians cannot properly be asked to settle criticism's interpretive questions for it simply by putting a text into context. The meaning and force of context are themselves open to perpetual re-contextualisation, which is to say perpetually open to reinterpretation. It may seem strange to associate deconstruction with common sense, but that's been common sense in the discipline for a long time.

In an effort to be more sympathetic than I feel to the Latourian 'context stinks!' phenomenon, I have considered another new book, called *Critique and Postcritique*, edited by Felski and Elizabeth Anker, and in particular a very smart essay in it by Jennifer Fleissner (Fleissner 2017). Fleissner notices one important oddity about the postcritique phenomenon – one might even call it a paradox. On the one hand, the postcritique critics appeal for a return to *aesthetics*, which they see criticism as having abandoned. On the other hand, they also often appeal for a reconciliation with *science*, as when Sharon Marcus and Steven Best

try to get literary studies back to (in their words) 'objectivity, validity, and truth' (Best and Marcus 2009), or more explicitly when Heather Love calls for a return to 'description' (Love 2010). Aesthetics and science: could any two terms be more contradictory? How can postcritique be in favour of both science and aesthetics at the same time?

The answer to this question leads to a quick hypothesis about what 'context' means in literary criticism and in the cultural disciplines generally and why the recent proposal to reject it has won a small but passionate following. The answer – maybe this is obvious – is that both aesthetics and science are universalistic perspectives. Each offers judgements which are understood to be independent of time and place. In other words, they are perspectives for which *context is not significant*. At any rate, that seems one useful hypothesis: context is a relativiser, a code word for some version of historical relativism, and it is that relativism – the antithesis of universalism – that is being rejected.

This is something that could easily be missed. When Felski denounces context, she does not explain that what she wants, rather than judgements which are contextual in the sense of being socially relative or dependent on time and place, is the universal. The words 'universality' and 'universalism' are missing from the index of Felski's book. Does this mean she thinks that universality and universalism cannot be openly announced or defended? I wonder. There would seem to be a necessary and nuanced conversation that demands to be had on the subject.

Joseph North's book is also anti-context, and it too omits any mention of the universalism to which it seems committed. But it offers, so to speak, a context for the turn against context – a context for the turn to universalism. According to North, 'the historicist/contextualist paradigm' came into being in the 1960s and 1970s and as a result, roughly speaking, of the liberation movements of that period. The liberation movements – the women's liberation movement, the movement for sexual liberation, the civil rights movement, movements of national independence from colonialism and so on – were objecting to a criticism that was in the unconscious habit of pretending it had the right to speak for everyone. Women and minorities were just then making it clear that they had not been consulted, that those who were in the habit of speaking for everyone were not necessarily speaking for *them*. And, by a logic that I'm not sure was ever articulated, the social pressure women and minorities exerted on criticism in the present was little by little also applied to historical context in the past. In the literature of the past, too, it was felt that attention now had to be paid to voices that had been silenced or marginalised. This explains how 'close reading' (which

definitely did claim to speak for everyone) came to be displaced by 'the historicist/contextualist paradigm'.

There is a lovely irony, therefore, in the fact that the postcritiquers claim for themselves and for the criticism they want the virtue of humility. In their polemics, the words 'modest' and 'humble' are repeated loudly and often. But from the perspective of the 1960s and 1970s, it was the turn to context that was the real humbling of criticism, its surrender of its claim to universality. From this perspective, what postcritique really wants to retrieve is criticism's lost confidence, some would say its lost *arrogance*: the old, pre-1960s right to speak for everyone, the claim that everyone was obliged to share in its moral and aesthetic judgements. Judgements that were understood to be universal.

In saying this, I will sound as if I am 100 per cent against universalistic arrogance. I'm not – though I am definitely against arrogance that disguises itself as humility. And I do wish the postcritiquers would admit that (like certain political figures today) they are trying to roll back the accomplishments of the 1960s and 1970s, to destroy the scholarly institutions in which those accomplishments have been preserved. But as I suggested above, the universalism debate is a real, a necessary, and a multi-sided debate. One can begin on one side and then find oneself on the other. Joseph North, explaining what the historicist/contextualist paradigm means to him, says he is fed up with being told what the text has to teach us about histories and cultures, and wants to focus instead on what it has to teach us about ourselves. The implication, however unintended, is that what we are ourselves as individuals somehow exist *outside* histories and cultures. That is one unrepentantly regressive way to understand universalism. It's a note that is struck again and again by the postcritiquers. In the *Critique and Postcritique* volume, Toril Moi uses Wittgenstein to suggest that the problem is not in the world, as 'critique' suggests, but '*in me, in us*' (Moi 2017, 37). In other words, don't whine about the state of the world; change yourself. Change yourself, not the world: that is a lesson you might well hear in church. In that case there's no need to attend university. Talal Asad, who is much cited as one of postcritique's seminal thinkers, consistently speaks from the point of view of religion (Asad 2009). Critique, for him, is secular, as it was for Edward Said. For Asad, therefore, secularism is the enemy. One would have liked someone in this collection to have engaged with that argument, an especially interesting one for Americans under a president who would not have been elected without the overwhelming vote of Christian evangelicals and whose supporters routinely argue that human-caused climate change, say, is only a belief or attachment like any other.

Only one essay in the *Critique and Postcritique*_volume mentions the salient fact that Latour himself, the movement's patron saint, has recently come out as a defender of religion (Fleissner 2017).

But notice that as far as universalism is concerned, we have suddenly come full circle: what Latour is defending is not universalism, but particularism. Latour and his followers reject 'critique', as they reject 'modernity', because these terms set up standards against which such traditions and particularisms as religion can be judged. On the other hand, it is just such standards that many women and minorities are now standing up for. Recognition of their difference is not all that woman and minorities wanted in the 1960s and 1970s and recognition of difference is certainly not all they want now. After some decades of enjoying the privilege of self-representation, they have noticed that this privilege can become an obligation and a burden. For a writer, it is not always a treat to be taken as mandatorily representing your identity or the identity of your group rather than, say, producing something of independent value. Independent value, meaning value for others, value in other times and places as well as one's own. I might hesitate to call this aesthetic universalism, but there is a clear overlap here with some of what Felski and her allies seem to mean when they refer to beauty, form, and the aesthetic. The difference, at least as I would like to express it, is that this is not a position that 'context stinks!' On the contrary, it's a demand for a *larger sense* of context, a context big enough to be shared by different social groups and different times and places.

It has not always been noticed that the period in which the historicist/contextualist paradigm arose is also the period of the fall of so-called 'grand narratives', *grands récits*, metanarratives like those of enlightenment and emancipation, which Jean-François Lyotard claimed (like Latour some time later) had 'run out of steam'. In both cases, the result was the belief, to put this crudely, that the universal is dead, and now 'everything is particular'. But 'everything is particular' is an incoherent position, subject to an infinite regress in which every particular must then be broken down into still smaller particulars until finally nothing is left except, eventually, relativism about relativism itself. History, however, is not all differences; it is also composed of samenesses. In that sense, it is entirely consistent with history that literary texts should be, so to speak, transhistorical, capable of transcending their immediate context in order to make themselves heard in another context, different but also linked to it within a common narrative.

In my own opinion, universalism is back on the table because we have realised that, like Trump's 'climate change is only a theory',

relativism can be a mode of hegemony. That is what I was suggesting when, apropos of world literature, I described how respect for cultural diversity can erase the atrocities committed by non-European empires. Universalism is back on the table because, in the era of climate change, we are once again feeling the need for a shared narrative that matters to us all, despite our differences. And it is because universalism is back on the table that we now ought to be able to see the compatibility of cosmopolitanism with the historicist/contextualist paradigm – that is, to see cosmopolitanism as one context among other contexts.

Note

1 This is roughly the same point that Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori make in the introduction to their *Global Intellectual History*: the best cases for such a history 'skew toward the modern, that is, toward a period in which patterns of interconnectedness have deepened enough to be deemed global' (Moyn and Sartori 2013, 16).

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2

Witness narratives in context: analysing the political prison writings of Graciliano Ramos and José Luandino Vieira

Elisa Scaraggi

The smell of context

In her controversial book *Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski dedicates a whole chapter explaining to her readers why 'context stinks' (Felski 2015, 151–85). According to this prominent scholar, 'we are inculcated, in the name of history, into a remarkably static view of meaning, where texts are corralled amidst long-gone contexts and obsolete intertexts, incarcerated in the past, with no hope of parole' (157). Felski declares her longing for a renewed, more intimate and immediate connection with literary texts, which is supposedly denied by the widespread academic devotion to a historical approach to literature. To prove her point, Felski reduces the historicist approach to literature to a barren 'placement in the box'.[1] Although her tones are certainly provocative and her aim is to open a debate, this is a clear oversimplification of a much more complex matter. Among other things, the argument leaves aside the problem of how we should consider texts that originate from historical experiences (diaries, memoirs, biographies and autobiographies, etc.). Additionally, when incarceration and parole are not simply catchy metaphors but constitute the material bases for the construction of a literary text, is it possible – or even ethical – to overtly disregard the context?

When analysing literature produced in confinement or that concerns the experience of reclusion of a writer, context, inevitably, plays an essential role. Indeed, it would perhaps be more accurate to use the

word context in the plural because, although incarceration is always marked by violence and by the fact that it places the prisoner in a state of exception, the experience of life in prison varies according to different historical, political and geographical contexts, not to mention the natural dissimilarities among prisoners. There is no single experience of life in prison but a multiplicity of experiences. There is no one literature of confinement as such, but a multiplicity of texts and contexts.

To show how crucial context is in the textual and theoretical analysis of texts related to the experience of confinement, I would like to bring here some examples taken from *Memórias do cárcere* and *Papéis da prisão*, respectively the prison memoirs by Brazilian novelist Graciliano Ramos, and the philological edition of the notebooks kept by Angolan writer José Luandino Vieira during his imprisonment under the Portuguese colonial regime. I will examine these texts as examples of witness narratives, arguing that they should be read and interpreted considering their historical and political contexts and their material conditions of production. Before proceeding any further, I will briefly outline the contexts in which Ramos and Vieira's incarceration took place and in which their writings were realised.

Different (con)texts

Graciliano Ramos was imprisoned for eleven months between 1936 and 1937, under Getúlio Vargas' first presidency.[2] Months before his arrest, a leftist uprising – deemed pejoratively as the *Intentona Comunista* (Communist uprising) – had broken out in Rio and other cities in the north-east of the country. Vargas took advantage of the uprising, which constituted no real threat to the stability of Brazil, to further concentrate power in his hands and reinforce the authoritarian tendencies of his government, among which was the systematic incarceration of political adversaries.[3] At no point throughout his detention did the writer receive a trial, sentence or even a formal accusation. With astonishment, Ramos recalls in his memoirs how his prison life was marked from the beginning as being outside the parameters of any state of rights.

> The interrogation, the witnesses, the ordinary trial formalities did not arrive. Not a word of accusation […] Why did we not appear in any record, not even a fake one, a simulacre of justice? It would be a farce, for sure, but that would grant us a vague possibility of doing something […]. An immoral tribunal is still worth something […].

> They did not show any intention of bringing us to trial. And it was possible that we had already been sentenced and that we were serving time without knowing it. They were stripping us of all our rights, even their last traces (Ramos 2014, 65).[4]

On the contrary, José Luandino Vieira received a regular, although biased, exemplary trial. Arrested in 1961 by the Salazarist political police for his participation in the struggle for independence of Angola, Vieira spent the next twelve years in confinement, detained in prisons scattered in what was back then the collapsing Portuguese empire: a few days in Lisbon, almost three years in different prisons in Luanda and finally, eight years in the notorious Tarrafal prison camp, in Cape Vert. Vieira was imprisoned and brought to trial together with two more poets, António Jacinto and António Cardoso, both of whom were white and had links with the Marxist-oriented nationalist movement MPLA.[5] In July 1963, the military supreme court sentenced them to fourteen years in prison,[6] 'the longest sentences ever handed down to any political prisoners in Angola' (Silva 2016, 76). Only a few years before, it would have been at least unlikely that three white men should be punished so severely given that, in colonial societies such as that of Angola at the time, the harshness of punishment was a burden generally reserved to the colonised, to non-white people.[7] Nonetheless, with the war ravaging on several fronts,[8] not only was exemplary punishment considered necessary, but the repression of any dissident cultural activity was also deemed of extreme importance for the maintenance of the empire. This justified the deportation of three notable intellectuals to the territories of Cape Vert, which would guarantee their complete isolation.

It was in the remoteness of Tarrafal that Vieira wrote most of his literary works and a significant number of his notebooks.[9] On the other hand, *Memórias do cárcere* was not actually written in prison. During his time in confinement, Ramos worked on the project of a prison memoir, but eventually he was forced to throw away the notes he had kept for fear of an inspection. After his release and for the subsequent twenty years, he worked on his memoirs, published posthumously in 1953.

I have decided to work on Ramos and Vieira's prison writings for different reasons. First, in the context that I research, that of literature written in Portuguese, both authors' canonical status is well-established: not only do their works circulate widely but, ultimately, they have an influence on other writers[10] and on a whole literary system.[11] In this context, Ramos' *Memórias* is definitely a benchmark and it has fostered a critical debate on how literature is related to issues such as the portrayal

of violence, the uncertainties of memory, and the representation of the body, to name but a few.[12] Furthermore, José Luandino Vieira has traditionally been linked to prison writings, but merely because the author is known for writing his *opus magnum* in prison.[13] Although it is too early to assess its impact,[14] the publication in 2015 of *Papéis da prisão* has reopened the debate on Vieira's prison years from a completely different angle. In fact, not only does the book show how fiction written in prison is intimately interwoven with the author's life experience, but in a way, it also questions the very status of that fiction and of literary writing (Ribeiro and Vecchi 2015, 13).

My choice was additionally dictated by the fact that these two works can be placed at the ends of literary production spurred by the experience of confinement. The titles speak for themselves: whereas *Memórias* (Memoirs) evokes an established literary genre which presupposes a well-structured autobiographical narration, *Papéis* (Papers) makes us think of a collection of scattered papers which have been assembled, if not casually, at least without a systematic literary project. The books also show different handlings of temporality, as one is an account made with the hindsight of twenty years, while the other is a daily record, an eleven-year long continuum that the reader can follow day after day. One thing they have in common, apart from the prison settings, is that they establish a dialogue with history, since they originate from real-life experiences and claim to be truthful to historical facts. One could say that bearing witness to history is one of their purposes.

A paradigm of interpretation

Assuming the role of witness and leaving a written testimony can be a means by which prisoners turn from objects into subjects of their own stories. In a text on South African prison writings, Paul Gready affirms that 'prisoners write to restore a sense of self and world, to […] seek empowerment in an oppositional "power of writing" by writing against the official text of imprisonment' (Gready 1993, 489). Given the lack of alternative written sources on imprisonment, 'the writer seems compelled to assume the role of witness' (490). This implies giving one's account of the truth, thus having to grapple with the unstable boundaries between the intimacy of one's life and the complexity of history, but also between the private, the collective and the public sphere.

In the context of prison writings, as Doran Larson states, the autobiographical account necessarily shifts into public testament, as a result

of a 'turn of voice that allows the "I" of the prison text – even when not opened into an explicit "we" – to represent communities larger than the prison author […]' (Larson 2010, 145). Larson also shows how prisoners write to call upon society, denounce their suffering and connect their cells 'to the apparatuses of power that turn to prisons as a primary means of establishing order' (ibid.). Behind this kind of writing, both Larson and Gready agree in identifying a political intention, regardless of the motivation of each writer's arrest.[15]

However, an openly political analysis of this kind of writing and the role of the witness has often been shaded by a paradigm of interpretation centred on the notion of traumatic memory and constructed in the first place around Holocaust survivors' accounts, which have become exemplary prototypes of witness narratives. As Hirsch and Spitzer affirm, 'the Holocaust has in many ways shaped the discourse on collective, social and cultural memory, serving both as touchstone and paradigm' (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 151). Influential works in literary and cultural studies have contributed to the establishment of this paradigm,[16] fostered also by the establishment of a new discipline, trauma studies.

According to this paradigm, the experience of the witness is always associated with trauma and therefore, with a certain degree of pathologisation. Hence, the testimony is considered 'always an agent in a process that, in some ways, bears upon the clinical' (Felman and Laub 1992, 9). The healing process can call for psychoanalytic sessions, but writing is also considered a useful tool to achieve the cure, a powerful means to work through the traumatic experience. Moreover, the discourse on the witness is built upon a fundamental contradiction, that is, 'the contradiction between the necessity, on the one hand, but also the impossibility of fully bearing witness to this particular traumatic past' (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 152). The traumatic experience is therefore presented as an event without witness (Felman and Laub 1992), or to use Agamben's words, an event without a 'complete witness' (Agamben 2002, 34).

Critics have also focused on the impossibility for witnesses to 'settle into understanding' (Felman and Laub 1992, 5) the memory of the violence experienced, a phenomenon which leads to aphasia, or a breakdown of language. Therefore, there is a keen interest in the palpable marks of trauma embodied in the speech abilities of the witness, marks that are revealed through silences, hiatus and dissociations. As Trezise affirms, the voice of the witness 'cannot fully coincide with itself torn as it is between the language of fact and the shattering of the very framework on which the intelligibility of such language relies' (in Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 155).

In the last few decades, trauma studies have evolved in very different directions, so that, 'though it was the Nazi genocide of the Jews that has provided the impetus for much of the current theorization about trauma and witnessing' (Kacandes 2001, 99), scholars address now a variety of different traumas as for example slavery, colonialism but also child abuse and sexual violence. Nevertheless, some of the premises – for example, the fundamental aporia, the therapeutic function of writing and the consideration on the language of the witness – have remained unchanged and the same parameters are used in a number of different analyses, including that of prison writings.[17] Are these parameters, however, effective enough to describe witness narratives related to the experience of incarceration?

At first glance, trauma theory seems to answer positively to this question. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma itself may provide a link between cultures and experiences 'not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves' (Caruth 1995, 11). However, if trauma is to provide a link between cultures,[18] as Caruth proposes, trauma must be reduced to its essential structure, to its lowest common denominator. This means that contextual details are unimportant and can be overlooked. As Richard Crownshaw argues 'our receptiveness to trauma is based not on historical experience […] but on an ahistorical structural trauma (a lack) at the core of our identity' (Crownshaw 2010, 8). Brazilian critic Fernando Kolleritz points in the same direction when he says:

> to narrate is to compensate. To repair, to recompose the ethical texture. Witness narratives redeem. They are somehow expiatory evocations. They are dedicated gestures. They recreate the moral world: they are the only possible compensation, not just posthumous, but rather a-historical, in the sense that they […] fill in a void of humanity, rearranging, and maybe abolishing, the abjection (Kolleritz 2004, 81).

Paradoxically, although witness narratives claim a strong connection with truth, reality and history, the paradigm to analyse them lacks historicity. History and memory appear then as two separated and even conflicting concepts: in contrast to what is perceived to be 'the cold storage of history' (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 155), memory, whose incarnation is the witness, is thought to be more accessible and humane, and able to transmit not only factual knowledge, but also emotions and feelings.

It is possible to observe here an unexpected affinity between Felski's exhortation to get rid of the historical context to reach a more intimate connection with the text and, for example, a trauma-informed reading of texts by political prisoners which privileges the personal over the political because the latter would 'prevent the reader from a real and deep interaction with the text […]' (Lollini 1996, 525). According to the paradigm I have described, personal approaches are more adequate when dealing with 'traumatic experiences such as those of long-term prisoners' (520). What I argue, however, is that although incarceration leaves indelible marks upon prisoners' memory and subjectivity, these cannot always be regarded as 'trauma'.[19]

José Luandino Vieira, for example, does not look at his prison experience as trauma. In an interview released in 2009 in which he agreed to talk about his incarceration at Tarrafal, Vieira affirmed: 'I think the years in prison were very good for me, speaking from a strictly personal point of view' (Coelho 2009). Moreover, in an interview granted to me in September 2017, Vieira refers to his experience in prison saying: 'there is nothing in my life, not even if I live twenty or thirty years more, that can leave such a mark on me. Luckily, it is a good mark'.[20]

Moreover, when analysing prison writings, one should consider that the text is produced as a response to the writer's incarceration, which takes place in a specific historical, political and social context. Ignoring it would mean losing part of the message the texts convey while, on the contrary, contextual readings can provide clues with which to understand allusions, subtle references and hints that writers did not make explicit for fear of being punished.[21] Besides, the very form of the text is defined by contextual conditions. Prisoners of Stalinist gulags, for example, often chose to compose poems rather than prose, because it was easier to memorise them when no paper was available (Pieralli 2017, 285). Likewise, texts written in prison are often fragmentary because the prisoner/writer did not have means to write or had to write quickly because of constant surveillance.

Finally, one cannot deny the powerful relation between witness narratives and history. If the former are not comparable to the work of historians (Wieviorka 2006, 41), one has to acknowledge that they often constitute valuable complementary historical sources[22] (Pieralli 2017; Jurgenson 2016). Historians are therefore 'expanding [their] notion of truth […], coming to a deeper, more encompassing historical understanding of what we might now think of as an embodied form of "truthfulness"' (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 161–2). This implies that it has largely been acknowledged that witnesses cannot – and are not

expected to – provide an exhaustive narrative of the truth, for their version of an historical event can only be partial and subjective.

As the paradigm of the witness states, the complete witness really does not exist. The question is, do we need him? Should we aspire to completeness? Is this really – and in any case – an unresolvable paradox?

Bearing witness – the case of Ramos and Vieira

Vieira and Ramos do face what theory identifies as the paradoxes related to the act of bearing witness, but they find their own ways of dealing with them and are still able to transmit the truth of their experience. In the first chapter of Graciliano Ramos' *Memórias do cárcere*, the author seems fully aware of the limits of memory and the possibility to convey historical truth through his text. He knows memory is unreliable. He is aware that his version of the truth is partial and, what is more, flawed and mixed with fiction. However, he does also claim his right to compose a coherent story in which all the pieces fit together and come to closure.

> I did not keep the notes acquired during long days and months of observation: in a moment of distress, I was forced to throw them into the water. Surely they would have been useful, but was it an irretrievable loss? I almost tend to think that it was good to get rid of that material. If it still existed, I would feel compelled to consult it at every hour, I would torment myself to say the exact hour of a departure, how many protracted sorrows warmed up in the pale sun, in a morning fog, the colour of the leaves falling from the trees, in a white yard, the shape of the green hills, tainted by light, authentic sentences, gestures, cries, groans. But what does it mean? These true things may not be credible. And if they faded away, leave them in oblivion: they did not amount to much, or at least I imagine they did not amount to much. Other things, however, remained, grew, connected with each other, and it is inevitable to mention them. Shall I claim that they are absolutely accurate? How naïve. [...] In this reconstruction of old facts [...] I expose what I noted, what I believe I noted. Other people might have different memories. I do not refute them, but I hope they will not refuse mine: they combine and complete themselves and today they give me an impression of reality (Ramos 2014, 11–12).

Without claiming to own or possess the whole truth, Ramos consciously claims his right to expose his personal version of the facts. The account is partial because of the very limits of human experience, and not necessarily because the writer could not settle the experience into understanding. The writer discloses his contradictions and doubts, he even considers renouncing the task, but the reasons to write are stronger.

Rather than the intelligibility of the experience, what prisoners do fail to settle into understanding is the violence of the state machine built to control and repress. However, what at first appears to them as mere irrationality, arbitrariness and excess, comes to make sense if it is interpreted as a strategic device used by the state to quash political adversaries. Putting the traumatic experience into an openly political frame of interpretation, the witness's aim can switch from the attempt to understand to the desire to resist and counteract.

Here it is important to consider the context of the incarceration and to acknowledge that different contexts require different tools of analysis. While in the case of the Nazi persecution of European Jews, people were deported, segregated and murdered without knowing or understanding the reason for their imprisonment,[23] for political prisoners incarceration may have a totally different meaning. In fact, being incarcerated may not represent the end, but rather another phase of the struggle. For a political prisoner, this understanding is essential to facing the experience of the prison in such a way as to avoid being destroyed by it. Thus, when dealing with texts written by political prisoners, one of the issues to investigate is how the awareness of being part of a larger political struggle influences the individual experience of incarceration and therefore, the account that prisoners give of it.

In the case of José Luandino Vieira, for example, writing can be considered a means to keep on participating in the struggle of independence of Angola, dodging the limits imposed by the incarceration. In fact, the notebooks that he succeeded in smuggling out of prison with the help of his wife constituted a useful source of information for the liberation movement acting in secrecy. Besides this, writing also allowed him to keep a close relationship with his wife, a relationship that he describes as 'fundamental'[24] and that was crucial for his mental well-being in prison.

Autonomy is another issue at stake. Prison writings show how, even in inhumane conditions, prisoners tend to carve out some space for themselves, a space not controlled nor supervised by the authorities. Writing as such is a space of resistance and autonomy. Historical and sociological research (Buntman 2003, McEvoy 2015, Alexander 2011)

has proved that political prisoners are likely to associate in groups and set up autonomous organisations, which is a powerful strategy to oppose and restrict the power that prisons exercise on individuals. Under certain circumstances, then, prisons can be seen 'as places not just of repression […] but of practical and imaginative exercises in self-government and even of state-making' (Alexander 2011, 552).

Graciliano Ramos, for example, recalls the role of the *Coletivo* (collective) and of the *Rádio Libertadora* (freedom radio). The former was an autonomous organisation who took care of prisoners' essential needs, while the latter was a human radio whose 'broadcast' would start as soon as prisoners were shut in their cells at night. Shouting from one cell to the others, prisoners would comment on news and criticise the government; they would read passages of books and sing communist songs and popular sambas. The *Rádio Libertadora* was also a means to keep in contact with the women who shared the same prison but lived separated from their male counterparts. Autonomous organisations show how prisoners did not renounce their agency or their creative power.

Creativity, especially in the case of prisoners who are writers, also passes through the development of a language and a literary form suitable to describing the experience of detention. Yet, as I have already mentioned, language in witness narratives is a contentious issue. As words are considered inadequate to represent a context so violent and oppressive that it appears unrepresentable, witness narratives are usually identified with a breakdown of language. According to the dominant paradigm, the experience is uncommunicable[25] because language becomes the embodiment of the traumatic experience. Of course, the paradigm acknowledges that most witnesses feel the urge to talk about their experience, but it also stresses the fact that there is always a discrepancy between reality and the words used to describe it.

However, in spite of all this, large numbers of witnesses have written about their experience and many of them have produced narratives that, apart from accomplishing their task of bearing witness to history, also have an undoubtable artistic value. Therefore, instead of focusing on the hardships related to the process of witnessing, I propose to look at the results and achievements of the process. Instead of reading the discrepancy as a failure to convey the truth of the experience, it is possible to interpret it as a device that actually discloses part of that truth, bearing in mind that subverting the common use of language or revealing the mechanisms that lay behind the act of writing can lead to a more aware reading. Brazilian critic Jaime Ginzburg states:

> Breaking with the trivial convention of language forces the reader's perception into a different path of knowledge and formulation of ideas. Without this differentiating movement, literature would continue to use a trivial language, unable to provoke the reader to consider the singular, strange and terrible dimension of the experience (Ginzburg 2010, 272).

Reflecting on how to represent the unrepresentable and finding the proper language to describe the horrors and the pettiness of daily life in prison are not only attempts to restore the primary articulation between language and body, but also a means to regain agency in a context that seeks to deny it.

Furthermore, looking at the materiality of the texts I work with, the first consideration that I would make is that, instead of suffering from a breakdown of language or aphasia, the two writers accumulated words and more words.[26] This craving for accumulation is particularly evident in Vieira's *Papéis da prisão*. Not only are the notebooks full of drawings, notes written by other prisoners, newspaper scraps, excerpts of letters from family and friends, but the very form of the text alludes to accumulation. In fact, the text is composed of fragments that were not meant to create a narrative, but whose juxtaposition eventually gives the impression of the flowing of time and of a real, lived life. However, looking at the date of the first entry of the notebooks, 10 October 1962, one notices that Vieira began to write almost a year after his arrest.[27] How should this year-long gap be interpreted?

In the brief introduction that Luandino Vieira wrote for the *Papéis da prisão*, he affirms that he started to write as soon as the necessary conditions for the secret circulation of the notebooks were created (Vieira 2015, 9–10). From that point onwards, his resolution to write sometimes wavered – and this is not surprising given the circumstances – but, eventually, it was always renewed. As Vieira affirms in an interview, 'writing was a good way of killing time, as well as working out the causes that had got me into that situation. Simply for having claimed a national consciousness, a national identity that translated into the nationalist activities that demanded independence, there I was' (Ribeiro 2010, 30). Nonetheless, one can wonder whether the year that Vieira stayed in prison and did not write any of his notebooks[28] was also functional for him to recover from the shock of the imprisonment, to process the experience and elaborate an adequate reaction to it, a reaction that was both political[29] and personal. Writing in prison combines these two dimensions, as 'one writes in prison to fill the void of time […], but on the

other hand, one writes in prison to resist, to avoid forgetting, to survive' (Ribeiro and Vecchi 2015, 25).

Also Ramos' *Memórias do cárcere* reveal that writing was a primary need for the imprisoned author. From the first moments of his incarceration, writing appeared to Ramos as a necessity imposed by the circumstances, a necessity that had to be satisfied:

> *It was necessary to write, to tell the events I was entangled in.* For sure, I could not develop them: I was lacking calm, everything looked senseless to me. Clearly, I was being senseless: it was absurd aiming to narrate indefinite things, the smoke and shadows that surrounded me. I did not think about this. *I had imposed a task upon myself and I had to accomplish it no matter how. Or maybe it was not my imposition, after all: the circumstances determined it.* It was essential to exhaust myself, discipline my rebellious thoughts, describe the oscillations of the hammocks, the human loads flopped in the corners, gasping with nausea, vomiting, my new friends' features becoming clearer. [...] I sat on a box and I began to write in the light coming from the hatch. I probably stayed there working for hours, disorderly (Ramos 2014, 130, my emphasis).

As he was a very strict critic of himself and his own writing, Graciliano was aware that his prison notes were probably not good enough to become part of a literary narrative. However, in another passage, he remembers how, despite all this, he was nonetheless compelled to write, chaotically and desperately.

> I was on my own, a book in my hand, racking my brains in vain to understand it. I struggled on a page, I read it five, six times, then I abandoned the brochure, discouraged. Reading had become impossible; however, I endeavoured to write. If I should find those sheets, disconnected and hideous as they were, they would reveal my perturbation, the weakness of my spirit. But the long hours dragged on, and it was necessary to fill them (479–80).

Beyond healing

Reading these excerpts, one tends to agree with Ann Kaplan, an influential scholar in trauma studies, when she says that the project of working through motivates the project of the memoir (Kaplan 2005, 44). The urge

to write seems to be part of the process of gaining awareness about one's own condition and putting thoughts and feelings in order. Still, in the case of Ramos and Vieira, writing not only has a therapeutic function but is also part of a larger project.

Take, for example, the writings of another famous political prisoner, the Italian Antonio Gramsci. Arrested by Mussolini's fascist regime, Gramsci was sentenced to 20 years and he eventually died because of the complications related to the poor living conditions he endured in prison. One of the judges of the Special Tribunal who tried him justified the harsh sentence saying that they had to 'prevent that brain from working for twenty years' (Gerratana 1977, LXIII). Nonetheless, during the whole time he spent in prison, Gramsci dedicated himself to studying and writing. In 1927, in a letter to his sister-in-law, he wrote:

> I am obsessed (this is a phenomenon typical of people in jail, I think) by this idea: that I should do something *für ewig* [...]. In short, in keeping with a preestablished program, I would like to concentrate intensely and systematically on some subject that would absorb and provide a center to my inner life (Gramsci 1994, 83).

The project of doing something *für ewig* (literally, forever) would materialise in the pages of the *Prison Notebooks,*[30] a series of essays that Gramsci wrote during his time in prison and that, in spite of its fragmentary and unfinished nature, remains one of the most original contributions to critical thinking in the twentieth century. It is worth noting that, from his arrest onwards, reading and writing had already appeared to Gramsci as vital needs; however, in the letter mentioned above he is saying that now they should respond to a higher purpose and seek a result for their own sake, rather than being a mere instrumental means of survival (Gerratana 1977, XVI).

It is interesting that, trying to explain the expression *für ewig* to his sister-in-law, Gramsci translates it as 'disinterested', which in this case does not indicate a work disconnected from reality, or art done for art's sake. On the contrary, 'disinterested' refers to Gramsci's personal condition as a prisoner: the project he has in mind is to trespass the restrictions imposed by the circumstances, the limits of the cell, the degradation of his body. As Rosengarten states: 'In prison, deprived of any immediate opportunity to influence the course of human affairs, Gramsci's sense of time became, paradoxically, both more intimate and subjective, yet at the same time more oriented to distant horizons' (Rosengarten 2014, 119).

Although their distant horizons differed from Gramsci's, in prison José Luandino Vieira and Graciliano Ramos cultivated their writing, and they used prison time to collect material that would eventually become part of the literature they would write outside prison: the experience of the confinement became a source of characters, stories and themes. Writing also became a form of resistance because it represented the refusal to give up a constructive dimension. It exceeded the logic of the therapeutic function of writing thus reinforcing the idea that, when analysing prison writings, we should look for a contextual paradigm of interpretation, one that takes into consideration both the political and the aesthetic intentions of prisoners who write.

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Notes

1. 'History […] consists of a vertical pile of neatly stacked boxes – what we call periods – each of which surrounds, sustains, and subsumes a microculture. Understanding a text means clarifying the details of its placement in the box, highlighting the correlations and causalities between text-as-object and context-as-container' (Felski 2015, 156).
2. 'Vargas became interim president in 1930 and then ruled the country until 1945. In 1937, he created the Estado Novo [New State], an authoritarian regime that relied on nationalism to garner support and legitimacy. Ousted from power in 1945, Vargas returned through a democratic election in 1950 with a populist program that relied on working-class and urban middle-class support…'. See: https://library.brown.edu/create/brazilundervargas/.
3. On Vargas' methods of repression of dissent, see Cancelli 'Ação E Repressão Policial' (1999) and 'O mundo da violência' (1994); Cardoso dos Santos Ribeiro (2008); Pedroso (2003).
4. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
5. Acronym for *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola), one of the three nationalist movements that fought for independence from Portugal.
6. Viera and Jacinto were released for good conduct almost two years before the end of their sentence. Nonetheless, they were not allowed to return to Angola, and had to live in Lisbon and report regularly to the police (Vieira 2015, 1033).
7. On incarceration in colonial societies, see Alexander and Anderson (2008); Bernault et al. (2003); Dikötteret al. (2007); Messiant (2006).
8. 1961 is remembered as the year in which the armed struggle started in Angola. The episodes that prompted it were the attack on the gaols of Luanda on 4 February and the massacres of white settlers and their black and mulatto workers in the coffee plantations in the North of the country in March, respectively promoted by the MPLA and the UPA (Union of the Populations of Angola). (See Wheeler and Pellisier (2009); Marcum (1969).)
9. All Vieira's literary works written in confinement appeared between 1963 and 1981, while *Papéis da prisão* was published only in 2015.
10. See, for example, Silviano Santiago's novel Em Liberdade (1981), a fictional account of Graciliano Ramos' first impressions of freedom once released from prison.
11. On literatures in Portuguese as single literary system (or 'macrosystem'), see Abdala Júnior (2000, 2003).

12 See, for example, Candido (2006); Miranda (1992); Ginzburg (2010).

13 After all the works he had written in prison had been published, Vieira did not publish anything new until 2006, when the novel *De rios velhos e guerrilheiros* appeared. The only exception to this protracted silence was the publication of two short-stories in 1998.

14 There are still very few critical analyses of *Papéis da prisão*, which was published in November 2015. The most important is *Papéis críticos avulsos* (*Sundry critical papers*) by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro and Roberto Vecchi, which works as foreword to Vieira's book, only two articles have been published up to the beginning of 2018.

15 In his article 'Towards a prison poetics', Larson (2010) works with writings by both political and common-law prisoners.

16 Among them, I remember Felman and Laub (1992); Agamben (1998); Caruth et al. (1995); Kaplan (2005). In the Brazilian context, the works by Márcio Seligmann-Silva have been particularly influential. Among them, see: 'Literatura e Trauma: um Novo Paradigma' (2002); 'Testemunho e a Política da Memória' (2005); 'Narrar o Trauma' (2008); 'Testemunho da Shoah e Literatura' (2009); 'O Local do Testemunho' (2010); 'Novos escritos dos cárceres' (2006). This last work focuses specifically on reading Mendes' prison writings through the lens of trauma theory. See also Kolleritz (2004).

17 For example, Lollini adapts the paradigm to *Letters from Prison* by Antonio Gramsci, one of the most famous political prisoners of the twentieth century and one that devoted his entire life to a political cause. The critic in fact refers to LaCapra's *Representing the Holocaust* as the best approach to analyse Gramsci's subjectivity (Lollini 1996, 523). According to Lollini *Letters* embodies 'the trauma and the paradox of the testimony, which lie precisely in this gap between the need of a consistent subject and the flow of time and of traumatic events that contradict this consistency and coherence. In this gap the subject experiences a crisis of identity' (522). It is possible to recognise the mark of trauma-informed discourse also in Gould's analysis of accounts by Iranian prisoners, when she affirms that 'their piecing together of the fragments of experience through language is part of a process of overcoming the trauma of confinement' (Gould 2017, 19). Ramos' *Memórias* have also been analysed through this paradigm, such as in Marco (2004); Silva de Abreu (2008); Oliveira (2011); Birman (2012).

18 One should also wonder which cultures Caruth refers to, considering that trauma theory has been concerned mainly with western culture. In recent times, the category of trauma has been widely used to refer to 9/11 (Kaplan 2005), and once again the focus has been on Western trauma. As Susana Araújo notes, 'experts have shown that trauma studies have seldom been applied to other historical realities' (Araújo 2015, 3). Along the same lines, Andermahr affirms that 'trauma theory has not fulfilled its promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement. Rather than forging relationships of empathy and solidarity with non-Western others, a narrowly Western canon of trauma literature has in effect emerged, one which privileges the suffering of white Europeans' (Andermahr 2015, 500). There is, however, an ongoing effort to 'decolonise' trauma studies. In this regard, see Andermahr et al. (2015); Balaev et al. (2014); Rizzuto (2015); Rothberg (2009).

19 Araújo affirms that 'in Freudian terms, trauma is not a straightforward process [...]. It is the inner working of an event, not the immediate, direct, or simple response to a painful event' (Araújo 2015, 2). Quoting psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, Araújo also states that 'many people never experience a trauma following a shock' (2).

20 The interview is still unpublished.

21 In her analysis of accounts by Romanian political prisoners, Dumitrescu reports how 'in their dexterous attempts to evade the censor [...] writers protected their lives by pushing their craft to ever-greater levels of allusive sophistication' (Dumitrescu 2016, 17). In an interview granted to me and still unpublished, Vieira recalls how, one day, one of his fellow prisoners was arbitrarily and severely punished in the prisoners' canteen at Tarrafal. As he could not talk explicitly about the event, this is what he wrote in a letter to his wife: 'Today, in the canteen, at lunch, something interesting happened. I forgot to eat my soup because I was looking at the sun coming in through the bars and depicting the bars

on our table. The others did not care much and kept on eating, but I could not eat the soup with the bars mirroring in it.'

22 Jurgenson (2016) suggests that replacing historical sources where they are not available may justify the prisoners' wish to leave a written testimony: 'it is the awareness of being the only ones able to leave a trace […] that induces some prisoners, still in the camps, to investigate, to collect other detainees' stories' (269–70).

23 Not only did Jews not know nor understand why they were being incarcerated and exterminated, but as Laub reports, they were made to believe that they deserved it (Felman and Laub 1992, 79).

24 In the interview that closes his *Papéis da prisão*, José Luandino Vieira affirms: 'if it wasn't for Linda I would have most possibly drowned … Two decisions were very important: one, the issue of writing; the other, my relationship. Without this relationship, none of us would be the same person; this is what I call a fundamental relationship' (Vieira 2015, 1072).

25 Even authors considered canonical in trauma studies, such as Primo Levi, do not always fit in the grid of the dominant paradigm. For example, Michaela Wolf states that Levi 'rejects the notion of the '*incomunicabilità'*, the incommunicability, of the *lager* experience […], thus arguing against the thesis that sees the Holocaust as a unique experience, which would imply that the experience is bound to remain buried with the death of its victims' (Wolf 2016, 14–15).

26 Both texts are quite voluminous: Ramos' *Memórias* are divided in four parts, which in the original project should have been four different volumes. On the other hand, the first edition of Vieira's *Papéis da prisão* has 1102 pages, while the original notebooks comprised 'approximately 2000 fragile handwritten sheets of paper' (Ribeiro and Vecchi 2015, 17).

27 José Luandino Vieira was arrested in Lisbon on 20 November 1961. The first entry in the first notebook dates 10 October 1962 (Vieira 2015, 41).

28 Although he did not write any notebooks during his first year in prison, Vieira wrote the short stories that were later collected and published with the title *Nosso Musseque*. For more information, see the chronology at the end of *Papéis da prisão*.

29 As long as Vieira stayed in Luanda, the notebooks had an immediate political purpose: passing information to the nationalist movement working in the underground. His transfer to Cape Vert would prevent this kind of communication. However, the notebooks still had a political drive, although not an immediate one: one of the intentions behind the notebooks was to collect material on Angolan culture to prove that 'the political independence [*of Angola*] has a cultural base because we [*Angolans*] have a different culture that justifies political independence' (Vieira 2015, 1053).

30 For a detailed analysis of the genesis of the *Prison Notebooks*, see the preface by Valentino Gerratana (1977, XXX–XLII).

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3

Literature as testimony: textual strategies and contextual frameworks in Fatima Bhutto's *Songs of Blood and Sword*

Ana Ashraf

> Four years ago I set out to trace my father's life. I opened dusty boxes filled with newspaper clippings, letters, diaries and official documents kept and collected by various members of the family over a forty-years period … documents, both written by hand and officially typed, served to build a political as well as a personal chronology (Bhutto 2010, 8–9).

This excerpt from Fatima Bhutto's *Songs of Blood and Sword: A Daughter's Memoir* provides a glimpse of the self-consciousness and the ardent toil with which Bhutto commemorates the controversial past of her father, Mir Murtaza Bhutto, the eldest son of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who after his father's assassination by Zia-ul-Haq (1924–88) the military dictator organised armed resistance against the dictator while being in exile, and later returned to Pakistan to join politics but was assassinated under dubious circumstances. To build this 'personal and political chronology', Bhutto mentions her reliance on a vast body of external sources ranging from personal letters to official documents. On the one hand, the reference to the close familial connection establishes the personal motivation to 'open dusty boxes' and on the other hand, her dependence on these external sources exhibits her consciousness to be historically accurate. Through her memoir she recreates her father's past from a daughter's perspective, rewrites the political history of her country and comes to terms with the self-conscious act of mediating the personal

memories with political history. Indeed, through a close reading of *Songs*, this article engages with significant questions regarding testimony, its literary representation and the contextual challenges faced by the writer of such work. I analyse different textual strategies and contextual frameworks in Fatima Bhutto's memoir *Songs of Blood and Sword* to understand how testimony, in particular transgenerational testimony, is shaped by different contexts, how witnessing functions within a literary text and how different narrative modes can allow testimony to transcend its own spatio-temporal bounds. Is testimony in its very structure compatible with traditional forms of narrative or storytelling? Does literary testimony[1] have an impact on the political consciousness of a society at large?

Published in 2010, Bhutto's *Songs*, while focusing on one man's murder from a familial perspective, puts this murder in parallel with greater political crises in Pakistan. Indeed, within the tradition of anglophone Pakistani literature, *Songs* is one of the few to position a personal testimony of violence and extrajudicial killing within a larger discourse of national history since the Partition of British India (1947), a constant string of political crises with various dictatorships in the country, the onslaught of War on Terror (2001 to date), the rise in extra-judicial murders as a means of counterterrorism and Drone War (2004 to date). *Songs* presents a highly interesting case in the contemporary literature of testimony. Firstly, positioning her memoir as an intermediary between familial and political concerns, Bhutto shows how literary testimony conjoins the personal and the political, the historical and the subjective aspects of lived experience. Secondly, the context of her gender, class and the retrospective authorial position creates a more ambivalent and somewhat alternative testimony which diffuses the official and dominant narrative of Pakistani history. Thirdly, its polyphonic discourse, and its use of other documents such as diaries, letters and family photos, not only makes it stand out in the tradition of Pakistani literature written in English but also constitutes a good example of how the multiple contexts of testimony affect the form and style of a narrative. Finally, *Songs* is also an example of a growing tradition of anglophone Pakistani literature aimed at a more global audience.

The theoretical framework for this reading is informed by theories of testimony and literature by Jacques Derrida, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Michael G. Levine, Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler, Maria Delaperrière, Marianne Hirsch, and Michael Richardson. Their insights into the complexity of testimonial literature and the role of the author as a witness, will guide my analysis of Fatima Bhutto's *Songs*. This article

relies on the critical concepts usually employed to understand the Holocaust testimony. Although the specificity of the Holocaust as a traumatic historical event cannot be denied, the critical and philosophical engagement to understand witnessing can function as a strong threshold to study other testimonies with different personal and political ramifications. As Hirsch emphasises in a detailed study of the concept of 'postmemory':

> The beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century – after the brutal dictatorships in Latin America; after Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur; during the aftermath, globally, of the events of September 11, 2001; and in the midst of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict – the Holocaust can no longer serve simply as a conceptual limit case in the discussion of historical trauma, memory, and forgetting (Hirsch 2012, 18).

Though not a 'limit case', the discussion of testimony in literature as provided by scholars mentioned above can help formulate a more intersecting framework to understand different and sometimes divergent historical traumas in parallel.

Songs of Blood and Sword: an overview

Songs chronicles the intertwined histories of the Bhutto family and Pakistani society. Bhutto draws the trajectory of her grandfather's political career and his later assassination. She also breaks the silence surrounding her father's political activism, his exile and murder. She explains how her grandfather Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, using his nationalist and socialist views, became the most popular politician in Pakistan during the 1960s. Later on, he became the fourth president (1971–73) and the ninth prime minister (1973–77) of Pakistan. Quite soon, however, Z. A. Bhutto emerged as a very controversial figure especially during his presidency both in national as well as international politics. Some of the leading causes for this controversial image were his promise for land reforms against the feudal system, nationalisation of industries in Pakistan, founding of the nuclear programme and a stronger emphasis on the Islamic brotherhood. Moreover, the Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971 made explicit the vulnerable geopolitical condition of the newly independent country. The two Indo-Pak wars laid down the basis of the cold foreign policy between India and Pakistan and further shaped

the international alliances during the Cold War era, whereby China was inclined towards Pakistan and America relied on India for their individual geopolitical goals. The civil war between East and West Pakistan over the election results of 1971 resulted in East Pakistan's separation into Bangladesh. Z. A. Bhutto became the president of a very demoralised society. His adherence to the nuclear programme in Pakistan, in spite of severe international criticism, the rise of Pashtun, Sindhi, and Baloch nationalism and his non-conformist attitude to the military junta of his time played a key role in his overthrow through a military coup. Thus, in July 1977, General Zia ul Haq dissolved the assemblies and Bhutto was put in jail for allegedly planning a murder of a political opponent. For the next two years, his sons, Murtaza Bhutto and Shahnawaz Bhutto, travelled throughout the world to appeal for justice. Meanwhile, at home Z. A Bhutto, without a chance for fair trial, was hanged under dubious circumstances in 1979 and even his dead body was not returned to the family. As a reaction, both sons, while already in exile, organised an armed resistance against the military dictator. In her memoir, Bhutto includes a comment by the British-Pakistani journalist and writer Tariq Ali, to confirm this version of the events: 'The failure to win diplomatic support from government around the world played a big part in convincing Murtaza that the only option was armed struggle' (Bhutto 2010, 176). Later on, the younger son Shahnawaz was found dead under suspicious circumstances. Grounding herself on an interview with the French lawyer, Jacques Vergès, Bhutto holds Benazir responsible for this murder.[2] Murtaza lived in exile until Zia ul Haq was killed in an airplane crash. During his exile, Al-Zulfikar (a militant insurgency organization formed in 1979), controlled by Murtaza, hijacked a Pakistan International Airlines flight and diverted it to Kabul in 1981. In the memoir, Bhutto provides another explanation of this hijack claiming that Salamullah Tipu who joined Al-Zulfikar without Murtaza's approval was behind the entire planning of the hijack. In 1993, Murtaza came back to Pakistan to launch his political career but this time found another rival in his own sister, Benazir, who, after coalescing with the military establishment responsible for their father's assassination, became the first woman prime minister of a Muslim country. Murtaza openly criticised Benazir and her husband Asif Ali Zardari's corruption, nepotism and foreign policies. On 20 September 1996, Murtaza was killed in a police encounter. While the official report states that the police was forced to open fire in response to the attack by Murtaza's guards, *Songs* provides a contradictory testimony: her father was killed brutally under a well-planned operation. As his sister Benazir

was in power, Fatima Bhutto puts the burden of ethical responsibility on the seemingly irresponsible state. Beyond this personal and familial terrain, the author puts her father's murder in parallel with the political unrest of the 1990s in Karachi. Many have called this time a period of civil war resulting in the killing of almost 2000 people in 1995 alone. Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali further describes this as a time of 'virtual civil war between the security forces of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's government and a heavily-armed, ethnically-based political party, the Muhajir Qaumi Mahaz (MQM, or Muhajir National Front), which claims to represent the interests of Karachi's six million Muhajirs [refugees from India at the time of partition]' (Yacoobali 1996).

Since the enforcement of Police Act 1861, the police departments of British India and Post-Independence India and Pakistan have used methods of extrajudicial killing, or fake encounters (Rumi 2018). Ever since its independence, the Pakistani authorities have never really tried to do away with the Act as it serves to use the police for the vested interests of a corrupt political system.[3] In the wake of terrorism, the same method has been used by the military authorities as a counterterrorist measurement (Rumi 2018). Storytelling in such a scenario gains supreme importance. In this larger context, extrajudicial killing is not merely killing the 'other', it causes double indemnity by killing without giving a legal right of trial or of being heard. Thus the narrative of the 'other' is always at risk of extinction – a forced extinction.

Bhutto as transgenerational witness

In the absence of the person killed extrajudicially, the next generation witness is responsible not only to narrate his or her own memories about the life of that person but to ensure that some kind of verbal justice is done through the act of storytelling. In this context, the role or the ambiguous nature of transgenerational witnessing needs deeper perusal. What modes of representation are employed by a transgenerational witness for the act of storytelling? How is the act of transgenerational witnessing shaped? How does the transgenerational witness mediate between the witnessing of first-generation's trauma and his or her own suffering that comes with this encounter? What emotional and subjective interests are at stake in claiming to use the agency of personal, familial witnessing? A witness is one who sees or experiences an event first-hand and subsequently makes a statement about the event. Many scholars define a witness in somewhat similar ways; a witness is 'a witness to the

truth of what happened during an event' (Felman and Laub 1992, 80) or the one 'who was present and is able to testify from personal observation' (Gordimer 2009, 66) or the one whose figure is 'credited with a special (typically moral) responsibility' (Gelfert 2014, 17). '[A Witness and testimony] must first be singular, whence the necessity of the instant: I am the only one to have seen this unique thing, […] – you must believe me because I am irreplaceable. When I testify, I am unique and irreplaceable' (Blanchot and Derrida 2000, 40). The 'experience' of the witness in the most corporal as well as figurative way is the gap which makes him different from others. The communication of this gap transforms the witness from victim to survivor. However, a transgenerational witness might seem less authentic as her witnessing relies on her own experience and the experiences of the others. Moreover, in a very literal sense, the transgenerational witness, or a witness speaking on behalf of another generation might be seen as lacking first-hand experience of things she describes. James Young while discussing Art Speigelman's *Maus* provides an alternative understanding by emphasising that the transgenerational witness by writing the story of his memories of another generation provides a 'new story "grounded" in a directly perceived reality, that of the "events of transmission" in the form of the artist's memory of the witness's memory in the form of "original interviews"' (Douglas and Vogler 2003, 46). The transgenerational witness mediates between his experience and the experiences of the others on the one hand and the collective traumatic past and the present audiences on the other hand. In Hirsch's words, to be the postmemory or transgenerational witness 'is to be shaped, however, indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe, the structure of postmemory and the process of its generation' (Hirsch 2012, 5).

Songs is clearly an example of transgenerational witnessing. The very title of the memoir sheds some light on her position as a witness: *Songs of Blood and Sword: A Daughter's Memoir* points to the limitations as well as the strengths of her testimony. First, as the title promises a careful configuration of 'songs' of personal and political struggles in different generations, the subtitle 'daughter's memoir' emphasises a break in the usual patrilineal legacy; rather than a son, it is a daughter who claims or inherits the past of her father and builds a present reality around it. The reference to a familial bond might also function as a universal appeal to the emotion of the reader. This familial bond also has its limitations. The cover photo confirms this notion: Bhutto is standing

near a window looking through the blinds. She looks outside with a sombre and serious expression and holds her posture with much dignity and without excessive emotion. Like the subtitle, this position brings out her role as an intermediary: while as an observer she only has an outsider's perspective on her father's personal experiences, as a daughter she is nevertheless located in an intermediate position between inside and outside. The Bhutto household provides a mediation between her father's private experiences and the outside space of party politics. By positioning herself in this space, she promises a privileged access to the reality of her father's life and death. Clearly, her perspective is formulated through a careful mediation of a deeply personal and shared experience and a generational remove facilitated through time and space. What Michael G. Levine says about Spiegelman's *Maus* is applicable to Bhutto's experience:

> The subtitle of the first volume of *Maus: My Father Bleeds History*, conveys a sense not only of physical injury, but of psychical wounding and emotional anguish. It suggests that the literally unbearable pain of the first generation will have spilled over somehow into the next, that the still unassimilated historical experience of the father will have bled through the pages of the "survivor's tale" drafted by his son (Levine 2006, 1).

While narrating her father's personal and political legacy, Bhutto also writes self-consciously about this *spilling over*. Born in Kabul, and later spending her early childhood in Syria given her father's exile, she mentions the awareness of homelessness in the form of a double displacement:

> I knew we were landless; I knew I came from somewhere else, somewhere I had never seen. Papa played old Sindhi folk songs, 'Ho Jamalo' usually, when he felt like remembering the sounds of his home. He used ajraks, the traditional Sindhi block-printed shawls, as table-cloths and he cooked achar gosht much too spicily (Bhutto 2010, 271).

In an indefinite period of exile, her father resorts to Sindhi (Province of Sindh: the birthplace of the Bhuttos) folk music and food as reminders of a distant homeland. However, Bhutto was neither born in Pakistan nor had she visited it as yet. She nonetheless shares the experience of homelessness and exile with her father without ever knowing the absent home. The *achar ghost* (pickled meat), the *ajrak* (block printed Sindhi shawls)

and the Sindhi folk song *Ho Jamalo,* sung in the praise of a nineteenth-century folk hero, Jamalo Khoso Baloch, serve two different purposes here; for Murtaza they refer to the past memories of lived experience whereas for Bhutto these are absences which in turn inform her own lived experience of connecting with her father's political exile and emotional solitude. Apart from this sense of exile and statelessness, she also inherits the constant fear, uncertainty and sense of danger from her father both literally and figuratively. These fears are given vent many times in the memoir. For instance, through the following comment about insomnia, 'as a young insomniac, something of a Bhutto family curse, I would be scared to sleep by Papa with my very own personalised bogeyman' (269); or when she remembers the browbeaten self of her father after her uncle's death, 'Papa was totally distraught. I had never seen him so overwhelmed by sadness before and would never again, not like this … Papa's eyes welled with tears. There was nothing to break the silence … "I'm sad", he said to me as I shifted uncomfortably next to him' (267–8). In this passage, Bhutto registers not only her father's trauma but also the more inherited and submerged trauma of a young girl compelled to witness her father's political and personal isolation. This transgenerational *spilling over* is not one dimensional in Bhutto's case. In fact, she refers to an incident when her unconscious memory of her uncle's dead body is reconfirmed by the memories of her mother. She was only three years old when she saw her uncle Shahnawaz Bhutto's dead body. Later on, her mother tells her about her childhood behaviour related to this memory:

> "It stayed with you for a long time," Mummy tells me twenty three years later … "You remembered seeing your uncle face down on the carpet and nobody imagined how much it had affected you, but one afternoon, months later, you found your father napping in the bedroom in Damascus and he was lying down like Shah had been, on his stomach, his face covered, and you shook him awake, crying and screaming at him to get up. That's how we knew. You thought he was dead, like Shah" (267).

This example exhibits the two-dimensional nature of the trans-generational witnessing. In witnessing, forgetting is as significant as remembering. Clearly, the impetus of forgetting comes from avoiding the childhood trauma of facing unnatural death. The posture of a dead body stays as a sign of something horrific and inexplicable. This gesture of forgetting is captured through her mother's remembering. Thus,

Bhutto's act of remembering the past depends on her own memories and the memories of others. However, as will be delineated in the later section of this analysis, her 'witnessing' also depends on different sources such as her the interview with her father's driver, close friends and even political opponents as well as other personal and official documents. Therefore, her testimony is not limited to what she bore from one generation to another but is inclusive of what her individual witnessing could not incorporate – thus making her testimony transgenerational.

The context of gender, class and authorial position in *Songs*

How is the position of the witness and the act of writing one's experience shaped, limited or challenged by different contextual frameworks such as class, gender, familial bonds? What role does the testimonial context play in shaping the text, as well as its reception? Testimonial literature and memoir demand a special attention to context. Unlike other forms of literature, testimonial writing is always burdened with the awareness of the traumatic experience situated outside the text, the unique way in which the witness perceived the event and the retrospective understanding with which he or she writes about it. Such a text therefore, always manifests the twofold significance of contextual frameworks. On the one hand, there are the 'tricks of time and memory' (Douglas and Vogler 2003), 'the necessity of fiction' (Fussell 1996), 'the lie and the perjury' (Blanchot and Derrida 2000) playing their role in an individual's attempt to recount events as they happened years or decades ago. On the other hand, the testimonial writing shows the urgency of communicating the specificity of an experience; what Phillip Dwyer, while analysing the role of storytelling in testimony, calls the necessity of recalling one's experiences in writing (Dwyer 2017, viii). This experience is situated in different contexts such as sociopolitical milieu, gender, race, ethnicity, class and many other frameworks which specify the position of the witness. Therefore, the meaning and purpose of testimonial writing is tied with the context that bears it. Thus in the case of a memoir or a testimony, the context and text continuously undergo what Felman refers to 'the contextualization of the text and the texualization of context' (Felman and Laub 1992, xv).

This synthesis of context and text shapes Bhutto's *Songs*. The contexts of gender, class and authorial position make her testimony ambivalent, polyphonic and intertextual at the formal level. Her

testimony is informed by divergent sometimes contradictory perspectives of an apologist daughter, an educated upper-class woman and a self-conscious writer. Although seeking empathy by claiming a universal familial bond of a daughter, the daughter, nonetheless, is an upper class educated woman who with the privilege of education and class can empower her perspective as a dissenting voice. Bhutto navigates these tensions by incorporating other voices and testimonies within her memoir. Whenever her familial bond limits her potential of first-hand experience, she resorts to documents, diaries, letters and other intertextual references. While these documents provide further information necessary to her story, they also lend credibility and authority to her account. Indeed, along with her own memories and the memories of her dear ones, Bhutto establishes her authority as a witness by drawing on other sources, shaping the text into a collage of different external sources and personal memories. She often draws from her grandfather's letters to her father and from Murtaza's diaries, letters, newspaper clippings. She also publishes excerpts from *Venceremos*, a magazine established in 1966 by Murtaza aimed at young Pakistanis to create political and social awareness in them. In this way, she positions her literary testimony within the writings of her own family. For example, she refers to *If I am Assassinated* (1979), written by her grandfather during his imprisonment. In this book, he appeals for justice to the international community and rebuts the charges made against him. The enduring value of his testament lies in its pithy analysis of Pakistani military establishment and political corruption which is relevant even today. Bhutto includes long excerpts from this text in her own memoir, but also comments on its quality and currency as follows:

> *If I am Assassinated* was not simply a tract on innocence and justice; it was like his letters – detailed, thorough, and resounding in its eloquence and force. Zulfikar weaves in an analysis of the political coalition that rose against him, the non-aligned movement, and General Zia ul Haq's Afghanistan connections (Bhutto 2010, 154).

While Zulfikar managed to write the book in prison, Bhutto emphasises the somewhat less known role of her father in getting the manuscript published: 'Papa knew the book by heart, he could quote from it citing page numbers. I never asked why and in all those years Papa never mentioned his role in its publication' (154). Following this apologist tradition within the family, Bhutto and her father also reflected on writing a book about his life:

> "You should write a book," I said. Papa laughed loudly and threw his hands up in the air. "I can't write a book while I'm alive. They would never let me come out into the open with the things I know." "What do you mean? You have to do it – write a book about your life, Papa…" "No, I can't. You'll do it for me. You can write a book on my life" (22).

This excerpt again places Bhutto's memoir in an already established tradition of literary dissent within her family. It also suggests that she fills the gap her father left by not writing about his life experiences. All in all, these intertextual references to texts by her grandfather and father perform different functions within the text. On the one hand, these references establish the literary tradition of dissent within her family and work as exemplary precedent to her writing. But these references as well as the collage of different sources help to perform another function of creating another picture of her father. In the din of political rivalries, Murtaza's image was tarnished by his terrorist past. A terrorist is literally the political 'other' of the responsible statesman. Bhutto, in order to bring her father out of this 'political othering', does provide him with a story as well as a revised history. She projects him as a loving and obedient son (as an evidence to his obedience to Z. A. Bhutto, she produces an excerpt of a letter from Z. A. Bhutto to Murtaza in which he guides his son to go to Afghanistan for help in case of his death), as a responsible and kind father and as a morally upright brother (as even after the death of Zia ul Haq he does not want to sabotage the political career of his sister). Only when he realises the complete political failure of his sister as a prime minister, he decides to go back to Pakistan and join politics. Moreover, Murtaza shows much more political insight (at least the way Bhutto chooses to write about him) than his female counterpart in the family, Benazir. In this way, Bhutto's memoir is not only a passive rendition of the past of her father, rather it actively reconnoitres the way in which her father as the silenced other is given speech.

In spite of her desire to present her father in a different light, as a conscientious writer she is still able to criticise the political choices made by her father. For example, while discussing how her father organises an armed resistance against the military ruler in Pakistan, Bhutto manifests the ambivalent position of a daughter who wishes to write that book which praises her father sufficiently and an educated woman writer who can see the loopholes within patriarchal forms of violence:

> But now I can finally understand the danger that followed my father and Uncle Shah for most of my childhood; it suddenly all makes

> sense and while his are not the choices I would make now, I feel secretly proud of my father for abandoning the offer of a bland but comfortable exile in London to fight what he believed was an unjust system (218).

Similarly, at another occasion, while she discusses the attempt made by the Kabul-based organisation of the Bhutto Brothers to kill Zia ul Haq, she comments, 'But it was irresponsible nonetheless. The attempt on Zia's life, carried out soon after the PIA hijacking, only created a space, and a legitimate one at that, for Zia and the junta to react against the Bhuttos' (237).

Finally, she also gives vent to the motivation behind writing this memoir as follows:

> I wanted to understand my father. I wanted to break the taboo of talking about what happened in Afghanistan. [...] It wasn't enough just to love him, regardless of his choices. I had to dig deeper and understand what happened through retrospective lenses. My reverence for my father did not change, but my method of questioning did. [...] My choice not only gave me the tools to understand a period that had been mythical for me growing up, but also gave me the added benefit of distance when working to understand a history that had deeply personal consequences (203).

In this way, understanding (not necessarily agreeing with) her father's choices is the aim of writing this memoir. Clearly, this understanding also gives her (and by extension the reader) a better grip on the history of Pakistan and provides a means to analyse the rampant violence rooted within a patriarchal set up from a woman's perspective.

Apart from the reference to works by her paternal relations, she puts her work in line with other writers and intellectuals who wrote against the oppressive power structures. For example the title of the memoir is taken from *Poem of the Unknown:*

> In you nestles songs of blood and sword
> In you the migrating birds
> In you the anthem of victory
> Your eyes have never been so bright (i)

The poem, written by the Iranian journalist, poet, and persecuted communist Khosrow Golsurkhi (1944–74), conveys the resistant and

dissenting tone of the whole memoir. This tone is further strengthened when Bhutto notes in the introductory pages: 'Milan Kundera once said that the struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting; this is my journey of remembering' (10). Thus by giving reference to writers dissenting the dominant narrative through their writings, Bhutto quite explicitly creates literary precedents for her own narrative of resistance. Inevitably, perhaps, most of these references are written by men. Thus, building her narrative on the existing male narrative: both her paternal narratives as well as the authorial judgements of male journalists and writers, she adds her own voice to the long-standing familial and literary tradition. Hence, her witnessing is informed by her role as a daughter, as an upper-class educated woman and as an author who is part of a tradition of critical testimonies, both in terms of the works of her own grandfather and father and in terms of the writings of intellectuals around the world.

This dissenting undertone serves a more explicit function outside the text and shapes a different context. Bhutto published her memoir in 2010 in which she puts the responsibility for her father's murder on the then ruling party, Benazir Bhutto and her husband, Asif Ali Zardari. On 27 December 2007 Benazir Bhutto, who came back to Pakistan after a long exile and had much popularity, was killed in a bomb blast. After this, in the general election of 2008, Zardari became the president of Pakistan (2008–13). It is no coincidence that Bhutto chooses to publish this memoir when the same people are in power. However, if the reason for publication lay in some personal vengeance, it might appear a case of settling an old score by damaging his repute as a president. However, her dissent is informed by her identity as a young Pakistani intellectual, because she highlights the greater and more painful irony of so-called democracy in Pakistan. Zardari's presidency, in spite of his bad reputation in the past, did bring a new hope for the people. Since Parvez Musharaf's long stay as a military dictator (2001–08) Zardari was the first democratically elected president. Soon after taking charge, his projects and vision took the country into further difficulties. His decision to tie closer with the United States in fighting the War on Terror resulted in the greatest number of drone attacks on Pakistani soil. According to an estimate, since 2004, of all the 406 drone attacks, almost 356 were conducted during his rule. According to one article published after the completion of his mandate, many impartial analysts regarded 'his five years' stint as a period of rampant corruption, bad governance, economic meltdown, nepotism, tall claims but little work, lies and disconnect from ground realities' (Mumtaz 2013). Within this context, Bhutto's memoir not only

places the injustices done to her father within a long forgotten historical context, but more importantly, as a young Pakistani she presents the present-day corruption and violence in more comprehensible form.

Context and text: the question of form

What role does context play in shaping up the form of the text? How can we appropriate the question of aesthetics, mimetic representation, style and artistic craft in a form of writing which claims a certain form of urgency? Indeed, the question of linguistic representation is inevitably tied to the contextual frameworks of a literary text. The factual and the literary aspect of any testimony pose greater challenges to the author, who has to mediate between the two, and the critic who has to negotiate between the unique and individual position of the author and the collective and objective historical rendition of the same experience outside the text. The apparent conundrum of the mutual exclusivity of the factual and the literary within the genre of literary testimony actually serves to free the context from the spatio-temporal bounds. Various scholars find a basic conundrum in the 'compossibility', to use Derrida's term, of literature and testimony. Delaperrière sums up this puzzle as follows: 'the notion of testimony already assumes accuracy of rendering someone's experiences by him/herself, whereas literariness (traditionally understood as a group of stylistic and fictionalizing values) seems to disqualify the truthfulness of such message in advance' (Delaperrière 2014, 42). As Derrida asserts, every act of testimony already entails the possibility of lie, of perjury:

> And yet, if the testimonial is by law irreducible to the fictional, there is no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie and perjury – that is to say, the possibility of literature, of the innocent or perverse literature that innocently plays at perverting all of these distinctions. […] In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted. It must allow itself to be parasitized by precisely what it excludes from its inner depths [intérieur], the *possibility*, at least, of literature [original emphasis] (Blanchot and Derrida 2000, 30).

The literariness of a testimony is not a hindrance to the proper function of testimony. Indeed, rather than considering it parasitic, like Derrida,

I consider the relation between testimony and literature as one of mutual 'symbiosis' where each party benefits from its dependence on the other (Delaperrière 2014, 48). In a court of law, a witness is called in the absence of evidence. The 'telling' of the witness formulates the only proof to a happening. Thus justice is the immediate function of the testimony in court, whereas the immediate function of the literary testimony is empathy wherein the reader judges a situation and makes a decision to empathise with the writer. As Richardson explains, 'the ethical practice of literary testimony, then, might be said to reside in its affect rather than any right per se. The writer takes on the task of translation, shifting history, politics, and violence into the literary imaginary' (Richardson 2016, 105). The literariness, the craft and the artistic skills act as the means to achieve this empathy and make this 'literary imaginary' possible. In this way, testimonial literature using the literariness of storytelling becomes 'less definitive, more loaded with potential meanings. Not immediate, but eventual. Not concrete, but gestural' (Richardson 2016, 2). As a result of this mutual symbiosis, a testimony is freed from the spatio-temporal boundaries of its contextual embeddedness and reaches a wider audience in the form of a story. This is most vivid in how quite often testimonial literature shows highly complex formal aspects, as it moves away from textual autonomy to heteronomy, from linear to non-linear narrative modes, from monophonic to polyphonic narration, from a singular to a communal consciousness. Therefore, far from being at odds with the testimonial pact between a witness and an addressee, literariness and storytelling add newer contexts of shaping literature into a political as well as aesthetic tool.

Just as the content of her memoir is guided by different contexts, a similar interdependence is vivid in the form. Bhutto begins by connecting the specificity of her father's murder to the anonymity of many who are killed in constant political violence in Karachi: '"Man found on a highway, cause of death body riddled with bullets, killer unknown – the victim had been shot to death. End of story". There is nothing new about this' (Bhutto 2010, 7). She attacks here both the violence endemic to the city and the lack of storytelling about these deaths. *Songs* defies this silencing as it narrates the story of her father's life and death. Although the official version holds that her father was killed in an exchange of fire between his personal guards and the police, Bhutto presents a different version of the events. She claims that the personal guards did not open the fire. Rather the police surrounded his car and started to fire with a deliberate plan. She also asserts that her father survived this first round

of fire. She reports how Asif Jatoi, one of the survivors of the attack, describes the experience:

> "Mir *baba* [Murtaza Bhutto] was fine at that point," Asif Jatoi tells me later. "He didn't even need to lean on anyone. The police" – Asif remembers the group including Rai Tahir, Shakaib Qureshi and Shahid Hayat – "told Mir *baba* that they were going to take him to hospital and he walked over to the police car. He got into the open back section, where the policemen sit, and the APC drove off. As it neared *Do Talwa,* it stopped. We heard a single shot. Then it drove off again." It was the last shot that killed my father. He had been injured, but he would have survived. He was walking and talking. It would take more than one bullet to kill Papa and the policemen made sure that the last bullet did the job. The last shot, Papa's autopsy showed, was fired into his jaw at point-blank range. It was fired, forensics confirmed, by a gunman standing over him as he lay down in the police car (401–2).

These interviews by the eyewitnesses are not without a complex legal and political context. The Murtaza murder case was dragged in the court for years. In 2009, however, the court acquitted of murder all the policemen involved and also pardoned the six workers of People's Party. However, in 2011 advocate Omar Siyal, appearing for Appellant Noor Muhammad, requested to reinvestigate the court trial. This appeal pointed to many flaws and gaps in the previous court trial: the report of the initial inquiry tribunal has not been brought on record, the police officers have not admitted to shooting Murtaza and his guards in self-defence in their records and finally, that the trial court, in spite of lacking any substantial evidence 'disbelieved' all seven eyewitness accounts for the reason that they were 'not of good character'(Mujahid 2018). By conducting interviews with the survivors who according to the court were unreliable witnesses, Bhutto formulates an alternative testimony, a testimony made inaccessible through court procedure is given its due space in the literary realm. However, the credibility of the memoir relies not just on these witnesses. Rather, a sum total of all the resources (personal, political, historical) allows the readers to decide for themselves whether they would want to trust or believe the testimony of these witnesses. In this way, the legal and political context of Murtaza Bhutto's murder case provides strong justification for making the memoir a complex collage of different sources.

The use of different intertextual sources makes *Songs* polyphonic and dialogic in nature. One example of this is her inclusion of dissenting voices – voices that dissented even from her own stance regarding her grandfather and father. For this purpose, she incorporates interviews from many journalists, party workers, friends and foes of her grandfather or father and her aunt. She goes to people who revered her grandfather as the saviour of Pakistan and believed in his vision, and also to people who were his opponents. She goes to people who condemned her father's political activism and resistance movement and the ones who considered him a national hero. For example, her grandfather's permission for a military operation in Balochistan (a province in Pakistan where many people have been involved in a separation movement) engendered hatred from the Balochi leaders and political opponents. Out of many interviews conducted for this memoir, one is with Sardar Marri, one of the strong opponents of Bhutto's strategies in Balochistan, she records, '"Bhutto was no different from Hitler," Sardar Marri revealed, "Before the operation he initiated, death only touched certain areas of the province. Then it affected all of Balochistan. The violence was expanded. Before, our resistance had been traditional, tribal. Then it became more nationalistic"' (Bhutto 2010, 118). This form of narrative challenges the dominating and simplistic metanarratives of history. The polyphony of perspectives, the non-linearity of narrative, the inclusion of dissenting voices and the ambivalence offered by a witness, who is a daughter, an educated upper-class citizen and a woman writer of contemporary society, certainly position *Songs* as a significant contribution to the contemporary testimonial literature in particular and the existing canon of Pakistani literature in English in general.

To conclude, it can be asserted that Bhutto's *Songs* is undoubtedly a complex form of transgenerational testimony wherein the main protagonist relies not only on her own memories, but also on tremendous amounts of resources: personal documents, letters, interviews, family photos, official reports. Bhutto mediates between her own experience as a daughter and an heir to the political and personal legacy of the Bhutto family and the experiences of other people. Her identity as an upper-class, educated woman certainly shapes and adds nuances to the way she remembers the past. It offers the perspective of a daughter and upper-class writer on particular moments in Pakistani history. In linking these moments to a larger cycle of violence, *Songs* transcends its time and place and speaks for the victims of violence to an international community. *Songs*, therefore, presents an elaborate example of how literary testimony problematises a grand narrative, how it defies the

traditional, linear narrative structures and how the author-witness uses different formalistic structures to not only convey the truth of his or her testimony, but also the difficulty of writing through that testimony. Bhutto's memoir reiterates the need to understand historical, political and cultural tensions through individual, subjective, and quite often fractal forms of experiences. The multiple contexts shape the form and the content of the text and also give rise to newer contexts in the present-day Pakistan. The somewhat controversial reception of the text within Pakistan and immediate critical acclaim in the international community provide yet another clue to how the contexts of a text keep reinventing and remodulating newer more nuanced contexts of reception and 'acceptance'.

Notes

1. I use the words 'literary testimony', 'testimonial literature' and 'literature of testimony' interchangeably in this article.
2. Many journalists and close relatives, including Sanam Bhutto, reacted very strongly to this allegation after the publication of the memoir. (For more details see Walsh (2010).
3. A very recent example of such a killing is Naqeeb ullah Masud, a 27-year-old from South Waziristan, who was allegedly among four suspects killed in an 'encounter' with a police team headed by Senior Superintendent of Police Rao Anwar in the Usman Khaskheli Goth on the outskirts of the metropolis on 13 January 2018. (For more details see 'Imtiaz Ali's Anger on Social Media after Waziristan Man Killed in Karachi "Encounter".' *Dawn*. 18 January 2018. https://www.dawn.com/news/1383540.) Another incident of extrajudicial killing occurred just after a month when according to Jalal Khan, 34-year-old Moosa Khan was tortured to death by the police on 15 February 2018. (For more details see: 'Protest over Another "Extrajudicial" Killing'. *Dawn*. 17 February 2018. https://www.dawn.com/news/1389836.)

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Part II
Interventions in context

4

Between the *Audienzsaal* and the bedroom: A feminist-narratological reading of female sovereignty in Caroline Auguste Fischer's *Der Günstling* (1809)

Aude Defurne

In 1797, German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte wrote the following on the position of women in the public sphere in his *Foundations of Natural Right:*

> The husband is the administrator of all her rights; she wills her rights to be asserted and exercised only in so far as *he* wills them to be. He is her natural representative in the state and in society as a whole. This is her relationship to society, her *public* relationship. She cannot think about exercising her rights directly on her own (Fichte 2000, 299).

In this statement, Fichte denies women any political rights of their own, which is exemplary of the gender ideology that emerged in the course of the eighteenth century and that conditioned the domestication of women. Together with other European philosophers of the period, such as Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel, Fichte 'succeeded in writing women out of the state', as feminist historian Karen Offen summarises (Offen 2000, 72). The irony of the situation, however, is that while these authors were developing their theories about the apolitical 'nature' of women, one of the most powerful persons in Europe was a woman: Catherine the Great, who ruled over the large Russian empire from 1762 until

her death in 1796 (Timm and Sanborn 2007, 17). Yet this example of female sovereignty would not be repeated. As I will be arguing, female political power was erased with the *Ancien Régime* and, in contrast to men, women were offered no alternative in the form of civil political participation.

The present article investigates how literature by German women writers of the early nineteenth century relates to this historical transition. When it comes to the question of female political power, can these texts be more than an aesthetic representation and mediation of their surrounding contexts and actively participate in them? In other words, did female authors try to 'write women back into the state'? Secondly, this article will search for a fruitful methodological and theoretical framework to chart the political potential of women's writing. As such, it will try to contribute to the ongoing debate in literary and cultural studies about the relationship of aesthetic works to their (many) context(s).

'In a republic, men are needed': female sovereignty after 1789

The story of Catherine the Great is, of course, more than exceptional, yet it illuminates a significant change in the political and gender norms of the late-eighteenth century. Although the entire history of sovereignty in Europe reveals a consistent ambivalence towards the idea of female participation in matters of hegemony, during the *Ancien Régime,* dynastic concerns in the continuation of power could supersede 'even the most entrenched attitudes and prejudices' (Earenfight 2007, 2). Examples did not only occur in the Middle Ages or in early modernity: apart from Catharine II, the eighteenth century knew other successful female regents and rulers (Hunt 2010, 325–30; Orr 2004, 2).

Yet the French Revolution, and with it the end of the *Ancien Régime,* marked a turning point in the history of female sovereignty. As is well known, the French Revolution aimed to replace the old monarchical order by a political system that found its origin and legitimation in the idea of a social contract between equal, free, and rational human beings. Women, however, were excluded from this contractual universe. Joan Landes (1988), Carole Pateman (1988), and Lynn Hunt (1992), among others, have convincingly pointed out the blind spots in the seemingly universal and humanist republican ideology.[1] Although the fundamental ideals of the French Revolution might have given rise to more political

rights for women, in the end, they resulted in a profound gendering of the public sphere and a castigation of female public action. Discourses on gender thus played a major role in the formation of a new political system. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, repeatedly warns for the corrupting female influence in society and argues that a healthy republic demands the domestication of women (Landes 1988, 66–89). He insists that 'in a republic, men are needed' (quoted in Landes 87). Joan Landes concludes: 'The Republic was constructed against women, not just without them' (171).

These phenomena did not remain confined to France. Even in regimes where monarchical sovereignty was not radically abolished, new ideas on patriotism, nationalism, and citizenship emerged during the nineteenth century that had significant consequences for the public roles of men and women. As the quote from Fichte's work demonstrates, even the slightest association of women and political action was erased or anxiously debated (Abrams 2002, 213–41; Timm and Sanborn 2007, 36–54). The idea of female participation in national and democratic sovereignty ultimately became 'inconceivable' and 'unthinkable' in political discourse (Frevert 1995, 88 and 93).

Writing women back into the state? Early nineteenth-century women's literature and 'dissensus'

The seemingly 'natural' logic that decides throughout the nineteenth century who belongs to the political community and whose speech is considered meaningful could be categorised as what Jacques Rancière famously described as the order of the 'police' (Rancière 2010, 139). Police operations structure what is visible and invisible, audible and inaudible, they distribute competencies and pin 'bodies' down to certain times and spaces and to 'specific ways of being, seeing and saying' (139). The increasing political exclusion of women throughout the nineteenth century is a good example of this policed organisation of people, places, and capacities. Yet Rancière emphasises that it is possible to break with the seemingly 'natural' order of the police and deprive the prevailing 'distribution of the sensible' of its self-evidence, an intervention which he designates as 'dissensus' (139). According to Rancière, politics and art are intrinsically connected because both can define a form of dissensus. Consequently, he defines the 'politics' of literature as follows: 'Literature as literature is involved in this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing and

saying that frames a polemical common world' (Rancière 2004, 10). In his attempts to trace the political 'efficacy' of art, Rancière does not assume a dichotomy between the 'real world' and the realm of fiction or representation. Instead of a 'real world' situated at 'the outside of art', there is only a certain partition of the sensible that is constantly challenged by artistic and political practices (Rancière 2010, 148). Works of art thus belong to 'a specific sensorium that stands out as an exception from the normal regime of the sensible' (Rancière 2002, 135).

Following Rancière's emphasis on the intervening potential of art, the central question of this article will be whether the regulation of female political activity is 'dissented' in literature written by German women after 1789. One of the reasons why this article zooms in on the German context is because nineteenth-century German feminism was a decidedly unpolitical movement. The idea of women as political subjects was thus absent not only from political discourse, but also from feminist discourse. Until the very end of the century, the German women's rights movement only concentrated on women's possibilities to participate in social and economic life, often rejecting the rare voices who stood up for women's political rights (Evans 1977, 103–4; Frevert 1995, 97–100; Greven-Aschoff 1981, 82–106; Nave-Herz 1997, 11–16). This feminist disinterest and unawareness makes it all the more interesting to trace whether women writers reflected in their fiction upon the socio-political, institutional, and ideological changes described above – in short, whether they attempted to 'write women back into the state'.

Early nineteenth-century women's writing, however, hardly gives evidence of such a dissensual potential. In the first place, the theme of political sovereignty is absent from almost the entire literary production by women in this period. Instead, many works focus on domestic themes, often dealing with a woman's struggle to attain personal sovereignty.[2] One of the few texts written by a female author that is concerned with matters of state and woman's participation in it, is the novel *Der Günstling* (1809) by Caroline Auguste Fischer (1764–1842). The novel deals with the Russian Empress Catherine II, who is not named explicitly: the monarch in question is called Iwanova.[3] Temporal and spatial settings remain oddly vague, the reader only learns that the story is located in a large, northern country governed by a female monarch who is referred to with the name 'the Great' (Fischer 1809, 7 and 11). Yet considering the widespread fame of the Russian Empress in Germany around the time of publication,[4] it may be safe to conclude that nineteenth-century readership associated these descriptions with none but Catherine the

Great. *Der Günstling* was published only thirteen years after her reign ended in 1796, which makes the novel one of the few works in early nineteenth-century German literature that stages a recent female sovereign. Whereas a number of texts on mythological, ancient, and medieval queens were published in this period, novels and dramas staging female rulers whose mark on European politics was still felt, were comparatively rare. By representing a recent manifestation of female political leadership, the novel thus establishes an association between bodies and capacities that were disentangled in the dominant distribution of the sensible. It attempts to make 'visible' and 'sayable' what was barely thinkable in nineteenth-century political discourses, both conservative and progressive (Rancière 2004, 10). The novel thus performs a fundamentally political act, as Rancière, by making reference to Plato, states that politics essentially begins when 'the invisible' is made 'visible' (Rancière 2010, 139).

Caroline Auguste Fischer is an author who has hardly found any attention outside the circles of feminist research, and even within this field, scholarship remains fairly limited in comparison to other women writers of the period.[5] Between 1801 and 1820, Fischer published four novels and several collections of short stories and fairy tales. Although her oeuvre is thematically diverse, all stories reveal the destructive consequences for both men and women of living in societies divided by gender, class, and race.[6] Her work is characterised by a formal and an emancipatory awareness that is 'unmatched in the work of any other German writer of this period', as one critic would have it (Purver 2000, 292). Yet this progressiveness seems absent in *Der Günstling,* as the plot of the novel and the characterisation of the female protagonists seem to reproduce contemporary discourses on women's participation in matters of state. In order to demonstrate how the novel relates to contemporary attitudes and discourses on gender and politics, the reception of Catherine II in Europe during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will first briefly be outlined.

Before the French Revolution, a number of admiring accounts of Catherine the Great appeared, and satirical images usually remained mild. After 1789, however, an abundance of caricatures, pamphlets, and biographies presenting the Russian ruler as a murderous despot or pervert and lascivious woman appeared, which colors her reception until today (Carretta 1994, 23–9; Dawson 2002, 69–77; Hunt 2010, 329–330; Timm and Sanborn 2007, 19–20). A good example is the satirical image An Imperial Stride*!* (*L'enjambée imperiale!*), which appeared originally in England in 1791 and in France in 1792.

It shows a colossal female sovereign with her legs widely spread, one foot pointing to Constantinople, the other to Petersburgh. She literally subordinates the male leaders of Europe, who look up and make suggestive comments, such as the Turkish Sultan who exclaims that 'the whole Turkish Army wouldn't satisfy her'. The image satirises both Catherine's sexual behaviour and imperial ambitions and betrays anxieties about women in power by evoking the so-called 'vagina dentata' motif. In the French version, Pope Pius VI warns the other male sovereigns: 'Voici un abîme prèt à vous engloutir' (Carretta 1994, 50–51). Other caricatures compare the Russian Empress to monstrous female figures such as witches or Medusa, for instance the print *Royal Recreation* (1795) by the hand of the famous British satirist Isaac Cruikshank. Here, General Alexander Suvorov, the recent conqueror of Poland, brings his monarch the heads of Polish civilians killed by his troops – a large and sinister collection with which Catherine 'far outdoes Salome' (66).

These demonising and sexualising representations of Catherine II are not exceptional but must be understood against the background of an 'ideological climate in which the overlapping of female sexual and political activity had become a central metaphor for political decay' (Maza 2013, 86). The association of femininity and dangerous (sexual) power is, of course, part of a longer tradition in European religious and philosophical thought (Timm and Sanborn 2007, 21). Yet from the late eighteenth century onwards, when processes of political modernisation were accompanied by enlightenment discourses on essentialist and dichotomic gender roles, this dogmatic idea was discussed more forcefully and anxiously. A key argument in French revolutionary discourses on the illegitimacy of monarchical rule was the suspicious power of women at French court by means of political intrigues or sexual manipulation. Nothing demonstrates this more sharply, of course, than the fate of Marie-Antoinette, who became the subject of a tireless stream of hateful pornographic images and texts before and during the Revolution (Hunt 1992, 103–14). Her body was imagined in antimonarchical propaganda as the summit of perversion, in other words, antithetical to and dangerous for the 'healthy' republican body politic (Vinken 2003, 89–91). The slander on the natural body of queens, as exemplified by the reception of both Marie-Antoinette and Catherine II, can be interpreted as the climax of the perceived incompatibility between women and (modern) political action.[7] In the course of the nineteenth century, warnings against female power remained meaningful in the demands of the emerging middle

classes for more constitutionalised or republican forms of government in Europe.

The plot of *Der Günstling* seems to reproduce these contemporary scenarios of demonised female power. The title, 'The Favourite', already refers to the connection between female sovereignty, sexuality, and the bourgeois criticism of corrupt court politics. Fischer's epistolary novel consists almost entirely of letters written by Alexander, a statesman at court who writes to his ambitious family at home, though their responses are never shown. Immediately after his arrival at court, queen Iwanova falls passionately in love with him. Yet Alexander, who is already very ambivalent about the fact that a woman is holding sway, reacts with repugnance to her overt amorous advances. Instead, he falls in love with the young girl who is under his guardianship, Maria. As her name suggests, she embodies the contemporary ideal of domestic, virtuous, and innocent femininity. By now, the queen's passion has become an obsession, and when Alexander and Maria finally marry, she turns into a murderous Medea who poisons their wedding bed and kills both.

The stereotypical figure constellation of the novel, associating women with either political corruption or domestic virtue, thus completely affirms ideologies about the unnaturalness of women in political roles. Yet considering the condemning attitudes towards female power, it is not surprising that women's texts do not dissent the political exclusion of women on a direct mimetic or thematic level. Both the conventional plot and the avoidance of any direct reference to the Russian Empress attest to the ambivalence or even anxiety women writers experienced when negotiating the question of female sovereignty in their texts. Yet there is a stream of research that argues that the political potential of women's writing should not (only) be sought on the representational level but (also) on the level of form, style, language, and structure. This is one of the claims of feminist narratology. According to one of the 'founders' of the field, Susan Lanser, feminist narratology is particularly fruitful to study historical literature dealing with culturally sensitive or contested themes, in other words, 'where content may have been closeted by circumstance … and where the story thus can't tell in any literal let alone vulgar way' (Lanser 2015, 37). In the remainder of this article, I will subject Fischer's ostensibly conventional novel to a feminist-narratological reading in order to investigate whether the text contains a dissensual subplot that it cannot tell 'in any literal way'.

Feminist narratology emerged in the 1980s as both an engagement with and a criticism of structuralist or 'classical' narratology. In its

original form, narratology proceeded ahistorically and aimed at distilling laws and typologies characterising *all* narrative texts (Lanser and Warhol 2015, 4). As Gérard Genette formulated in his seminal *Discours du récit* (*Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Genette 1980), the goal was to identify 'elements that are universal, or at least transindividual' (23). Against this universalising paradigm, feminist narratology drew attention to the importance of context, insisting that contextual issues do not only shape the thematic dimension and interpretation of narrative, but its particular narratological, formal, stylistic, and structural properties as well. When feminist narratology was developed by Susan Lanser and Robyn Warhol in the 1980s, this was the first attempt to bridge the gap between ahistorical structuralism on the one hand and political, ideological, and context-sensitive readings of literature on the other. Lanser and Warhol understood their work not only as a corrective to the gender-blindness in narratology, but also to the prevalent mimetic and historicising orientation in most early feminist literary scholarship (Lanser 1986, 344–6; 1989, 3–4). The field gained firm foothold in the 1990s and has by now been widely acknowledged for pioneering the so-called 'postclassical' and contextualist turn in narratology.[8]

Feminist narratology thus offers a different contribution from both narratological and mimetic-based historicist approaches to text. Although this distinction might no longer be as absolute as it was in the 1980s, as late as 2010, Susan Lanser observed that 'the more historicized a narrative project, the less likely it is to be narratological, and … the more narratological a project, the less likely it is to be historical' (Lanser 2010, 186). Indeed, some present-day narrative scholars are still sceptical about the project of contextual narratology (Nünning 2009, 51),[9] while scholars on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German women's writing still tend to devote more attention to sociohistorical conditions than to the formal or structural dimensions of women's texts (Gilleir 2011, 32). Yet as I will demonstrate here, a purely mimetic reading neglecting the 'transgressions, subversions, and contingencies embedded in form' is not the most productive approach to uncover the political potential of early women's writing (Lanser 2015, 25).

The call of feminist narratology to integrate formalist and contextualised readings of literature also resonates with Rancière, who insists in his article 'The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes' that only the link between the 'autonomy' and 'heteronomy' of aesthetic practices guarantees their dissensual faculty (Rancière 2002, 134). As diverse as feminist narratology and Rancièrian theory might appear, they share the same commitment towards the question of the 'politics of literature',

in other words, the question of how literature is 'involved in the actual generation of the ways of thinking and attitudes that stand behind historical development' (Nünning 2009, 61).

'The greatest of all women…': towards a feminist-narratological reading of *Der Günstling*[10]

What is remarkable, first of all, is the question of narrative situation and perspective. The story in *Der Günstling* is told only from the point of view of Alexander's letters, who can thus be classified as an intradiegetic and autodiegetic narrator with internal focalisation. The letters mostly focus on his personal experiences of court life, or they offer direct descriptions of his dialogues with Maria. While her words are, of course, still controlled and shaped by his act of narration, this at least gives a suggestion of her discourse. In contrast, although Catherine II arguably was one of the most powerful persons of her age, her literary alter ego Iwanova hardly receives a voice of her own, which is symptomatic of the real attempts to silence women socially and politically around 1800. In Rancièrian terms, it demonstrates the police distribution of the audible and inaudible, of who counts as 'subjects sharing in a common world, making statements and not simply noise' (Rancière 2004, 10).[11] The opening letter is illustrative of the way Iwanova will be represented throughout the rest of the novel:

> I have arrived. Whether she lives up to her reputation? O yes! A great mind, a great dignity and yet very mild – milder than I expected – but also a lot of self-confidence. That is no criticism. What would she be, what would her people be, when she did not have it? They call her mother, and rightly so. She is it, however, more in mind than in deed, which is unfortunately only seldom hers (Fischer 1809, 1).

Alexander's 'barely hidden criticism, despite his claim to the contrary' and his attempt to subsume Iwanova under conventional categories of femininity indicate the fundamental theme of the story, namely the ambivalence towards women and power (Harms 2013, 46). The first lines of the opening letter already show that the novel will primarily revolve around the 'reputation', i.e. the subjective perception and construction of the sovereign woman. All information we receive about Iwanova are subjective interpretations of Alexander, such as 'It *seems to*

me as if she has changed' (Fischer 1809, 10, my emphasis). His letters are in fact hardly recognisable as such: they consist of a rapid and fragmentary succession of emotional outbursts, fleeting impressions, and sudden thoughts. Through a repeated use of apostrophes, a highly coloured image of the absent Iwanova arises: 'Unhappy woman! On your lonely throne, you begged for love, but it was not given to you. The immense pain threatened to destroy you, so you fled into the jaws of lust' (50).

These thematic and formal elements – monologic narration, an emotional and associative language, a male narrator who is pathologically struggling with his place in society, and the performative construction of a largely absent female character – all remind of a work that had become a literary landmark in early nineteenth-century Germany, namely Goethe's epistolary novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774). Late eighteenth-century literature in Europe was especially influenced by the epistolary novel as created by Richardson and Rousseau, whose novels display letters of all main protagonists, thus creating a more objective account of the events and situating them in broader familial and societal contexts. By radically isolating the perspective of the hero, Goethe broke with this dominant model and introduced a new subjective tone in Western literary history (Safranski 2013, 159–62). Yet rather than merely imitating Goethe's seminal work, Fischer uses its formal innovations for her own purposes and varies them. While her other epistolary novels lie in the tradition of Richardson's and Rousseau's polyphonic novels, adopting the one-sided, almost narcissistic viewpoint of *Die Leiden* enabled her to reveal that both the figures of the dangerous female sovereign and the angelic virtuous woman are in fact subjective and masculine constructions.[12]

Because of its single perspective, the novel seems to offer an unanimously negative account of female rule. In contrast, polyphonic epistolary novels usually create a plurality of divergent opinions, attitudes, and beliefs. Yet the idea that the role of women lies outside the political sphere was hardly disputed around 1809. Hence, it would have been rather difficult to insert a letter that is openly positive about the question of female power – or, in Rancièrian terms, a letter that is directly criticising the police distribution of capacities, functions, and destinies according to gender. Instead, in far more subtle ways, dissenting voices are woven into the seemingly single perspective of the novel.

A first example concerns the voices of Alexander's relatives, who function as the 'narratees' or fictional addressees of his letters. Although their responses are never shown, Alexander repeatedly refers to their answers in his last letters. His writing thus increasingly approaches a

dramatic mode of expression, as Anita Runge points out (Runge 1997, 23). He for instance opens one letter with a seemingly literal repetition of a reproach of his family: '*Thoughtless? And more ruthless to [Iwanova], than I have ever been?* How soft should I be, according to you? – You fear. What do you fear?' (Fischer 1809, 168, my emphasis). According to Runge, the criticism of his family functions as an 'irritating accent' against Alexander's seemingly homogeneous discourse (Runge 1997, 107). It opens another perspective on Iwanova that is confirmed and strengthened through a surprising narrative intervention at the end of the text. While Goethe's novel opens with an introduction by a fictional editor, thus making clear from the outset that Werther's letters are part of an embedded narrative, only at the final page of *Der Günstling* does a fictional editor enter the story. The higher narrative level of the frame is thus only inserted at the end, which is 'the rarest and most striking type' of narrative embedding according to Monika Fludernik (Fludernik 2009, 22). While the editor in Goethe's story largely endorses Werther's viewpoint and conduct and aims at enlarging the reader's identification and sympathy, the editor in *Der Günstling* agrees with the criticism of Alexander's family:

> These were the last lines of Alexander to his family. They have reproached him with thoughtlessness and ruthlessness, unfortunately, with good reason. He, who was normally always in control of himself, could now no longer suppress the repugnance to his enemy. […] But this harshness drove the unhappy woman to extremes (Fischer 1809, 172).

The fact that Alexander's narration is for the first time explicitly questioned by another narrating instance has an alienating effect that is increased by the surprise effect of the change in narrative levels. This formal intervention thus causes a turn on the level of story as well: the editor proclaims that Alexander's treatment of Iwanova has provoked her extreme reaction, which casts doubt on the societal conviction of the inherent danger of female power.

Applying a Rancièrian vocabulary allows us to grasp the dissensual potential of the narrative situation of this novel: the radical subjectivity of Alexander's perspective and the criticising voices of both the narratees and extradiegetic narrator are in fact challenging 'the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world', more in particular, the perception of women as having either an inherently corrupt or unpolitical domestic nature (Rancière 2004, 10). By upsetting

'any steady relationship between manners of speaking, manners of doing and manners of being', Fischer's novel tries to suggest an alternative partition of the sensible (14).

Finally, Alexander's own discourse on Iwanova provokes a more complex reading as well. As a highly educated, intelligent, and upper-class man, he is the type of narrator who is conventionally associated with reliability and authority (Allrath and Surkamp 2004, 155–7). Yet the authority of his narration is increasingly called into question, and at times it even resembles unreliable narration. It becomes increasingly clear that Alexander is not the self-controlling and rational man he claims to be, as he is often overwhelmed by his violent emotions, torn by constant doubts and inner conflicts, and repeatedly contradicts previous convictions (Fischer 1809, 50 and 169). Throughout the story, he struggles in vain to reconcile his personal desires with the ambitions of his family, his duty towards the country, and his social and political dependency on Iwanova (Harms 2013, 53). His increasing despair is made evident by the emotional language of the letters, which are characterised by exclamations, rhetorical questions and broken sentences. This already troubled perception of the story world is further distorted by his growing antipathy towards Iwanova, which becomes especially manifest when he falls ill. During his feverish delirium, the perception of Iwanova is more coloured than ever, and his aversion to her grows into sheer 'madness' (Fischer 1809, 149).

On the other hand, he allows a sneaking respect or admiration for her, for instance when he calls her 'noble' (11), 'mild' and 'kind' (119), praises her self-control and sense of duty (45), and even asserts that she deserves the designation 'The Great' (110). Then again he condemns her for being 'cruel' (30), 'fiery' (39), and 'consumed by a terrible passion' (110). One moment he perceives of her as a terrifying, inhuman, Medusa-like figure,[13] the next he is filled with deep compassion because of her – perceived – loneliness and unhappiness. Alexander's dissonant assertions testify to what extent he seems to struggle with the available codes and with his own categories and models of thought in order to cope with the phenomenon of female rule. Through his discordant speech, a heterogeneous plurality of different, incompatible 'versions' of Iwanova arises, which again undermines the self-evidence of police dogmas and ideologies.

The last formal strategy of importance here is plot structure. The story is driven by the two scenarios that have dominated Western literature at least since the late eighteenth century: the marriage plot and the plot of the *Bildungsroman*. Both plot structures are intimately

connected with the values, norms, and world views advocated by the emerging middle class. Principles such as the idealisation of the bourgeois family or the ideology of the separate spheres also figure prominently in *Der Günstling*. On the other hand, as scholars have rightly noted, Fischer's protagonists also look critically at some aspects of bourgeois life. Alexander denounces, for instance, the exhausting work regime that is expected from him as a statesman, as it is undermining his mental and physical health (Harms 2013, 55–6) and might threaten his relationship with Maria (Dawson 2002, 84). In general, however, most values and norms associated with the nineteenth-century middle classes seem to be endorsed on the level of story.

This ideological stance makes the end of the novel all the more striking. As the story proceeds, *Der Günstling* seems to turn more and more into a parody on the *Bildungsroman:* Alexander initially left his family to search for professional and private success, but because he rejects Iwanova, he loses his career and social status, and his wedding ends in violence and death. *Der Günstling* thus engages critically with two prominent literary genres of its time: the epistolary novel and the *Bildungsroman,* of which the prototypical example, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1794/96), was also written by Goethe. Instead of outlining the *Bildung* of its subject, Alexander's letters register his increasing alienation and collapse. The novel also responds to the genre's exclusive focus on *Bildung* as a male process, by showing how Maria's eagerness to receive a scientific and artistic education is disapproved by Alexander, who dismisses her inquisitiveness as something 'that could distract her attention away from me' (Fischer 1809, 56). Through this manipulation of generic conventions, the novel reveals the incongruities of Enlightenment ideals such as *Bildung* and exposes the regulation in bourgeois gender ideology of 'the "proper" relationship between what a body "can" do and what it cannot' (Rancière 2010, 140). By placing one woman in the position of a political ruler and the other in the position of a subject striving for *Bildung*, maturation and self-realisation, the novel introduces female bodies 'into a new configuration of the sensible' and participates in a 're-distribution in the whole set of relationships between capacities and incapacities', which is a central example of 'aesthetic rupture' (140).

The figure of Maria demonstrates that the only possible course for female characters lies in the marriage plot. Today, feminist narratologists have well established the dominance of this heteronormative scenario in narratives featuring female protagonists.[14] Yet as Judith Roof revealed in her seminal study *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (Roof 1996),

not only the novel of marriage is intrinsically heteronormative but virtually *any* narrative that is oriented towards futurity and closure – as, indeed, most stories usually are. She points out to what extent prevailing understandings about what narratives are, depend on endings (6). She emphasises that narratives are essentially heterocentric even when they do not appear to represent sexuality at all. Roof is in other words not so much interested in literal representations of sexualities, but instead, she traces how narrative's teleological structure metaphorically reaffirms and reconfigures a reproductive heteroideology (xxviii).

Because of its emphasis on the developing love story between Alexander and Maria, the plot of Fischer's novel seems to be driven by a teleological development towards the founding of a heteronormative couple and nuclear bourgeois family. Yet the abrupt and violent ending of the novel interferes with this scenario. One could raise objections against this analysis by arguing that Maria's and Alexander's death is nothing more than a variation of the marriage plot: after all, the extradiegetic narrator describes their death as their 'union for all eternity' (Fischer 1809, 173), and the connection between love and death is a conventional topos in the history of Western literary imagination, as, for instance, Denis de Rougemont has argued (De Rougemont 1983). Moreover, their mutual death once more replays the heteronormative 'narrative structure of joinder and completion to which we are accustomed as the premise of narrative satisfaction' (Roof 2015, 49). From this angle, the ending of Fischer's novel would not so much undermine but rather *reproduce* the bourgeois and heteronormative marriage plot. However, it can be argued that the 'eternal union' of Alexander and Maria follows a radically different logic. The tragic ending of the lovers was anticipated by a letter of Maria, inserted halfway in the novel, in which she describes a prophetic dream about her and Alexander being killed by Iwanova and ascending to heaven:

> Would it be possible for two people to only think of one another? To only find happiness in one another? That must be an indescribable and blessed state! … There was a large, glorious angel, who caught us with his wings. … We heard heavenly music … We floated higher and higher, there were a thousand stars around us … it was as if you were me, and I were you, and I knew … everything you thought (Fischer 1809, 122–5).

According to Anita Runge, the letter affirms the image of Maria as 'child-woman' (Runge 1997, 60). Yet it presents more than a mere sentimental

and naive fantasy: it is the only moment in the novel when a female voice disrupts the dominant masculine and heteronormative logic. Maria dreams of a removal of all differences and boundaries between lovers in another dimension, characterised by an almost static and eternal temporality. Her vision, refusing closure, futurity, and productivity, is at odds with the logic of the bourgeois family, which hinges upon reproduction, progress, and strict differences between the male and female position. This challenge to normative conceptions of time is what several queer theorists have called 'queer temporality.' As Judith Halberstam has argued in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Halberstam 2011), time is not a neutral or objective given, nor is it value free. In dominant conceptions of time and history, temporal development is interpreted as a linear movement that builds on the old and proceeds according to a generational logic. The main social form connected to this temporal model is that of the family, with its emphasis on lineage and tradition (70–75). Queer challenges to time, on the other hand, seek for alternative ways of relating people and operate 'against the logics of succession, progress, development, and tradition proper to hetero-familial development' (75).

These arguments allow us to conclude that Fischer's novel is *queering* the heteronormative, bourgeois plots of both marriage and *Bildung*. To take this argument even one step further, I would suggest that the inherent structure and temporality of epistolary fiction *in se*, where the narrator during the act of writing can have no sense yet of the final outcome of the story, disrupts and *queers* the specific temporal and teleological organisation crucial to both the plots of romance and *Bildung*.[15] This leads to the important insight that, although some aspects of bourgeois ideology are criticised on the level of story, these world views undergo a much more profound subversion on the formal level.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have traced how Caroline Auguste Fischer's novel *Der Günstling* is shaped by and responds to its historical moment, especially when it comes to the political exclusion of women. Although I have focused on one individual case study, the analysis has shed light on the 'political' – in the Rancièrian sense of the term – potential of early nineteenth-century German women's writing as a whole. Moreover, it has addressed a central debate in literary studies since decades, namely the relationship between a literary text and its (many) context(s).

In the first place, this contribution has shown that even neglected and ostensibly conventional literary texts can actively negotiate their relationship to broader contextual issues, instead of being only a passive echo of prevailing societal discourses. *Der Günstling* seems to reproduce police distributions regarding gender and power on a mimetic level, but a combination of feminist-narratological and Rancièrian analysis has proven to be a fruitful approach to reveal its dissensual faculty. By taking up two dominant literary genres of her time and consistently incorporating innovations on the level of form and structure, Fischer can challenge the self-evident de-politicisation of femininity in contemporary ideology and discourse. As such, the novel essentially reminds of and affirms the scenarios of artistic political intervention as explored by Jacques Rancière. The societal consensus on woman's domestic nature and the ambivalence towards female political participation can explain why Fischer did not incorporate direct statements on women's political exclusion in her novel, but used narratological devices and intricate plot lines to define a form of dissensus instead. Hence, a final conclusion is that, although formalist and politically engaged readings are to a certain extent still considered incompatible, only a methodology combining a narratological and historicist approach can elucidate the political efficacy of a text that cannot dissent 'in any literal way'.

Notes

1. Apart from Landes', Hunt's, and Pateman's fundamental work, numerous other studies discuss the changing position of women in the public and political sphere during the gradual transition in Europe from *Ancien Régime* to modern forms of political government. Some excellent recent studies include Abrams (2001), especially the chapter 'Politics, Nation and Identity'; the chapter 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' in Timm and Sanborn (2007); and chapters 8 and 9 in Margaret Hunt (2010).
2. Many novels written by female authors in this period explore the difficulties for women in their striving for individual autonomy, independence, and self-development, often connecting this with power conflicts in the private sphere, such as those between a female protagonist and her father or husband. Examples include novels by Friederike Helene Unger (*Julchen Grünthal. Eine Pensionsgeschichte,* 1784), Sophie Mereau (*Das Blüthenalter der Empfindung. Roman,* 1794; *Marie,* 1798; *Amanda und Eduard. Ein Roman in Briefen,* 1803; *Die Flucht nach der Hauptstadt,* 1806), Therese Huber (*Louise. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Konvenienz,* 1796; *Die Ehelosen*, 1829), Caroline Auguste Fischer (*Die Honigmonathe,* 1802; *Margarethe,* 1812; *Justine,* 1818), Johanna Schopenhauer (*Gabriele. Ein Roman,* 1819/20; *Sidonia,* 1827/28), Ida Hahn-Hahn (*Gräfin Faustine,* 1841).
3. This name could also refer to another eighteenth-century female ruler of Russia, who was much less known and less powerful: Empress Anna Ivanovna, who ruled from 1730 until 1740.
4. For the German reception of Catherine the Great around 1800, see Dawson (2002).

5 One reason for this is that Fischer was not connected to a famous male author or to one of the literary circles of her days, unlike authors such as Sophie Mereau, Johanna Schopenhauer, Sophie von La Roche, or Bettina von Arnim.

6 Fischer connects questions of racial and patriarchal oppression in the story *William der Neger* (1818), which is considered the first story in German literature that represents a love relationship between a black man and a white woman.

7 In the wake of Ernst Kantorowicz's famous theory of the king's two bodies, the question of how the dual concepts of the natural body and mythical-political body apply to female monarchs has recently started to intrigue scholars. See Schulte (2006). Studies focusing on late eighteenth-century queens include Vinken (2003) and Hunt (2002).

8 Roy Sommer has for instance called feminist narratology 'the earliest and most established strand of contextual narratology' (Sommer 2007, 61), and David Herman remarks in his introduction to *New Narratologies* that Lanser's early work 'reflects the move toward integration and synthesis that is one of the hallmarks of postclassical narratology' (Herman 1999, 11).

9 See for instance Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, who state that 'the contextualists have so far *failed to provide a convincing justification* for the notion that narratology should or could be transformed into a theory of interpretation capable of taking "contextually driven concerns" (835) into account' (Kindt and Müller 2003, 415, my emphasis).

10 *Der Günstling,* Fischer (1809, 11). All translations from the novel are my own.

11 In their chapter on multiperspectivity in *Erzähltextanalyse und Gender Studies,* Allrath and Surkamp present an overview of how the specific narrative perspective of a novel could be influenced by, relate to, or express societal relations and hierarchies, especially with regard to gender (Allrath and Surkamp 2004, 159–70).

12 Anita Runge also emphasises that the one-sided and subjective perspective of the novel exposes how the female characters of *Der Günstling* are the product of male anxieties and wishes (Runge 1997, 59).

13 Throughout the story, Alexander continuously describes Iwanova as having 'a burning eye' (Fischer 1809, 20), a 'flaming gaze' (99), 'fire eyes' (170), etc.

14 See for instance Susan Stanford Friedman, who argues that the *Bildungsroman* is 'a genre that for women has been dominated by the marriage plot … the narrative drive (kinesis) centered in courtship; narrative closure (stasis) achieved in engagement and immanent marriage' (Friedman 1996, 123).

15 Robyn Warhol makes a similar argument concerning serial fiction in her essay 'Queering the Marriage Plot: How Serial Form Works in Maupin's *Tales of the City*' (Warhol 2001, 233–4).

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5
Literary form and limited liability: it-narratives and the context of corporate law in the British public sphere, 1860–1880

Jakob Gaardbo Nielsen

> 'What philosopher can explain to me the nature of the causes of which I am the vile effect?'
>
> Laurence Oliphant. 'Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company (Limited)'. 1876.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, it has become common to imagine corporate and financial bodies as autonomous or even cognisant entities. The concept of 'corporate personhood', the idea that companies, as 'artificial persons', are, in fact, legal subjects separate from the humans who form them, underscores this metaphorical autonomy, even if it remains a somewhat controversial concept in corporate law. The legal definition of a company as a 'corporate person' is useful insofar as it safeguards individuals from personal liability and thus facilitates investment, but it also sits uneasily with ethical and legal concerns about corporate responsibility. As a legal concept, as well as a cultural metaphor, corporate personhood also mediates a fantasy of containment – a fantasy of a separate and autonomous place known as 'the financial sector' in which the business of trade takes place according to obscure rules and conducted by experts who are functionally if not ethically 'in the know'. Even so, incorporation is a lot less controversial today than it used to be. In the late nineteenth century, when incorporation was deregulated and gradually became a common form of business

organisation, the idea of a corporate person was still highly controversial and gave rise to an inflamed ethical and political discussion about corporate responsibility. The debate took place in several discourses but became particularly nuanced in fiction, where the abstractions of high finance could be interpreted, questioned, and concretised by the narrative and rhetorical devices of imaginative writing.

In this article, I shall focus on the late Victorian period, when rapid financial development afforded new and controversial ways of making money in corporate enterprise. One of the most controversial developments, propagated by deregulatory legislation in the 1840s and 1850s, was the increased availability of company incorporation and the extension of 'limited liability' privileges to smaller and smaller private companies. Corporate personhood was a highly controversial topic (economically, politically and ethically) in the 1870s and sparked debates across the public sphere. In this context, narrative fiction, I shall argue, played a key part in negotiating the ethics of these new financial institutions. Literary discourse was able to shed light on the concrete influences of changing economic structures on social and interpersonal experience – to displace finance from its rhetorical obscurity and resituate it in a domain of cultural and aesthetic visibility. Literary devices such as anthropomorphism, narrative form, and prosopopoeia helped common readers understand how corporate finance worked, paradoxically enough by representing companies as fundamentally uncanny or contradictory entities.

More specifically, I shall analyse the relationship between the new developments in corporate law and a contemporary literary text that built its internal structure directly on this logic of corporate organisation. In his short fictional essay from 1876, 'Autobiography of a Joint Stock Company (Limited)', Laurence Oliphant lets a joint stock company be the narrator of its own biography, thus giving narrative authority to an abstract, immaterial financial entity. This anthropomorphic perspective, typical of object tales or 'it-narratives', dramatises the issue of corporate 'personhood' in a highly specialised and direct way. Oliphant's text is entangled, formally as well as contextually, in its historical moment and gives literary form to a discussion about incorporation and liability that was not possible in the financial press, in political economy, or even in novels – a form that engages *formally* with the economic context in question.

In this article, I aim to demonstrate that Oliphant's text offers a unique take on the public debate about joint stock companies in the 1870s. The formal nature of its intervention in an economic context puts it within something of a blind spot in the field of literary

studies of economics and finance, which has been predominantly organised around studies of the realist novel.[1] It draws on different generic structures – differently orientated connections between writer, text, audience and context – that are difficult to reconcile with either formalist or historicist methodologies and thus, I argue, calls for an analysis based on an extended concept of *form*. In the first section, I briefly introduce the field of literary studies of finance and argue for an expansion of its traditional empirical horizon to include, on a more consistent basis, financial it-narratives. In the second section, I briefly flesh out the specific aspects of late Victorian corporate law which relate to corporate personhood. In the third section, I analyse Oliphant's text with an emphasis on the nature of its engagement with this financial context. In the fourth, fifth and concluding sixth section, I discuss these insights by reflecting historiographically on the use of the 'context concept' in the field and, referring to recent scholarly works on form, suggest a methodological reorientation towards the historicity of economic and aesthetic *forms*.

Economic contexts and the social cycle of things

The contemporary scholarly field of literary studies of economics has always had an erratic and changeable attitude towards the concept and methodology of historical context. In a recent survey article, Nancy Henry attributes the conflict between (new) formalist and historicist methodologies to a fondness for comparisons between 'nineteenth-century economics [and] the present economic climate' (Henry 2015, 217). On the one hand, formalist critics argue that the 'truly financial element' (Kornbluh 2014, 13) of literary realism is not the contexts of contemporary finance, but the *form* of 'aesthetic disclosure' (13). On the other, historicists argue that the specificity and particularity of a given historical moment and the specific public debates about finance it occasions, constitute the determining frame of reference for understanding a work of fiction as an utterance which is, so to speak, in dialogue with its own historicity. Excellent research is conducted from both sides of the spectrum, but the best new works, Henry concludes, 'are those that balance historicism and formalism, providing both viable historical narratives and original interpretations of literary texts' (Henry 2015, 221). This division is by no means absolute, but most scholars in the field have a stake in the theoretical discussion about context, which is particularly pertinent in this field.

My aim in this article is not to distance myself from the field, nor to attempt reconciliation between historicism and formalism. Rather, I want to address the empirical horizon which has kept scholars predominantly preoccupied with the novel, while the significance of other genres of literary fiction about finance has been somewhat marginalised. To be sure, the research on the major British novelists has been crucial for a historically and culturally qualified understanding of nineteenth-century anxieties about finance, but other texts existed that afforded, and still afford, other insights which were not determined by the material and commercial circumstances of novel writing and publication.

It-narratives, also known as 'novels of circulation' or 'object tales', are a good example of this. In short, it-narratives are fictional narratives (short as well as novel-length) about objects or animals, often narrated in the first person by these objects or animals themselves, usually based on the satirical insights afforded by the free movement of mundane things, inscribed narratively with aesthetic and cognitive sensibilities, between the sociopolitical boundaries of society. The genre became popular during the growth of commercial society in eighteenth-century Britain, and contains several subdivisions (animal narratives, organ narratives etc.). In the following, I will focus on the so-called 'specie narrative' in which monetary tokens narrate their horizontal movements across financial networks and the hierarchies of commercial society.[2] A 'curious record of British society's relationship with its material framework' (Blackwell 2007, 12), the genre and its preoccupation with the silent and hidden circuits of monetary things indeed offered a salient allegory of a society increasingly organised by the flow of money and paper in only partially visible networks.

The defining feature of it-narratives is the narrative authority it attaches to the perspective of objects. Coins, bank notes and other monetary tokens 'move freely' between sociopolitical boundaries, because they move organised according to the horizontal logic of the market rather than the vertical hierarchies that restrict human interaction to predetermined relationships. Liz Bellamy has distinguished it-narratives from novels by attributing the former with a preoccupation with disunity, fragmentation, and a lack of narrative closure. Novels, she argues, 'are primarily structured around a plot that culminates in the establishment of permanent bonds between individuals' (Bellamy 2007, 122). Whereas novelistic realism depends on internal continuity and narrative coherence, it-narratives, she argues, represent a social reality characterised by disunity, disorder, and permanent flux: 'the [social] relationships […] are inherently transitory […] They are narratives of

irresolution' (122). The objects themselves are often characterised by a lack of 'independent agency' (121), which makes them subject to the haphazard movements and motivations of human actors, but this in turn affords them this different horizon of information. Such a fictional perspective allows writers to imagine commercial society from a specialised position which subsequently frames the narratives as 'disclosures' of covert information.

This element of disclosure also shapes the formal properties of it-narratives. Essentially a string of more or less random encounters between objects and people, their narratives often take the form of 'an accumulation of interpolated accounts' (122) rather than a causal chain of events. It-narratives resist causality, Bellamy argues and, while this diminished contemporary taste for their literary merits, it also allowed them to render commercial reality in a different form. She continues:

> By refusing to enclose individual stories within a structure of fictional containment, these works are able to explore the social system from a range of ideological positions and with a satirical vision that avoids the reassertion of hegemony and negation of subversion that tends to be implicit within narrative resolution (124).

It-narratives, then, probe the disunity of commercial reality, the rhizomatic and networked ontology of commercially mediated social relations. Bellamy's argument might be overstressed, as the element of disunity and incoherence are also very much at work in realist novels focused on the obscurity of modern commerce and finance.[3] She is right, however, in asserting that these texts are fundamentally different (formally and structurally) from the classic novels of Victorian realism and that their stories about economic life provide insights calibrated according to a different and highly specialised literary mediation. Therefore, they should be analysed with a different set of terms when it comes to the distinction between the narrative itself and the economic context in which it is nested.

Corporate persons in the age of financialisation

In the 1870s, that context was still influenced by the introduction and early naturalisation of joint stock companies. Until the 1840s and 1850s, such companies had been a relatively rare sight. Before the company

Acts of these decades, incorporation and its attendant privileges of limited liability was only granted to major public works such as railways, canals, and mining operations (Poovey 2003, 9–18; Taylor 2006, 3–8).[4] The political aversion to incorporation had roots in the disastrous South Sea bubble in 1719–20, and only started to give way to free trade and *laissez-faire* arguments after the Joint Stock Companies Act of 1844. The proponents for deregulation contended that the strictness of corporate law was an impediment to economic growth (Taylor 2006, 9) and an unnecessary restriction of freedom (Robb 1992, 24). Because of the possibilities of risk diversification afforded by limited joint stock companies, the private wealth of directors as well as shareholders became safer from bankruptcy and fraud suits and financial speculation consequently became less perilous and much more profitable.[5] The economic 'surrogacy' provided by the limited liability principle drew new lines between economic and personal life and upturned many of the prevailing notions of economic responsibility, ownership, and agency within the economic sphere. This gave rise to a long and heated public discussion about the ethics of risk diversification and the unsettled connection between personal and economic integrity it entailed.[6] This debate took place in many discourses, but assumed a special significance within narrative fiction in its various forms: novels of all kinds, short prose fiction, satires, even lyrical poetry and – of course – it-narratives. Literary form thus became a key player in negotiating new concepts and categories related to corporate law and finance, because it could mediate, in a publicly intelligible way, the ways in which abstract economic forms permeated not just the financial sector, but the private lives of individuals.

'An abstract being like myself': corporate personhood and literary form

While the popular serial novels about finance, such as Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit* (1857) and Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875) rather famously provide insights into Victorian anxieties about finance, it-narratives offer a different and more direct staging of how the contemporary public imagination was troubled by the proliferation of joint stock companies and financial capital. Laurence Oliphant's 'Autobiography of a Joint Stock Company (Limited)' from 1876 is one of the most radical attempts to approximate literary form to the specificity of joint stock

companies. By telling a story about corporate finance from the perspective of a financial entity, not from human economic agents, it is able to foreground the ethical problem of limited liability in a way which highlights implicit tensions in the form of corporate personhood. The narrator reports on its 'brief and stormy career' (Oliphant 2003, 327) as a limited company (presumably a large international bank)[7] from its 'gestation' in the brain of an adventurous speculator via its birth at the registrar of joint stock companies to its 'deathbed' in the 'Court of Chancery', all of which is narrated in the past tense from the point of view of the company in its final hours before 'liquidation'.

The company narrator is anthropomorphised through the autobiographical coding and narrative structure of the text. With no byline, the text further signals a satirical element, while also inscribing itself within the collective authority of the periodical in which it appears.[8] The paratext thus allows the company narrator to speak from a position of testimonial authority. The company has supposedly ruined thousands and extends this 'most timely and instructive warning' (328) as penance for its crimes. It asks to be recognised as a fellow victim of larger, systemic shifts in society. As victim and offender both, it claims a moral faculty, and the text employs displays of empathy and psychological interiority to calibrate reader response to sympathetic engagement. The narrator addresses its anticipated readership directly: 'I address myself to you, fair readers […] the parsons, the widows, the orphans, the officers on half pay, the rich squires, the titled dupes' (328). It also acknowledges that it is far more likely to be read by speculators, brokers, and other stock-jobbers, who will read its story 'as thieves read the police reports […] on account of the affectionate interest they take in the profession' (329).[9] The tension between its moral conscience and sense of interiority on the one hand, and its complete lack of independent agency on the other, is the primary narrative tension afforded by the coupling of an anthropomorphic perspective and the formal logic of the limited company. The company narrator's moral faculty affords no jurisdiction over the actions ordered of it by the board of directors. It wields no influence over its own actions and exists solely as a vehicle for the will, whims and actions of its board members.

Oliphant's narrator, in other words, anthropomorphises a limited company into a recognisably moral subject by calibrating its narrative form to the elements of disclosure and empathetic engagement afforded by the coding of the text as a deathbed testimony. The position of psychological interiority from which the company speaks is thus different from the empirical reality it inhabits insofar as the former

allows for moral judgements while the latter (the financial sector) is a space of action rather than contemplation. This incommensurability between a sphere of action and a sphere of contemplation underlines the notion that financial activity is closed off to the jurisdictions of ethics and even politics.

The generic framework of the it-narrative, however, is what gives the text its unique narrative structure. The company narrator thinks and narrates as a single psychic entity, but senses material reality through the various pieces of paper (prospectus and share certificates) on which it exists in writing at any given time. It is thus characterised simultaneously by centrality and decentrality, by psychological unity and simulacral proliferation. The company began its maturation in the mind of a speculator, was born into material reality on the prospectus offered to initial investors and from there spread out to countless pieces of paper, as the prospectus and share documents multiplied, duplicated, and spread to the pockets of all the syndicate members and eventually, the shareholders. This gives it access to otherwise inaccessible information. The company often explains how it obtains certain snippets of incriminating information from within the jacket pockets of the very people for whom it assumes liability. This is also the way the text introduces narrative tension and suspense, as in the following case, where the company suddenly sees itself implicated in an insider-trading scheme which eventually overinflates it into insolvency.

> I must here remind my reader that having been printed in so many forms, I now filled the pockets of all the syndicate members, and that it was owing to this circumstance that I overheard the following conversation in Mr. Mire's office [one of the directors] (343).

This decentral aisthesis is the key point I want to highlight here. As a morally well-adjusted, thinking subject, the company narrator is characterised by centrality – whatever the size and scope of the company, it remains *one* individual, one corporate person. At the same time, however, the senses by which it registers events and people around function according to a differently proliferating logic. In turn, this networked sensibility supplies the corporate person with *too much* information – knowledge which it can never translate into action except by writing it down in autobiography, by bearing witness.

This use of decentral narrative logic differentiates Oliphant's text from other specie narratives, in which narrator and sensibility usually inhabit the same, singular material object. It is not a single coin or bank

note circulating randomly, but a proliferating genre of economic writing (the forms representing a certain denomination of shares) that 'reports back' to the corporate entity they collectively constitute. This narrative perspective explodes the logic of physical proximity and subsumes plot and narrator both in a kind of formal stalemate in which the forms of cognitive sequence (thinking, writing) and spatial networking (circulation of paper) continually stress the contradictory nature of a speaking limited company. Interestingly, however, this contradiction allows the company to disclose otherwise covert information and inscribes its disclosure in a moral framework that is calibrated specifically to evaluate and judge the consequences of the information disclosed. Who better to judge the ethics of corporate finance than a financial company? The abstract body of the narrator, its network of sensory nodes mysteriously comprising a centralised cogito, mirrors at once the new networks of financial trade mediated entirely by paper and the telegraph and the divorce between ownership and control that the Company Acts of mid- and late-nineteenth-century Britain gradually implemented. As a moral surrogate for the syndicate members, the company assumes all the economic liability, but also, as a thinking, moral subject, all the guilt, shame, and embarrassment that must be removed from the equation if a company is to be profitable on the money market. Drawing on the vocabulary of aesthetic and political forms as 'comparable patterns that operate on a common plane', recently advocated by Caroline Levine (Levine 2015), one could say that a bounded whole affording centrality and singularity and a network affording proliferation and connectedness are overlapping here. Over the course of the text, this collision, which is essentially a collision between a literary form (narrative time) and a financial one (incorporated companies and their networks of circulating paper), mediates the central contradiction which is being addressed, namely, that the principle of corporate personhood, while immensely profitable, involved an ethical and social problematic for which the discourses of political economy or economic theory had an imperfect vocabulary. The core ideas behind limited liability, personhood, incorporation, and the attendant atomisation of ownership become the formal principles of the literary text itself. Limited liability translates into apathy, while the scattered ownership structure of incorporated companies organises the aesthetic experience of the company according to the network of sensory nodes (i.e. shares) that represent its substance (i.e. capital stock). The text's central tension is based on this contradiction

inherent in incorporation (the 'giving body' to an abstract entity is not an ethically neutral operation) and comes to symbolise the moral impotence of modern finance – the narrator's inability to translate knowledge contemplation into action is the tragedy of its 'artificial' life.

This is not an outright accusation of financial capitalism. Rather, by letting one of the 'beings' of the 'financial sector' speak, Oliphant removes it (the financial sector) from the artificial domain of obscurity this has come to imply in the public discourses surrounding the financial market. The financial sector is not a mystical domain where hidden forces such as capitalism secretly govern the course of history. It is rather, it seems, merely another *social* sphere of action where high and low interests intersect. Oliphant's text thus gives specificity and context to the abstractions of financial capitalism, showing how limited companies are not ethereal entities (as they may appear) but concrete activities entered upon by concrete people motivated by regular interests and emotions. As opposed to the general trend of specie narratives, where money narrators tend to be relatively unconcerned with the 'paradox of value' and to have 'an unshakeable conviction of their own utility' (Bellamy 2012, xlvii), Oliphant's company narrator is extremely preoccupied with its nature and functionality as a joint stock company. While it acknowledges the potential of joint stock companies, affectionately referred to as 'my fraternity', this initial credit is quickly exhausted as the 'moral element' temporarily infused in its 'system' becomes 'expelled' (Oliphant 2003, 328) over the course of the narrative.

To conclude, then, Oliphant's curious text exposes the notion of a rationally coherent financial market as a fiction; a fiction whose function is to alienate the investing public from the prosaic nature of finance, the baseness of the interests proliferating in the modern market, and the specificities of ownership and management of joint stock companies, prone and vulnerable as they are to speculation and more or less illegitimate trading practices. Another fiction this implicitly engages is the notion of 'Economic Man' and the transparent and rational nature of 'the market'. If the entities who mediate market activity are allowed to speak, it seems, they tell not of informed rationality but rather of incoherence and erratic decision-making. The warning, then, is not against capitalism, but against letting greedy speculators play Doctor Frankenstein with your money – you never know which monstrosities your pension funds might end up creating and what kind of life (social as well as ethical) that monster will have to endure.

Financial metaphysics: form, genre, and history

Oliphant's 'Autobiography' appropriates a specific historical context and invests itself directly in the discussion of joint stock companies that began around mid-century and carried on through to the twentieth century. This kind of contextual entanglement is not, of course, unique to Oliphant's text. Many novelists of the Victorian age based their plots more or less implicitly on contemporary financial crises or fraud cases. In Oliphant's case, however, this reflection on contemporary finance is bilateral and occurs principally on the level of *form*. This happens in a way which, I shall now be arguing, destabilises the prevailing scholarly narrative about how literary narratives about the financial sector should be conceptualised historiographically.

In order to elucidate this point, it is necessary to reassess the prevalent concept of context. Oliphant's text uses the context of corporate law actively, as a formal architecture which organises the text into a literary approximation of the incorporation and limited liability principles. Unlike realist novels, which attempt to describe the different aspects that characterise the historical reality of their characters with a certain degree of accuracy or plausibility, the 'Autobiography' works instead toward a kind of philosophical realism, striving not for accuracy in detail but specificity in principle. The relationship between text and context is thus not of reflection or determination, but of appropriation and participation. This may be said of some novels as well, to a certain extent, but the 'Autobiography' is unique in the way it intermingles the form of its content with the form of its discursive logic. The generic mix that determines it is key to this hybridity. As it-narrative, it enacts and dramatises the hidden circuits of financial entities; as autobiography, it anthropomorphises a tale of corporate greed into useful information (and warning) for potential investors (the implied reader); and as testimony, it unveils and disenchants the machinery of joint stock companies and the kinds of relationships they institute between the people they connect. Finally, it then forces corporate personhood into cultural visibility by representing it as a matter of empathy rather than analysis. Through this combination of diverse genres, Oliphant's text is able to frame the question of finance in a way that is markedly different from most other accounts. Instead of representing the 'financial sector' as a place where people go to become either rich or destitute through the application of chance or the dark arts of speculation, he deconstructs the spatial metaphor on which the notion builds. By building the principles of incorporation and limited liability into literary form, he is

not *representing* joint-stock enterprise, but *enacting it as a specific way of organising and categorising a plausible reality*. The underlying principles of the joint stock company with limited liability, namely, the separation of ownership and control and the limitation of economic responsibility, thus become the formal scaffolding to a mode of thinking mediated by the object of thought itself.

This makes Oliphant's text something of a curiosity within the paradigm of context and historiography currently being debated by literary and cultural researchers. The scholarly discussion of formalist and historicist methodology is still highly influenced by Rita Felski's provocatively titled article from 2011, 'Context Stinks!' Felski laments the Sisyphus-like pendulum that has come to determine literary scholarship, swinging it back and forth between formalist and historicist methodologies with an institutional rhythm of a few decades. The pendulum hinges at the 'context concept' which, she argues, 'inveigles us into endless reiterations of the same dichotomies: text versus context, word versus world, literature versus society and history, internalist versus externalist explanations of works of art' (Felski 2011, 576). From the vantage point of Latour's network theory, she instead advances the actor-network model as an alternative to the text-context distinction, one that allows the critic to do justice to both the 'singularity' and 'worldliness' of literary texts, by analysing them as 'non-human actors [...] enmeshed in a motley array of attachments and associations' (589). Felski therefore, on the one hand, charges historicists of imprisoning texts 'in their moment of origin' (575) and on the other hand, formalists of a naive kind of 'transcendental' timelessness (575). Actor-network theory is the alternative, she argues, allowing the critic to see 'the social [...] only in its instantiations, in the sometimes foreseeable, sometimes unpredictable ways in which ideas, texts, images, people, and objects couple and uncouple, attach and break apart' (578). Felski is not pitting formalism against historicism, nor seeking middle ground. Instead, she proposes a flat ontology of text that renders both meaningless.

Interestingly, Felski accuses the context concept of 'knowing [the text] far better than it can ever know itself' (574). In Oliphant's case, however, the 'knowing' flows in the opposite direction. As a literary text formally founded on the specificity of a certain context – joint stock companies and limited liability – the 'Autobiography' becomes meaningless if viewed from either methodological polarity: from a strictly formalist perspective, it is easy to overlook the role played by a contingent discussion about joint stock companies taking place within in its form, while a strictly historicist reading is likely to overlook the

significance of its aesthetic qualities, its complex formal structure and assign it to the contextual orbits of the popular novels. The latter has so far been the fate of Oliphant's text, which is commonly referred to as a secondary curiosity in the margins of novel studies, but rarely analysed in its own right. As a periodical essay satirically masquerading as autobiography, it calls for a different and more compound set of terms, especially in relation to form and context and this discrepancy may explain the relative scarcity of literary studies dealing with it.[10] From the perspective of novel studies, the text fails to achieve the transhistoricity of 'exceptional texts' and does not, as a work of periodical short fiction, seem to merit independent discussion in that context. However, when analysed as a work of narrative fiction in its own right, the text becomes, in my view, highly exceptional, and of methodological relevance to the field of literary studies of finance.

A slight recalibration of terms remains necessary to explain the significance of a text such as Oliphant's in this field. First of all, it is important to remember that any literary text is a product of aesthetic mediation. Even in the late nineteenth century, any text about finance, literary or not, struggled with the scarcity of reliable information about companies and institutions. Indeed, as Mary Poovey has pointed out, 'the lack of readily available information means that every piece of writing about finance in this period [nineteenth century] was an attempt to understand and interpret something that was only partially visible and constantly in a state of change' (Poovey 2003, 4). Credible journalistic accounts of how financial institutions and companies really functioned were rare, so any one individual writing about financial institutions would never have access to the full picture and any resulting texts would be inherently speculative. Oliphant's text strives for economic and social realism, but is, perhaps, more akin to a kind of philosophical conjecture than mimetic representation. As aesthetic mediation, it works performatively, not mimetically. Anna Kornbluh, in the case of the realist novel, attributes this performativity to all literary form, arguing that 'Form […] wields a conceptual agency – an agency for assembling concepts while simultaneously defamiliarizing them' (Kornbluh 2014, 16). Literary texts that engage with economic ideas through transformative mediation are not texts *about* finance but an exercise in 'the formal logic of capital' (13) itself. Kornbluh stresses the capacity of realism to create 'excessive, aberrant, counterfactual realities' which, to a higher degree than 'documentary evidence' allows it 'to think the conditions of ficticious capital' (4).[11] Even if this is true across literary genres and discourses, however, it is also true that novels and most other self-contained genres

inevitably fail to implement this in full. Oliphant's text is conspicuous here because it combines marginal genres, differently calibrated to reader response and historical context, into a composite discourse whose function is not to depict nor mediate – in any real sense – stories about humans and their money, but, instead, to force the contradictory and ambiguous nature of joint stock companies into full view, allowing it to appear in precisely those forms which its contradictory nature affords. The form of corporate personhood thus adjusts literary form to suit it, and not the other way round.

The *form* of contexts

What is needed, then, to explain the significance of Oliphant's 'Autobiography' is a concept of form that is bound neither by the context concept nor the form/content distinction; a formalism attuned to historical specificity as well as the discursive functioning of aesthetic mediation. A persuasive attempt at such a formalism was recently put forth by Caroline Levine, in her 2015 book, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Levine proposes a historical formalism based on an extensive definition of form, which includes 'all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference' (Levine 2015, 3). Form is not simply the rhetorical structure of literary discourse, but mechanisms that distribute the latent potentialities of materials, objects, and forms – in the empirical world as well as in discourse. Spatial and temporal forms alike (Levine includes bounded wholes, rhythm, hierarchy and network) organise individual, social and political experience in any given historical moment, setting the horizons for different intersecting ways of knowing and identification. The 'affordances' of various forms can overlap, delimit, and travel across material reality and discursive domains, determining 'what it is possible to think, say, and do in a given context' (5). Levine does not apply her method to finance, but the possibility is implicit in the logic of her argument. Forms such as social hierarchies, financial legislation and even corporate entities are determined by a historical moment, in which they organise social and political experience. But these forms also travel historically and, in this view, continue to exert their influence over the popular imaginary of finance across decades. In this way, as structural principles, they permeate several social strata and geographical areas and also enter into the aesthetic, political and journalistic discourses that are active in the same moment. Forms move into literary texts by

carrying their affordances with them into texts where they organise 'aesthetic experience' (5). In other words, forms, which are specific to a historical moment, at the same time as they move across historical time, exist *before* they appear as organising principles in discourse. Levine thus extends the vocabulary of formalism so that it, so to speak, becomes applicable to texts *as well as* contexts. This implies substituting the logic of causality (dialectics, structuralism) to the logic of 'collision', which affords a flat ontology of forms:

> […] I argue in this book that the binary opposition is just one of a number of powerfully organizing forms, and that many outcomes follow from other forms, as well as from more mundane, more minor, and more contingent formal encounters, where different forms are not necessarily related, opposed, or deeply expressive, but simply happen to cross paths at a particular site. Suspending the usual models of causality thus produces new insights into the work of forms, both social and aesthetic (19).

In this view, forms work in erratic, disorganised ways at the same time as they exert unifying or organising forces. In the case of Oliphant's text, we may say that the structure of the text is determined by just such a collision, or encounter, between two radically different forms, namely, the network form of joint stock companies and the bounded whole form afforded by narrative focalisation in literary discourse, which in turn mirrors the sequential form of cognition. The collision between these two forms is what allows the specific issues of ownership and liability to appear in the text, determining as they do the life of the company and the retrospective moral judgements it attaches to them. In Levine's terms, the transposition from economic to literary form of the joint stock principle and the form of networked association it affords is first and foremost a recalibration of a spatial form into a sequential one, whereby the inherent contradiction in the logic of incorporation becomes visible. This is the prime function of narrative form understood as 'productive thought experiments that allow us to imagine the subtle unfolding activity of multiple social forms' (19). As network and sequence intersect, the various social forms at play in the text pop up in orbit around this central contradiction. These forms include the socio-economic hierarchy of potential investors (ranging from spinsters to the royal family), the geographical whole of the narrative in the City of London, and, finally, the ethical and social forms that govern behaviour and organise agency in various social strata and in specific

locations such as boardrooms, the stock exchange and even casinos. The appearance of these forms as organising principles in the narrative disclose not a unifying vision of how commercial London is secretly governed by accelerating financial capitalism, but how the new 'sector' of modern financial institutions seem decidedly ungoverned and principally characterised by disunity, partiality of perspective and a lack of reliable information.

Conclusion

In this way, the relationship between the text and its historical moment is one of extreme 'intimacy', but not in a descriptive or mimetic sense. Even if Oliphant's detailed descriptions of the company's budget and prospectus have been called accurate and instructive by contemporary readers,[12] this is not why the text is interesting from a current perspective. The intimacy between the text as a hybrid it-narrative and historical time is interesting because it is based on formal equivalence. The text is not only a product of a certain historical context which it represents with accuracy and detail, nor is it autonomously a work of imaginative writing removed from this historical moment. It is both at the same time.

Instead, it may make more sense to look at this text (and perhaps, the genre of financial it-narratives) as a mode of thinking about finance that draws on several epistemological vantage points at the same time. This mode of thinking involves both aesthetic mediation and historical specificity. Corporate personhood, limited liability, and the incorporation principle is what the text is thinking about and to do so it calibrates itself directly to the forms that such thinking necessitates. The coherence associated with the novel would blind the text to the contradiction between agency and liability. Instead it combines the generic mix of autobiography, it-narrative, and testimony to hone in specifically on what is problematic about joint stock companies as such in this period, namely, the problems with distributing guilt to its rightful place in cases of insider trading and other semi-criminal activities. The result is a particularly salient account of modern finance in literary form.

This tells us two things about Oliphant's text and the study of literature and finance. First, the popular serial novels of the Victorian period may have shaped the contemporary and still prevalent metaphor of the 'financial sector', but this does not mean that the novel, as a set of literary norms and generic practices, was the most 'economically invested' mode of literary discourse. Different financial entities and

issues necessitate different formal approximations before they can appear as parts of a fictional narrative recognised as 'literary fiction'. Oliphant's text is a rare example of a literary work that is conscious of the formal equivalency between itself as a fictional text and the historical reality with which it is supposed to engage critically. The novel can tell stories about the influence of systemic and economic structures on the experience of individual and social life, but it cannot, to the same degree, 'tell' or 'think' *financially*. Second, Oliphant's text requires a mode of historical analysis that is not limited to the text-context or form/content distinctions. Therefore, we might do well to look beyond the forms of analysis that owe their primacy to a long tradition of novel analysis, in order to understand how the connection between literary fiction and financial history is not a binary, nor a pendulum, but a spectrum of equivalence.

Notes

1 For a detailed overview of this scholarly field, see Henry (2015). A few notable exceptions are Mary Poovey (2008) and Tamara Wagner (2010), who reads Oliphant's text as a curious entry into the Victorian imaginary of finance, but mention it only in passing and mostly as a comparison to novels. Poovey comments on Oliphant's text in *Genres of the Credit Economy* (2008), noting how, as a periodical essay, and despite its obvious criticisms, it helped 'naturalize the workings of financial institutions by providing a norm against which aberrant behaviors could be judged' (275). Wagner also reads Oliphant as journalism, as one of a number of 'instructive manuals or thinly fictionalized cautionary tales' (18). As my analysis will demonstrate, I argue that these readings overlook the variety of literary devices employed in the text and that understanding it principally as a work of narrative fiction affords important insights about the way Oliphant uses literary devices and forms in a metaphysical engagement with a financial institution.

2 Well-known examples of specie narratives include Joseph Addison's *Adventures of a Shilling* (1710), Charles Johnstone's *Chrysal;* or*, The Adventures of a Golden Guinea* (1760–65) and Thomas Bridges' *Adventures of a Bank-Note* (1770–71).

3 The most prominent example of this, I argue, is Anthony Trollope's 1875 serial novel, *The Way We Live Now*, which predicates its entire narrative on the specific form of a joint stock railway company, whose rise and fall also determines the lives of most of the characters, of whom only one or two has complete knowledge. Bellamy's argument presupposes the idea that narrative resolution necessarily affirms hegemony and, conversely, that disunity necessarily subverts it.

4 The harsh regulations were mainly in place to prevent smaller companies from incorporating, but they were very unsuccessful in managing this. The speculative bubble known as the 'railway mania' of the 1840s is a case in point. Fraudulent conduct and company promotion sparked a speculative frenzy that soon resulted in another collapse of public confidence with regard to joint stock companies (Robb 1992, 71)

5 The most important legislative changes occurred in 1844 with the Joint Stock Companies Act, which granted incorporation (but not limited liability) to companies registered with the new Registrar of Joint Stock Companies. Royal charter was thus no longer required and incorporation became significantly more accessible. Limited liability was officially

granted to joint stock companies and their members (incl. shareholders) with the 1855 Limited Liability Act and the 1856 Joint Stock Companies Act, still largely in place today. An 1862 consolidating Act granted banks and insurance companies the same possibilities for limitation of liability (Robb 1992, 23ff; Poovey 2003, 15ff). See also Johnson (2010, 118f).

6 The political economist, J. R. McCulloch (1789–1864) was one of the more vocal opponents to the limitation of liability and lamented the loss of the 'Scheme laid down by Providence', in which 'every man [is] personally answerable to the utmost extent for all his actions'. The new forms of corporate commerce, he argues, is likely to flatter the hubris of humanity and encourage 'Even the soberest individual […] to embark in desperate adventures; for, by limiting the risk, they in great measure secure themselves against loss by failure, at the same time that they reap all the advantages of success.' (McCulloch 1856, 10–11). Proponents of free trade welcomed it as a small but necessary 'instalment' in a course of revisions 'due to the public', accusing unlimited liability as 'nothing better than a gross injustice and wrong done by the law, speaking in past time by the mouths of common law judges – men wholly ignorant of trade, and whose predominant idea was to protect the landowners against the success of combined capitalists suffering under a "legislature rather averse"' (*The Economist*, 25 August 1855, 925).

7 See note 12.

8 The text is presented anonymously on the page of *Blackwood's Magazine*, as if to signal that the company in question is, indeed, the author of his own story. In the late nineteenth century, the practice of writers of periodical articles in *Blackwood's* and similar magazines to withhold their names from the printed article sometimes indicated satirical intent. Additionally, the lack of a byline has been associated with a notion of collective or, indeed, corporate authorship (Buurma 2007, 20). The text is thus inscribed within a simultaneously satirical and factual mode of disclosure.

9 In *Blackwood's Magazine*, the text is likely to have congregated a slightly different segment, however, who are here implicitly included amongst the people which the text accuses of being 'utterly unfit to manage your own money-matters' (Oliphant 2003, 328).

10 See note 1.

11 It is interesting that Kornbluh actually mentions Oliphant's text briefly as an aside to a discussion of Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875) and subsequently in two footnotes. Kornbluh thus mentions the text as an example of how the Victorian imagination used 'personification and even prosopopeia' to understand the 'fictionality of the corporate person' (Kornbluh 2014, 176 n12).

12 Mary Poovey argues that the text is based 'on the actual case of Albert Grant, the promoter who created the notorious finance company, the Credit Foncier and Mobilier of England, in 1864' and that it 'was heralded by contemporaries as being true in every particular' (Poovey 2003, 303).

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6

Homeland(s) in comparison: contexts of reterritorialisation

Susana Araújo

At a time when new approaches to comparative literature test the limits of its contexts and reach, claiming to offer wider or more inclusive cartographic mappings of literary productions, movements and transactions, it is important to ask to what extent in academia, as in other social and cultural arenas, certain strategic changes – even if well intentioned – are not necessary to maintain and justify the more traditional, and arguably endangered, basis of a given field of thought. In this article, I will not be focusing on world-based, planetary and other comparative approaches to literature – though academic approaches play an important role in sanctioning the political and cultural processes I am concerned with in this article. This article will explore ideas of context, comparatively, by dwelling on a specific word, a term which has vigorously re-entered contemporary speech and writing in recent times across different geographical and political spaces – the word 'Homeland'. My aim is to show how changes in terms of the (re-)employment and transaction of a term such as 'Homeland' (often transcribed with capitalised H in official documents) can be seen to both re-establish and expand its original contexts in political, social and cultural trends emerging not only in the USA but also in Europe. I will start by giving an overview of the way the word has been employed in the USA in order to examine how it was later borrowed and readjusted in Europe, in the context of the War on Terror. I will conclude by examining Michael Haneke's film, *Hidden* (Caché, 2005), a movie that draws on multiple notions of 'terror', unveiling the links between current securitarian policies and old colonial legacies. The film allows us to see how ideas of 'homeland' are articulated visually and projected narratively

within a site both specific and allegorical: a middle-class home in the centre of Paris, which hosts particular historical/cultural resonances, but also illustrates the wider role of Europe's privileged 'Home(land)'.

'Homeland' in the United States

When the word 'Homeland' re-emerged in US political discourse in the post-9/11 context, it brought a ring of novelty to previous approaches to national security whilst evoking feelings of vulnerability and igniting fantasies regarding a native and familial national unity. The term gained currency after the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in 2002, with the publication of the Homeland Security Act, introduced in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the subsequent mailings of anthrax spores. In this new department, security policies – not only military but also civil strategies – were reorganised and centralised under a new cabinet-level position (the Secretary of Homeland Security). It must be highlighted, however, that if 'Homeland Security' became a widespread term with the Bush Administration, the concept had been previously employed to refer to integrated security policies. Indeed in 1998, President Bill Clinton published a directive entitled 'Protection Against Unconventional Threats to the Homeland and Americans Overseas' ('Presidential Decision Directive 62'). This directive departed from the premise that, due to the '[The United States] military superiority, potential enemies, be they nations, terrorist groups, or criminal organizations, are increasingly likely to attack [the USA] in unconventional ways' ('Presidential Decision Directive 62'). 'Homeland' is used to depict the object of 'unconventional threats': a noun with a strategic double-bind, both familiar and unconventional. Since then, the word has continued to be used widely in different sites of the political spectrum. Indeed, 'Homeland' is not only a key word for neoconservative hardliners, but it has also been used recurrently by liberal political leaders such as President Obama (e.g. 'President Obama's Presidential Farewell Address' 2017).[1]

Despite its obvious associations with 'roots' and 'land' the term 'Homeland' does not have a long-standing history in US English. While terms such as 'motherland' and 'fatherland' have appeared in *American Dictionary of the English Language*, published by Noah Webster in 1847, 'homeland' only entered Webster's Dictionary in 1973 to designate 'a native land: fatherland' (*Webster's Eighth Collegiate*). In its 1983 edition, this dictionary added a second definition: 'a state or area set aside to be a

state for a people of a particular national, cultural, or racial origin' (*Webster's Ninth Collegiate*). Initially the word was used to designate the native land of specific groups of displaced people such as refugees, immigrants or asylum seekers, but its usage peaked in times of international conflicts such as during World War II. At this point, the term was used both by the allies to refer to the native lands of war refugees or migrants as well as endangered nations, but it was also used by the Nazis, who referred to Germany as their *Heimat* – home or homeland (Becker 2002). Drawing on his analysis of *The New York Times* coverage of the term, Phillip Bump explains that 'the spike in the 1970s was focused on a particular homeland: the push for a homeland for Palestinians. This was a period during which tensions between Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel were increasing dramatically' (Bump 2014). This short history of the word in US English reveals that 'homeland' is far from a stable version of 'home'. On the contrary, it implies a sense of susceptibility and precariousness that 'home' did not entail, justifying sturdier and farther-reaching responses and strategies. By promoting associations between the attacks to the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in 2001 in the USA to the historical predicament faced by groups of people who have been recurrently subject to violent geographical displacements and dislodgements, the concept of 'Homeland' grants both authority and a sense of urgency to the policies shaped under its name in the USA.

Several academics, journalists and other public intellectuals have, from the outset, presented their misgivings about the term. In 2003, Amy Kaplan wrote an article, to which I will return, where she examined this term alongside other politicised words, such as 'Ground Zero,' scrutinising their meanings in the context of the current War on Terror and demonstrating that previous administrations did not use such words (Kaplan 2003). Naomi Wolf, journalist and previous advisor to Al Gore and Clinton, corroborates the idea that previous presidents did not use such a term to refer to the USA as a country (previously referred to as 'the nation' or 'the republic') nor to describe its internal policies (formerly called 'domestic') and suggests that the term is 'saturated with nationalistic echoes' (Wolf 2007, 7). It must be noted that the disapproval of this new terminology was not restricted to liberal circles: some conservative writers and politicians such as columnist Peggy Noonan and political commentator Michael Reagan, also rejected the word, which the latter calls 'un-American' (Reagan 2014). Whilst defending the usage of patriotic expressions and visions, these authors associate 'Homeland' with a European rather than American legacy.

Noonan suggests that the word has 'a vaguely Teutonic ring […] and Republicans must always be on guard against sounding Teutonic'. (Noonan 2014, 216). Reagan concurs that '"Homeland" – as well as its Soviet cousin, "The Motherland"' are not suitable terms for 'truly patriotic Americans'.[2]

Like most terms, 'Homeland' carries multiple meanings, some of them contradictory. It can be argued that this word evokes a topographical element much loved by the Romantics, which offers itself to patriotic interpretations but also to nationalistic and jingoistic readings. Some authors may go as far as to say that its topographical and naturalising element can be associated with the notions of the German fatherland and the sinister identification of the word *Heimat* with fascist ideologies of racial purity (Becker 2002). It can also be argued, by recalling Salman Rushdie's notion of 'Imaginary Homelands', that this concept evokes elements of nostalgia, associated with the 'urge to look back' (Rushdie 1982, 18) which drives writers – and, one may add, also politicians or ideologues – to 'create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind' (18). If desire and nostalgia are elements vividly evoked by the word 'Homeland', one should bear in mind that their negative counterparts – repulsion, disgust, aversion – can also be aroused by the term. As Jacques Derrida has shown, meaning is never self-sufficient, it is always deferred, a concept needs to be understood also in the context of its opposite (Derrida 2001, 276). Interestingly, 'Homeland' also resonates with the word *unheimlich*, something that is strangely familiar, an unhomely home, a vulnerable and uncanny place where one belongs to but where one is always in danger of becoming something else – something which in the context of the War on Terror gains a frightful poignancy.

One should also note that the term 'Homeland', although topographically evocative, is not geographically circumscribed: it expresses and addresses a reterritorialising impulse which is far-reaching and, conceivably, limitless in both time and space. Indeed, as Kaplan suggests while the term evokes simultaneously 'associations with ancestry, stability and ethnic homogeneity' it also implies the idea of 'boundless reterritorialization' (Kaplan 2003, 82–93). 'Homeland' appeals to a radical and enduring sense of insecurity, demanding a form of security where the home becomes an ever-expandable battleground, requiring far-reaching strategies and worldwide control. Indeed, according to the 9/11 commission, 'Homeland' was not limited to US territory, it had a planetary scope. A report entitled 'A Global War Against Terrorism' published by that same commission argues precisely that: '9/11 has

taught us that terrorism against American interests "over there" should be regarded just as we regard terrorism against America "over here." In this same sense, the American homeland is the planet' ('The 9/11 Commission Report' 2002, 362).[3]

Donald Pease reinforces this view by stating that this ongoing state of emergency implies an approach to home that not only dislocates US citizens (and others) from their territory but also displaces the former from 'the civil rights and liberties that defined the civic condition of their belonging to the US and to re-experience themselves as a population now under protection of the Homeland Security State' (Pease 2004, 192). Pease explains the extraterritorial dimension of the new emergency state:

> The Homeland Security State that emerged in the wake of the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center was not identical with the landmass of the continental United States. The 'Homeland' referred to the unlocatable order that emerged through and by way of the US people's generalized dislocation from the nation as a shared form of life (Pease 2004, 192).

'Homeland' does not designate a territory or a community, instead it 'rediscribe[s] the entire planet as the space that the US security apparatus was required to police in its war against global terrorism' (193). In this context, citizens inside and outside the US are denied rights guaranteed by their status as residents or legally recognised subjects of sovereign countries. Security is the result of multiple deterritorialisation processes which proceed by 'dislodging territories across the entire planet from their geopolitical coordinates and resituating them in the Planetary Homeland State' (195).

The European Homeland

When I use the English word 'Homeland' in my classes in Lisbon, Portugal, many of my students will immediately refer to the highly popular series *Homeland Security* (also known as *Homeland*) developed by Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa (2011–19).[4] This US television programme was based on the Israeli series *Prisoners of War*, and focuses on the figure of a bipolar CIA agent engaged with national/international security issues, namely saving the USA and the world from terrorist attacks. The world of the series is a paradoxical one: it is a world where the 'Homeland' (and here I mean the US planetary 'Homeland') is haunted by terrorists but

where innocent civilians can also be prey to overzealous security agents. The climate of fear, double agents, and multiple forms of political subversion as well as corruption are clearly translated by the series title. Journalist James Straub, reveals that when the writer and producer of the series, Alex Gansa, finished the script for the show, he was looking for a word or phrase that would conjure an atmosphere of '"creepy subversion" – something creepy, xenophobic, un-American' (Straub 2016). Gansa considered the word 'Shadowland' but it did 'not quite' achieve the desired effect: '"Homeland" on the other hand, was "perfect!"' (Straub 2016). The series, which premiered in 2011, has been broadcast in different parts of the world, finding large audiences in different continents.[5] This suggests that the worldwide circulation and transaction of the term 'Homeland' is bound to further reshape and widen its conceptual framework.

I will not be able to consider the reception of the word in its planetary amplitude in this article, but I would like to turn my attention now to the way the concept has reached Europe. In academic fields such as International Relations and Security Studies, terms like 'Homeland' were readily adopted by policy makers in different European countries, as well as by scholars working on International Relations and Security Studies. To be sure, 'Home affairs' was an expression already used to depict a specific range of security policies. Indeed, the Justice and Home Affairs policy, created in 1992, under the Maastricht Treaty, aimed to tackle criminal activity across borders by encouraging intergovernmental cooperation between member states and the creation of supranational institutions led by central EU bodies.[6] Following a number of agreements, the Lisbon Treaty (2007) extended the EU's power by giving the European Court of Justice jurisdiction over these matters. Curiously, this policy area, Justice and Home Affairs, was renamed at this point as 'Justice, Freedom and Security', which carefully translated issues of justice and criminality in more positive terms, adopting 'Security' as maxim, alongside the new mottos, 'Justice' and 'Freedom'.

Significantly, in 2002 the European Union created an agency dealing with the analysis of foreign, security and defence policy issues under the Common Foreign and Security Policy to 'foster a common security culture for the EU, support the elaboration and projection of its foreign policy, and enrich the strategic debate inside and outside Europe' (EUISS 2017). Among the documents published by the newly created European Union Institute for Security Studies, we can find research proposals such as the document entitled, 'Protecting the European Homeland – a CBR approach' in 2004 (Lindström 2004).

This document is concerned with potential chemical, biological or radiological (CBR) attacks on the European continent. Its author contends that, while the probability of such an attack 'on the European continent is low, the ramifications of such an attack could be high'. More significantly for us here, one can see from this document how the word 'Homeland' was borrowed from US security discourses and translated into the European context, based upon the premise that there are 'threats facing the EU' (sic) that need to be addressed through a transnational approach. In this document, 25 nation states ranging, in alphabetical order, from Austria to the United Kingdom are all presented as part of the 'European Homeland', a concept which remains unexplained and undocumented in this paper. The notion of a European 'Homeland' seems to be justified, above all, by the type of security required: 'the implementation at EU level of a "Common Homeland security policy"' (8) – a cross-national European strategy, clearly influenced by US guidelines.

Certain academic fields have played an important role in importing and naturalising the concept of 'Homeland' as part of Europe's new approach to security. After the EU–US Vienna Summit Conclusions of June 2006, an agreement was established between the USA and the European Commission to encourage and foster cooperation in the field of science and technology research on security. Signed on 18 November 2010, this document, entitled 'Implementing Arrangement for Cooperative Activities in the Field of Homeland/Civil Security Research', confirms that, not unlike what had happened in the USA, in the European context, 'Homeland' becomes an alternative for – and a synonym of – civil security. Associations with civil defence will also be appealing to European security scholars and officials, not only because they justify the need to incorporate security measures into the structure and logic of civil society as well as to homogenise and control heterogeneous processes of civil life by framing them into a single model. Indeed, while we need to understand the tensions that have allowed the re-emergence of this term in the logic of US political discourse, new meanings of 'Homeland'– clearly connected to its employment in the US context but readapted and readjusted to a new reality – arise in the European context.

The UK was the country that most readily incorporated US approaches as part of its national security strategy. *Homeland Security in the UK: Future Preparedness for Terrorist Attacks Since 9/11* is the title of an updated report of the study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) on the groundwork necessary for the UK to organise itself against and respond to, terrorist attacks (Wilkinson 2007).[7]

The creation of a Department for Homeland Security was considered and discussed by politicians as well as government officials in the UK. Although the UK's government opted for not pursuing the establishment of a new department with the above title, part of its conceptual framework was otherwise imported into the logical context of British politics: in 2002, Tony Blair appointed a senior civil servant to take over the coordination of the Government's intelligence and security effort; the newly created position was announced as a 'Homeland post' (The Telegraph 2002) and between 2003 and 2007 the Conservatives appointed Patrick Mercer as 'Shadow Minister for Homeland Security' (Parkinson, 2014).

Whilst in the British context, the employment of the term 'Homeland' is kept within limits of the nation state, in the context of European security, the use of the word 'European Homeland' explodes and expands such boundaries as a means of projecting and empowering naturalising notions such as 'home' and 'land' into a wider and more complex context – the idea of European common space. In this broader setting, the idea of 'home' becomes clearly transnational and evokes the need to apply larger, overarching and coherent cross-national policies. This is translated in recent security studies, as the volume *European Homeland Security: A European Strategy in the Making?* (Kaunert, Léonard and Pawlak 2012) illustrates. By questioning the limits of prior policies – the European Security Strategy implemented in 2003, the Information Management Strategy of 2009 and the Internal Security Strategy of 2010 – the contributors to this volume argue for a wider, more coordinated and strategic approach to security in the context of the 'European Homeland'. In the book's preface, Christian Kaunert, Sarah Léonard and Patryk Pawlak regret that, notwithstanding the actual influences in terms of policies received from the US since 9/11, 'Homeland security is not [yet] part of EU's security rhetoric'. They maintain, however, that it should be readily adopted since 'it is both appropriate and beneficial for researchers to use this concept to analyse various developments in European security in recent years' (xvi). While the argument for an integrated and overarching security system can entice more traditional tendencies within security studies, the displacement of a logic of national security to an all-encompassing approach to a European Homeland state can be seen to have much in common with the reterritorialising and interventionist tendencies which US authors such as Pease and Kaplan perceived to be central to the establishment of the Homeland State.

In relation to Europe and in the context of European security, the argument for an integrated security state, where the reterritorialisation

of the Eurozone as 'the Homeland' is seen as a necessary biological reconfiguration, becomes doubly problematic: it presents Europe as a necessary partner in the USA's mission of global policing and uses the rhetoric of exceptionality to justify and reinforce Europe's integration project. By adopting the US securitarian terminology and conceptual framework it subscribes to a global enterprise that positions Europe within the same unlocatable order which the new state of emergency aims to promote, i.e. Europe as part of the US planetary Homeland. Despite the initial hesitations, conveyed by a number of European countries regarding the invasion of Iraq, Europe has continued, more or less consistently, to play a significant part in the so-called War on Terror and, despite individual efforts, it has not been able to present either alternative or forceful critical stances against US military practices. This raises multiple questions regarding Europe's place in this global order and within the USA's flexible and expandable global 'Homeland': what is Europe's role in relation to the US project of reterritorialisation? Does this role allow Europe to consider the links between terrorist practices and the legacies of its colonial history? Is there not a danger that this role may, in fact, contribute to a re-enactment of an unresolved colonial heritage?

Secondly, by postulating the idea of European integration upon notions which are clearly linked with Agamben's state of exception (Agamben 2005), the idea of 'European Homeland' reduces European citizens to the status of a biological mass that needs to be protected against unpredictable and unlocatable terrorist attacks and both displaces and supplants national laws regarding individual privacy, freedom of speech and movement as well as constitutional privileges which were conquered, in different states, under diverse historical conditions. Indeed, it can be argued that the expression 'European Homeland Security', although less expansionist than the US version of planetary 'Homeland', evokes a similar desire for reterritorialisation and answers to a longing, expressed by many politicians and officials, to reinforce, justify and – indeed – 'secure' integration at a time when the European Project has been hampered by multiple obstacles. In fact, the editors of *European Homeland Security* recognise that 'attempts to define the territory through the twin processes of integration and enlargement have also created instances of "variable geometry"' (5). They explain: 'through various opt-outs and opt-ins (Concerning the UK, Ireland, and Denmark) and intergovernmental agreements, such as the Schengen and Prüm conventions, attempts at defining the EU territory have been accompanied by trends obscuring this very definition' (5).

Yet these scholars believe that the limitations of the European project can be resolved through a common security strategy, while they state that:

> there is no clear indication of what a "European Homeland" might mean for Europeans, other than the treaty provision stating that "[the] Union shall offer its citizens on area freedom, security and justice without internal frontiers, in which the free movement of persons is ensured in conjunction with appropriate measures with respect to external border controls, asylum, immigration and the prevention and combating of crime" (Kaunert, Léonard and Pawlak 2012, 5).

Unconcerned with what a 'European Homeland' might mean for Europeans at a grass root level, advocates of 'European Homeland Security' prefer to depart from the premise that Europe's role should be that of an agent responsible 'for the provision of security' (5). Like the USA, Europe finds its authority and worldwide projection restored by assuming its role in the new biopolitical order, as the 'Guardian of the People' (Mitsilegas, Monar and Rees 2003, 1). Interestingly, the editors of *European Homeland* present a disclaimer about the title of their volume that rejects 'any linkages with possible misinterpretations of "homeland security"' (Kaunert, Léonard and Pawlak 2012, 11). They claim that in their book 'the concept is used as an analytical device particularly well-suited to analysing inter-linking policy areas, which, as a whole, all contribute to the creation of a post-sovereign political community in Europe' (11). To be sure, 'Homeland' aims to describe in this new context a strategically viable alternative to nationalism. However, by attempting to replace what they believe to be the 'political' (i.e. national/istic) connotations of the term for the potential 'analytical' meaning of 'Homeland', the authors fail to acknowledge the ideological nature of a security-centred discourse and the way it is rhetorically reinforced due to the term's flexibility and reach. Arguably dissociated from nationalist aims, the term 'Homeland' nevertheless projects and asserts, within the European context, ideas of expansion and enlargement, even if these are presented as a means to achieve a cross-national security strategy.

Hidden in the Home

I will conclude this article by referring to an excerpt from the film *Hidden* (*Caché*, 2005) directed by Michael Haneke, an author who, since the

beginning of the twenty-first century – in films such as *Code Unknown* (2000), *Time of the Woolf* (2003), *White Ribbon* (2009) and *Happy End* (2017) – has powerfully explored Europe's failure to commit itself to some of its self-declared ideals such as community, solidarity and hospitality. *Hidden* (*Caché* in the original) is a co-production of four European countries: France, Austria, Germany and Italy. Elsewhere I have written at length about the intricate relationship between hospitality and security in this film; here I would like to refer to the film in order to illustrate how it engages with the very context of 'European Homeland'.[8]

The film is set in Paris during the war in Iraq but examines its present context by focusing on a particular setting: a bourgeois family home in the centre of Paris – the home of Georges and Anne Laurent and their son, Pierrot. It focuses on an episode of Georges Laurent's childhood that had been kept secret from his wife and son – a secret that returns to disturb George and his family, reaching his home through several unsolicited parcels. These mysterious parcels include, among other items, footage of the front door of the Laurents' apartment. The viewer will find out that, when George was a child, his parents had tried to adopt an Algerian boy, Majid, whose parents had died during the massacre of 1961 (a bloody episode in French history where hundreds of demonstrators, fighting for the Independence of Algeria, were killed by the national police under the head of Maurice Papon). However, due to George's fears and jealousy, the adoption is cancelled and Majid is sent to an orphanage. The film forces us to rethink, thus, Europe's long history of failed acts of hospitality as well as the impact of colonial legacies in current military enterprises such as the War on Terror.

The focus on the Laurents' household, during the War on Terror and in relation to French colonial history, offers significant insights into the relation between the concepts of home and homeland in relation to the European context. I will focus my attention on a specific section of the movie which is carefully staged and elaborated in the movie's script (Haneke 2013). The sequence opens with images of Italian troops occupying a village in Iraq which – as we find out – are being broadcast as part of a *Euronews* bulletin. The initial news reel is conveyed in full screen but soon we find out the programme is being watched by Georges. The TV set projects its images into the Laurents' household, not unlike the mysterious tapes and letters which continue to reach their home and according to Georges constitute Majid's 'campaign of terror'. The initial sequence of images concerning the Italian soldiers in Iraq are accompanied by an interview with the Italian governor of Nasiriya. The film's script clearly conveys the symbolic overtones of the interview:

> Commentateur: Mais sour place, la governeure … de la region de Nassiria, une Italiénne nommée par les Américains … Barbara Contini réclame plus de clarté à se sujet … Les Italiens étant sous commandements des Britanniques, qui eux ont le statut de force occupante […]
>
> Plan serré sur Barbara Contini en interview. Le commentateur traduit en voix over:
>
> Commentateur: Il est fondamental que tous les pays de la coalition qui ont décidé de faire partie de cette mission bénéficient des mêmes prêts d'engagement, pour une plus grande homogénéité et pour une plus grande coordination.
>
> Plan longue focale sur le Drapeau italien qui flote au vent.
>
> (Haneke 2013, takes 169–169H)

When Barbara Contini refers to the expression *prêts d'engagement* explaining that there is a clear need for rules of engagement between the coalition partners, the expression gains meaning in the context of Georges Laurent's family (a unit whose members are clearly set apart by various secrets, ongoing lies and obscure pacts). The Laurents' home becomes, thus, a synecdoche for the European community, presented in the film as a quiet, well-off but ultimately dysfunctional household. The chains of command conveyed by the bulletin convey larger geopolitical hierarchy ('une Italiénne nommée par les Américains'; les Italiens [sont] sous commandements des Britanniques') and within the European context they can be seen to re-enact the rules of EU as a community – a union whose technocratic modus operandi ('homogénéité et pout une plus grande coordination') has been greatly criticised, particularly in recent years, for both undermining striking inequalities of power between member states as well as for failing to promote substantial forms of hospitality towards those who seek refuge in European shores.

It must be highlighted that the reinforcement of international bonds and military alliances made in times of conflict is not new nor unreasoned. They are part of Europe's history and often used as a pragmatic means to avoid conflicts and war. The influential sociologist, Ulrich Beck, was one of the authors who believed and promoted the

idea that security could be used as the basis of a 'cosmopolitan state formation' in Europe (Beck 2001).[9] In an opinion piece published in *Eurozine* in December 2001, which contained many of the ideas later developed and consolidated in his work on European cosmopolitanism, Beck claimed that in order to deal with a threat such as global terrorism 'states must de-nationalise and trans-nationalise themselves for the sake of their own national interest, that is, relinquish sovereignty, in order, in a globalised world, to deal with their national problems' (Beck 2001). These ideas became popular amongst many advocates of 'European Homeland Security' not only because of the bare-life rhetoric enacted by the state of exception, but also because there is in the heart of the European project a void that gives leverage to supposedly apolitical – but ultimately also ideological – transnational strategies. In fact, some of the ideals that justify European cosmopolitanism – the principles of inclusion, recognition of otherness and differentiated integration, also advocated also by Beck (2001) – can be said to have been disregarded by Europe's political structures, particularly in relation to the economic and social challenges of the last decade. The European Union has been criticised not only by 'hard Eurosceptics' but also 'softer' critics for assuming an elitist, technocratic stance whose inability to deal with inequalities and concrete social and economic dilemmas, in and around Europe, can be seen to have impaired the accomplishments of the European project.[10] Europe's inability to deal with the so-called 'refugee crisis', its support for punitive policies of austerity in relation to southern European countries and the rise of nationalisms in Europe illustrate some of the predicaments currently faced by homes and homelands in the context of the EU.

Hidden prefigures some of these problems, inviting us to reflect upon the meanings of home in the context of the new geopolitical configurations which the War on Terror has put into place: it interrogates Europe's place within a 'Global Homeland' and questions the legacies of Europe's colonial history in the face of the new geopolitical strategies of hegemonic power which the recent and ongoing military 'interventions' have put into practice. To be sure, the transatlantic nexus, which has invited the term 'Homeland' to re-emerge on both sides of the Atlantic, strategically responds to generalised anxieties about security, restoring a bare version of authority to US and European formations of power which, according to leading politicians, needed to be reinforced and rearticulated. By simultaneously amplifying its legal scope and reducing the idea of home to a biopolitical stronghold, 'Homeland' helps

to dissociate ideas of 'home' and 'land' from their specific historical and political contexts and structures disrupting the way ideas of citizenship and hospitality are also globally perceived. Through the rhetorical investments and symbolic subtractions made upon these concepts by security discourses and practices, notions such as home and land have become, once again, ideal and idealised grounds – and therefore contexts – in which nationalistic and xenophobic movements can resurface.

Notes

1 Since language works as a system, the securitarian connotations of the term 'Homeland' were bound to spill into the simpler terms that compose the compound noun, influencing the way words like 'home' and 'land' are now re-employed. Hence, for the use of the word 'Home' in Donald Trump's speech see, for example, the president's inaugural address where the word maintains the nationalistic and protectionist echoes revealed during his campaign ('Inaugural Address: Trump's Full Speech' 2017). Within a large corpus of speeches where Trump uses the word 'home' we find, for instance, picturesque quotations from the *Wizard of Oz* such as that made in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in Vietnam in November 2017, where Trump reads: 'The world has many places, many dreams and many roads. But in all of the world, there is no place like home'; in the same speech he reiterates the image of home as a place in need of protection and defence: 'For the glory of God, protect your home, defend your home' (Karl 2017). In an earlier speech made on 1 September 2017, following Hurricane Harvey, Trump comments on the destruction of actual 'homes' to underline his vision of the nation as *home* ('President Donald J. Trump's Weekly Address' 2017). It must be highlighted that the terms 'Home' and 'Homeland' are also widely used in Europe where they can be recurrently found in the context of British politics, voiced by the three major political benches, as well as in the rhetoric of nationalistic movements spreading throughout the European continent, where mottos such as 'God, honour, fatherland' intersect with the idea of 'white Europe' (Koslowska 2017). I would like to thank João Miguel Palaio de Almeida Gabriel and Mandala de La Rivière, assistant researchers of Project CILM, for their help in researching political speeches, legal texts and media documents containing these two terms.

2 My research on criticisms made by republican authors and politicians to the term 'Homeland' was guided and informed by Teresa Botelho's article 'Worlding America?: Homelands and Geopolitical Cartographies in Post 9/11 Fiction' (Botelho 2017, 85–102).

3 This report is quoted by Amy Kaplan in her article, 'In the Name of Security' (Kaplan 2009, 22).

4 Although the series has a Portuguese (translated) title, *Segurança Nacional* (National Security), most students will identify the series more readily by its original English title.

5 The series premiered on: 1 November 2011, Super Channel, Canada; 13 January 2012, RTÉ, Ireland; 22 January 2012, Network Ten, Australia; 19 February 2012, Channel 4, United Kingdom; and 30 September 2013, Star World, India and Pakistan.

6 The Treaty of Amsterdam, signed in 1997, for instance, gave EU institutions full control over some areas of Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) policy, such as asylum and immigration. The Treaty of Amsterdam brought the Schengen Convention into EU law, allowing further cooperation on JHA matters. Following these treaties, the EU approved the creation of European Arrest Warrant and of a European Evidence Warrant.

7 This volume brings together a team of academic researchers from the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence of St Andrews University, and the Mountbatten Centre for International Studies at Southampton University. Paul Wilkinson, the volume's editor, clarifies that the term 'Homeland' has been unapologetically borrowed from US policies (Wilkinson 2007). Wilkinson and his contributors endorse the application of this term to the British context, adding that it 'has already been adopted as a useful shorthand for a number of conferences and seminars for a whole variety of specialists in aspects of counter-terrorism' (3). Apart from drawing on the logic of previous US policies of civil defence, the new term serves to create a clear link to US research and practices in this area and to renew UK security policies by improving coordination across different departments and sectors (from environmental safety to military security).

8 See Araújo (2015).

9 It should be highlighted that in 2013 Ulrich Beck revised some of his previous thoughts on Cosmopolitan Europe in his book, *German Europe*, a fierce critique of what he, now, recognised to be a Germany-dominated Europe and incorporating many of the criticisms regarding the European project which his earlier work dismissed (Beck 2013).

10 Taggart and Szczerbiak describe soft Eurocentrism 'where there is NOT a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that "national interest" is currently at odds with the EU's trajectory' (Taggart Szczerbiak 2002). For discussions on technocracy and governmentality in relation to the EU see, for example, Raedelli (2017); Keisen and Schat (2014); Walters and Haahr (2005).

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Part III
New contexts

7

Swimming against the hetero- and homonormative tide: a queer reading of Wolfgang Tillmans' photo installation (2004–2009) in the Panorama Bar at Berlin's Berghain

Oliver Klaassen

Introduction: welcome to the Panorama Bar at Berlin's Berghain

Typical of the atmosphere of the Panorama Bar, located on the second floor of the Berghain in Berlin, is a combination of electronic music, drugs, ecstatic dance moves and hundreds of people. The perceptual disorder of the revelers is fostered not only by drug consumption, but also by repetitive music, the fast-flashing strobe light and the mist on the dance floor. Objects flicker, blur, and dissolve, and even those who are joining in the dance are transformed into artificial figures. On the opposite side of the bar, on the wall above the dance floor, comprising a total length of twelve metres and a width of two metres, two abstract images hang above the heads of the party crowd (Figure 7.1). The surfaces of both images are covered by bundles of dark lines, running like a stream through a mostly blue-coloured space without a quantifiable depth. Most of the lines are connected with other lines, resulting in dark (line-)formations that create spaces with complex structure. On the adjacent wall to the right, next to the two abstract images, hangs another image that shows an uncovered human genital area (Figure 7.2). What exactly is this constellation between abstraction and figuration about? What happens in this dialogue?

Fig. 7.1 Wolfgang Tillmans, installation view, Panorama Bar (Berghain), Berlin. Left on the wall: Wolfgang Tillmans, *Ostgut Freischwimmer (left)*, 2004; right on the wall: Wolfgang Tillmans, *Ostgut Freischwimmer (right)*, 2004. Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne.

Fig. 7.2 Wolfgang Tillmans, installation view, Panorama Bar (Berghain), Berlin. Left on the wall: Wolfgang Tillmans, *Ostgut Freischwimmer (right)*, 2004; right on the wall: Wolfgang Tillmans, *nackt*, 2003. Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne.

Some reflections on a queer reading as a theoretical and methodological approach for analysing visual art

These abstract images in the Panorama Bar are dependent on individual and social contexts that construct and structure their meaning. In contrast to the context of art museums, with their White Cube conditions of neutrality and calmness, the reception in a club like Berghain is a totally different one: here the music and lights, together with the drugs, suggest other attentions, arouse different expectations, and stimulate other behaviours. As I will elaborate below, it is this contextuality of the work that calls for a specific kind of analysis, an oppositional reading strategy that combines a semiotic with an affective approach, thus fusing critique of representation with the potential of fantasy and desire in the process of reception. Starting from queer art studies and its critique of identity and visibility politics,[1] the overall aim of this article is to find out to what extent the constellation of abstraction and figuration in the Panorama Bar intervenes in normative discourses of sexuality, gender, and desire.

In order to be able to decipher possible pictorial statements, I conduct a twofold analysis. On the one hand, I consider the 'framework', which is to say the spatial, temporal, discursive, and institutional context, which enables the perception of the artwork and retroactively modifies its interpretation. On the other hand, I critically re-examine the modes of representation.[2] My analysis addresses the following questions: what and how does something become visible? What is the purpose of this visibility? Who are the target recipients of this visibility? And what remains excluded? What is made invisible by visibility? In short: what is the what, who, and how of visibility?[3]

My understanding of context is informed by the views of two theorists, Stuart Hall and Judith Butler: first, it is not only the exhibition venue of the two abstract images, Berghain's Panorama Bar in Berlin, but it is also an image of a human genital area displayed next to them which is another important, more complex, wittingly constructed layer of the context. Similarly, in 1997, Stuart Hall, in his analysis of intertextuality in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices (Culture, Media, and Identities)*, argues that no meaningful element should be considered detached from its context and its interaction with other texts, images, and signs (Hall 1997, 232). Meaning, therefore, is constructed by the totality of all signs; that means signs stand in constant interdependence to one another and their embedment in different contexts is linked to different concepts of knowledge. Second, central for

my understanding of context, are Judith Butler's theoretical considerations in *Körper von Gewicht – Die diskursiven Grenzen des Geschlechts* (*Bodies that Matter: On the Discoursive Limits of 'Sex'*) on the possibility of transforming and re-signifying linguistic and social meanings, norms and conventions, and their use for purposes for which they were not intended. Of particular interest for me is the ability of signs and visual expressions to break with contexts and to create new contexts. This article's underlying understanding of the intersection between politics and aesthetics is based on a foundation of semiotics, according to which political opposition can be realised by attacking the symbolic order through the alienation of existing signs.

As I will show, in the case of the Panorama Bar, it is the interdependence of different image realities, which, as a performative strategy in the process of reception, not only entails anticipatory and transformative potentialities, but also empowers the viewer to engage in queer reading. Queer theory, as I define it, is a post-identitarian mode of thinking and articulating difference (always referring, though never limited, to gender and sexuality), which underlines the transformative moments of representation and investigates the dynamic interplay of power and desire in social and cultural relations.[4] Because queer reading favours multiple points of view, including the detection of contradictions and the deviation from social agreements, it hardly needs mentioning that my interpretation manifests itself in the selected Panorama Bar installation,[5] in which associations and contents are evoked, not as fixed and stable givens, but also as ephemeral practices, dependent on the situation-based reception of my own person. Consequently, it is my aim to produce ambivalences instead of smoothing them out into a reductionist interpretation.

In addition to the framing component, an important starting point of my analysis is that the understanding of visual material depends on the viewer's background knowledge, their visual habits and expectations as well as fantasies, desire, affects, and feelings. As elaborated throughout this article, the very 'nature' of the constellation of different images in the Panorama Bar installation invites the viewer to make sense according to his_her[6] own ideas and fantasies, rather than trying to anticipate the intentions of the artist.[7] In order to analyse the identification and projection processes to which the visual material in the Panorama Bar installation invites the viewer and which can be charged with different aesthetic, emotional, and affective meanings,[8] a shift of focus towards the perceptual experience is necessary, in particular the potential of fantasy and desire in the process of reception: what makes the arrangement of

different pictures resonate with me as a viewer? What is set in motion? How do movements of desire take place? And what kind of connections does it create? The theoretical foundation for this is provided by Antke Engel, who combines the concept of performativity with the concept of fantasy. According to Engel, in the process of reception imagination can develop social and political productivity by causing trouble in the ruling concept of heteronormativity.[9]

The first part of this article analyses the abstract images and how they were made. The second part examines the Panorama Bar installation. The third part focuses on techno and rave club culture. In doing so, I will not only give some background information about the characteristics of Tillmans' curatorial practice and the setting of his installation, the Panorama Bar, but I will also take a closer look at a constantly recurring motive in the artist's oeuvre: party subculture. My conclusions are drawn in the final section.

Freely swimming between abstraction and figuration

Upon first glance it is immediately noticeable that the abstract images are reminiscent of bodily fluids, muscle fibre structures, underwater landscapes, as well as astronomical and biological-microscopic phenomena (Figures 7.3 and 7.4). Although the images might elicit analogies, they are in strictly technical terms nothing less than luminograms, camera-less generated light-spaces. The depicted structures on the surfaces of the photographs are a result of gestural and chemical operations in the darkroom. With the help of sources of light, the manual manipulation of light-intensive photo paper creates

Fig. 7.3 Wolfgang Tillmans, *Ostgut Freischwimmer (left)*, 2004, courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne.

Fig. 7.4 Wolfgang Tillmans, *Ostgut Freischwimmer (right)*, 2004, courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne.

a random accumulation and scattering of colour particles in and on the fibres of a chemically reactive paper. Abstractly gesturing with flashlights and lasers creates sweeping washes of soft colour – as if someone was drawing with light. The reflections of light produce surfaces that are both determined and indeterminate and that shift between different optical markings: between form-formlessness, abstract-figurative and similar-dissimilar signs. After creating the originals in the darkroom, the two camera-less photographs were scanned, coloured, enlarged, and afterwards installed in the Panorama Bar as unframed inkjet prints. Abstraction is thus structurally inscribed in the photographic image. It is embedded as aesthetic processes that consistently results from the fallibility of photographic recording techniques in analogue photochemistry. Instead of labeling the *Freischwimmer* photographs as 'abstract', I understand them as open images with an unexplained reference.

Both photographs are part of the ongoing series *Freischwimmer* (*Free Swimmer*) (since 2001) by Wolfgang Tillmans. Part of this larger project of luminograms are also the series *Blushes*, *Einzelgänger* (*Loner*) and *Urgency* (all since 2001). All of them have something in common: they are depicting similar things, namely coloured collections of filigree thread structures with varying density. Strictly speaking, nothing figurative is depicted. Although the photographs were created without a lens or camera, the eye perceives the photographs as reality. Tillmans describes this play with the belief in photography as a medium that depicts reality in an interview with Gil Blank as follows: 'I'm trying to challenge people's assumptions that every photograph is reality, by presenting abstract forms that somehow look figurative' (Blank and Tillmans 2004, 119). It is only through the act of reception that the photographs become figurative.[10] Tillmans thus pursues an inherent media reflection

of photography. The surfaces on the camera-less photographs, characterised by a mix of indeterminacy and determinateness, confront the viewer not only with his_her deficient perception, but also with the precarious principle of photography. That is, the simultaneous act of registration and erasure.

The two camera-less photographs are titled *Ostgut Freischwimmer (left)* and *Ostgut Freischwimmer (right)*. In a literal sense, from the 1950s until the 1980s, *Freischwimmer* was the official name for a basic swimming badge for beginners in the form of a colourful fabric badge to be sewn onto the swimwear in Germany and Switzerland. Learners were awarded the badge after successfully completing a swim test (15 minutes swimming in deep water and jumping from a one-metre height). In addition, according to the *Duden* the German verb *freischwimmen* ('to swim freely') means 'to learn to stand on one's own feet, to be independent and emancipated'. Despite its emancipatory connotations, *freischwimmen* also has an ambivalent aftertaste because, in order to feel free, people must first learn to leave things behind. Shihoko, too, comes to this realisation in her analysis of Tillmans' *Freischwimmer* photographs:

> The space of these photographs is filled with a sense of liberation and sensual joy, but they do not automatically usher us to freedom and independence. In order to swim there, we need the courage and strength, just as when swimming in the ocean for the first time or stepping onto a diving board. The sea of freedom and independence is wide. A strong will and sincere convictions are required to continue swimming in it proficiently (Shihoko 2004, 104).

Considering the ambivalent connotations of *Freischwimmer*, I want to find out to what extent does the translation of this ambivalence into the visual argumentation of the Panorama Bar installation have negative (the resolution, deconstruction, or disappearance of the subject) or positive (a release and depiction of the process of individualisation) effects.

As mentioned before, besides the two camera-less photographs on the adjacent wall to the right hangs another image: this photograph depicts the lower half of a human's torso. Sitting on a chair the person is leaning back to the left and wearing a grey top. Naked with parted legs from the waist down, the photograph *nackt (naked) is* exposing an uncovered human genital area (Figure 7.5), which, at first glance, could be identified as female* because of the labia. It is strongly reminiscent of *L'origine du monde* (1866) by Gustave Courbet (1819–77), a painting that has caused a sensation since 1866: in an unusual perspective, a

Fig. 7.5 Wolfgang Tillmans, *nackt*, 2003, courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne.

life-sized female* body section is depicted as a classic torso stretching from the thighs to the breasts. The viewer's gaze falls on the spread legs, on the genitals, which feature slightly opened labia. It was particularly the explicit act of showing a female body opening which was contrary to the ideal figure of the European art academics until the twentieth century and that made the boundaries between art and pornography brittle. According to the art historian Linda Hentschel, this painting not only reflects the connection between deep space and the female body, but also the sexualisation of the visual act itself. In her 2001 published book *Pornotopische Techniken des Betrachtens. Raumwahrnehmung und Geschlechterordnung in visuellen Apparaten der Moderne* (*Pornographic Techniques of Viewing: Space Perception and Gender Order in Visual Apparatuses of Modernity*), Hentschel devotes herself to the patterns of relationships between the history of optical apparatuses, the techniques of seeing, and historically conditioned gender constructions, searching for hetero- and androcentric structures of desire in the history of art (Hentschel 2001). By relating the central perspective to the angle of a voyeuristic male viewer, resulting in a feminisation of the space as well as a sexualisation of the act of seeing (Hentschel 2004, 205), she reveals the interfacing of the female body and image space as characteristic for the gender producing techniques of the Western image. Hentschel

uses the concept of 'pornotopia' to describe feminine-connoted landscapes as a penetrative act of male-coded space (207f). Art history thus fosters fetishism, hidden in the landscape, by the inversion of the feminine body and the medial space in the form of pornotopia (210). Against this background, throughout this article, I want to find out whether Tillmans' installation continues a heteronormative and androcentric tradition of a gaze that takes a central perspective and can be characterised as male and voyeuristic. And, if not, how he breaks with this tradition?

Tillmans' Panorama Bar installation in context: Berghain and the club subculture

The photo installation was created for the Panorama Bar in the legendary Berghain in Berlin. The Berghain originated from the club Ostgut in 2004, which ran from 1999 to 2003 in Berlin-Friedrichshain. As an integral part of the gay house and techno scene in Berlin, it was the first venue for gay fetish and sex parties as well – so-called *snax events* – and thus a safe haven, especially for gay men*. Even today's Berghain guarantees a high degree of sexual freedom and variety: views from outside by looking at its theme parties and flyers, as well as from inside by looking at the sexual implications of the interior architecture, e.g. the darkrooms,[11] especially frequented by men*, reveal a sexual atmosphere that especially speaks to the LGBT+[12] community. Berghain is still the organiser of gay sex parties, such as the legendary *Snax Club*, that only take place in parts of the premises, the so-called *Lab.Oratory*. Although the club continues to speak to a non-heteronormative – especially gay – audience, it has opened up to a broader target group in recent years. One of the reasons is the great media interest in Berghain after being voted the best techno/house club in the world by the British music magazine *DJ Mag* in 2009. The fast development over recent years from a gay underground venue to a tourist magnet has not been without consequences. The cultural recognition of Berghain has changed with its entry into the public cultural discourse. Since being awarded this distinction, the club has been mythologised by mainstream media. It is also widely known and spoken of around the world by those in the know: the strict door policy, the non-observability from the outside, the prohibition of photography inside, as well as the promise of sex, the giving over of oneself to disorder and ultimately transcendence.

The origins of the musical and social movements of the house, rave, and techno scenes go back to the disco culture of the USA in the

1970s, to scenes mostly framed by gay men and people of colour. From the very beginning, this scene was related to a habitus of tolerance (Seifert 2004, 244). The aim was to create safe-spaces that escaped from the rules of the normative, white, heterosexual majority and thus offered protection against discrimination.[13] In addition to being against the prevailing conventions of dominant culture, the emerging techno culture opened the door to an alternative world, an exaggerated and delimited world in which not only normal grids constantly move, but also boundaries of space, time, and body seem to dissolve. In the context of techno, the prevailing principle of deconstruction takes place on many levels: on a methodological level in the form of collages, montages, and samplings, and on an aesthetic and a subject-theoretical level in the form of a fragmentation of the self (348). Tillmans' arrangement in the Panorama Bar, in which different image realities are brought together, resembles a collage. The metaphors and aesthetics referring to the techno are wide landscapes, space, water, flowing movements, and the resolution of space, which can also be found in the *Freischwimmer* photographs.

Club subculture has been a constantly recurring motif in Tillmans' oeuvre. Since the early 1990s, he has been known as a visual chronicler *par excellence* of the contemporary techno, rave, and house subculture, which he has repeatedly captured amidst raves, concerts, pride events, and domestic places before or after a party.[14] Not only in his photographs, but also in interviews, Tillmans constantly draws attention to the extremely stimulating landscape of club culture: 'What people see in a disco is already an abstraction. It is set up in such a way that people go back and forth between what they see and what they are no longer able to make out clearly' (Schneider 2015, 26). For him, the mixture of light, music, desire, social interaction (body), and dance (movement) transforms Berghain into a place of utopian narratives (30).

When it comes to dance marathons, not only the physical experience of the self has priority, but also the desire for the total experience of a group ritual (Seifert 2004, 266f.). For a Raver, the reason for the immersion in ecstatic dance is driven by the desire to dissolve into the whole and become one with the mass. In the past, Tillmans has repeatedly tried to capture masses in nightclubs under bad light conditions: for example, in the photograph *hundreds* (2002), traces of the blurred motion of dissolving and transforming human bodies are depicted. In the photograph *rig* (2002), the individual body on the dance floor is not in the field of view. Instead, hundreds of dancing bodies, together

with the light effects, suggest the mass of a body consisting of thousands of people.

Not only is the separation between the materiality of the physical bodies – the imagination of the body merging with the others – blurred in the act of dancing, but also is the separation between bodily perception and inner bodily experience (Klein 1999, 185). With that said, what is depicted on the surface of the *Freischwimmer* photographs seems to visually express shared communal experiences of decentred corporealities – extreme inner bodily experiences such as ecstasy, trance, and the loss of orientation hundreds of dancers collectively share in an atmosphere where boundaries of place, time, and identity are blurred as a result of a potent combination of electronic dance music, vibration, rapid light, dancing, and drugs.

Exploring the limits of visibility

With his installation in the Panorama Bar, Tillmans critically foregrounds the promise of free gender expression and sexuality at Berghain. In an interview with Thilo Schneider, he explains his selection of photographs as follows:

> Initially, I was thinking of just hanging the two big *Freischwimmer* works there. Then I thought that their non-figurativeness needed a counterpoint. Abstraction is indeed problematic insofar as it blanks out a lot of realities and consequently doesn't pose specific questions. As an object and as pictorial content, an abstract image refers completely to itself and to the compositions and color gradations depicted. It is only in a figurative sense that it becomes a picture of the world. By also hanging the over-sized photo of the lower abdomen of a naked woman in this gay club, I wanted to broaden the perspective on sexuality – which is so important to me – and achieve a more open way of dealing with it (Schneider 2015, 32f).

Even though I want to distance myself from identifying the ambivalent genital area as being clearly female (the heavily swollen labia on the photograph seems to be reminiscent of a scrotum), against this background, the installation can be understood as an enlightening moment: in its plea for the increased inclusion of other genders, the photograph *nackt* (2003) can be understood as a conscious act of

provocation for the gay male core audience, especially taking into consideration that the clientele was predominantly characterised by male homosexuals in the first years after the opening of Berghain. As the art critic Dominic Eichler in his 2005 published article 'Bilder der Nacht: Sound und Vision' ('Pictures of the Night: Sound and Vision') notes, Berghain is thus marked as space with power structures that produces inclusions and exclusions: 'It is not surprising, then, that his [Tillmans'] work shows up at Berghain – precisely in this context, the bluntness not only invites reflections on gender, biological necessities and constraints, but also counters women's contempt of some guests with progressive openness' (Eichler 2005, translated from German into English by Oliver Klaassen). Even today, the techno scene is still dominated by men*. Access to the music production and to DJ positions is largely blocked for women*. The frankness of the abstract photographs together with the explicitness of the figurative photograph mirrors the hedonism of Berghain and its (Ostgut) roots as a totally unapologetic way of expressing gay sexuality. Besides the reference to the necessity of the inclusion of other genders, the two *Freischwimmer* photographs can be read as a kind of Ostgut reminiscence, because, as mentioned before, each of the photographs bears the name of the club in the title. They remind one of a place of (homo)sexual freedom, a non-judgemental platform for the exploration of human sexual desire and identity. By avoiding explicit representations of the human body, the former club is marked as a safe space, in which norms are negotiated differently. (Hetero- and homo-) normative forms of visibility are avoided; instead, visibility is produced without being decipherable within hegemonic frameworks. At this point it can already be summarised that the meaning of *Freischwimmer* runs in a literal sense like a common thread through Tillmans' installation: not only in terms of the production process of the camera-less photographs, in the sense of a light floating and the form, the clash of different image realities, but also in terms of content, in the sense of free-floating away from hetero- and homonormative boundaries, away from prejudiced body images to new visual worlds.

In addition, my point is that through acts of (re)combination and (re)contextualisation, the *Freischwimmer* photographs together with a photograph of an erotically and sexually charged genital area produce a moment of radical ambiguity.[15] In this state of 'undisambiguity'[16] (*VerUneindeutigung*) (Engel 2002), the photo installation works as a deconstructive, denormalising, and anti-hierarchical project that attempts to push forward other ways of thinking. Persisting in a trembling state of interactive (de)construction, a back and forth movement between

the dissemination on a photo technical level and the act of overcoding by the neighbouring figurative photograph, the photo installation brings forth a heterotopic space.[17]

The different image realities and their associative arrangement on the wall asks for a readjustment of the gaze. The installation creates a situation described by Elspeth Probyn as 'outside belongings', a depersonalisation of identity without the desire[18] for belonging while losing its significant and effective value (Probyn 1996). Instead of one 'preferred' belonging, there are multiple desirable belongings in the Panorama Bar installation. I would go even one step further and claim that – following Engel's theoretical reflections on the reconceptualisation of desire to activate subversive and destabilising potentials in 'Queer / Assemblage: Desire as Crossing Multiple Power Relations' – the photo installation sets free 'queer desire', meaning connections resulting from movements of desire which undermine hierarchies, exclusions, and norms (Engel 2011).

In this threshold zone, in which absences are crossed and defended and discrepancies are produced, the resistant potential of resignification comes into play,[19] fostering an expansion of the viewer's field and a complementation of his_her deficient perception. Visual habits are set in motion, provoking a different perspective on familiar images: in its destabilising and unsettling effect, the visual argumentation of the abstract *Freischwimmer* photographs makes the fixed genital area appear in an androgynous light. New denormalising and non-hierarchical associations of signs and images arise, which not only counteract normalising or stereotypical patterns of decision-making, but also propagate forms of difference without following any kind of classificatory logic of difference. The result is a rhizome-like structure, which is composed of multivalent and polymorphic embodiments, referring to unstable and merging subjects that are not predetermined, but performatively produced.

The photo installation is the first out of three that Tillmans has created so far for the Panorama Bar. With the second one, Tillmans seems to implicitly criticise the ongoing rising symbolic and market value of Berghain, which has not only changed the cultural perception, but also the social formation of the audience. In 2009, all three photographs were replaced: the *Freischwimmer* photographs by the camera-less photographs *Neutral Density (a)* and *Neutral Density (b)* (2009) and *nackt* (2003) by the photograph *Philip, close-up III* (1997). With an aggressive gaze at the back of a bended male subject position, spreading his buttocks with his left hand and thereby exposing his anus, Tillmans continues with sexual explicitness. As the photographer mentions in an interview, with this

selection he wanted to comment on the heterosexuality of the audience in the Panorama Bar:

> In the meantime, the public in the Panorama Bar had become much more heterosexual. Which of course isn't bad, and the people who go there are certainly not homophobic, but in order to maintain this presence and this confrontation with oneself and one's own identity, it seemed appropriate to me to show that picture. It is indeed fascinating that this boundary still remains in place (Schneider 2015, 35).

Since 2015, the three photographs *Weak Signal (P Bar, left)* (2014), *Weak Signal (P Bar, right)* (2014) and *Mundhöhle* (*Oral Cavity*) (2012) have been installed in the Panorama Bar. What is striking about all the three installations, but especially the last, is the way they seem to scramble any available gendered code – focused entirely on the tonsils, the glistening back of the throat stands utterly unspoken in terms of genderedness. In all three installations, the interdependence of different image realities promotes a feeling of radical ambiguity. Whether the exposure of a vulva and an anus, or a close-up of an open mouth, the recurring motif is bodily openings and thus a constant exploration of limits of visibility and perceptibility. The installations try to unmask the secret source of invisible power structures: they encourage not only a critical reflection on the acts of seeing and recognising, but also they help the viewers to learn how visual constructions work. Therefore, the Panorama Bar installations remind the viewers of what is always already implied in representations: namely the unavailability.

Anti-hierarchical, borderless, provisional, and intimate: Tillmans' queer installation practice

A first glimpse at all of Tillmans' exhibitions leaves the viewer with an unusual provisional and intimate impression: room-overlapping, associative assemblages, and glued installations that seem to be in a constantly changing mood. Instead of choosing one presentation technique, different approaches and elements are combined: a wide range of hangings (salon-style hang, horizontal, single and linear hang, salon, studio walls, bedsit-style, etc.), a mixture of three-dimensionality and different formats, often unframed and fixed with adhesive tape or braces to the wall. With exhibitions in which order and hierarchy make

room for equality and openness, Tillmans challenges conventions of display typical for art museums by not adhering to the formal character of a contemporary presentation. The translation of flexible and complex subjectivities in Tillmans' curatorial practice brings forward not singular but heterogeneous subject positions.[20] Along with a meta-theoretical understanding of sexuality, gender, and desire as movable and socially convertible on the level of content, the photographer creates arrangements, which, instead of the monolithic order of the central perspective, privilege rhizomatic intertwinements, as well as generate moving topographies.

A second glimpse of Tillmans' exhibitions reveals that the constellation of abstraction and figuration in the Panorama Bar installation is no coincidence. Instead, sharp contrasts in themes and motifs run like a common thread throughout the photographer's photo installation practice.[21] Strikingly, in his exhibitions very often the investigation of the chemical foundations of photography takes place in dialogue with figurative photographs, which, for example, explicitly address relationships with his lovers, friends, the ecstasy of clubbing, HIV prevention and the complexities of LGBT+ experience. As Bob Nickas puts it in his article 'Pictures to Perceive the World', Tillmans' aim of '"borderless" picture-making' (Nickas 2006, 1), the abolition of strong boundaries between abstraction and figuration, is pursued with a conscious, dissonant composition:[22] 'In gallery installations of his photographs, when abstract and representational works are placed side-by-side, it's clear to see that for Tillmans the relationship between them is reciprocal. They inform one another, to be sure, but it's also apparent that these are not wholly separate bodies of work' (5). Depending on the context (the exhibition in general and the constellation with other photographs within a particular exhibition), one and the same *Freischwimmer* photographs may unfold different meanings. Tillmans' curatorial practice that aims at a constant (re)contextualisation and (re)combination, favours discontinuities rather than continuities of meaning. This shows us the structural 'unsaturation' of contexts, and thus the impossibility of final determination.

With his installation practice, it seems like Tillmans is therefore proposing a unique act of seeing that is free of ideology, in which rules of perception are constantly broken, meanings are disturbed, and everyday practices of attributions are reduced to absurdity. The triggering of a linear topic, which is caused by his flexible methods of displaying, acts as a political statement because it opens up new discursive visual spaces of open links and therefore invites for constant reinterpretation.

Against this background, Tillmans' installation practice can be described as activist in that it is all about formation, dissolution, and a new formation of pictorial and symbolic alliances and combinations.

Concluding thoughts

With my analysis of Tillmans' installation in the Panorama Bar, I offered a reading in which the patterns of subculture, underground, resistance, and dissent can be found. The queer potential of the photochemical iterations on the *Freischwimmer* photographs unfolds in the moment of (re)contextualisation and (re)arrangement, especially against the backdrop of the setting of the installation in the Berghain in constellation with a photograph of human genitalia and the techno and rave club culture context in general. Tillmans' photo installation brings forth more alternative, non-assimilatory queer politics of visibility and transformative knowledge not only by attacking the normative symbolic order through radical ambiguity, over-semantisation, discursion, and irritation, thus leading the way to cross, disturb, negotiate, and change gestures, codes, and signs of sexuality, gender, and desire, but also by advocating for a modified understanding of queerness that favours more the notion of communality than of difference. My intention is to emphasise the inescapable dimension of context in both art production and its reception and interpretation with my queer reading of Tillmans' photo installation. A consideration of the artist's curatorial practice in general that favours discontinuities rather than continuities of meaning requires us to realise this multivalent and open-ended character when analysing Tillmans' art. Therefore, a sensitive and informed engagement with art requires cognisance of its context in all of its complexity, while simultaneously necessitating continued interaction with meanings forged in ever-changing contexts of reception.

Notes

1 Since the 1970s and 1980s within queer-theoretical and art-scientific discourses, ever growing attention has been paid to the importance of both artistic and everyday cultural aesthetics and forms of expressions pertaining to the construction of gender, sexuality, and desire. Artistic work and art-scientific analyses are constantly exploring the imaginations, ideas, emotions, images, meanings, symbols, and constructions of gender and sexuality that circulate in societies under specific historical and political conditions and that can be described with the concept of gender and sexuality imaginaries. For a detailed

review on the topic of queer art history see Getsy (2016), Hoenes and Paul (2014), Jones (2016), Jones and Silver (2016), Krass (2003), Lorenz (2012), Lord and Meyer (2013), Paul and Schaffer (2009), and Zimmermann (2006) among others.

2 In queer theory, social change and the formation of subjectivity are closely linked to questions of representations as a battleground that has always allowed the expression of different perceptions, norms, and knowledges about sexuality, gender, and desire. Following post-structuralist and deconstructivist approaches, which emphasise the performative and transformative potential of the visual, my queer reading of the Panorama Bar installation is based on a broadened understanding of representation, which combines approaches from semiotics, discourse analysis, and gender studies. This constructivist and non-fixed understanding of representation is a helpful methodological tool for redefining the relationship between representation and reality (Schade and Wenk 2011, 171). As a basic approach to postcolonial and queer politics, the critique of representations aims not only to make visible formative and often unquestioned image patterns but also to deconstruct and, if possible, change them. More details on the topic of the critique of representation can be found in Hall (1997)among others.

3 With notions of visibility and invisibility I refer to semantic nuances which are important to understand in context. Visibility is often presumed to be intrinsic to presence and self-representation in the social space (being seen and heard), but it is also linked to the judgement and stigmatisation that arise from the gaze directed to the 'other'. Conversely, invisibility refers both to marginalised people – often deprived of the power of being seen and heard – and to 'normality', which makes it possible to pass unseen.

4 I am using queer as a research perspective as well as a starting point for the critical analysis of visual material in order to avoid the danger of emptying the term of its meaning/political charge and encouraging its de-politicisation. Originally a homophobic term of abuse, in the late 1980s and early 1990s queer was positively picked up by LGBT*QQI*P activists as a counter-concept to heteronormativity and has since then served as an affirmative mode of self-reflection. The initialism LGBT*QQI*P stands for people who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer, questioning, inter*, and pansexual. Looking from the perspective of the history of science, since the early 1990s, queer theory has emerged from discourse analysis, post-structuralism, and feminist theories. It has been positioned as an opposite of and reconceptualisation of gay and lesbian studies, and as such queer theory has been developed as a critical and political concept and a field of research focusing on a diversified society. The critique of fixed and stable identities, deconstruction, (un)doing gender, queering, performativity and representation are among the most important concepts in queer theory. More details on the topic of queer studies as a field of research can be found in Degele (2008), Hall and Jagose (2013), Paul and Tietz (2016) among others.

5 The work displayed in Berghain's Panorama Bar can be read as a site-specific installation, especially – as I will explain later in detail – considering the fact that the artist's practice of hanging the works, often unframed, with tape, nails, and bulldog clips, has become an iconic and recognisable part of his oeuvre.

6 In an attempt to use gender-fair language, the gender gap (_) marks the diversity of gender-based ways of existing. According to the philosopher Steffen K. Hermann, at a linguistic level the underscore interrupts unquestioned representations and reproductions of the two-gender system and instead gives trans* and inter* subject positions an intelligible space between masculine and feminine suffixes (Herrmann 2003). In addition, by making use of the asterisk (*), I want to signal the denaturalisation and social and cultural construction of man*, woman* etc.

7 Which is the reason why I am more interested in the secondary context, i.e. in what circumstances the work is displayed (the social, historical, and cultural setting in which the work was produced) than in the primary context (the artist's attitudes, beliefs, interests, values, education and training, and biography).

8. In my analysis, I rely on Johanna Schaffer's psychoanalytically well-founded reflections on the conditions of a self-reflective practice of seeing (Schaffer 2008), based on the theories of the art historian Silverman (1997) and the philosopher Butler (1993).
9. Antke Engel asks whether desire can activate subversive and destabilising – queer – potential and comes to the following conclusion: 'The movements of the images make it possible to liberate desire from being bound to a subject or an object and thus also elude the hierarchical subject/object arrangement' (Engel 2011).
10. As the curator Lida Shihoko puts it in her essay *Wolfgang Tillmans: Spirit of the Freischwimmer*: 'Described objectively, it is "an image, not a thing", formed by physical particles on photosensitive paper through a chemical reaction between light and the developing solution. We only see in it what we want to see. A photograph is an image. In Tillmans' case, photography is not superior to painting in terms of recording facts. His photographs are not abstract just because no concrete image can be seen in them. There is something concrete in abstraction from the beginning. Naming is an act of representation.' (Shihoko 2004, 106).
11. In this context, with darkrooms I mean darkened rooms in nightclubs, gay bathhouses or sex clubs, where sexual activities take place.
12. It should be noted that by choosing the initialism LGBT+, I am seeking to not only simplify things but also to be open to a plurality of sexualities and hoping to contribute to the social and artistic recognition of people who form part of and identify with these communities.
13. The exhibition *Party out of Bounds: Nightlife as Activism since 1980* (18 September –10 October 2015) at LA MaMa Galleria in New York is just one among many examples that show the close link between nightlife and politics, focusing on the entanglement of the continuing HIV/AIDS crisis and nightlife since the 1980s and its transformative potential.
14. Tillmans' photo reportages on the young club and music scene as well as the emerging techno culture were also published in subcultural, left-oriented magazines such as *Tango, spex* and *i-D*, which – as the photographer describes in an interview – offered identification possibilities beyond the mainstream: 'The main attraction was that it showed you that you can create your own identity, or rely on your own identity without having subscribe to any official rules of how to behave and how to look in order to be right or to be cool' (Tillmans and Halley 2002, 12).
15. In line with a large number of arguments, gathered in the anthology *Radikal Ambivalent. Engagement und Verantwortung in den Künsten heute* (*Radically Ambivalent. Commitment and Responsibility in the Arts Today*) (Mader 2014) and in the monograph *Wider die Eindeutigkeit. Sexualität und Geschlecht im Fokus queerer Politik der Repräsentation* (*Against Unambiguity. Sexuality and Gender in Queer Politics of Representation*) (Engel 2009), in my dissertation project 'Radically Ambiguous Politics of In_Visibility: A Queer Reading of Art Photography and its Presentation in Exhibition Contexts Using the Example of Kaucyila Brooke, Dean Sameshima, David Benjamin Sherry and Wolfgang Tillmans', I argue that ambiguities and political commitment are neither mutually exclusive nor inconsistent with one another. Especially in times of neoliberalism and homonationalism, when Eurocentric political agendas such as demands for equal rights, gay marriage, and domestic partnership, assume a gay citizen whose affective fulfilment resides in assimilation, inclusion and normalcy (Duggan 2002, Puar 2007), ambiguities in the field of the arts and visual culture can be an empowering and protective tool for the LGBT+ community against surveillance, control, fixation, stigmatisation, stereotypisation, and discrimination.

    In *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir Puar locates homonationalism as sexual exceptionalism in which queer individuals are incorporated into the Western nation state, in order to cordon off sexual citizenship to bodies that are properly defined as belonging, and thus demarcating the bodies that are not. Homonationalism, Puar continues, 'corresponds with the coming out of exceptionalism of the American empire. Further, this brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness,

or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects' (Puar 2007, 2). This opposition falls between white, secular hetero- and homosexuals, on the one hand, and the racialised bodies that are placed under the frame of homophobia and religious extremism, on the other.

16 Engel describes 'undisambiguity' (*VerUneindeutigung*) as a 'strategy of queer politics of representation' (Engel 2002, 224, translated by O.K.) that favours, contrary to previous descriptive definitions of gender and sexual differences within politics of representations, 'denormalizing, destabilizing and deconstructive potentials' (225, translated by O.K.).

17 With heterotopia, I refer to Foucault's concept of other spaces or counter spaces, used for the first time in a radio broadcast for the culture channel France-Culture in December 1966. Originally, the concept of heterotopia comes from medicine and means healthy tissue that is not in the anatomically correct position.

18 My investigation is based on an understanding of desire as a movement, referring to the philosopher Gilles Deleuze as well as to the sexologists Elspeth Probyn and Margrit Shildrick. In 1996, Probyn argued in *Outside Belongings* that a reciprocal relationship exists between images as transportation of desire and the movements of desire that can create images (Probyn 1996). The movement of desire in images can be explained with the help of psychoanalytic explanatory models: the recipient's desire is looking for a sign in the object (picture), which stand for a wish fulfilment and therefore the recipient's fantasy is needed. In other words: an action is followed by a network of connections which, in turn, can create movements and a social space.

19 Judith Butler, in her 2006 published book *Hass spricht: Zur Politik des Performativen* (*Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*), reveals that through the revaluation and decontextualisation of a sign, through the break with prevailing meanings, a performative force can evolve which subversively exposes the uncertainty of standardised meanings and therefore contributes to the expropriation of an authorised discourse (Butler 2006, 230 and 246).

20 As the artist and curator Julie Ault in her essay 'The Subject is Exhibition' aptly points out, 'Tillmans' belief in his own complex, flexible subjectivity – and the extension of its validity to one and all – inspire its methods, which subtly decenter institutional authority and redistribute display. Identity is irresolute. Self-construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction are vital dimensions of Tillmans' artistic formation. His practice reflects continually shifting subjectivity, necessitating that design always be anew' (Ault 2006, 126).

21 Tillmans expresses his interest in the dialogue of different image realities as follows: 'The human eye has a great desire to recognize things when it looks at a photographic print. I made use of this phenomenon and found I could speak about physicality in new pictures while the camera-based pictures could be seen in a new light as well. So they kind of inform each other, rather than being pitted against each other' (Eichler and Tillmans 2008, 235).

22 For Tillmans' photographic work, Lane Relyea also notes the following leitmotiv: '[T]o treat pictures, including abstract ones, not as isolated phenomena but as always interrelated' (Relyea 2006, 90). Bob Nickas comes to a similar conclusion: 'In gallery installations of his photographs, when abstract and representational works are placed side-by-side, it's clear to see that for Tillmans the relationship between them is reciprocal. They inform one another, to be sure, but it's also apparent that these are not wholly separate bodies of work' (Nickas 2006, 5). Last but not least, Mark Wigley notes: 'There is no clear line between these seemingly abstract images and seemingly realistic ones' (Wigley 2006, 154).

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8

Performative contexts in contemporary theatre: towards the emancipation of the relational sphere

Belén Tortosa Pujante

Introduction

Since the emergence of the European avant-gardes in the early twentieth century, many have been the attempts that have challenged theatre, the performing arts and the limitations of drama as a genre. For decades, 'representation' in theatre has been understood as a unique event originating in the simultaneous presence and mutual perception of a number of actors and the audience attending a play. This belief usually goes hand in hand with seeing a play as an event where something necessarily *happens*. Likewise, this notion appears to be strongly linked with the assumption that the encounter between living bodies taking place during a play automatically creates a sense of community among those involved (that is, the actors and the audience). This definition, however, does not seem to adequately address the challenges facing contemporary theatre. As Jacques Rancière points out in *The Emancipated Spectator*: 'What exactly occurs among theatre spectators that cannot happen elsewhere? What is more interactive, more communitarian about these spectators than a mass of individuals watching the same television show at the same hour?' (Rancière 2008, 16).

According to Rancière, the mere fact of attending a play does not automatically 'activate' a sense of community in the audience nor in the actors. Contemporary stage creators appear to be aware of this as well, as they are increasingly willing to build new spaces for collective

representation that allow them (and the rest of the people participating in the event) to approach and explore human relationships from innovative perspectives. Rancière's point of view suggests, indeed, a number of questions that continue to challenge the mainstream perception of what theatre is and how it works in the present day. This chapter will be dedicated to examining those that stand out as more relevant to our study:

a) What defines the contemporary plays that in the twenty-first century challenge our perception of the place we occupy in the world (*how* and *why* we inhabit a certain space)?
b) What is context from a performative point of view?
c) How can we approach plays that cannot be separated from their context? What are the limitations of current scholarly research on this subject?
d) Why has context become a fundamental actor? Can this be considered as a symptom of the need to rethink the social and community-related aspects of theatre from innovative points of view?

Delving into these questions might not only prove useful in understanding the recent evolution that has led to the present situation of the theatre scene, but it might also contribute to helping us re-evaluate the current theoretical and practical approaches to what can be called 'dramaturgies of the context', as well as their consequences for both the contemporary theatre scene and future scholarly research into issues related to it.

In order to approach these issues, two contemporary plays will be analysed: *El triunfo de la libertad* and *The Quiet Volume*. *El triunfo de la libertad*, a controversial work by La Ribot, Juan Domínguez and Juan Loriente which premiered at La Bâtie Festival in Geneva, Switzerland, has not stopped generating the most varied responses among both the critics and the general public since its official opening in 2014. *The Quiet Volume*, a collaborative work by Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells, has been touring libraries all over the world after its premiere in 2010. Even though the two selected works may seem quite different from each other, both of them stand out for their focus on the spectator and, accordingly, on the context in which the play takes place.

German author Erika Fischer-Lichte's contributions concerning the aesthetics of the performative provide a possible approach to explaining the actual evolution of the theatre scene from the early twenty-first century to the present day. Over the last decades, several movements and creators have challenged the traditional definition of 'representation',

resulting in what has been coined as a 'crisis of participation' (Fischer-Lichte 2008). For the most part, the main goal of those challenging both representation and participation in theatre has been to de-automatise the spectator's role. In this light, the most noticeable outcome of the changes brought about by artists throughout the recent history of theatre is probably the increasing importance of context, which has become the most relevant aspect of contemporary plays. As a result, the relationship between the actors and the audience is being redefined. Likewise, shifting the focus to the context in which the play is taking place is now allowing emergent artists to explore the possibilities of the 'spectator's emancipation' (Rancière 2008).

The performative turn

In her well-renowned work *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (2008), Erika Fischer-Lichte lays out the characteristics and implications of what she coined as the 'performative turn' in contemporary theatre. With this concept, Fischer-Lichte isolates and describes what, in her eyes, are the main features that distinguish contemporary theatre. The most relevant is that, while being performed, the play becomes an event that inspires the audience to increase their awareness of what they are *experiencing* and not just *seeing*, bringing forward the relationship between the 'material status' and the 'sign status' (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 54). In the same way, seeing the play as an event instead of as an unchangeable work of art redefines the relationship between subject/object, material status/sign status.

As Fischer-Lichte points out, from a traditional hermeneutic and semiotic perspective, it is essential to establish a clear separation between subject/object, observer/observed, spectator/actor, materiality/signicity (signifier/signified). The aesthetics of the performative instead propose a redefinition of these dichotomies: the play is no longer seen as a mere sign, but as an experience – a living event that takes shape as the individuals involved share the same space and time, becoming co-subjects in the development of a collective experience. From this point of view, the material elements of the play are not simply signifiers that spectators can fill with a certain meaning. As Fischer-Lichte sees it, the material aspects act as a powerful trigger for physiological, affective, volitional, energetic, and motor reactions that motivate further actions (34–5). These reactions are, for their part, conditioned by the cultural, political, economic, and social context.

The concept of performativity was coined in the second half of the twentieth century. It originated in the field of language philosophy as a notion related with Austin's well-renowned speech acts theory. However, the conditions required for an utterance to be performative are not only linguistic. They depend, above all, on institutional and social matters. Cultural studies scholars realised this in the 1990s and decided to approach the concept from new perspectives, using it as a tool for research in gender and identity studies. Judith Butler's work is one the best examples (Butler 1993). According to her, gender is and must be read as socially and culturally constructed. In this light, 'the here so-called performative body acts do not convey a preconceived identity, but they create identity' (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 54). Identity is thus seen as the result of a process of embodiment, given that 'the stylized repetition of performative acts embodies certain historical and cultural possibilities […] and only this way [performative acts] generate the culturally and historically marked body as well as its identity' (56).

Notwithstanding this, Fischer-Lichte has suggested that the aesthetics of the performative need to complete the existing theories by developing a more accurate definition of performativity that matches the reality of its current situation. In the author's words, 'the first performative turn in the twentieth century European culture did not have its place in the performance culture of the 1960's and 1970's but occurred much earlier with the establishment of ritual and theatre studies at the turn of the last century' (63).

Cultural anthropology studies might prove useful in this context. The works by Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep are particularly helpful to understand the strong connection between ritual and theatre.[1] The first research studies on theatre, published in the early twentieth century, strongly relied on the idea that Greek theatre (and consequently, Western theatre) had its origins in ritual, not in literary texts. This notion, which would be reappropriated by theatre scholars in subsequent years, is the backbone of the performative turn theory and its redefinition of the relationship between actors and spectators.

During the 1960s, visual artists like Joseph Beuys, Wolf Vostell, the Viennese actionists, and the members of the Fluxus group created a new genre in the field of performing and action arts. Their actions had great influence in the art scene, and performance started to be seen as way of bringing to life the formal and conceptual ideas behind art creation (Goldberg 1998, 24) – the performative turn was taking place and its effects were noticeable in every art form: music, literature, theatre …

In the field of theatre, the performative turn redefined above all the relationship between actors and spectators (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 42), which at the same time led to the questioning of a key concept: representation. This was, indeed, the origin of what is known as the 'crisis of representation', that is, theatre stopped being understood as a mere tool for representing a fictional world. This conception of theatre had created a framework where all actions executed by actors and spectators during a play were self-referential (that is, they were not intended to mean anything beyond their own execution) and, as such, they were constitutive of reality. It is important to highlight that, in that context, actions *needed to* be self-referential in order to actually be *performative*. However, as the influence of the crisis of representation spread through the arts scene, theatre started to be seen as a possibility for creating a collective experience – an encounter with the potential to make something *happen* among the actors and spectators involved in a play.

Establishing a clear separation between theatre and performance is not an easy task, mainly due to the fact that new uses of theatrical signs brought about by the crisis of representation are blurring the borders that used to delimit them as independent domains. The increasingly common aspiration to use plays as a means to experience the real (a feature traditionally associated with performance art) is distancing contemporary theatre from traditional drama. With the aim of describing this new status quo in a more accurate way, Fischer-Lichte has revisited Marx Hermann's works and proposed a redefinition of the concept of performance: an action or group of actions with the power to produce 'a unique, unrepeatable constellation between the actors and spectators co-presence' (72). According to the German author, the main interest of the performed actions now lies in the dynamic processes *happening* among all the people involved in the play. Accordingly, both actors and spectators have a role in what in this light is seen as a unique shared experience.

Certainly, the physical co-presence of the participants involved in this kind of theatrical event is at the core of what has been referred to as a 'happening'. This is not, however, the only condition determining it: context, too, is crucial, as it became more and more explicit in performances put on show during the 1960s and up to the 1990s. Since the 1990s, theatre/performance art seems to have taken a turn towards a deeper exploration of the performativity of the play/event. This has resulted in a redefinition of the spectator's paradigm, which now focuses on the social aspects related with theatrical events and has been broadened to include a wider number of art disciplines and techniques.

The proliferation of art-related educational projects (encouraged by the *arts in context* movement, born in the 1990s) is a good example of this.

As it has been pointed out by critics and scholars such as Claire Bishop, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Jacques Rancière among others, shifting the focus from the play (in its most traditional definition) to the audience led to a re-evaluation of the social aspects of the (now accordingly renamed as) theatrical event. While relatively recent works like *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Claire Bishop, 2012), *L'Esthétique relationnelle* (Nicolas Bourriaud, 2002) or *The Emancipated Spectator* (Jacques Rancière, 2008) explicitly approach this subject, most of these changes had already been anticipated by Rancière almost two decades before in his work *Le Maître ignorant*: *Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle* (2004). The most relevant conclusion that can be reached from a close reading of these works is that spectators and context have become the actual dramatic events. In Bourriaud's words, contemporary theatrical events can be described as 'a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space' (Bourriaud 2002, 113).

The performative turn has shifted the interest to where, when, and how a theatrical event takes place among the people involved in it (and actually *making it happen*). In the same way, theatrical strategies have strongly evolved throughout the last decades as a result of the innovations put into place by performance artists and theatre creators, also showing the great impact of the crisis of representation that came upon the Western 'society of spectacle' (Guy Debord, 1992). A number of strategies have been developed as reaction to the society of spectacle, the most relevant being immediacy, presence, and the interaction between actors and spectators. Furthermore, actually putting these strategies into practice instigates the participants to question them and their implications (in line with the previously mentioned crisis of participation).

From a spectacular context to a post-spectacular context

In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Jean Baudrillard describes contemporary culture as a 'factory of images' that are no longer intended to represent reality. According to the French philosopher, contemporary culture reacts to the 'fading of the real' by becoming a simulation of immediacy, of actual experience and 'raw' reality. Baudrillard refers to a

'transparent', a concept that would later be developed by Gianni Vattimo, one of the most influential postmodern critics. In his works, Vattimo analyses the social impact of the media, and defines reality as the result of an intersection of multiple images, interpretations and reconstructions that compete with each other. These conflicting images, he states, are disseminated by the media without any central coordination (Vattimo 1989, 81).

This can be seen as the triumph of what Guy Debord had called (already in 1967) the 'society of spectacle': a society where human relationships are not directly experienced and where social life is but an accumulation of spectacles – actual experiences are replaced by or turn into representations of themselves. Debord's notion of society of spectacle had great influence on subsequent scholars and was essential in the consolidation of Situationism (1957–72), a movement set up by a group of artists, writers, and social critics (among which Guy Debord) that aimed to fight capitalism through the revolutionisation of daily life.

According to the Situationists, the spectacularisation of culture and society should be fought through the actual experience of situations (events). The aim of 'situations' as they were understood by the Situationists was to incite in the participants a sensation of liberation from their everyday life. They wanted to promote the experience of moments that were not intended for the *production* of something, be it objects, images, or services. Nicolas Bourriaud has proposed a further development of this notion. He has pointed out that the society of spectacle has evolved into a new phase, becoming what he has coined as a 'society of extras':

> The individual has shifted from a passive and purely receptive status to activities dictated by market forces. So television consumption is shrinking in favour of video games; thus the spectacular hierarchy encourages "empty monads," i.e. programless models and politicians; thus everyone sees themselves summoned to be famous for fifteen minutes, using a TV game, street poll, or news item[…]. Here we are summoned to turn into extras of the spectacle, having been regarded as its consumers (Bourriaud 2002, 113).

Bourriaud's society of extras theory encourages us to question the actual efficiency of the alternative tools or strategies (immediacy, presence, and interaction) proposed by the Situationists and most performing

artists during the 1960s and 1970s. In Bourriaud's eyes, contemporary citizens cannot continue to be considered as mere 'spectators' (in the most traditional sense of the word, that is, as passive receptors of the spectacle), as they have become active participants in every other domain. In this light, Situationism-related strategies are not valid anymore. They are outdated and ineffective: they lack the potential to allow the emancipation of individuals because they have been absorbed by neoliberal capitalism, a system in which ENJOY is an omnipresent imperative (Zizek 1994, 13) and experience is but another product subject to the dynamics of transaction and consumption.

Authors like André Eiermann have approached the concepts of participation and *criticality*,[2] two delicate aspects that play an important role in scholarly research on contemporary theatre. The effects of the previously mentioned crisis of participation become apparent in a series of works that Eiermann has labelled as 'post-spectacular theatre', a kind of theatre based on criticising *criticality*:

> el término postespectacular representa una crítica de la pseudo-crítica, la *criticality*, que en el período de la permisividad no puede ser ya una crítica real, porque sus demandas de inmediatez ya han sido adoptadas hace tiempo por el espectáculo[3] (Eiermann 2012, 9).

The crisis of participation has exposed the need for creating new spaces in contemporary theatre that allow us to rethink human relationships from innovative perspectives more in tune with the current times. This is probably the main reason why context (and its impact on the interactions among the participants of a theatre-related event) has become the most important dimension. Contemporary theatrical creations encourage attendees to reinvent their selves through the experience of different 'ways of being' (of existing as a living body, and of being present in a certain time in a certain place). These ways of being, as defined by Spanish scholar Óscar Cornago, rely on what he has called 'minimal actions' (Cornago 2015, 41). Cornago describes these actions (reading, listening, thinking, talking, or simply being present) as something that could go unnoticed or be considered banal, natural; just trivial *everyday life* events. However, contemporary creators shifting the focus to such actions encourage us to de-automatise them, raising our awareness of how they are (like all events) culturally and socially determined: why do we applaud at the end of the show? Why do we remain silent when the room's lights are switched off? Why are the lights switched off at all?

According to Eiermann, the purpose of post-spectacular criticism is to reflect upon the role of human relationships within the context of a spectacle. From this perspective, post-spectacular theatre can be a powerful tool for exploring the social role of contemporary theatre at large. It urges us to rethink the social fabric, its framework and dynamics, proposing the development of 'rejection strategies' designed with the aim to allow us to take distance from the society of spectacle. Stoppage, slowness and the stating of absence (Eiermann 2012, 9) are some examples of these techniques.

> Esta marcha hacia el vacío, hacia el fin de la función referencial de la escena provoca también la posibilidad de una no estructuración o des-estructuración del mundo. Así como plantearía una desubicación del hombre. [...] Es posible que ese vaciamiento sea correlato del desnudo frente al cual el derrumbe de los grandes relatos nos ha expuesto. Nos descubrimos vacíos de aquellos ropajes que nos cubrían y nos daban la seguridad del sentido de nuestras acciones[4] (Jaureguiberry and Etchecoin 2011, 3).

This emptiness, as it is described by Jaureguiberry and Etchecoin, acts as a mirror for an audience to be (the attendees to the event might eventually become an actual active audience as they contribute to the very process of its *happening*). In this way, the empty scene works as an open question upon which the attendees are invited to reflect – such is the purpose of the works that this article intends to analyse: *El triunfo de la libertad*, by La Ribot, Juan Domínguez, and Juan Loriente, and *The Quiet Volume* (Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells).

Reading and being: *El triunfo de la libertad* (La Ribot, Juan Domínguez and Juan Loriente)

'Why did you come to the theatre tonight?' is the most repeated of the sentences displayed by the LED panels put on show for the attendees (and which are the only onstage installation) for the whole duration of *El triunfo de la libertad* (60 minutes). The play, officially premiered in 2014, is a collaborative work of three Spanish artists (La Ribot, Juan Domínguez, and Juan Loriente) whose creative relationship dates back to the 1980s, when they started working together in Madrid.

The most remarkable feature of *El triunfo de la libertad* is that the human presence of performers has been replaced by physical linguistic

symbols (written words) and the (also physical) potential of an empty space (that of the stage) where not a single element is in 'non-motion', as the lights, the music, and the LED displays do not remain static. Spectators are urged to become active readers in (and of) a show in which they are given the possibility of playing their very own role. In effect, via their involvement in the apparently banal activity of reading, they become active participants in the process of creating the event, of making it happen. The ostensible emptiness of the stage reinforces not only the absence of actors, but also the now unavoidable presence of the audience. Thanks to their stage design choice, the three creators behind *El triunfo de la libertad* manage to be absent and present at the same time: from the perspective of traditional representation they are, indeed, absent, but they are still present in the room, sharing time and space with the attendees. This simultaneity of absence and presence, along with the fact that nothing appears to be happening onstage, can be seen as another way to ask the main question that needs to be approached by contemporary theatre studies: *what is representation?*

The three artists behind *El triunfo de la libertad* have described their work as an invitation for the audience to reformulate their aspirations and preconceptions regarding theatre and, in so doing, explore and put to test the freedom of their imagination (La Ribot, Domínguez, and Loriente 2016, 23). The removal of actors shifts the emphasis of the dramatic weight to the audience. The emptiness of the stage activates what Eiermann calls a 'third term', something acting as a kind of 'mediator'. According to the German author, this third term is what has the power to promote a critical reflection upon our self-image and the automatic patterns we tend to use when interacting with others and the world:

> […] se hace evidente la participación permanente del tercero [el apuntador secreto], que casi se funde con el actor, pero nunca de manera completa. Sus apuntes se hacen audibles en la escena vacía. Se manifiestan en forma de las expectativas que los espectadores depositan en la representación, motivados por las convenciones a las que están habituados, así como en forma de concepciones proyectadas al vacío de la escena a partir de dichas expectativas[5] (Eiermann 2012, 20).

Given its unusual stage design and purpose, it is not a surprise that many spectators jeered at the play's premiere, complained out loud and even

left the room before the end of the event. *El triunfo de la libertad* generated reactions of irritation, deep confusion, and anxiety – the lack of the usual rules and conventions caused the play to be invalid in the eyes of most members of the audience.

The play not only encourages the audience to take part in an event where nothing happens, but also it does so in a space traditionally used for conventional theatrical representation. However, the very feelings of confusion and rejection that it might inspire are actually what can trigger a critical approach to what we are seeing and experiencing, and to representation itself:

> A reflection that probably is addressed less to conferred meanings of each action than to the question of why certain action has triggered a certain reaction. How do effect and meaning relate in this case? (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 36).

A possible answer to this issue lies in context: the rules and conventions that condition and give shape to a play or event are not static – they are fluid and subject to changing during the representation or performance. Contemporary theatrical events thus invite us to experience context not as a pre-established, static entity, but as a constantly changing and dynamic process.

Seen in this light, context can be a potent tool with an actual capacity to enable emancipation. In regard with 'intellectual emancipation' as Rancière sees it, the spectators' power is not rooted in community, but in their capacity to translate what they perceive in their very own way and to connect it with the 'unique intellectual adventure that makes [them] similar to all the rest in as much as this adventure is not like any other' (Rancière 2008, 16). The ultimate goal would then be to create new spaces where individual differences are welcome, brought together, and accepted. This would allow spectators to be themselves in a way that feels 'true' and develop their own unique interactions with the objects and the people surrounding them. As Rancière puts it, 'in all these performances what is involved is linking what one knows with what one does not know; being at once a performer deploying her skills and a spectator observing what these skills might produce in a new context among other spectators' (22).

El triunfo de la libertad invites spectators to observe, but also to be observed. It encourages them to redefine their expectations and preconceptions on what theatre actually is. To do so, it urges the audience to test (and put to test) the freedom of their imagination – *how free are we really?*

Inviting us to reflect on this question is also the goal of Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells' *The Quiet Volume*.

Seeing, reading, and listening: *The Quiet Volume* (Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells)

As is the case with *El triunfo de la libertad*, *The Quiet Volume* is too a collaborative work set up by Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells, two creators with long-standing careers on the theatre scene. *The Quiet Volume*, premiered in 2010, has since been on show at some of the most renowned libraries in the world.

The play focuses on everyday actions (seeing, reading, and listening), inviting us to reflect upon how the proposed activities induce the creation of mental images, thoughts, and associations. *The Quiet Volume* 'proposes […] to revoke the privilege of vitality and communitarian power accorded the theatrical stage, so as to restore it to an equal footing with the telling of a story, the reading of a book, or the gaze focused on an image' (Rancière 2008, 22).

At the beginning of the play, every spectator – only two spectators are allowed per show – is provided with a headphone set and an MP3 device. They are then asked to enter a library room and invited to sit at a table on which lie two piles of books. For about 60 minutes, the participants are given instructions in order to perform simple tasks ('you just have to listen and read the books at your own pace'). A voice whispers into their ears: 'The first thing you notice is that, for a place dedicated to silence, there's not really that much silence at all …'. The voice guides the 'spectators' through what could be described as the 'experience of the objects of everyday life'. It draws their attention to the subtle movements of the library users and the sounds and noises caused by their actions: typing on keyboards, turning pages, closing books, holding in sneezes. For the duration of the event, the participants become 'hidden spectators' – imposters, fake library users – of other people's privacy.

*The Quiet Volum*e enables 'spectators' to set up their own individual staging of the 'play'. Their 'personalisation of the stage' is also encouraged by the imaginary of the specific books they read during the event, as Hampton and Etchells propose different 'scenes' based on a careful selection of readings:[6] three novels (Jose Saramago's *Blindness*, Agota Kristof's *Klaus and Lucas* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*) and a photography book (*Cityscapes* by Gabriele Basilico).

Hampton and his creative partner Silvia Mercuriali created the term *autoteatro* to refer to this kind of display. In autoteatro events, the spectator's participation is based on subtlety, rigour, and imagination. Its goal is not to urge participants to be clever or inventive and it does not encourage competitiveness of any kind. Autoteatro is not addressed to an audience in the traditional sense of the term, but to the 'participants themselves' (For more, see the website: http://www.anthampton.com/about.html).

Blindness, loss of sight, blank pages, the act of hearing/seeing, snowy landscapes, emptiness/the void, post-war ruins, and lack of light are the words most frequently repeated by the 'guiding voice'. Invitations to read a book on one's own are alternated with the instruction to perform a collective reading along with the other participant. This enables different ways of experiencing the images suggested by what is being read and how they are affected by the changing conditions both of the surroundings and the reading approach. According to the authors of the play, this experience can help us build new mental patterns for inhabiting space – a new sense of spatiality that is made possible by the practice of different ways of being present, seeing and listening. As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, to be listening is to open up towards an 'itself' that enters a new spatiality as long as it opens to that listening: 'écouter, c'est entrer dans cette spatialité par laquelle, *en même temps,* je suis pénétré: car elle s'ouvre en moi tout autant qu'autour de moi, et de moi tout autant qu'au dehors, et c'est par une talle double, quadruple ou sextuple ouverture qu'un "soi" peut avoir lieu'[7] (Nancy 2002, 33). 'Listening' originally meant 'un lieu d'où écouter en secret'[8] (16), which, again, brings us back to the notion of privacy, of being a 'hidden spectator'.

Public space (the library) and private space (the new senses of spatiality allowed by the participant's imagination) are at the core of *The Quiet Volume*. Explicitly approaching the tension existing between both spaces motivates new ways of seeing, listening, experiencing ourselves in the context of the surrounding space. While *The Quiet Volume* encourages the desired reactions of the audience by urging them to experience public space from a 'staged' privacy, *El triunfo de la libertad* reaches its goals through deliberately exposing the audience as 'public' in a public place. In this regard, it is interesting to point out how the isolation experienced by the spectators taking part in *The Quiet Volume* contrasts with the community of attendees created by the setup of *El triunfo de la libertad*. Despite this, both plays share a similar interest in questioning the traditional notion of representation.

Both *El triunfo de la libertad* and *The Quiet Volume* challenge representation and its implications in contemporary societies. In Ant

Hampton's words 'questioning the means of representation and the processes by which we watch and are aware or not of what's going on. But it's constantly playing with representation […] setting it up in order to break it down. Setting it up in order to cut the strings and feel it fall' (Gansky 2015).

Conclusions. Towards the emancipation of the relational sphere

Contemporary theatrical events as the ones analysed throughout this article are trying to fight the traditional theatre aesthetics linked with the effects of the so-called society of spectacle. To achieve this, creators have opted for new theatrical strategies and stage designs that promote new ways of interacting with each other and the world. As Nicolas Bourriaud has put it, 'In our post-industrial societies, the most pressing thing is no longer the emancipation of individuals, but the freeing-up of inter-human communications, the dimensional emancipation of existence' (Bourriaud 2002, 73). For reaching this goal, creators are now proposing works that aim to establish an open, continuous dialogue with society and with the context in which they take place. As a result, plays are no longer locked inside the realm of their own aura, as the focus has been shifted to the role of the audience and the relational context of the event. Theatrical events have stopped being finished, invariable objects – they have become unique entities subject to constant change.

More and more studies conducted in the field of aesthetics of the performative are urging us to re-evaluate the importance of context, its social potential and implications as a powerful tool in contemporary theatre, as it is exposed by works like *El triunfo de la libertad* and *The Quiet Volume*. The aesthetics of the performative provide us with research strategies that can prove useful for the development of more accurate analyses of contemporary theatrical events that deal with complex socio-political and cultural issues and encourage us to reflect upon how the tension between public space/private space, actors/spectators expresses itself in the present time.

Discourse and its attributed meaning is not the nucleus of theatre anymore, nor is representation seen as an image of a fictional universe. Plays themselves are becoming a 'third term', a potential mediator with the aspiration to allow non-spectacular encounters within the (still subject to capitalistic and spectacular dynamics) contemporary society. In this light, theatrical creations like *El triunfo de la libertad* and *The Quiet*

Volume can be seen as an act of resistance that, by making us more aware of the complexity of context and how our mere existence contributes to it (despite being unavoidably affected by it), encourages us to reflect upon the automatic patterns that we put into practice when relating with others and the world.

Context, more than ever, has become a paradigm for approaching and rethinking the relational sphere as a discourse that conveys meaning to the new ways of being in this representation that we call society.

Notes

1 Fischer-Lichte's comments on the 'first performative turn' refer to the first performative turn in the framework of the Western culture, usually dated in the twentieth century.

2 'Criticality' is a term used for referring to criticism to the society of spectacle. According to post-spectacular criticism, the tools that criticality proposed for fighting the society of spectacle (immediacy, presence, and interaction) are currently inadequate and ineffective, since they have been assimilated by the society of spectacle and have, too, become spectacular.

3 [The term 'post-spectacular' is used for labelling criticism of pseudo-criticism, that is, criticality. Criticality, indeed, cannot work as real criticism anymore, since the immediacy for which it called has been assimilated by spectacle from a long time now.] All translations by author.

4 [This change of direction towards the void, towards the death of the referential function of theatre allows the possibility for a non-structuration or destructuration of the world, which would entail a relocation of the traditional position of man. […] This emptying of the scene is maybe linked to the nakedness into which we have been forced as a result of the collapse of the great narratives. We now feel empty, devoid of the garments that gave us cover and filled us with the confidence that our actions had substantial meaning.]

5 […] makes apparent the omnipresent participation of a third party [the hidden prompter] whose role is almost that of an actor, although it never becomes completely so. What he says is now heard in the empty scene – it is expressed through the spectators' expectations of the play, which, for their part, are motivated by the conventions with which the audience is familiar. Likewise, they can also manifest in the form of conceptions (those generated by the expectations) that the audience projects on the empty scene.]

6 With regard to the role of reading in a play, Ant Hampton has stated the following: 'I was reading Tim's stuff, talking about text, his thoughts regarding text and writing, particularly what he wrote about how reading can in some ways parallel a sort of dramaturgical process. In that as you turn pages and read, there's an unfolding event over time, and there's a conjuring of presence' (http://www.anthampton.com/about.html).

7 [To listen means to enter a spatiality that, as the very act of my listening takes place, enters me, too: this is so because it unfolds inside me and around me, both from inside and outside of me, and this two, four, or even six-sided unfolding process is precisely what allows the possibility for a 'self' to exist.]

8 [A place from which a secret can be heard].

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9

I object to your position: hyperreal decontextualising of objects

Ana Calvete

Introduction

The phenomenon of hyperreality, which came as the offspring of technological advances, mass consumption and globalisation that accompanied late capitalism, grants us the opportunity to assess the individual's lack of control over its environment through the study of hyperreal objects and their impact on aesthetic interpretation. Because it reports the slow death of traditional aesthetics through a critical exploration of hyperreal American locations, Umberto Eco's essay *Travels in Hyperreality* constitutes the primary material of this article. In this article, the physical context in which hyperreal objects are found – the other objects surrounding them, the captions beside them, the edifice that contains them – informs us on the status of the cultural objects in the postmodern era and influences to a great extent their impact on aesthetic interpretation. This context appears to be the result of a movement generated by capitalism and globalisation, which causes the extraction of the cultural objects from their original contexts and their reframing within new ones. After a short introduction to *Travels in Hyperreality*, I will start by defining both hyperreality and context as central notions of this study.

I argue that in the postmodern era, hyperreality produces a decontextualisation of cultural objects, and the purpose of this study is to examine the impact of this decontextualisation on the status of the object and on aesthetic interpretation. This article will be divided into

four sections. I will first discuss the changes that the original contexts undergo when cultural objects are accumulated and decontextualised. The second aspect examined will be the drawbacks of aesthetic interpretation associated with the accumulative decontextualisation. I will then focus on the shift in aesthetic judgement created by the recontextualisation of historical and fictional characters in a wax museum. Finally, I will address the turn initiated by hyperreal objects, leading to the disappearance of the original art-piece, to the independence of simulacra and to a relational functioning of hyperreal copies.

When he wrote his essay, Eco selected museums as his privileged area of investigation where the kitsch and the authentic cohabited. He took the readers on a journey across the United States, exploring, among other sites, Los Angeles' Palace of Living Arts, Malibu's J. Paul Getty Museum, and Disneyland. Eco started his journey 'in the spirit of irony and sophisticated repulsion' with the aim to find 'The Absolute Fake', and he consciously 'exclude[d] examples of correct, philological art collections, where famous works are shown without any manipulation' (Eco 1986, 35 and 31). The author admits to his and his essay's Eurocentric bias. His critical distance towards the USA's treatment of art – not least of all *Italian* art – is fuelled by his identity as an Italian professor addressing a well-read, primarily Italian, readership. Eco did not claim to give an account of a phenomenon pervading all museums or the entire world of art, but to report a marginal phenomenon that had potential implications for the world of art.

Eco's quest gave a shape to hyperreality, and thus participated in the creation of its own contextual frame, that is, the background against which his essay can be presented and the analytical tool with which it can be interpreted. In 1986, the same year that saw the translation of Eco's essay into English, Jean Baudrillard published *America*, a trip into the United States of 'deserts, freeways, safeways', 'motels and mineral surfaces', which, like Eco's travels, focused on the description of hyperreality (Baudrillard 2016a, 63 and 10). As defined by Eco and Baudrillard, the hyperreal is a simulated reality deprived of origin, which is substituted for the authentic reality and claims to pass as authentic. Holland and Huggan explain that both authors were fascinated with 'the possibility of Absolute Fakery – with the construction of perfect models that then supplant what they once copied' (Holland and Huggan 1998, 24). Since these models 'supplant' reality and since Baudrillard defined 'hyperreality' as a 'disappearance of objects in their representation', we can deduce that, for Baudrillard, these models result in a destruction of reality (Baudrillard 1981, 72, my translation). For Baudrillard, the term

‘hyperreal’ is equivalent to ‘simulation’: ‘[the simulation] is the creation by the models of a Real without origin or reality: hyperreal’ (my translation, 10). In its concrete manifestations, hyperreality is a more intense version of reality; partly visual and partly virtual, it is an ‘hallucination’ (184). An example of the emphatic style hyperreality uses would be Disneyland’s castle. We recognise it as a castle, although it has little in common with Heidelberg Castle, Versailles or Cardiff Castle. It is in fact the physical embodiment of a fictional, ideal and spotless castle that draws upon and exceeds them all. Hyperreality is a fictional reality that is artificially constructed through commercials and representations, and whose ambition is not to resemble reality but to improve upon it. If we look for the characteristics of hyperreality in Baudrillard’s writing, we can see that through his analysis of the Beaubourg Museum and through his definition of the three orders of simulacra, the hyperreal model functions as a totalising machine aiming for ‘total control’ over the resurrected (hyper)reality it generates (Baudrillard 1981, 102 and 179, my translation). This resurrected (hyper)reality is born from media such as television, photography, films and advertisements, from the circulation of information, consumerism and capitalism, all of which are components of postmodernity (see Brooker (1992), Jameson (1991), Bauman (1997) and Malpas (2005) for a complete definition of postmodernism and postmodernity).

Hyperreality forms the setting for the art-pieces and wax statues encountered by Eco and can therefore be understood as their broader context. The objects of *Travels in Hyperreality* can be considered both to be placed in a hyperreal context and to compose their own hyperreal context. For instance, the pirate robots of Disneyland represent an artificial and idealised duplication of an imagined reality: not only are they encapsulated in hyperreality, but they also contribute to creating hyperreality.

The term ‘context’ will be used in its traditional textual form. It will be understood as the physical elements surrounding cultural objects, such as neighbouring objects and the fictional or historical origin associated with the objects, even if this origin is geographical or historically remote, and even if the original they hint at has been destroyed by the centuries. The etymology of the word ‘context’ throws light on the interpretative practices associated with these cultural objects: constructed from Latin *con* (‘together’ –) and *texere* (‘to weave’ –) ‘context’ is closely linked to notions of meaning (and therefore interpretation) and connecting space. This etymology highlights not only

the interconnectedness of important elements (for instance, two statues placed together in a museum room) but also the seemingly invisible fabric that binds them together (the frame, the decorum, the transitions between them). In this article, I contend that our interpretative practices are affected by the hyperreal setting, the association of cultural objects and the connecting fabric between these objects. How, precisely, are our interpretative practices impacted by these contextual configurations?

Part I. Decontextualised accumulation of art-pieces: hyperreal treatment of the original context

A – Evocating history: the value of original contexts

In the museums Eco visits, the objects are extracted from their original temporal and geographical contexts and replaced into new ones, artificially created by the curators. The curators seem to assume that the properties of the original art-pieces, furniture and archaeological objects are transferable and conserved even when separated from their original contexts. In the monumental mansion of William Randolph Hearst, which served as model for Xanadu in *Citizen Kane* (1941), they are placed among a plethora of other objects of unequal financial, artistic and historical value with no visible classification or separation by areas or eras:

> Amid Roman sarcophagi, and genuine exotic plants, and remade baroque stairways, you pass Neptune's Pool, a fantasy Greco-Roman temple peopled with classical statues including (as the guidebook points out with fearless candor) the famous Venus rising from the water, sculpted in 1930 by the Italian sculptor Cassou, and you reach the Great House, a Spanish-Mexican-style cathedral with two towers (equipped with a thirty-six-bell carillon) […] The floor of the vestibule encloses a mosaic found in Pompeii, there are Gobelins on the walls, the door into the Meeting Hall is by Sansovino, the great hall is fake Renaissance presented as Italo-French (Hearst's agents sought the scattered pieces through various European dealers), the tapestries are seventeenth-century Flemish, the objects – real or fake – date from various periods, four medallions are by Thorvaldsen […] The striking aspect of the whole is not the quantity of the antique pieces plundered from

> half of Europe, or the nonchalance with which the artificial tissue seamlessly connects fake and genuine, but rather the sense of fullness, the obsessive determination not to leave a single space that doesn't suggest something, and hence the masterpiece of bricolage, haunted by *horror vacui,* that is here achieved (Eco 1986, 22–3).

Let us examine the value of the art-pieces' original context. The reader is invited to assess their value based on their geographical and temporal origin, the name of their creator, and their position on a scale of authenticity. A range of adjectives indicate the degree of authenticity of each object and place them on a scale according to their relation to truth: 'genuine', 'remade', 'fantasy', 'fake', 'real or fake'. Although authenticity was clearly not the criterion that defined which objects entered Hearst Castle, it remains a classificatory category for Eco. Yet few expressions such as 'genuine', 'real' and 'the *famous* Venus' enhance the objects' authenticity and they do not outnumber the expressions revealing the artificiality of other items. Since Eco chooses to focus instead on the geographical and temporal origins, we may consider that according to him, these mattered more to the collector than the authenticity of items. As a result, the geographical and temporal origins attached to the objects are not the contexts from which real objects have been extracted, but the contexts evoked and connoted by the objects, whether these are real or fake. Historical connotation and evocation – that is, the ability to signify and refer back to something past – replace historical authenticity: that is, the physical affiliation of art-pieces to a past era or their status as artistic originals. Given that all objects aim to evoke the past, the reader may consider that this gathering of items hints at what Brooker calls the 'failure of the new', the 'imprisonment in the past' or the 'nostalgia mode' that characterises a postmodern era condemned to an eternal and grotesque digestion of the styles of the past (Brooker 1992, 169). At first sight, this initial context validates their value and serves as an alibi for their presence in Hearst Castle. Yet when the reader casts a second glance they can see that even the labels attached to the objects are ridiculed by Eco, as in the example of 'the famous Venus rising from the water, sculpted in 1930 by the Italian sculptor Cassou' which is presented by the guide as original through the adjective 'famous', even though it is only an adaptation of Boticelli's famous painting dating from the fifteenth century. Not only does Hearst Castle exhibit the 'failure of the new', but also the failure of the old.

B – The homogenising and illusory effects of accumulation

The status of the objects contained in the castle and their ability to refer to a past context are altered by their uncontrolled accumulation in one location, a phenomenon correlated with globalisation and capitalism. Although Eco writes that '[t]he striking aspect of the whole is not the quantity' (23), he does so in a four-line long sentence (22) which is in itself a representation of profusion. Quantity overrides quality, as the reader can see through the author's insistence on the 'two towers' and 'thirty-six' bells of the Great House. The oppressive fullness of Eco's destinations can be seen in the text through lists and catalogues wrapped up in sentences that stretch over half a dozen lines. Each collection Eco visits seems too exhaustive and heterogeneous to be grasped fully by the visitor or even by the person who possesses them. Eco announces an era marked by a collection of material possessions (the realm of having) rather than an increased potency of the subject (the realm of being). Because of the saturated context in which they are embedded, the cultural objects of Hearst Castle lose their unique artistic value and become shapeless stock mass-produced by the mansion. The castle's aim to dazzle the visitor fails as the readers do not have the time to picture the splendour of the Pompeii mosaic when they are already faced with gobelins and tapestries that would require just as much attention. This description offers visual consumption instead of slow contemplation and shares characteristics with what Brooker regarded as a postmodern landscape: 'a bountiful hell of unrelieved, unhampered flatness (the desert, the prairie, the highway, the shopping mall)' (Brooker 1992, 4). Indeed, real and fake works of art are flattened out by the absence of hierarchy of coordinate clauses; no object stands out, they are all homogenised. Because they are drowned in a new context made of a multitude of items, they no longer succeed in referring properly to their original context, or to high art, or to past beauty. Instead they refer to the wealth of their present owner, to his possible hoarding disorder – hinted at by Eco through the use of the symptomatic word 'obsessive' – and more largely to capitalism.

Once it has become shapeless stock, this collection produces two effects linked to postmodernity and capitalism. First, just like the objects, the visitors become mass. Indeed, this collection points to a model that organises objects and people according to a logic of accumulation and turns humans and things alike into a standing reserve Heidegger called *Bestand* (Heidegger 1977). We may link the accumulation,

objectification and passivity contained in Heidegger's *Bestand* to Baudrillard's argument about mass. According to Baudrillard, 'the construction of stocks of objects brought about the complementary processes stocking men: the queue, waiting, traffic jams, concentration, camp. This is "mass production", not understood as a massive production or as being designed for the use of the masses, but the *production of mass*' (Baudrillard 1981, 103, my translation, emphasis in the original). It follows that visitors, who, caught in the context of accumulation, replace and succeed one another in the castle, are contaminated by the mass of objects and become mass themselves, which results in their objectification and hinders their interpretative power: two implications that I will address in more detail in the next section.

The second effect of Hearst Castle accumulation is closely linked to Baudrillard's theory of simulation. According to Baudrillard, we live in a global simulation that has replaced a now dead reality and that tries to make us believe that reality is still alive. To do so, simulation produces signs of life that lead us to think that reality is still here; in other words, it presents us with a zombie reality that masks the absence of reality. For Baudrillard (1977), 'economic accumulation', 'accumulation of time, value, the subject' belong to a 'gigantic illusion' of accumulation, and '[a]ny attempt of accumulation is devastated in advance by the void' (56, my translation). The reader may consider that the accumulation of references to geographical and temporal contexts – 'Roman', 'baroque', 'Flemish' (Eco 1986, 22 and 23) – precisely attempts to cover up the absence of these remote contexts. Hyperreal simulation thus seemed to be fuelled by the production and accumulation of a mass of objects, people and signs and if we look closer at the accumulation of signs, we can assume that when Eco underlines 'the obsessive determination not to leave a single space that doesn't suggest something' (23), he is stressing the value the collector intended for the art-pieces. They were to act as hypersigns, reviving strong referents such as Rome, Ancient Greece and Pompeii, which all traditionally evoke ideas of grandeur, civilisation and the foundations of our conceptions of philosophy, art and politics. What Eco calls '*horror vacui*' can be read as the collector's fear that the original referents are not merely absent because they are located in a remote time and space, but also, simply, because they are dead and/or empty, as Baudrillard asserts.

Part II. Guided visual consumption substituted for semiotic reading

A – Hyperreal control is exerted over objectified consumers

Having discussed the attempt at artistic validation through reference to the past and the homogenising consequences of piling stock, I will now analyse the status given to the subject in hyperreality, and how this status affects his interpretation of hyperreal objects. What is the explanation for the failure of the objects to refer properly to original contexts? First, referentiality and artistic interpretation are hampered because the visitors are treated as passive objects. We have previously seen that hyperreal collections were saturated and that the accumulation of items was correlated to a parallel transformation of mankind into stock. The reader may consider that if the visitors are crushed under the quantity of objects on display, they are therefore denied the possibility of taking a step back from the objects and wondering what their artistic value is. This is an issue in regard to the subjects because it makes them passive. The subjects are objectified since they lose their capacity for interpretive action. This passivity is even better exhibited by the functioning of the zoo and theme parks. For instance, in Redwood City's Marine World, the visitor 'has to follow the established routes, sit down at the given moment, buy the straw hats, the lollipops, and the slides that celebrate wild and harmless freedom' (Eco 1986, 51). When he underlines the loss of free will and control over experience, Eco represents capitalism as alienating. This alienation conjures up Baudrillard's definition of hyperreality as totalising and exerting control over the simulation it creates. The only freedom allowed is called 'harmless', which could be interpreted as 'harmless' for capitalism. The consumerist society Eco explores has turned subjects into consumers whose freedom is limited to their ability to choose between several commodities: 'Disneyland is a place of total passivity. Its visitors must agree to behave like its robots. Access to each attraction is regulated by a maze of metal railings which discourages any individual initiative' (48). Entrance into hyperreality is possible on the condition that the subject relinquishes his critical thinking and creativity. The hyperreal spectacles – be it a Disneyland ride or a wax Venus – wish to impose a uniform route or interpretation on the viewers, who are not encouraged to form new ideas or question the complicity between hyperreal and capitalism.

In the Palace of Living Arts, a Venus de Milo with arms illustrates the lack of leeway for interpretation. It has been made out of coloured wax, allegedly to the likeness of the living model:

> Not far is the Venus de Milo, leaning on an Ionic column against the background of a wall with figures painted in red. I say 'leaning', and in fact this polychrome unfortunate has arms. The legend explains: 'Venus de Milo brought to life as she was in the days when she posed for the unknown Greek sculptor, in approximately 200 B.C.' (Eco 1986, 20).

This simulacrum claims to be the Venus 'as she was', without modal or conditional, thus foreshadowing the end of imagination in hyperreal representation. It is however redeemed by Eco's parodic reading of hyperreal objects, here illustrated by the statement 'this polychrome *unfortunate*'. By means of an apophasis in the sentence, Eco resists the lack of critical distance in Hearst Castle too. With a negative structure that claims not to highlight a point, he actually draws attention to it: '[t]he striking aspect of the whole is not the quantity of the antique pieces plundered from half of Europe, or the nonchalance with which the artificial tissue seamlessly connects fake and genuine […]' (23). Both the terms 'plundered' and 'nonchalance' exhibit irony if not contempt for American hyperreal reconstructions. In addition, with the words 'obsessive determination', the lack of space in the connective tissue is presented as the symptom of a disease.

B – Accumulation impairs the semiotic analysis of mass culture

In the hyperreal context, the subjects are not surrounded by messages, they are overwhelmed by them. What Eco describes as 'the obsessive determination not to leave a single space that doesn't suggest something' is partly a failure (23). Signs require readers and here they cannot be read properly because there is plethora of them and they are coupled to a lack of critical distance. In Hearst Castle, the signs-objects cease to have individual meanings and merge into a single impression: that of a crushing monumental art-piece. In *Citizen Kane*, the wife of Charles Foster Kane appears precisely as overwhelmed by the castle Xanadu, as Eco's reader can be by Hearst Castle. She is crushed under the weight of Xanadu's inhuman profusion. She complains of being one more object among them all, which seems to be a fate shared by the visitors of

Disneyland if we are to believe Eco. When the visitors are denied the possibility to interpret, the goal Eco set for himself in the *Preface to the American Edition* cannot be realised:

> I believe it is my job as a scholar and a citizen to show how we are surrounded by 'messages', products of political power, of the entertainment industry and the revolution industry, and to say that we know how to analyze and criticize them (*Preface to the American Edition*. Eco 1986, xi).

For Eco, mass culture needed to be analysed critically with the help of structural methods (Farronato 2003, 47–8).

Part III. Recontextualisation and incarnation of historical and fictional characters: the impact on the aesthetic judgement

A – How the promiscuity of real and fictional figures impacts the visitor's mind

Not only does hyperreal representation hamper semiotic reading of art-pieces as I just explained, but it also affects the reading of reality. In the Movieland Wax Museum, California, the visitor enters space shared by historical and fictional characters that are not distinguished by the curator. Their unusual gathering sparks a questioning of the real:

> When you see Tom Sawyer immediately after Mozart or you enter the cave of *The Planet of the Apes* after having witnessed the Sermon on the Mount with Jesus and the Apostles, the logical distinction between Real World and Possible Worlds has been definitively undermined. Even if a good museum (with sixty or seventy scenes and two or three hundred characters) subdivides its space, separating the movie world from religion and history, at the end of the visit, the senses are still overloaded in an uncritical way; Lincoln and Dr Faustus have appeared reconstructed in the same style, similar to Chinese socialist realism, and Hop o' My Thumb and Fidel Castro now belong forever to the same ontological area (Eco 1986, 14).

Eco's museums embody a change in aesthetic representation insofar as the mind, presented with real and fake objects put on an equal footing, is forced to use categories different from the familiar division between 'real' and 'fake' to exert aesthetic judgement. Eco explains that the abundance of copies, simulacra and artefacts disintegrates a divide within the mind of the visitor: 'the logical distinction between Real World and Possible Worlds has been definitively undermined' (14). As suggested by the adverbs 'forever' and 'definitely', the viewer is impacted even beyond his visit of the museum. Eco's reading of his hyperreal experience undermines what Malpas analysed as being the aim of realism for Lyotard: 'to depict the world according to conventions with which the reader or viewer is already familiar so that it can quickly and unproblematically be understood' (Malpas 2005, 28). Even if the statues' identities can be 'quickly' decoded, they cannot be understood 'unproblematically', given that the visitor is not protected from doubt. Doubt does not apply to the identification of a referent (we recognise Lincoln through his wax statue) but to the reality of that referent (how accurate or real is our conventional idea of Lincoln? Or put differently, how real is Lincoln?). Therefore, Eco's critical reading of hyperrealism can be paralleled to postmodern criticism of realism: 'the role of post-modernism is thus to perform an immanent critique of the day-to-day structures of realism' (Malpas explaining Lyotard, 30). It means that the hypersigns – the profusion of signs – are not taken at face value but analysed. If the reader takes a step further they may even consider that, like Disneyland, the wax museum belongs to the 'third order' of simulation. As explained by Baudrillard, 'Disneyland is here to hide that it is the "real" country, the entirety of "real" America that *is* Disneyland [...] Disneyland is posited as imaginary in order to make believe that the rest is real [...] The aim is to hide the fact that the real is no longer the real, and thus to save the reality principle' (Baudrillard 1981, 24). Baudrillard may indeed have analysed the wax museum as a fictional place whose aim was to make believe that the rest of the country was real.

B – Showcasing of the operation of resemblance and undermining the referent

While the statues of Lincoln, Mozart and Fidel Castro refer to historical figures, Dr Faustus refers to a myth and Hop o' My Thumb to a fairy tale. The two latter have no models to which they could be compared to

measure accuracy: they do not resemble a model, they exhibit signs that point to the idea of a model and make them recognisable (perhaps Dr Faustus is placed next to the Devil and most likely Hop o' My Thumb is relatively small). This anaphoric operation has been repeated for decades using the same signs, until they eventually became conventions pointing to certain referents. Yet, now that statues referring to fictional, mythical characters and historical figures are placed side by side and 'reconstructed in the same style, similar to Chinese social realism' (14), they point less towards a well-known referent than towards the operation of resemblance and the artificial construction of referents. The operation of duplication is brought even more to the foreground here due to all wax statues being fake by definition, born from technique and not from the hand of an artist. They are also conceived from the start as duplicable objects and because of these characteristics, Baudrillard could have classified them as 'industrial simulacra' (Baudrillard 2016b, 90). As for the conventional construction of the referents, it is clear that here the intrinsic value and meaning of the models are heavily altered. The blending of fake and real deprives historical figures of their reality and makes fictional ones more real. Because characters that originate in various geographical and historical contexts are simultaneously present in the mind of the visitor, the outer world is forgotten in favour of a suspension of both belief (in the real) and disbelief (of the fictionality of fiction). The statues aggregate or lose meaning in a way unforeseen and uncontrolled by the curators or the visitors and *in relation to* the other statues around them rather than in relation to a referent.

As shown by the late modernist movement of Surrealism, changes in context can highlight the unexpected properties of objects. Surrealist art worked relationally, as the wax statues do in Eco's text. Such objects include Meret Oppenheim's *Object*, a 1936 combination of a cup, a saucer, and a spoon all covered in fur and Salvador Dali's 1936 *Lobster telephone*, all of which gain their surprising effect from unexpected assemblages and give back to the objects their uncanny dimensions and reveal that our familiarity with them is only a deceptive surface knowledge. When they are combined in original ways, they are replete with other surprising possibilities, which suggests that there may still be room for imagination in hyperreality.

Part IV. Removing the original from the copy: the ontology of difference

A – The relation between original and simulacra

I have previously argued that the identity of the cultural object is created relationally and that its new hyperreal context can have unexpected effects on both the value of the original historical contexts and the referents of these objects. We may thus work with the assumption that the concept of authenticity – reference or resemblance to an original – is jeopardised by Eco and move on to assess the extent to which authenticity is mocked, maintained or replaced. The question of the original art-piece is raised simultaneously with the physical presence of its copies and can therefore be considered part of their context (if we return to the definition given in the introduction: *con*, that which appears 'together'). However, to what extent do the objects need their context to be meaningful? The following section argues that in Eco's text, hyperreality has initiated but not yet reached a stage of representation from where the original would be utterly removed.

In Antiquity, a figurative work of art represented the real and aimed for resemblance: it created a representation that differed from the model in some ways. With the industrial era the copies appeared, which were duplicates of the original work of art, and held less value. In the past fifty years, the development of technology made holographic and three-dimensional representations of paintings possible. At the same time, Baudrillard and Eco theorised the major changes happening in *mimesis*. According to them, the notion of an original work followed by subsequent copies should give way to a theory of the simulacra. How is the independence of the object possible within the context of the current system of representation? Eco's text seems to say that first, objects need to become simulacra before they can gain independence from the concept of an original work or model.

The hierarchy ordering the artworks from original to simulacra goes back to the myth of Plato's cave. Inside the cave are men, chained to the wall. Outside the cave are real objects, inaccessible to the chained beholders. They can only see shadows projected on the cave's walls. These shadows are cast not by the real objects, but by representations of these objects. The shadows seen by humankind are simulacra; they are the image of an image. Plato's readers can identify two gaps in the cave: the first gap stretches between the real objects and their representations and the second space is introduced between the representations

and their shadows. In *Travels in Hyperreality*, the wax statues of the Venus with arms and of Peter Stuyvesant constitute examples of simulacra: one is based on a statue, the other on a painting, which makes them the image of an image. Furthermore, they modify the image they draw inspiration from in such a way that the real model is not recognisable. The simulacrum holds a subversive power since it overthrows the hierarchy of original and image. For Deleuze, our era is characterised by a shift in focus:

> [T]he real platonic distinction moves and modifies its nature: it is no longer between the original and the copy, but between two sorts of images (*idoles*) among which copies (*icons*) are only the first sort, the other being composed by the simulacra (*phantasms*) (Deleuze 2011, 166, my translation).

Baudrillard and Deleuze agree on the fact that the simulacrum draws itself further away from the original than the copy. In the representation of hyperreality, the simulacra threaten the hierarchy between real (authentic) and virtual (copies, simulacra) worlds: 'what is condemned in the simulacrum is […] the evil duplicity contesting the notion of both model and copy [because of] the moral origin of the world of representation' (Deleuze 2011, 341 my translation). The 'moral origin of the world of representation' is based on the idea that the original, the real object outside of the cave is synonymous with the True and the Good. This moral assessment finds an echo in *Travels in Hyperreality*, where Eco sometimes exerts not an aesthetic but a moral judgement on the works, through the use of irony and derogatory terms. The vocabulary pertaining to atonement is also extensive throughout the essay and can be found in expressions such as 'the temptations of hyperreality', 'exorcise [kitsch]', 'real cities redeem' (Eco 1986, 30 and 29). It is evidence of Eco's faith in the authentic. Although Eco undermines the concept of authenticity by dedicating a large part of the essay to grotesque simulacra, it remains a core principle for him. When he writes that 'for the reproduction to be desired, the original has to be idolized', Eco admits that the original has not been totally erased by simulacra, but remains, to a certain extent, a reference (19). He has one foot in postmodernism, and one outside of it. On the one hand he gives in to a master narrative dominated by the concept of original, although such all-encompassing theoretical structures are abhorred by postmodernism. On the other hand, he uses parody, which, according to Linda Hutcheon, plays a role in the reversal of suspicion whereby the original is deemed as dubious as the copy:

'[w]ith parody – as with any form of reproduction – the notion of the original as rare, single and valuable [...] is called into question' (Hutcheon 2003, 89). The authority of the model is still eroded and not spared by 'the spirit of irony' Eco keeps on his journey and the distance that accompanies it (35). Peter Stuyvesant's statue illustrates the potentially farcical aspect of the copy: '[it] shows us a three-dimensional statue, which reproduces Peter Stuyvesant as portrayed in the painting, of course, Peter is seen only full-face or in half-profile, whereas here he is complete, buttocks included' (Eco 1986, 8). The reader may assume that this grotesque dimension was unintended by the curator and ponder on the damage done by this copy to the ridiculed original. Eco harms the authority of the model by drawing attention to the copy's buttocks. It is noteworthy to add that his declared aim was 'not [...] to absolve the shrines of the Fake, but to call the European sanctuaries of the Genuine to assume their share of guilt' (39). The trivial dimension added by the copy of Peter Stuyvesant is provocative and affects the way the onlookers will gaze at the original. Instead of benefiting from the sacred aura of the original – lost in the industrial era, if we are to believe Walter Benjamin – the copy destroys it (Benjamin 1979, 199).

B – From resemblance to difference

Baudrillard explained that simulation was an image 'unrelated to any reality, [an image that was] its own pure simulacrum' (Baudrillard 1981, 17, my translation). The statues of Peter Stuyvesant and the Venus with arms are so distant from the original models that they can almost be considered 'unrelated to any reality', and thus independent from their models. By doing so, I argue that they set in motion the end of the traditional representation system, in which there was a model and an original artwork that could be called first and told apart from subsequent copies. They function according to the post-structuralist theories of difference since they refuse the concept of an original work that could be called first and that would thus be the identifiable beginning of a series of copies. Instead, we could maintain that they propose an infinite series of differences, 'with neither beginning nor end', 'obeying no hierarchy but propagating from little differences to little differences', as Foucault put it (Foucault 1973, 61, my translation). They base the ontology of objects on difference, and not identity, which calls forth Deleuze's assertion that identity 'comes second, not first: it revolves around the Different' (Deleuze 2011, 59, my translation). Eco's trip into hyperreality did not

include a preliminary stop in European museums to describe the original works first and then assess copies based on resemblance or identity with originals. Instead the emphasis is on the way the replicas differ from each other: their scale, the era they were made in, the material they are made of. This choice reminds the reader of Foucault's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. Taking the example of René Magritte's *La trahison des images* (1929), a drawing of a pipe paired with a caption stating 'This is not a pipe', Foucault explains that there is 'an open network of similarities. Not open to the "real" pipe, which is absent from all these drawings and words, but open to all other similar elements (including all the "real" pipes, made of clay, foam, wood, etc.) which, once included in this network, would have the place and function of simulacra' (Foucault 1973, 67, my translation). A similar network of differences is visible when Eco beholds 'seven wax versions of Leonardo's *Last Supper*':

> Each is displayed next to a version of the original […] [I]f compared to the original, the three-dimensional creation might come off second-best. So, in one museum after the other, the waxwork scene is compared to a reduced reproduction carved in wood, a nineteenth century engraving, a modern tapestry, or a bronze, as the commenting voice insistently urges us to note the resemblance of the waxwork, and against such insufficient models, the waxwork, of course, wins (Eco 1986, 16–17).

A belt of reproductions orbit around the seven wax versions and relate to them. These 'insufficient models' (17) are used as enhancers for the waxworks, they put them in the spotlight and they exist in relation to the waxworks rather than in relation to the original painting. However, in Eco's text, the poststructuralist turn is not complete. These copies do not exemplify Deleuze's 'series devoid of centre and convergence' (Deleuze 2011, 79). The network of copies stresses difference rather than identity with an original, as copies exist primarily in their relations to each other, but this is toned down by the lingering presence of 'resemblance'. Although Eco was not guided by a concern for 'resemblance', the curators of the collections were. The 'resemblance of the waxworks' to the original is at stake in the multiplication of copies since the wax statues need to be compared to other copies in order to appear superior to these copies and more faithful to the original. Yet this process emancipates them from the notion of an original and opens up the possibility for a new parallel reality made of simulacra.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this investigation was to study the impact of hyperreal decontextualisation on cultural objects and our interpretation of them. What emerged is that context is crucial when analysing the effects of hyperreality. The geographical and temporal contexts attached to art-pieces, furniture and reproductions, as well as their degree of authenticity are landmarks which have traditionally helped museum visitors understand their significance. The past, still revered in hyperreal locations such as Hearst Castle, is also rendered grotesque by Eco's parodic reading of the curators' choices. As I interpret it, the superimposition of real and fake objects in an all-encompassing historical chaos has shown that historical authenticity was less vital to the museum curators Eco depicts than the *evocation* of the past through (real or fake) conventional signs. However, through this article I have argued that there were two major hindrances to the referential function of these signs. On the one hand, the saturation of signs results in their annihilation: valuable objects become mass-produced shapeless stock and the hyperproduction of signs reveals rather than covers the absence or artificiality in the original context. On the other hand, when hyperreal museums attempt to guide the interpretation of the visitors, they deprive them at the same time of their ability to read and interpret signs critically and creatively. Without interpretative space, hypersigns remain disconnected from the original referent or context hinted at.

Throughout *Travels in Hyperreality*, Eco raises important questions about the effect of hyperreality on our ability to be creative semiotic readers. Hyperreal museums and theme parks attempt to turn their visitors into a mass of passive consumers who are fed unproblematic signs. However, Eco inserts doubt through irony as a regular reminder that hyperreality should be read critically. Imagination resurfaces through this criticism, but also in unexpected ways when cultural objects are recontextualised alongside other objects hinting at very different originals. As an example, I examined wax statues of fictional and historical figures and showed that once enmeshed in such a disparate context, their referents could no longer be interpreted individually, but were altered by the other statues' referents. This disparate recontextualisation of once historically and ontologically separate referents unsettles the concept of 'reality' in the minds of visitors. In so doing, it enacts the destructive side of hyperreality as defined by Baudrillard: as a simulation, hyperreality hastens the death of the real. Overall, this study of Eco's text strengthens the idea supported by Deleuze that

identity can be defined through difference rather than resemblance. Indeed, the effects of this recontextualisation supports the idea that signification and interpretation are created relationally. Despite Eco's hint of nostalgia for European originals, hyperreality initiates a change in aesthetic representation where instead of being compared to an original, the copies are compared to other copies.

The insights gained from this study may contribute to existing knowledge of hyperreality by analysing hyperreal simulacra as a stage towards Baudrillard's utter simulation. The scope of this study is however limited to a single non-fictional travelogue. Further research could be undertaken to address a broader corpus of postmodern travelogues and examine more closely the links between postmodern criticism of hyperrealism and realism. In addition, I have brushed concepts of 'real' historical authenticity (when an object dates from the era it refers to) and 'evoked' historical authenticity (when an object copies the sign associated with the era it refers to), but the definition of authenticity in relation to the art-pieces' impact on the visitors – is the effect such and such artworks have on the visitor real? – would be a fruitful area for further work.

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10

From data to actual context

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It is hardly a secret that humans are producing a lot of data these days and that there is no end in sight to this. Rather, we are witnessing a further acceleration of the amount of texts, images, videos, web pages and records of online activity that will be stored at no small cost to the carbon footprint. For studies in arts and literature, this means that most of the objects of study within the disciplines are being digitised in some form and that the new texts and images produced are either exclusively or to an overwhelming degree born digital. However, this still leaves many objects outside of the digital realm and a new awareness of the materiality of media has arisen, likely as a response to the overwhelming dominance of digital media. These are, of course, themselves material and can and should be studied for the particular effects they bring about. Nevertheless, it is in particular the context of any given subject, which is typically not thought of as material but rather as a sum of facts about relevant elements, that the vast expansion of available data can help make sense of the subject in case in new ways.

The ubiquitous presence of digital media has had multiple effects. This article will primarily address how new practices and methods for research have arisen and in particular have proven valuable in relation to framing and analysing the context of a given object of inquiry in literature and arts. Structured data that inform about sales, translations, media presence and so on are helpful when it comes to measuring the impact of books and artworks. But there is a greater challenge in making sense of unstructured data from large collections of text and images that can be processed to discover, for example, trends in the use of concepts, preferences for certain colours and much more. The value of such approaches is still debated, and while there is a maturing field of digital humanities that proves the usefulness through numerous cases, there

are also many questions that should be raised critically in the meeting of hermeneutically dominated traditions for studying arts and literature, and data-driven approaches to understanding a given phenomenon.[1] No matter how one views the pros and cons of computational approaches in the humanities, it is a significant challenge to this generation of scholars: if asked in 2069 what the response was to the digitisation in 2019 of most of the objects studied, it would be a little sad if the best answer was that we made key word searches and left it at that. A lack of curiosity regarding the opportunity for raising new questions, or just giving better answers to old ones, hardly spells academic merit.

The debate around digital humanities echoes some of the debates between structuralism and post-structuralism of the 1960s and 1970s: between looking at the big picture knowing that details will be lost, or insisting that it is exactly in what does not fit a system that the interesting things take place. Both positions have their qualities and it would be foolish to insist that one side of this divide is right. The object and purpose of an analysis is obviously a quite important part of this. What should not be dismissed is that there is both a methodological and a critical aspect of digital humanities that pick up the mantle of Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, who each in their way had projects that would be involved with computational approaches had they been carried out today. Levi-Strauss explicitly wrote in *La Pensée Sauvage* that one could dream of a computer that could analyse punch cards which would cover multiple dimensions of a tribe's life (Levi-Strauss 1962, 117). In *S/Z,* Barthes carries out a lengthy analysis of Honoré de Balzac's novella *Sarrasine*, built on identifying five codes or narrative modes in the text (Barthes 1970). Barthes' text could easily be seen as both an argument for computational analysis (that could automate some of the processes and apply them on a much larger scale than to a short story) as well as against (as the point of the text is not how it fits into the different modes, but how they work together in ways that statistics probably cannot reveal). At any rate, Levi-Strauss and Barthes both sought to try out new ways of dealing with the complexity of their object, just as their lasting influence is a testament that the ability to synthesise and bring forth new concepts is reliant on researchers with a deep knowledge of their domain.

On a more general and profound level, our relation to data may also be changing. The awareness that we are living in a data-producing era changes conceptions of knowledge, certainty and preferences. We rely more and more on the wisdom of crowds: online reviews of everything we consume produce a new culture of shared knowledge, while we also learn to distrust all information that is presented to us, because it may be

designed to lure us into certain desires and actions. The uncanny feeling that an advert shows up on a website some seconds after an online search has now become an everyday experience that one has to adapt to in a world where there is much talk of going offline but few people actually doing it. On the other hand, the possibility of engaging with the world through data is also being embraced, whether it is through tracking our own bodies or being fascinated with virtual spaces where the sense of the presence of virtual crowds is integral to the experience of the phenomena. Yuval Noah Harari has argued that once we, maybe rationally, rely more on data on our bodies than our own sensations, we will enter a phase of 'Dataism' that has quasi-religious traits and displaces authority:

> By equating the human experience with data patterns, Dataism undermines our main source of authority and meaning, and heralds a tremendous religious revolution, the like of which has not been seen since the eighteenth century. In the days of Locke, Hume and Voltaire humanists argued that "'God is a product of the human imagination". Dataism now gives humanists a taste of their own medicine, and tells them: "Yes, God is a product of the human imagination, but human imagination in turn is the product of biochemical algorithms." In the eighteenth century, humanism sidelined God by shifting from a deo-centric to a homo-centric world view. In the twenty-first century, Dataism may sideline humans by shifting from a homo-centric to a data-centric view (Harari 2016, loc 6251).

It could be argued that a new situation, where it would be normal to make decisions on lifestyle based on one's DNA and take data into account before entering into a marriage, is not about to arise within the couple of decades that Harari suggests, but the overall description of a change in the idea of the world and the way humans are adjusting their ideas of how to make sense of the world and of their own lives seems plausible. The debate on certainty, which long ago became a focal point of physics, may slowly have captured the modern mind, which will begin to think more about probabilities than certainty – a view of the world that goes well with the downfall of the Cartesian subject.

Context and method

The more pragmatic consequence of the increasing ability to gather, store and process data is its impact on research, not least when it comes

to questions of context. There are many promising developments going on in the humanities, both in terms of new tools and materials that are being made available, and new questions that it is possible to ask. There is also a well-founded scepticism towards the extent to which the limitations of computers should dictate the questions asked by researchers. Obviously, they should not, but as is the case with any tool humans design and employ, there are also limitations. However, reliance on data-driven approaches does not mean that it would be the only approach. A combination of hermeneutic approaches and computational analyses will be, I reckon, increasingly important, and there is little value in a discussion about the straw man that supposedly wants digital approaches to become the only ones in the humanities.

The relation to context is the part of studies in art, literature and culture where it is easiest to make the case for the usefulness of a computational approach. Although even a short text or a novel can be so complex that insights drawn from a computer-aided analysis might assist the reader and maybe question some of their subjective impressions, the human mind is much better (and will be so for a considerable time) than a computer at making sense of a story and bringing together the meaning of characters, plot, themes, references, style, etc. However, it is not possible for humans or even groups of scholars to search for the occurrence of a given word across thousands of books, let alone to perform such searches with multiple words. The ability to historicise the use of concepts has been radically changed by the digitisation of older books and there are numerous other examples of contexts or fields that are accessible and possible to analyse in ways that they were not before. In 'Cultural Data', Lev Manovich makes reasonable claims about how the understanding of our present social media culture is reliant on being able to analyse large data sets that convey patterns of the uses of, for example, Instagram, which contains many million photos (Manovich 2017, 268). Manovich explicitly sees the need for this to be able to handle the nuances of the context and not, contrary to the widespread reservation, try to simplify the many expressions of human activity. The field of humanities is changing and scholars who ignore quantitative studies while making claims about genres, patterns, trends, public evaluations and so on will increasingly be open to a valid critique of why they have not looked at data that could have provided more certainty or knowledge about things that would not otherwise be known.

The hope of being able to understand context better by focusing on a few features does not necessarily entail a digital approach, although the computational powers are what make this interesting now. Franco Moretti's

provocative concept of 'distant reading' from his article 'Conjectures on World Literature' (2000a) was proposed without reference to computational approaches but suggested that scholars have to rely on other scholars' syntheses in order to describe a field too vast to read themselves, which world literature obviously is. The basic vision behind distant reading was to be honest about this reliance and not to suggest that the whole could be derived from reading a few of the parts. In an article from the same year, 'The Slaughterhouse of Literature', Moretti addresses the problem of the 99 per cent of literature that does not make it into literary histories but which is still part of literary culture (Moretti 2000b). He describes a mode of distant reading that is focused on understanding the use of the clue in Conan Doyle's fiction, reading through not just the Sherlock Holmes stories but also more than a hundred other detective fiction stories from the *Strand* magazine in the 1890s. What Moretti discovers is that there is a wealth of other ways to solve crimes and few that involve the search for clues which has made the Sherlock Holmes character a staple of modern culture. This 'tree' of different modes has an epistemological value to Moretti:

> This is why the tree is useful: it is a way to "open up" literary history, showing how the course selected by European audiences (Conan Doyle, the canon) is only one of the many coexisting branches that could also have been chosen (and weren't). What the tree says is that literary history could be different from what it is. Different: not necessarily better. And there are strong reasons for its being what it is; most of my article tries precisely to explain why Conan Doyle's selection makes sense. But "explaining" means organizing the evidence we have so as to account for a given result: it doesn't mean maintaining that that result was inevitable. That's not history; that's theodicy. Inevitable was the tree, not the success of this or that branch: in fact, we have seen how unlikely the branch of clues was in the 1890s (Moretti 2000b, 227).

This intertextual context for Doyle's fiction is very illuminating and a fine example of a way to create a focused investigation. But what if there had been 10,000 short stories? It would then have been very difficult to read through them, even if the only ambition was to unveil specific traits. It would also be a challenge to create a digital tool that could make the same observations a human reader would be able to, in particular with respect to observing other strategies for solving crime mysteries. This challenge of formalisation is also addressed in Moretti's pamphlet

'Operationalizing' in which he discusses the problem of figuring out which character in a novel 'owns' a sentence, not to speak of being able to train a computer to identify that (Moretti 2017). This is much easier when it comes to drama, where all lines are attributed to characters, and which Moretti uses to show the large variation in the main character's share of the dialogue in a number of canonical plays. Such examples can give rise to both challenges and frustration: on the one hand, there are challenges related to making it possible to find out more about the traits of one work seen against the background of a corpus of works too large to analyse manually. Also, some frustration comes along with seeing analytical insights in one genre that can be reached today, while others seem very difficult or even impossible to get a grasp of.

The influence of a changed relationship to context will take many forms and, obviously, scholars will work in different ways, some doing groundwork to establish new contextual data, others integrating these in hermeneutical studies. In the following, I will present three uses of computational approaches to context that have already, in my opinion, proved to further the way knowledge is produced particularly in literary studies, beyond what a close reading or a hermeneutic approach can accomplish.

Canons and the great unread

Canons are, as Frank Kermode put it, one way of making the past accessible (Kermode 1989, 118). The interesting thing is that canons, as they appear in curricula, scholarship and anthologies to mention a few places where they appear to be manifested, are on the one hand open to criticism for being too narrow and excluding many valuable texts. On the other hand, even what would count as a national canon of literature is often too large for an individual to read, let alone the literature of several nations. The vast ocean of the great unread already starts with the literature David Damrosch has called the 'shadow-canon' – works that are no longer central to the canon although at one point they were deemed as such (Damrosch 2006, 45).

The assumption about a canon is that the included literature (or paintings, films, sculptures, etc.) is better than the rest, but that leaves a lot to be said about what is not being read. How does the non-canonical actually differ from the canonical? Is it a matter of style, of themes, of narrative form, or something else? Is the canonical vastly different from the tradition it comes from, as one could, for example, argue in the case

of Jorge Luis Borges and his innovative fictions? Or are canonical works very much a continuation of a tradition, being just the tip of the iceberg fortunate enough to be seen? A few studies have tried to come up with answers for this, providing stimulating new contexts for canonical works.

In 'Canon/Archive. Large-scale Dynamics in the Literary Field' from *Stanford Literary Lab*, the group tried various strategies to measure literary works and eventually see whether a group of works considered canonical and a group of works considered to be 'archival' would differ. The criteria for selection of a canon is in itself complex and entails many choices concerning which lists and collections to draw on, as the group makes clear (Algee-Hewitt et al. 2016, 3). But once a trustworthy differentiation between canon and archive is established, the next question is to develop productive criteria for analysis that addresses the texts themselves and not just their reception. One of the most interesting measures the group developed was of the redundancy or predictability:

> Taking a cue from information theory, Mark Algee-Hewitt measured what is called "second order redundancy" (predictability at the level of individual words), using a modification of Shannon's measure of information load which determines the information content of each text by assessing how predictable each word-to-word transition is, given the range of possible transitions. Since "of" is much more often followed by "the" than by "no", for instance, the word pair "of no" is far less predictable – hence more informative – than the bigram "of the" (Algee-Hewitt et al. 2016, 5–6).

As the illustration from the article shows (Fig. 10.1), this suggested a clear difference between the two groups of works, although there was some overlap between them.

The findings may not be completely surprising and may even border on the obvious. But is it that obvious? Why should this stylistic feature of being less predictable be so strongly connected to canonicity? There are many other ways in which works can differ (and probably do). It is not, as the authors make sure to note, the only key to understanding the difference between these two sets of works, but once one has seen this analysis, it is difficult not to think of it as a contribution to a more nuanced and well-documented understanding of the context of canonical literature.

A different take on creating a context for the canonical works employs the clarity of who is speaking in a play and makes it possible to create networks for a play. Frank Fischer and a group of Göttingen-based researchers extracted the co-presence in more than two hundred German

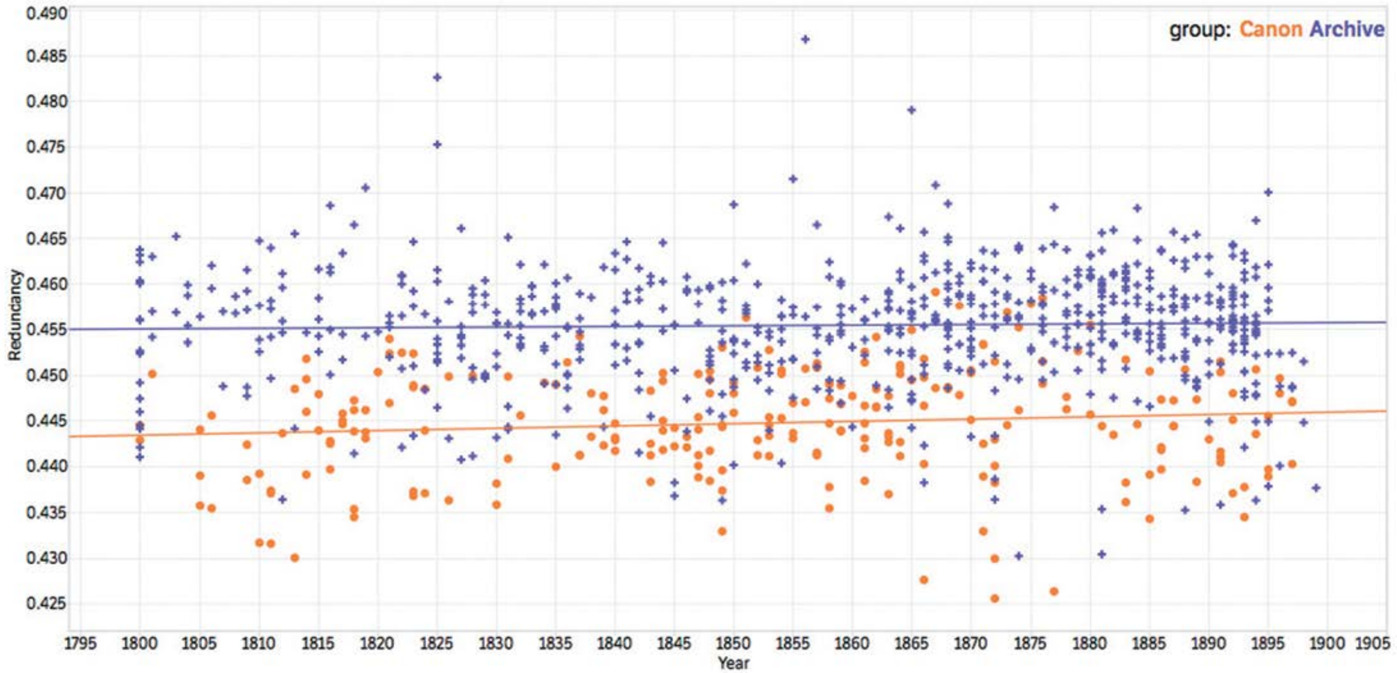

Fig. 10.1 Measuring redundancy, 1800–1900 (purple crosses indicate archival novels, orange circles canonical ones). Algee-Hewitt, Mark et al. 2016 'Canon/Archive. Large scale Dynamics in the Literary Field.' *Standford Literary Lab, Pamphlet 11*, p.6.

plays and visualised them (Fischer 2016). The overwhelming amount of network graphs carries a lot of information that it would not have been possible to extract without this approach. In a historical perspective, the work demonstrates how the number of characters in the plays increases dramatically around 1770 – a finding that could have been obtained in other ways but which in the work of this group has a very systematic and solid grounding. The collection of network graphs also makes it possible with more certainty to underscore the complexity of Goethe's *Faust,* and it can serve as a heuristic tool for seeking out, for example, other plays with a similar complexity.

In visual media, numerous tools are being developed that help put works into perspective. A good and recent example of this is a project on Edward Munch's paintings. As with most artists, there is a core canon of works that are being analysed again and again. The https://knownwork.knack.com/artnome# allows the user to search for certain objects among the total of 1871 paintings that Munch painted. Using information from the titles of the works in addition to, more importantly, recognition of objects, it is possible to bring forward different constellations of works that will often juxtapose forgotten paintings with the very famous ones and thus provide the user with a perspective on Munch's works that would have been unlikely without a database that employed automated recognition of objects. The tool is not perfect: searches for 'hat' will also provide results of people with hair that has a more hat-like appearance; however, the ability to see many renderings of certain motifs – women, streets, etc. – across Munch's whole oeuvre provides a particular mode of access to the context of the most famous and commented works, which in practice would have been impossible, or at least much more limited, without the digital tool.

In music and film studies, it is particularly interesting how commercial providers of streamed content, such as Netflix and Spotify, are working with a very refined concept of genre. They do so in order to figure out how to make their users spend more of their time on their service, but a byproduct of this is new ways of mapping music and film. In the case of Spotify, this has for example resulted in the tool Every Noise at Once (http://everynoise.com/engenremap.html) which makes it possible to both track which genres that are the most popular among contemporary listeners and explore the vast ocean of music through a mapping of how closely related the different genres are.

The difference between canons and archives will remain in the sense that some works will be given more attention, often rightly so, and while there are movements between a counter-canon and a hyper-canon,

most works of art and literature that have been produced will exist unobserved or unread. These new approaches do not change that in a traditional sense, but they strengthen the awareness of how canon and archive may or may not differ on certain points and they provide tools for exploring what would otherwise have remained unknown. As such, tools like the above have taken steps to significantly alter the grasp of context.

Trend lines

When Google released the Google Books Ngram Viewer, they also made a tool that would be a 'gateway drug' to digital humanities as Matthew Jockers phrased it (MacKenzie 2013). With a few clicks, anybody could pull out information on the use of concepts across millions of books from more than two centuries. While problematic in some respects, the Ngram Viewer is very useful to confirm more vague notions of how things have developed and to raise new questions about why a certain word appears more or less at a given time. When I wrote my book *The New Human in Literature* on the idea of the posthuman, I did have a notion that the term had rarely been used prior to 1990 (Thomsen 2013). However, it was very useful to see that the Ngram Viewer confirmed that there had been virtually no prior use of the term until then, when it took off significantly. Transforming common sense ideas about developments into a much more solidly underpinned description of a change of context is a primary benefit of such trend lines.

Google's tool also enables more detailed searches that can shed light on what the context for an often-used concept has been. In Fig. 10.2, the nouns that most typically occur with the concept 'epiphany' are depicted. I have emphasised two results: the rise of Joyce, no doubt referring to James Joyce, whose use of the term came to prominence in the 1950s and whose name was among the primary words used along with 'epiphany' apart from the more generic uses of 'moment' or 'revelation'. Interestingly, the use of 'God' took off later, only overtaking Joyce in recent years.

The valid critique of the Ngram Viewer is that it is a black box when it comes to the data behind and that it is about books, which are only one part of the cultural activity of humans, although for centuries a very important one. If one wants to pick out the finer details, it is important to have transparency in the data set. Newspaper digitisation projects are some of the most interesting in the respect that they complement the book-orientated world of Google's Ngram.

Fig. 10.2 Graph of nouns that most typically occur with the concept 'epiphany' over time, generated by the Google Ngram Viewer. See Jean-Baptiste Michel, Yuan Kui Shen, Aviva Presser Aiden, Adrian Veres, Matthew K. Gray, The Google Books Team, Joseph P. Pickett, Dale Hoiberg, Dan Clancy, Peter Norvig, Jon Orwant, Steven Pinker, Martin A. Nowak, and Erez Lieberman Aiden. 2010. 'Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books.' Science. Published online ahead of print: 2/16/2010 DOI: 10.1126/science.1199644. https://science.sciencemag.org/content/331/6014/176.

In the graph shown in Fig. 10.3, generated by the Smurf tool at the Royal Danish Library on the basis of 32 million newspaper pages (http://labs.statsbiblioteket.dk/smurf/), the use of two Danish terms, *novelle* and *fortælling*, is shown. *Fortælling* can both mean a story and a short story, whereas 'novelle' is a specific kind of short story that is often perceived as a very generic and staple term. Yet, there are very significant ups and downs in the use of the term, which would provide an indispensable context for any study of the development of the genre in Danish literature. Questions of when the genre came into being, lost its importance and regained it can be answered with much more certainty than before. However, the 'why' is not given; it requires a deeper understanding of the uses of genres and the people who introduced them, just as the demise of the genre still needs to be fully explained. One plausible thesis is that the mass market for short stories in magazines has declined significantly and that new digital media, which in many respects are ideal for shorter forms, have not provided a new market (Vidich 2011).

A more focused study of a specific trend was made by Ted Underwood in his book *Why Literary Periods Mattered* (Underwood 2013). Underwood compiled a corpus of texts from 1700–1900 in three genres: non-fiction prose, fiction and verse. Then he calculated the ratio of words that entered the English language prior to 1150 in relation to those that entered later. As Fig. 10.4 shows, the findings are striking.

Around 1700, the vocabularies do not differ that much and there is a tendency towards using more modern words in all three genres. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the differences become significant and increase throughout the nineteenth century with non-fiction prose having a steady balance between newer and older words, while fiction and, in particular, verse have a dramatic increase in the use of pre-1150 words. First of all, it is important from a methodological point of view because there is in practice no other way that this could be documented without a study such as Underwood's that relies on a computational approach of thousands of machine-readable texts. Secondly, it reinforces a common narrative about Romanticism and the valuation of memory, myths and the archaic and shows how this is reflected in the vocabulary of poets that reaches far beyond the impression of certain motifs and themes. But it may also come as a surprise that the trend continues and the reliance on a more archaic vocabulary is more pronounced in the post-Romantic period. And, obviously, one wonders when or whether the curves will decline.

Underwood's investigation is obviously limited to a sample of texts that is far more modest than what it would be possible to come up with.

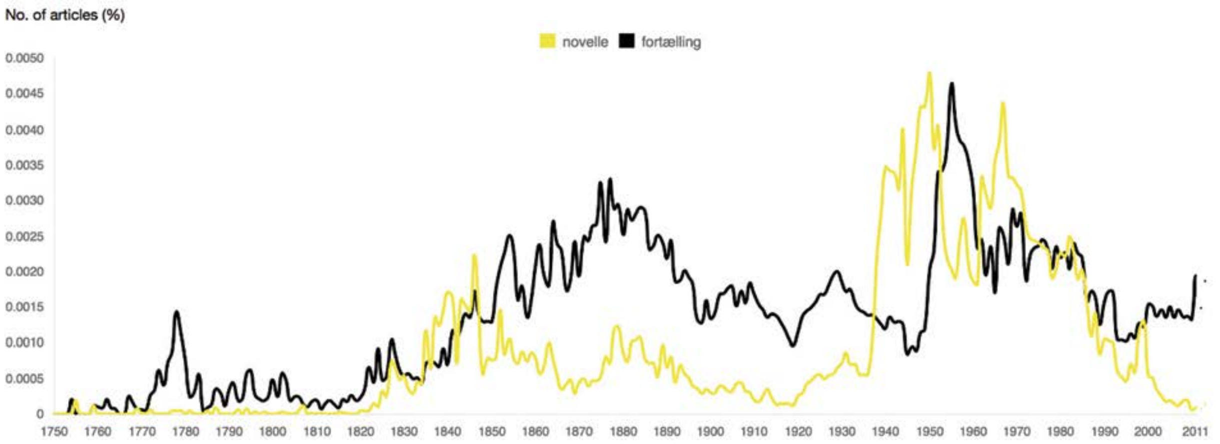

Fig. 10.3 Graph generated by the Smurf tool (Royal Danish Library) showing changes in the use of the terms 'Novelle' and 'Fortælling' over time: http://labs.statsbiblioteket.dk/smurf/

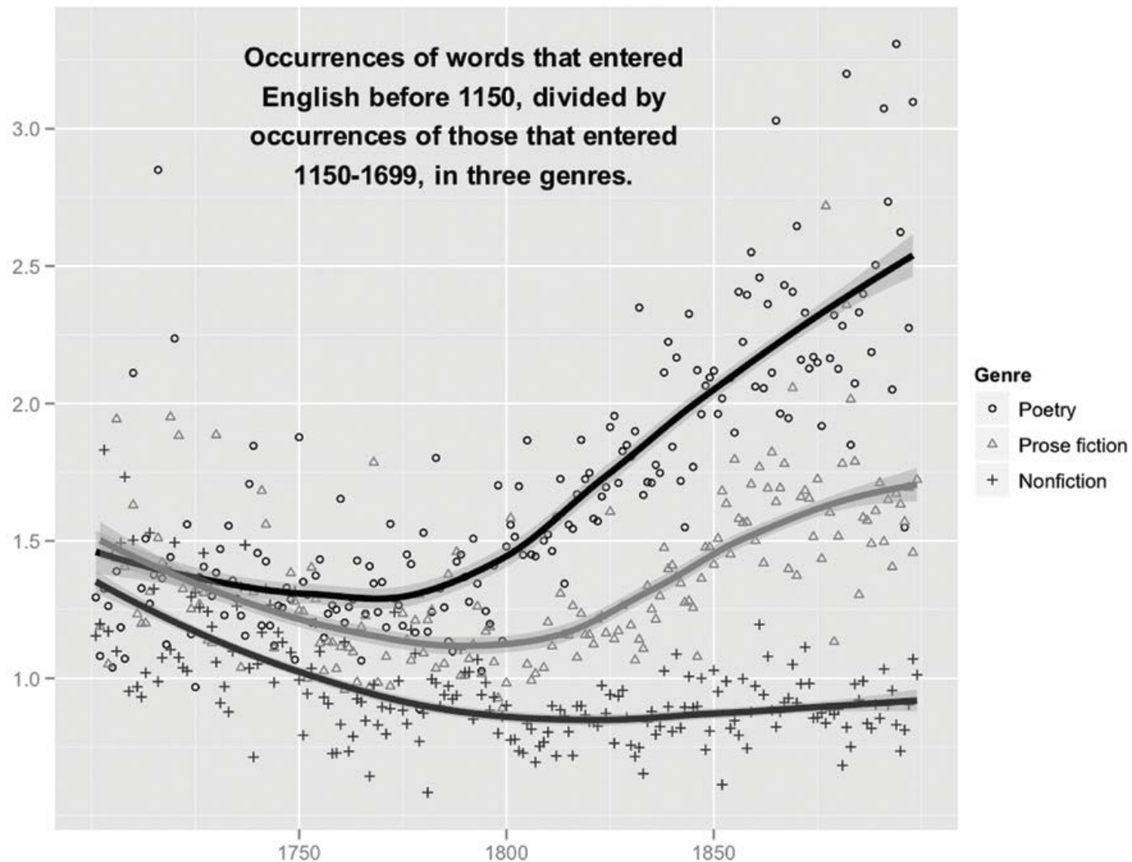

Fig. 10.4 Ratio of pre-1150 to post-1150 words, excluding stopwords and proper nouns. Underwood, Ted. 2013. *Why Literary Periods Mattered*. Stanford: Standford University Press, p.167.

Nevertheless, it provides an interesting basis and with so many other enlightening probes into the vast ocean of texts, it provides a baseline for other investigations to falsify, correct or confirm. As with the other examples given here, the trend lines inform about the very specific conditions in a multifaceted field, but they can be an invaluable part of a larger puzzle.

Circulation

The final example of an area where computational approaches have made a difference in the study of context concerns circulation. Sociology of art and of literature is by no means a new discipline, but there are a number of new resources that have changed the field. Some provide access to more and better data that do not change the field methodologically but simply improve the quality of certain queries. Other data, which do raise new questions of methodology and the combined wealth of approaches to understanding how art and literature circulates and is valued, are in themselves challenging because of the numerous combinations and ways to weigh data against each other. In the following, I will outline how this has been significant to literary studies.

First of all, the access to data on translations and library holdings has become much improved. The data are often somewhat flawed, but services such as UNESCO's Index Translationum and WorldCat.org make it possible to study the literary activity that is expressed through publication, both with regards to, for example, how a national literature interacts with the rest of the world through import and export of works, and how single authors' works have fared, how many editions they have been published in and how many languages. This is very helpful in order to give a more accurate picture of the reach of a literature or an author, rather than relying on vague notions of international significance.

Secondly, the trend line tools mentioned previously, Google Books Ngram Viewer and newspaper databases, are also revealing of changes in the long-term interests of authors whose names most often provide a singular way of identifying them, contrary to more abstract terms that can have multiple uses. Myths of the rediscovery of certain authors can be confirmed or debunked and the relative cultural influence of different authors can be qualified much better. The popular notion that Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville did not really receive critical attention until the 1910s and 1920s actually holds when looking at the

representation of these writers in books and comparing them to the more frequent appearances of, for example, Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman. This is also important in order not to mistake the more or less implicit hierarchies in literary studies for a broader public interest in works, which is not to say that public interest is more important than critical recognition, just that it cannot be ignored.

Whereas the sources above change the ability to address circulation and valuation through data that could theoretically have been collected manually, a number of different data sets on sales, social media and encyclopedias have emerged that rely on data that needs to be processed differently.

Sales numbers are notoriously hard to access in the book industry and there is still no sign of openness that will allow researchers to make comparisons with statistically reliable data. While the number of editions that have been published of a work obviously reveals something about interest, it remains difficult to measure. One intriguing source that helps gain an understanding of what readers want is Amazon Sales Rank, which gives a fairly good indication of what tier a certain work belongs to in terms of sales at a given time. Considering the dominant position of Amazon in internet sales, in particular in the USA, one can assume that it is fairly representative, although all bestseller lists historically have been compiled with great inaccuracy of the actual sales. Nevertheless, as an instrument to inform about which works by a certain author are still selling and which are not, and to determine some order of having sold extremely well (as is the case, for example, with classics such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* that are both in the top 500 of all books in the US store), somewhat well (such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* that both hover around 8,000), or very poorly for a Nobel laureate (such as Gao Xingjian and Claude Simon that have sold very little at rank 400,000 and above).[2] The Sales Rank figures are particularly useful in displaying preferences that vary from country to country (bearing in mind that Amazon's position is not equally strong on all markets) and perhaps even more tellingly, how certain works dominate authorships.

Another source that was born with the internet is social media. Sites dedicated to literature, such as Goodreads, are also good resources that help with an understanding of what fascinates readers. The number of reviews and ratings for works are telling of interest and evaluation of quality and a first step in engaging with this media. The users of Goodreads are in all likelihood not representative of all readers, but the

two different access points offered by Goodreads for participating in the conversation – giving a simple rating with a click or writing a review – makes it accessible to most, and the site covers most genres. There are a number of interesting next steps to take with the reviews on Goodreads, or Amazon for that matter. A sentiment analysis could disclose discrepancies between ratings and the language of reviews. Topic models and frequency analysis can show what the guiding concepts and themes are among hundreds of thousands of readers. And, as Timothy Tangherlini has shown, it is possible to study how reviews on Goodreads recount the books by making a network model of the collective reviews, which often tells a different story from the books themselves (Tangherlini et al. 2019).

Finally, the open and user-driven encyclopedia Wikipedia is an interesting representation of collective knowledge. While it is not edited to a common standard across all subjects and language versions, there is a very active community that corrects errors, requests sources and so on. The article 'World Literature According to Wikipedia' presents an attempt to analyse what would count as canonical literature or world literature in fifteen different language versions of Wikipedia (Hube 2017). On http://data.weltliteratur.net/ranking.html, the top results from various measures to quantify importance are presented, the most interesting measure coming from the PageRank measure of the importance of links to a given author, using the same technique as the Google search engine. This method is applied both to articles on the authors and all articles in the Wikipedia editions to convey the difference between 'authors' authors' and the cultural importance of writers in general. The actual use of Wikipedia from year to year is also documented for the years 2012–14. The hierarchy revealed by this is of course not the literary system itself, but it does mine one of the best sources where people collectively try to figure out what is important and what is connected.

The importance of works in terms of circulation and valuation has always been part of criticism in art and literature, also as a sign of respecting that the individual reader's own opinions are not sufficient to form a basis for judgement. The wealth of resources that are now available allow researchers to make a more nuanced case for the different kinds of impact a work has had. There is still a lot to solve in terms of comparing the different measures and maintaining a critical awareness of the biases and sources of errors. On the other hand, there are often multiple conclusive findings of what is deemed as important and what is not, and art and literary studies generally gain from providing such figures because they are evidence of activity in a cultural space rather than a vague notion of importance.

Conclusion

It is difficult to imagine scholarship on art and literature without any relation to a context. The question is rather what the relevant context is in a given situation. Is it a limited number of other works? A conception of the spirit of an age? A number of historical events? The use of a genre in general culture? There is not one answer, but the way a context is established is very important to scholarship in art and literature. The approaches discussed here have expanded and not replaced other ways of creating context for the works at the centre of a study. From comparing with other works, relying on general descriptions of genres, periods and historical events to histories of reception and use, there are numerous ways in which context is being made relevant.

The digital approaches bring about ways of creating context with various degrees of necessity. There are contexts that work as heuristic tools for further work rather than a result in itself, such as it has been shown here with Munch's paintings and the structure of German plays. Then there are approaches to contexts that are problematic to ignore, such as the development of concepts over time or the various attempts to measure influence, because they provide answers to traditional questions but with much better data than previously. Finally, there are ways of looking at context that are innovative because their approach was not possible or relevant without computational approaches, such as the Stanford Literary Lab's measure of redundancy.

In this article, the focus has been on how the difference between bodies of work, between the archive and the canonical, can be understood; how computational approaches provide new ways of describing changes over time; and how criticism can move closer to the actual use and valuation of works. The usefulness of such approaches will vary: some will provide a few significant figures as part of a larger argument based on a hermeneutical approach, whereas other studies will primarily be orientated towards establishing a more nuanced understanding of a given field based on a data-driven approach. At the end of the day, one will always have to argue, directly or through example, for the choice of context, and for not including what was once not available but now is.

The question of the relevance of establishing context is not new and the pendulum that swings between formalistic and historical schools will probably not find rest. However, the difficulties of applying digital methods to the understanding of single texts and works of art, contrary to their usefulness in relation to wider and larger contextual material where nuance[3] is less important than general tendencies, may

lure disciplines into reorienting themselves towards contexts rather than single works. Do we want criticism that can show the impact (or lack of it) of a work of literature, an installation or a sculpture based on a contextual analysis, or do we want critics who can point out what makes the artwork special and valuable? Of course, this is not an either-or, but in practice it could become so, and that would be a great shame.

Going back to Moretti's article 'Conjectures on World Literature', it is usually overlooked that he not only argues that distant reading could be a condition for acquiring certain kinds of knowledge but that he also emphasises the ability to perform experiments, to set up new conditions for the way we look at texts and observe what follows from that 'until, ideally, all of literary history becomes a long chain of related experiments' (Moretti 2000a, 62). Rather than ending all arguments with facts extracted from large collections of data, as a caricature of computational approaches could sound, Moretti envisions the method of defining a particular unit of analysis and looking for it widely as a way of opening up literary history and drawing on a wider body of works, thus providing a different and hopefully, better context.

Notes

1 Timothy Brennan delivers a harsh critique of various digital humanities projects in literature and the field as a whole in 'The Digital Humanities Bust' (Brennan 2017). While his critique is certainly not founded on a close reading of the articles he criticises, his analyses of the oftentimes hyperbolic rhetoric of promises is worth taking seriously. What he fails to note is that many of the people who have done good or great work with computational approaches have not done so against the institutional odds, whereas Brennan presents their endeavours as an unholy alliance with the neo-liberal university. See also a series of interviews in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* at https://lareviewofbooks.org/feature/the-digital-in-the-humanities/, and Jennifer Schuessler's portrait of Franco Moretti in *The New York Times (*Schuessler 2017*)*.

2 The sales rank figures for these works were made on 22 October 2017.

3 For an emphatic call for looking at the larger lines, see Kieran Healy's 'Fuck Nuance', which is written in the field of sociology but applicable to other disciplines (Healy 2017).

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COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Context in Literary and Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary volume that deals with the challenges of studying works of art and literature in their historical context today. The relationship between artworks and context has long been a central concern for aesthetic and cultural disciplines, and the question of context has been asked anew in all eras. Developments in contemporary culture and technology, as well as new theoretical and methodological orientations in the humanities, once again prompt us to rethink context in literary and cultural studies. This volume takes up that challenge.

Introducing readers to new developments in literary and cultural theory, *Context in Literary and Cultural Studies* connects all disciplines related to these areas to provide an interdisciplinary overview of the challenges different scholarly fields today meet in their studies of artworks in context. Spanning a number of countries, and covering subjects from nineteenth-century novels to rave culture, the chapters together constitute an informed, diverse and wide-ranging discussion.

The volume is written for scholarly readers at all levels in the fields of Literary Studies, Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies, Art History, Film, Theatre Studies and Digital Humanities.

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