

Experiences of Textuality: from the *Oulipo* to the Cyborg Author of the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the interaction between the three factors that govern meaning-creation in literature: the author, the reader, and the text. Starting with 1960s experimental literature, I will examine how the text influences its own perception, how language affects the act of reading, and how the author/reader power structure can be challenged by new, innovative mediums whose characteristics incur counter-cultural readings. The ultimate aim of this thesis is not to analyze these mediums as separate phenomena, but rather as part of a large artistic continuum; as such, the conclusions drawn from their analysis will concern the larger fields of literature, artistic production, and the political structures they exist in. I will also use the concept of “fanfiction” to develop a philosophical reflection against the concept of intellectual property as it exists, before examining the aesthetic qualities of AI-generated literature, as well as what it reveals on the mystified social nature of literary production.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims at furthering the efforts made to emphasize the collective nature of creation, too often mystified by an individualistic approach to authorship: through studying both new and old creative practices, I intend to examine how artistic modalities have been influenced and altered, and the extent to which new mediums allow for the redefinition of authorship, readership and textuality. In this digital age where we are constantly all at once producing and being exposed to media, what is a text? What makes an author, and how is readership negotiated in the age of digital media?

What this thesis is concerned with, ultimately, is the power structures inherent to the creation of art. The question of authorship, of course, comes to mind: as the systems that regulate the production of art become increasingly intricate, the role of the author is constantly being challenged. Barthes's "author-god", a demiurgic figure which governs all aspects of artistic creation and interpretation, is long gone, and if the power of creation cannot be found within the figure of the author alone anymore, where is it? To attempt to answer this, we will be examining works of art which present alternative meta-textual modalities, meaning features that depart from traditional understandings of authorship (who creates the text), readership (who uses the text), and medium (how is the text created and used). Though these terms will be further discussed in relation to the examples relevant to them, it is worth defining them here, as this analysis relies on a study of difference. As a starting point for these definitions, let us discuss the notion of "text": central to this study, its definition has to be broad enough to encapsulate starkly different objects of study, yet specific enough to sustain the coherence of the analysis. As such, I would like to introduce the work of Espen Aarseth, a Norwegian academic considered to be a precursor of electronic literature studies. His book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Aarseth 1997)¹ offers us a theoretical framework conjugating formal analysis and reader-response theory. In spite of having

¹ Aarseth 1997 introduced two notions essential to my analysis: "cybertext" and "ergodic literature". As such, these concepts will be used throughout my thesis.

been written more than two decades ago, his terminology, tools for formal analysis, and approach to art history, I argue, are all the more relevant today. In this book, he argues that the formal elements which make up a text are consequential in that they affect the reader's experience, yet they should not be understood as singular, decontextualized features. Rather, his approach considers art and artistic creation as a continuum, and the mere fact that a formal element is "new", does not mean it is "novel". This brings us to his definition of the notion of "text":

A text [...] is any object with the primary function to relay verbal information. Two observations follow from this definition : (1) a text cannot operate independently of some material medium, and this influences its behavior, and (2) a text is not equal to the information it transmits. [...] Information is here understood as a string of signs, which may (but does not have to) make sense to a given observer. (Aarseth 1997; 62)

There are three main elements that make Aarseth's defining features efficient and topical: first, presenting a text as an object has the double effect of reaffirming its place in the material world and encompassing any media that allows for the transmission of verbal information. What, however, should be made of the adjective "verbal"? We are faced with two possible interpretations. The first is literal: that to be a text, the object has to signify through words, be made up of them. This would be in keeping with a more traditional understanding of "text", one that can be found in dictionaries. It would, however, rule out many forms of artistic expression; most paintings do not include words, yet their medium influences their reception, and they present their audience with a sensible string of signs. Most importantly, what of hybrid medias for which words are but one of many forms of expression? Do comic books only become texts if we dismiss their illustrations? Are movie scripts texts, but not the movies themselves? Applying this literal interpretation would imply that the textualization of these hybrid medias could only occur if they are studied partially. The second

interpretation, which is the one I have chosen to use, requires acknowledging that, according to this definition, all information is ultimately verbal. Indeed, on both ends of the signified to signifier continuum, there are words. Whatever the sign, at its core is language; its producer thought in terms of language, and its receiver interpreted it so. The addition of the adjective “verbal” thus doesn’t serve to dismiss medias that are not word-based but to reaffirm the key role that language plays in our cognition and the interpretative process. Thus, paintings, movies, advertisements, sculptures, buildings, expositions, memes, games, and novels are all equally textual; material, mediated strings of signs. This brings us to the second defining feature of interest to us: the importance Aarseth places on the role of the medium.

Aarseth’s literary theory implies the understanding of the text as a machine, one that is created (authored) and used (read) but that has a unique functioning. According to him, though texts can and should be related to larger mediums and genres, every text acts as a mechanism for which “the functional differences among the mechanical parts play a defining role in determining the aesthetic process” (*ibid.*; 22). This implies that the aesthetic qualities of a text are all at once influenced by the characteristics of the mediums they are read through, and by their individual, unique set of characteristics, ones that let them offer a different, idiosyncratic reading experience, and that both should be taken into account when analyzing it. This insistence on the influence of the medium is crucial to my thesis, as it will include discussions of how the conditions of consumption of the cited examples impact reader experience, especially when it comes to newer, innovative mediums, whose characteristics have novel effects. We will resume our exploration of Aarseth’s theory and terminology later on; for the purposes of this introduction, let us simply reaffirm that a text (1) is a materially conveyed system of signs, and (2) the medium through which it is conveyed can influence the interpretation of the text itself.

This definition will be the basis of my analysis, one which aims at expanding the field of literary possibilities through the study of examples which offer insight into how consequential a

text's medium is both to its conception and reception, how recent technological advancements have allowed for the development of new mediums with unique sets of characteristics, and attempts to assess how the relationship between reader, author and machine is challenged by technological prospects.

First, I shall discuss works by the Oulipo, a French collective founded in 1960 and still active to this day. They constitute a perfect starting point for such an analysis as, in the rise of structuralist and post-structuralist literary analysis, they worked to challenge traditional approaches to textuality, through medium manipulation and literary experimentation. Their texts make up the cornerstone of my analysis as they work to connect the traditional, established mediums they used (poems/novels) to those, more recent, incurred by technological advancement. Their attitude towards creation will allow us to discuss the notion of creativity, and reveal some ways in which it is discursively mystified. I will also use their texts to develop a theory of language, and relate it to the very act of reading: introducing the figure of the reader will allow us to further dissect what role reading plays in the creative act.

My second object of study will be the notion of “interactivity”, that is the level of involvement which the reader, confined to their role, is allowed to have in a given text. In order to best delve into this, I have chosen to first execute a comparative analysis of a digital text and its print counterpart, as their differing formal characteristics radically alter both the reader's experience and some of the interpretative possibilities inherent to its structure. To further this line of questioning, our second analysis will challenge the concept of authorship, in introducing a medium which has the potential for an infinity of authorial identities, the wikia. Within this context, I will address the potential intersections of readership and authorship, and in doing so attempt to reshape their respective definitions.

Thirdly, I will tackle “fanfiction”, a truly deviant form of textuality which clashes with traditional notions of authorship, as it appropriates previously established intellectual properties. I

will assess the ways in which this appropriation can actually be productive, as well as the social dimension of its reception. Disregarding dismissive approaches to this bastardized authorship, we will attempt to reinforce its validity through an alternative history of the idea, one whose avowed goal will be to highlight the role of the collective within the creative process, both in its material and ideological input.

Finally, I will take a gander into the future, and consider the role which artificial intelligence might play within processes of artistic creation. After having examined the functioning of AI systems, and addressed some of its problematic features, such as its cultural biases and its reinforcement of hegemonic values, I will introduce a text “written by” an AI: this label is what I will focus on. Can AI write, or rather can it author? And if so to what extent? The field of AI literature is incredibly recent, and as such the examples are few and far between. Yet, the meteoric rise of the technology warrants the examination of its potential, both as a threat to the established order of literary standards and as a potential tool for the evolution of literature. But in order to best look into the future, let us start by examining the past.

The *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or Oulipo, is a French collective of authors whose avowed goal is to push the limits of literature through experimentation. Its members, interestingly enough, were not merely authors; though they all shared an interest in literature, and most of them, at the time of the collective’s creation, were already established writers, a lot of them were also evolving in radically different fields. Some notable examples are Jacques Bens, a former student of natural sciences, Jean Queval, the author of a cricket manual, and Claude Berge, a sculptor and graph theorist (Levin Becker 2012). The blending of disciplines was a preeminent feature of the group’s work: the first oulipian text, Raymond Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (One Hundred Thousand Poems), is a mathematics-inspired collection of sonnets. The page-long poems are each cut into fourteen strips of paper, one for each stanza, and readers are encouraged to combine the strips as they see fit, for a grand total of 10^{14} (one hundred trillion) possible poems;

Queneau estimated that, in order to read all of them, a reader would have to dedicate 190,258,751 years to the enterprise (*ibid.*). It is quintessentially oulipian: “a book that cannot possibly be read in its entirety by any single human being—including its author—and whose significance thus remains, in a strong sense, potential” (*ibid.*; 124). Mathematics and its associated fields were essential to the early works of the Oulipo, and recent iterations of the collective have even been criticized for not including enough specialists of the field (Lapprand 2020). Another seminal work of the oulipian canon, Georges Perec’s *La Vie mode d’emploi*, is based on a geometrical constraint: it tells the interlocking stories of the inhabitants of a Parisian building, traversing its rooms following the pattern of the knight’s tour, a mathematical and algorithmic sequence that allows for a knight to visit every square of a chessboard exactly once. This is, of course, not something that was imposed on Perec. It is, in fact, a perfect example of a process that is at the core of the Oulipo’s corpus: constrained writing.

Part I. The Oulipo: to Write and to Read

When you're an experimenter, whether with the human genome or with the Roman alphabet, you don't always end up where you thought you would, or where you initially wanted to go. (Levin Becker 2012; 126)²

a) Constrained Writing: Defining Creativity

The concept most famously associated to the Oulipo is that of the “*contrainte*” (“constraint”)³. Within the lexical field used to discuss the collective, it has almost become a totem, a two-way signifier: Oulipo signifies constraints, and constraints signify the Oulipo. Defining the term “constraint” as it relates to the Oulipo, in fact, is quite the lexicographical conundrum: Merriam-Webster lists it as “the state of being checked, restricted, or compelled to avoid or perform some action”⁴. As efficient and concise as this definition is, once displaced within the oulipian lingo, it becomes incomplete. In this first part, we will examine the constraint as it relates to the Oulipo, and from it draw conclusions on the inner workings of creativity. The oulipian constraint is characterized by two other features: first, it is self-imposed: oulipian authors choose the conditions they are constrained by, they are the authors of their own restrictions. Second, the oulipian constraint necessarily provokes creativity; its effectual dimension cannot be ignored, as it is also at the core of its existence, thus making it one of its defining features. The authors’ self-imposed constraints have but one goal: to create new forms of literature, which otherwise would not have

2 In 2009, Daniel Levin Becker became the second American to be elected a member of the Oulipo. He has translated works from the collective, and his 2012 book *Many subtle channels : in praise of potential literature* examines the past, present and future of this practice, and is cited in this thesis as a source of historical information on the Oulipo.

3 I have chosen to translate the French noun “*contrainte*” as “constraint” throughout this thesis. Though there is no such thing as perfect equivalence, the latter signifies in much the same way as the former, in that it indicates restriction, loss of freedom/agency, binding, ... and these features are what will be examined. How is it constraining? Who is being constrained? How to overcome the constraint?

4 *Constraint*, Merriam-Webster, accessed on 09/27/2023.
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constraint>

been imagined. Creativity, it seems, therefore “reside[s] in the ability of the individual to transcend and radically transform these constraints and, in the process, discover new possibilities” (Novitz 1999; 71). As the start of our analysis of the Oulipo’s work, let us delve deeper into how these constraints function and the extent to which they lead to the inception of the creative act.

David Novitz⁵, in his paper “Creativity and Constraint”, discusses Margaret A. Boden’s theory of radical creativity (Boden 1994), which, he argues is “invariably explained as the transformation of the organising principles that unify a conceptual space” (Novitz 1999; 68). According to Boden, true creativity only occurs when the very borders that confine the creative space are redefined; any work that operates within those borders without transforming them could thus not be radically creative, i.e. in a way that produces new ideas and concepts. In radical creation “the generative principles involved in depicting are radically reconstituted in ways that enable the artist to overcome limitations in the previous system of depiction” (Novitz 1999; 69): radical creativity is one that seeks to further its medium, push the boundaries of its means of signification. This analysis is valuable to our purposes, yet incomplete, as it would rule out some oulipian constraints as being non-radically creative: let us take the example of George Perec’s *La Disparition* (A Void):⁶

Today, by radio, and also on giant hoardings, a rabbi, an admiral notorious for his links to Masonry, a trio of cardinals, a trio, too, of insignificant politicians (bought and paid for by a rich and corrupt Anglo-Canadian banking corporation), inform us all of how our country now risks dying of starvation. A rumour, that’s my initial thought as I switch off my radio, a rumour or possibly a hoax. (Adlair 1995; vii)

5 David Novitz was a member of the American Society for Aesthetics : I have chosen to discuss his theory on creativity as its articulation of aesthetics and phenomenology makes it the perfect starting point for a thesis such as mine, which delves into how, why, and when creativity is realized – especially in, as we are about to discuss, the ways in which it builds upon Margaret Boden’s.

6 Citations for this text will be taken from its 1995 translation by Gilbert Adlair, the only one to be published. The various translations that have been attempted constitute a fascinating object of study for translation theorists, but for the purposes of this thesis, we shall simply quote from Adlair’s. It should be noted that, for the sake of clarity, (Perec 1969) will be used to refer to the original novel, and (Adlair 1995) to quote from the translation.

The simple yet incredibly restricting constraint which governs this novel is representative of the way the Oulipo explores language's potential: the 78 000 word-long detective novel does not contain a single occurrence of the letter "e", the most common vowel in the French language. This forced Perec to find strategies to work around all of the most common words in French, to systematically avoid producing the banal; it resulted in a strange, uncanny reading experience. It should be noted that readers were never explicitly made aware of the constraint that ruled the text: one could have potentially read the whole text without even noticing the absence of the vowel. This is also reflected in the narrative, a detective story which chronicles the events that follow the vanishing of a man named Anton Voyl. The characters are all at once Perec and the reader: they are faced with the challenges of the former, having to find ways around the absence of the letter, which incurs the absence of any object that cannot be named without it from the diegesis, and those of the latter, bewildered and perplexed. Can this stylistic exercise, though, be considered as radically creative? Not according to Boden's definition. Indeed, it does not redefine the contours of its medium, does not produce new means of signification: "it merely involves the exploration of an existing conceptual space, and results in the application of its fundamental principles in more or less imaginative and novel ways" (Novitz 1999; 69). Because it does not produce the new means of depiction which are essential to Boden's understanding of creativity, the consequences of this constraint, according to her, are not radically creative: "there is nothing very original about this; nothing that surprises or astounds" (*ibid.*). Does this, then, mean that *La Disparition* is not a creative work of art? Certainly not. A lot of valid criticisms can and have been levied against it, from its lackluster and overly complex plot to the utter absence of female characters, but accusing it of a lack of creativity is a harder sell. Set aside any value judgments on the novel's quality, the strategies Perec had to use to work around the vowel's absence led to a novel like no other before it, as it led to the production of absurd sentences and turns of phrases: "Things look normal, but looks

can play tricks on you. Things at first look normal, till, abruptly, abnormality, horrifying in its inhumanity, swallows you up and spits you out.” (Adlair 1995; 23) The style sometimes comes off as clumsy, the lexical choices grating: “Anton Vowl’s bosom companion is a man known as Amaury” (*ibid*; 44). The novel playfully includes its constraint into both its text and metatext: the reader, in a sense, is turned into a detective, having to gather clues and solve the mystery of what has not been included in the text. Some notable examples include the names of the two main characters, Anton Voyl and Amaury Conson, whose last names are respectively the French words *voyelle* (vowel) and *consonne* (consonant), stripped of the forbidden letter, or the book’s structure; it is divided in twenty-five chapters, one to four and six to twenty-six, one for each letter of the alphabet except for the fifth: “e”. The absence of a fifth item in a series of twenty-six is also a recurring motif in the novel. In presenting a variety of solutions, Perec invites the reader to find the problem, thus altering the way in which the reader approaches the text. The narrative is made secondary, subservient to the extra-diegetic quest for the constraint. Having the reader attempt to solve the mystery of a detective novel is an integral part of the genre; a good detective story is one that is efficient at dispersing breadcrumbs, that gives its readers a chance at solving the overarching mystery alongside the main character. *La Disparition*, in that regard, is creative and original: the very structure of the book is made up of clues, both textual and meta-textual, that hint at a resolution that is both diegetic and extra-diegetic; it represents a new kind of reading experience, an expansion of the genre which makes the most of the specific characteristics of its medium. However, it did not create new means of signification *ex nihilo*, did not redefine the borders of its conceptual space. Boden’s definition of creativity thus appears incomplete, as it does not encompass such an endeavor, ruling it out as non-radically creative, in spite of it offering a new and novel experience. In order to improve upon it, Novitz devised the “recombination theory of creativity”, arguing that

people may be radically creative even when they do not transform anything as well-defined as a conceptual space. They may, for instance, combine ideas in accordance with well-established rules and techniques, and they may do so in ways that turn out to be wonderfully insightful, that shift our understanding of certain phenomena, that cast things differently—in a different light, with new emphases, altered alignments and surprising new connections. (Novitz 1999; 76)

There is a sense, in Boden's theory, that the boundaries of a medium are ontologically fixed, and that in order to alter them, one has to radically reinvent them: "one would need to move, say, from bare outline drawing to perspectival projection, or from this to orthographic projection, or (unlikely as it may seem) from orthographic projection to impressionist painting" (*ibid.*; 69). Just as Gilles Deleuze understands difference not as the negation of a phenomenon but as its affirmation (Deleuze 1968)⁷, Novitz argues that new and innovative uses of preexisting means of signification are just as creative, as they represent an exploration of their field of significance. Deleuze argued that repetition and difference were productive, and claimed that they created a conceptual space; employing a mathematical metaphor, he called this a "derivative"⁸, a space which separates two tangentially related events. It is in this space which exists between usages that creativity occurs.

The oulipian constraint might not always result in a radical shift of the boundaries of a conceptual space, but it creates difference, forces into existence a creatively productive derivative. Crucially, the difference needs not be absolute for it to be recognized as creative; partial or incremental differences also have the potential for the inception of creativity. This understanding of the concept is invaluable to our purposes, as some of the boundaries between mediums are fairly unclear; having radical and absolute difference as a requirement would encourage us to look for it,

7 I am making a connection between Deleuze and Novitz because they both looked for an alternative to an anti-historical and anti-material approach to creation (such as Boden's) which appeals to individual genius. Deleuze's theories are evoked briefly, and serve to support Novitz's.

8 It should be noted that Deleuze and Novitz both employed spatial metaphors to discuss the environment in which creativity occurs; others will be introduced throughout this thesis.

thus blinding us to similarities, especially when it comes to the role the medium plays in the interpretative process. Aarseth criticizes this side effect of the centering of ontological difference as

the tendency to describe the new text media as radically different from the old, with attributes solely determined by the material technology of the medium. [...] The ideological forces surrounding new technology produce a rhetoric of novelty, differentiation, and freedom that works to obscure the more profound structural kinships between superficially heterogeneous media. (Aarseth 1997; 15)

Writing in the late 1990s, his focus was on the way that digital media and specifically computer-mediated texts were perceived and analyzed as wholly different from paper media. According to him, though a text's medium plays a crucial role in how it is consumed and understood, a theory that only focuses on a single, ontological difference, but fails to recognize the similarities between medias is necessarily insufficient. Much like the oulipian constraint, there is an argument to be made that the examples that will be presented in this thesis do not represent a clean and absolute break from other, older forms of media; we will attempt to apply this newfound understanding of creativity to explore how they make use of the tools at their disposal to innovate, find new pathways of meaning, and ultimately be creative. Just like the authors of the Oulipo, who, of their own volition, chose to write under constraint, in the hopes that it would lead to the expansion of the field of literary possibilities, the authors of those texts chose the novel, the unfamiliar, and the innovative, in order to find new ways to tell stories. All of these texts, in their own ways, are constrained; the objects of part II, for instance, by unfamiliar mediums and formal characteristics, those of part III by ideological and legal structures. All of these constraints, as we will see, work to produce a literature that defies the canon, alters the act of writing and, maybe more importantly, the act of reading.

b) Constrained Reading: Emancipation and Alienation

So far, we have explored the consequences of constraints on the process of creation: on the authors' side, the constraint is effectual before and during creation; it influences aesthetic and structural choices, rules out some signifying practices and pushes the author towards other, more uncommon ones. This, ideally, culminates in a creative work of art, one that innovates either by creating new means of signification, or inflects or combines preexisting features to convey meaning in novel ways. However, the life of a text does not end at its production, which begs the question: how do constraints affect readers? Once an oulipian novel is written, how are audiences influenced by its underlying constraint? There are two ways of approaching this issue: aesthetically and politically. The former approach consists in analyzing how the constraint is received as part of the structural semiotic construct that makes up the text, how it interacts with other meaningful parts and inflects their interpretation. The latter is concerned with the author/reader power structure, the hierarchical organization that historically situates the reader as the passive receiver of a message offered to them by the author.

First, aesthetically, the constraint is significant and signifying in that it purposefully highlights what language lacks:

Le lecteur reçoit les contraintes comme la métaphore d'une parole handicapée et d'une difficulté d'expression propre à la littérature, comme l'allégorie d'une impuissance fondamentale, d'une littérature désespérée par le réel. (Reig 2011; 84)

The reader receives constraints as a metaphor for a handicapped speech act and a difficulty of expression specific to literature, as the allegory of a fundamental powerlessness, a literature made desperate by reality. [translation mine]

A constrained text, for the reader, is an uncanny one. In choosing unfamiliar semiotic pathways, the author forces the reader to go against their habits, to look for meaning in places where there usually is none to be found. This is even more relevant when discussing texts that hide their constraints; while not a necessary feature of oulipian works, the group's authors traditionally do not expose their constraint, simply leaving hints for the reader to figure out under which restriction the text was written. To trace it back to *La Disparition*, a reader which ignores that the author forbid himself from using the vowel "e" will be confronted with a text that uses rare word choices, strange sentence structures, and playful breaking of linguistic rules. The consequences are two-fold: on the one hand, the text is turned into a mystery, a quest for the concealed constraint; on the other, its poetics hinder the reader, and in doing so force them to reconsider their relationship to language. Traditionally, the work of the author is to subdue language, to instrumentalize it in order to convey their message as smoothly as possible.

The act of writing has been considered as one of domination over words, of the imposing of the self; what the pre-modernist centering of the author, which Barthes called the "intentional fallacy", implies is the author's ability to perfectly order a string of signs, linguistic or otherwise, to produce one, teleological meaning. This is refuted by post-structuralist thinkers, who argue that language is untameable, and that no author can force a reader to adopt their interpretation of the semiotic system they produced:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. (Barthes 1968; 86)

This detachment of language and the author is common to structuralism and post-structuralism: Jacques Derrida famously encapsulated this by saying “I have only one language, yet it is not mine” (Derrida 1998; 21); in stressing the dual nature of language, all at once collective and individual, he highlighted its underlying tension. One’s individual cultural production is necessarily inflected by an other’s individual interpretation, dictated by their own relationship to language. To examine the practical applications of these theories, I would like to introduce a more recent oulipian work which engages directly with language as a tool for the creation of meaning, and the multiplicity of the meanings which it can create: the novel *Moi et François Mitterrand* (François Mitterrand and I)⁹, written in 2016 by Hervé le Tellier.

Le Tellier’s works have been published in *La Bibliothèque Oulipienne*, a collection made up of short texts written by or in collaboration with members of the collective. The premise of the text is quite simple: it presents itself as a conference given by the main character and narrator, a fictionalized Hervé Le Tellier, who shares his alleged private correspondence with former French president François Mitterrand. He claims, in the very first sentence of the novel, to have corresponded regularly with the president throughout the years: “*Je n’en fais pas une affaire d’État et n’en tire aucune gloire personnelle, mais à partir de 1983, François Mitterrand et moi avons entretenu une correspondance assidue*” / “I am not making it into a state affair, and am not looking for personal glory, but starting in 1983, François Mitterrand and I have corresponded regularly.” (Le Tellier 2016; 7). Interestingly enough, his first affirming that he does not intend for this to be a national affair and that he takes no pride in having had these exchanges suggests those ideas to the reader, implying to them that Le Tellier is about to disclose personal, maybe intimate information

9 *Moi et François Mitterrand* has not yet been translated into English, as such all translations will be mine.

about the former president. The novel is made up of three main parts: first-person narration, letters written by Le Tellier to François Mitterand, and an impersonal standard letter from the French president's office. Throughout the whole novel, the content of the president's reply, except for the date of the letter it acknowledges, stays exactly the same: it is the only reply to Le Tellier's many letters. For every single one which Le Tellier sends to the president, he receives a standard letter back, which, to the reader, obviously does not represent private correspondence. Therefore, the originality and appeal of this novel reside in the narrator's multiple interpretations of a unique letter:

Cher Monsieur,

Votre lettre en date du 10 Septembre 1983 vient de me parvenir et je vous en remercie.

Ne doutez pas, cher Monsieur, que vos remarques recevront toute l'attention qu'elles méritent et qu'elles seront prises en considération par nos services dans les délais les plus brefs.

Je vous prie de croire, cher Monsieur, à l'assurance de mes sentiments les meilleurs.

Le Président de la République. (ibid.; 8)

Dear Sir,

Your letter dated September 10th 1983 has just reached me, thank you.

Rest assured, dear Sir, that your comments will receive all of the attention they deserve and that they were taken into consideration by our services in the shortest possible time.

With the warmest of regards,

The President of the Republic. [translation mine]

The author-narrator weaves a conversation around this reply, each time interpreting the same words in a slightly different way to create a narrative. We thus observe the inception of a one-sided friendship; Le Tellier, convinced that the president is personally replying to him, warps the content of the letter to create a fantasized dialogue. The delusion of the narrator reaches comically absurd heights; in one letter, he claims to be able to find traces of the president's style: "*Dès les premiers mots, j'ai tout de suite reconnu le style de François, si aérien, si littéraire, et en même temps tellement précis et direct*" / "From the very first words, I instantly recognized François's style, so light, so literary, and at the same time so precise and direct." (*ibid.*; 12). In another, he senses regret and modesty: "*Comment ne pas sentir dans cette lettre de François tout son regret, sa pudeur aussi ?*" / "How could one not feel, in this letter from François, all of his regret, as well as his modesty." (*ibid.*; 21). The government office's letter, which, to anyone, would represent a standardized, impersonal reply, constitutes for the narrator a depth of information about its alleged author, "*Le Président de la République*".

In having the narrator both literally accept the premise of the letter (that it is an actual reply written by the president) and interpret its content, Le Tellier sheds light on the unstable relationship between writing and reading, and produces a commentary on the reader of a text's role in the production of meaning. Thus, *Moi et François Mitterand*, in highlighting the instability that governs language, offers truly post-structuralist insight. First, the text's absurd showcasing of a wholly unstable language, one that can be molded into almost anything by whoever receives the message, is a pure representation of Jacques Derrida's *différance* (Derrida 1967), a concept which refers to the inherent difference between signifiers and their referents, as well as to the fact that the meaning of a word results solely from its difference to other words. Indeed, all words exist within a broader linguistic context, and it is the difference of a word from others which produces its signification; Derrida argues that words, as signifiers, never hold a fixed meaning, but are wholly context-dependent. More importantly, Derrida denies the existence of an essential referent: to him, language

does not exist to hint at a subject, the subject is created by language: “*Ce mouvement de la différence ne survient pas à un sujet transcendantal. Il le produit.*”/ “This movement of *différance* does not happen to a transcendental subject. It produces the subject.”¹⁰ (Derrida 1967; 92)

Moi et François Mitterand exemplifies this through the presentation of a text which does not refer to anything, one whose meaning(s) can only be attained through pure interpretation. The words of the president’s letter are, in essence, meaningless; on the “author’s” end, all of them have but one unique goal: to acknowledge that the letter has been received by the government’s office. The letter’s entire semiotic system, every sign that it contains, fuse together to attain this goal. *Différance*, here, exists within the text and its context. What Le Tellier is showing his audience is that what the narrator is doing with this letter, as absurd as it appears, is actually a similar process to the one that is expected of its reader. If those words only mean in relation to their context, if they are devoid of an essence, then how absurd really is the narrator’s interpretation? What it represents is a desperate fight against the inherent meaninglessness of language, a refusal to accept not being allowed to *read*. Indeed, this text presents its audience with a truly post-structuralist theory of reading, one that places meaning production within the figure of the reader. Signs may be unstable and devoid of inherent meaning, yet they *mean*; they simply do so in relation to the context they exist in. This implies that the text is not a stable equation: the structuralist fallacy of fixed meaning was built upon the assumption that by finding out the unique properties of a text, a *telos* could be attained, an ultimate, unchanging meaning. However, as demonstrated in *Moi et François Mitterand*, other factors influence the perception of a text, and can drastically impact its interpretation. The instability of meaning resides in the fact that the context in which a text is read comprises a seemingly infinite of moving parts, which can be divided in three main categories: the author, the reader, and the text.

This, however, does not simplify the semantic equation, as these three categories are themselves unstable. As demonstrated earlier, the signs that make up a text are context-dependent:

10 Another spatial metaphor, emphasizing that creativity occurs within a dynamic space.

even though they stay the same, their meaning is easily influenced, which is why Le Tellier is capable of weaving a whole narrative around one unique letter. The novel also comments on the nature of authorship; indeed the president that Le Tellier writes to, and who allegedly signs the letter, changes. In 1995, Le Tellier starts writing to Jacques Chirac, in 2007 to Nicolas Sarkozy, and in 2012 to François Hollande. The letter, however, stays the same. The first letter he receives from Jacques Chirac, the direct successor to Mitterrand, offers us an edifying comment on the way authorship influences reading: after receiving it, Le Tellier says the following:

J'ai relu cette lettre de Jacques Chirac plusieurs fois, je l'ai placée côte à côte avec celle de Mitterrand, les ai longuement comparées, et j'ai pensé, tout comme vous bien sûr en cet instant : décidément, n'est pas François Mitterrand qui veut. (Le Tellier 2016; 30)

I read over Jacques Chirac's letter several times, placed it next to Mitterrand's, spent a great deal of time comparing them, and I thought, as I am sure you are thinking right now: clearly, not everyone can be François Mitterrand. [translation mine]

Despite the fact that the letters are made up of the exact same words, Le Tellier finds Chirac's inferior to Mitterrand's. He details the reasons why in an in-depth comparative analysis of the two, citing elements of stylistics (*"Ah ! Buffon n'avait pas tort de dire que le style, c'est l'homme même"* (*ibid.*; 33) / *"Ah! Buffon was not wrong to say that one's style is one's character"*) and biographical analysis (*"le puissant « Ne doutez pas, cher Monsieur, etc. » de François, [...] prend sa source [...] dans une tradition catholique romaine solidement ancrée"* (*ibid.*) / *"François's powerful 'Rest assured, dear Sir, etc.' [...] finds its source [...] in a deeply rooted Roman Catholic tradition"*). The narrator, in this passage, equates the text to its author, which works to demonstrate how consequential authorial identity is to the interpretation of a work. The same words, arranged in

the same way, attributed to two different people, take on very different meanings: the perceived authorship of the letter inflects all interpretative endeavors. However, in doing so in such an absurd manner, Le Tellier playfully hints at the biases that this author-centered approach creates. Indeed, the narrator's analysis, which finds Mitterand's letter to be superior to Chirac's, seems to be informed by his personal preference for the former. When Jacques Chirac is elected, he states that he did not support him: "*ce n'était pas mon candidat, si je puis ici l'avouer*" / "he was not my candidate, if I can admit so here" (*ibid.*; 28). The same personal bias can be found in his interpretation of the other presidents' letters: he expresses his discontent at Nicolas Sarkozy's becoming the new president ("*L'élection de Nicolas Sarkozy fut une nouvelle déception.*" / "Nicolas Sarkozy's election was yet another disappointment." (*ibid.*; 48)), and accordingly interprets "his" letters unfavorably ("*Vous le constatez avec moi : nous avons là affaire à un copier-coller sans imagination, qui n'est pas loin de s'apparenter au plagiat.*" / "You notice it just like I do: this is an unimaginative copy-and-paste, this close from plagiarism." (*ibid.*; 49)). And though the narrator does not give a personal opinion on François Hollande, it is unsurprising in light of his previous political stances that he would appreciate him ("*Bien entendu. J'ai reçu [la] réponse [de François], elle est charmante, pleine de considération, et d'humour aussi*"; "Of course, I received François's answer, it is pleasant, very considerate and humorous." (*ibid.*; 59)). Thus, we are left with a dual interpretation: on the one hand, it exemplifies how an author's identity can influence a text's reception; on the other, it demonstrates that one's perceived relationship to the author is also a factor of interpretation. This entails that, in the interpretative process, the figure of the author is subjected to that of the reader, and not the other way around, a reversal of traditional power hierarchy. Indeed, there is no real author to dictate the meaning of the government's letter: the standardized letter is effectively *unauthored*. Yet, Le Tellier uses its alleged author to infer its meaning, thus showing that authorship as a factor of meaning does not exist outside of the text but within it, and, much like the Derridean sign, only means in relation to other factors. This does not mean that the author has no

influence on the meaning of a text, but that authorship is granted to a text by its reader. The one letter is interpreted in two starkly different ways solely on the basis of who authored them, thus establishing that authorship has an effectual power, yet, this power, though situated within the author, does not belong to them: it is ultimately wielded by the reader. This leads us to the final category of items which influences interpretation: the reader.

The unauthored nature of the letter to which Le Tellier repeatedly replies serves to decenter the author from the sphere of meaning production, thus shedding light on the significance of the reader. The often forgotten conclusion of Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author" is the following: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author." (Barthes 1968; 87) Few works exemplify this as efficiently as *Moi et François Mitterand*. The text within the text, the president's letter, is picked apart; it is subjected to its reader's cognitive processes, his biases and preferences. Le Tellier demonstrates that, as the act of reading is enacted by the reader, its result, ultimately, is the reader's. Barthes claimed that "the image of literature to be found in ordinary literature is tyrannically centered on the author" (*ibid.*; 83) and through his choice of constraint, Le Tellier showcases the mystified nature of authorship. This approach to author-reader interaction is central to the academic analysis of the Oulipo's work:

L'Oulipo a pour principe éthique de ne rien vouloir de son lecteur, se bornant à lui signifier qu'il est un partenaire potentiel (en un sens un alter ego). Il lui est loisible de tirer le parti qu'il voudra de ce qui lui est suggéré. (Oulipo 2001; 14)

The Oulipo's ethical principle is to not require anything from their readers, consistently signifying to them that they are potential partners (in a sense alter-egos). They are allowed to take whatever they would like from what is suggested to them. (translation mine)

The predetermined structural constraint, central to the Oulipo, is thought of as a means to empower the reader, to make them interact with the work in unique ways, and to some extent, it does: the quest for *La Disparition*'s constraint or the combinatorial nature of *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* create reader-involvement in unique, innovative ways. However, can it truly be said that they allow for the reader to transcend its role? Does the Oulipian constraint turn the reader into something more than the passive consumer of a finished product? Aarseth claims that

A reader, however strongly engaged in the unfolding of a narrative, is powerless. Like a spectator at a soccer game, he may speculate, conjecture, extrapolate, even shout abuse, but he is not a player. Like a passenger on a train, he can study and interpret the shifting landscape, he may rest his eyes wherever he pleases, even release the emergency brake and step off, but he is not free to move the tracks in a different direction.¹¹ He cannot have the player's pleasure of influence: "Let's see what happens when I do this." The reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent. (Aarseth; 4)

According to Aarseth, predetermined structural constraints such as those characteristic of Oulipian novels can never create a veritably interactive piece of art, precisely because they do not allow for the reader to have an influence on the work's structure. The reader, in an Oulipian novel, operates in an enclosed space, the boundaries and features of which he has no influence on. This ties back to Novitz's theory of creativity in a very interesting way: can a reader achieve creativity by recombining elements of a conceptual space that has been authored for them? Does Novitz's thesis apply equally to readers and authors?

The author, according to Novitz, does not have to wholly redefine a conceptual space to be creative; simply combining its features in innovative and unique ways suffices to achieve creativity.

11 Another instance of spatialization: the text is a space through which the reader is taken; what is at stake, then, is their agency and freedom of movement.

However, this thesis seems to be inapplicable to the figure of the reader. Indeed, is the reader of *La Disparition* performing a creative act when going outside textual boundaries to supply its reading with metatextual information? Is the reader of *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* achieving artistic creation when they combine pre-written lines to form one of a hundred trillion poems? No, because in the hierarchy of creation, their act is subordinated to that of the author. The semiotic structure of a work of art can be thought of as a conceptual *space*, in the sense that it is “visited”, “explored”, “traversed”: this metaphorical approach to textuality, however, according to Aarseth, leads to

a systematic misrepresentation of the relationship between narrative text and reader; a spatiodynamic fallacy¹² where the narrative is not perceived as a presentation of a world but rather as that world itself: In other words, there is a short circuit between signifier and signified, a suspension of difference that projects an objective level beyond the text, a primary metaphysical structure that generates both textual sign and our understanding of it, rather than the other way around. (ibid.; 3-4)

The reader’s freedom is different from the author’s: the author has total freedom, whereas the reader has but the freedom that the author allows for. This is demonstrated by the oulipian constraint in a very thought-provoking way: the constraint, thought of as a way to liberate the reader of its passivity, is not an *ex nihilo* occurrence: it is authored. It expands the freedom of the reader, to some extent, yet does not turn the reader into an author:

This is not interactivity [...] but a strategic counterattack upon the limited role of perspective offered to the reader by the hermetic text and an effort to regain a sense of

12 This spatiodynamic fallacy is not a necessary effect of spatial metaphors: supporting this claim simply requires noticing that Aarseth himself spatializes the text! How this space is constructed and discussed is what produces this fallacy.

readership. **To suggest that the reader is a reader-author is to deny that the gap between these two positions has never been greater.** [...] (Aarseth 1997; 93) [emphasis mine]

Ironically enough, this is best demonstrated by Le Tellier's *Moi et François Mitterrand*. The book exposes the importance of readership in the construction of meaning, and how, through language, authorship status is necessarily subjected to reader interpretation during the performance of the act of reading. However, it can be argued that the development of this thesis necessarily entails that of its opposite, as Le Tellier is not simply reading the president's letter: he's authoring a novel. What we are presented with is authored reading, which exemplifies the unstable and interpretational nature of language, yet the boundaries of this conceptual space were arranged by an author. What allows for the construction of the post-structuralist theory of language is the unauthored nature of the interpreted letter, its being effectively devoid of authorial power. And it is so within the diegesis of the novel; yet, when we as readers are presented with it, it has been charged by Le Tellier's authorial influence, it has become part of a semiotic structure of which Le Tellier is the inceptor. The recombinational theory of creativity exposed by Novitz functions because the freedom of the creator within a conceptual space is virtually unlimited, thus making recombination productive. However, the authored nature the structural "spaces" of *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, *La Disparition* or *Moi et François Mitterrand* are fixed by their authors, thus necessarily delimiting the reader's freedom. It stems from this conclusion that the reader-author dynamic is not deconstructed by the oulipian constraint; it is reinforced. The post-structuralist idea(l)s that oulipian works inspired and were inspired by, Derrida's theory of language or Barthes's approach to authorship, in effect, were necessarily hindered by their metatextual characteristics. As I further this study, these characteristics will be my main focus: can technological advancement and new artistic mediums, which according to Aarseth should be analysed as uniquely functioning machines, allow for the achievement of the oulipian enterprise of liberation? Can a change in Aarseth's three variables

(author/text/reader), or their interactions, radically modify the act of reading? The answer, as is often the case in theoretical writing, will not be a simple yes or no. Rather, I will argue that means of signification incurred by technological advancement cannot lead to a total redefinition of these concepts, but offer new pathways for meaning in shedding new light on their relationships, rearranging them creatively. I will further the study of these relationships in this next chapter, through the differences of effects produced by digital and paper media. In introducing electronic literature, I hope to establish that the material conditions that govern a text's existence, as well as its consumption, should also be understood as means of signification. I am hoping that in studying the exception, I can shed light on the rule, and demonstrate that the normative characteristics of print media also influence the interpretation of content.

Part II. Cybertext and Hypertext Fiction: Technological Advancement and Creative

Readership

One of the conclusions drawn from this first chapter is that the traditional codex format, because of its material functioning, confines the reader inside of an authored conceptual space, one within which they can exercise a limited freedom. *Moi et François Mitterrand* may showcase the inherent multiplicity of language, yet its authored nature still restricts the reader to a secondary role in the process of meaning creation. This thus begs the question: is there a form of literature which allows for its reader to exercise unrestricted freedom? Is there such a thing as “creative readership”? Let us first attempt to define the characteristics necessary to the inception of such a phenomenon. Our analysis of the Oulipo seems to indicate that for readership to be creative, it needs to occur within a conceptual space that is not fixed. It becomes so when (1) the text’s medium materially forbids change and (2) the space it constitutes is dictated by its author(s). These are in order of importance: as this study will demonstrate, the inescapable existence of authorship can be tempered by the characteristics of a medium. However, some mediums are necessarily fixed, no matter the author-function of the text. The codex format, a term Aarseth uses to refer to texts whose characteristics are akin to that of the modern physical book format¹³, is a perfect example of this: its very nature appears to rule out creative readership. Once published, it is virtually fixed in time, the boundaries of its space becoming unalterable; there is no more escaping the grasp of its author. It is crucial to understand, however, that it is not authorship that renders the medium still, but the material features of the medium which turn authorship into a function of its stillness. The material conditions of the act of reading cannot be ignored; in her 2010 book *The Possible World of Hypertext Fiction*, Alice Bell, a scholar whose aim is to develop a new critical theory for digital

13 I have chosen to adopt Aarseth’s use of the term “codex” because it emphasizes the physicality of the text (as opposed to digital) and historicizes its format, as it is also used to refer to early manuscript books. However, whenever I am using the term codex, I will be referring to texts which possess the textual characteristics of a modern physical book. Though it may sound contradictory, a digital text can also be a codex if possesses these characteristics: codex thus refers not so much to the physical book itself but rather to its structure: a single author, an unchanging text, and a linear mode of traversal.

literature, claims that “there is an interdependent connection between the medium and the narrative which has a significant effect on the reader’s experience” (Bell;17). The effect of the codex, I argue, is to necessarily turn its narrative into a singular, teleological phenomenon. It is not the only medium to do so: other formats, such as, among many others, the movie, the play, the painting, or the comic-book, despite their many formal differences, all share characteristics which amount to this effect: they exist as a single entity, and have an attributed beginning and end. This is fairly evident, for instance, for the novel or the movie: they stand as a stable, unchanging semiotic structure, and are consumed as such. Other formats have the same effect, though it is less clear: a painting, for instance, may not have a beginning and an end, yet, once it is finished, it is materially unalterable; though it may have multiple interpretations, and those can vary over time and depending on the individual observing it, its structure is unchanging. This is in keeping with Aarseth’s theory and the significance he places on the role of the medium. Therefore, to further our purposes, we must leave the world of fixed media, whose mechanisms require semiotic stillness, and look beyond, to a sphere which allows for the element of change: digital media. In this part, we will study pieces of digital literature and how they differ from their paper counterpart; in doing so, we will try to uncover how the idiosyncrasies of the Web can lead to the construction of an active readership, one that, through its involvement with the work of art, manages to attain creativity. As the start of our analysis, let us consider a media which is intrinsically digital: hypertext literature.

a) Effects of the Hypertext: A Comparative Analysis of 253

The term “hypertext” refers to a digital text that contains hyperlinks: those are defined as “electronic link[s] providing direct access from one distinctively marked place in a hypertext or hypermedia document to another in the same or a different document”¹⁴ As a device, the hyperlink

¹⁴ *Hyperlink*, Merriam-Webster, last consulted on 11/03/2023.
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hypertext>

is used to link concepts to one another in a practical and user-friendly way: many online dictionaries use them to let the reader access definitions of related words, for instance. The prefix *hyper* here indicates that the hypertext is a feature that exists beyond our common understanding of “text”, but how exactly does it achieve this? What exactly separates a digital hypertext from a codex? Thankfully, there exists an object of study which allows us to study this difference in depth: Geoff Ryman’s *253*. Originally, this piece of literature was published as a hypertext, hosted on a website in 1997. It tells the stories of the passengers of the London tube station, the title “253” referring to the 252 passengers of a Bakerloo Line train, plus its driver. To fit the theme, every individual text in the novel is made up of 253 words. This is very reminiscent of the Oulipo’s constraints, and though Ryman never explicitly claimed it, *253*’s systematic exploration of a physical space’s inhabitants could have been inspired by Perec’s *La vie mode d’emploi*. What makes it such a thought-provoking example is the fact that after *253* experienced success as a website-hosted hypertext, Ryman was offered a book deal to produce a paper version of it, which would be granted the 1999 Philip K. Dick award. Thus, there exist two versions of *253*: the website, a form of digital literature which functions with the use of hyperlinks, and the codex, *253: The Print Remix*. Through a comparative study of the two, I will attempt to isolate the ways in which a change of media can affect both the effect of the constraint and the freedom granted to the reader.

253: The Print Remix, in practice, is a very similar work to those of the Oulipo. It has a predetermined structural constraint (the number of words of each entry and the spatial distribution of passengers in the cars), exists within the boundaries of that constraint and, from it, creates a structure that the reader is free to explore. What truly separates it from its digital counterpart is the absence of hyperlinks: the novel contains an index which lists a page number for each passenger, but the articles are not linked to one another by the use of hyperlinks. Though Ryman could, of course, not include this digital device to his paper text, there were options to his disposal: a simple indication to visit another page, for instance, could have created a kind of link between chapters.

This begs the question: why, when adapting his digital text to a paper media, did Ryman not attempt to replace the hyperlink with another, effectively similar feature? When interviewed about the absence of links in the paper version, Ryman said that “the other thing [he] found about the links [...] is that you have to be careful that they're not a little bit unsubtle. You don't want to deprive the reader of the fun of putting two and two together” (Grossman 1997). This quote encapsulates a fact about the hyperlink as a literary device: it links, yet does not necessarily show *how* it links. In the hypertext version of 253, each entry contains at least one hypertext. Let us take the examples of passenger 36, Mr. Jason Luveridge. The body of his descriptions contains four different hyperlinks: clicking on the first, “St. Paul’s School”, will take the reader to a footnote giving more detail on said school. The second hyperlink “Passenger 3, Deborah Payne”, leads to the entry for that passenger: a direct link is created. It is, however, unilateral: her description does not contain a link for passenger 36. We learn, in his information, that he “has been struck with love” for her; yet the fact that he is linked to her but not her to him lets us in on the fact that this is a one-sided relationship. He feels a connection to her that she does not. Ryman here uses the hyperlink as a proper literary device, one that expresses beyond words; the hyperlink is a true poetic device. It is different from simply mentioning her textually: visually, the hyperlink highlights and underlines a word or concept, thus granting it more importance than others. The third hyperlink in passenger 36’s entry is “Elephant and Castle”, the name of an area of London. Clicking it will take the reader to passenger 65, which also contains an “Elephant and Castle” hyperlink; clicking this one leads to passenger 66. Clicking passenger 66’s “Elephant” hyperlink leads to passenger 112, and so on. Following this thread creates a conceptual link between these characters, one that, crucially, has no defined beginning and end. The multiplicity of hyperlinks, coupled with the non-linear structure of the digital novel, places emphasis on the similarities between the tube’s passengers. In Ryman’s words:

253 with links is about what makes people the same, because you can follow through – the grandparent theme, the people thinking about Thatcher. It's about the subliminal ways we're linked and alike. You just read it passenger by passenger, and it's about how different we all are. (Grossman 1997)

The hyperlinks in the original 253 function as a truly poetic feature, in the sense that they are used to create meaning. Their absence, in the codex version, translates to a lack of connection, which places emphasis not on similarities but differences. Ryman attributes this to the linearity associated with paper texts; it should be noted, however, that linearity is not an inherent feature of paper texts. 253: *The Print Remix* does not have to be read linearly: not every codex is linear; however, it should be taken into consideration that linearity is what is expected of a codex. On the relationship between paper media and linearity, Aarseth wrote that

since linearity is not an intrinsic part of the codex structure, we must ascribe its dominance there as primarily an ideological one, perhaps inherited when it succeeded the more strictly linear papyrus scroll as an even more effective way to preserve and represent lengthy texts. (Aarseth 1999; 47)

This “dominance” might not be essential, but its existence ought not be disregarded: linearity, is the standard, culturally enforced “traversal function”¹⁵ (*ibid.*; 62) of the codex. Aarseth defines the traversal function of the text as the way in which its textual elements are unveiled to the reader, as well as the path(s) the reader has at its disposal. The traversal function of 253: *The Print Remix* is linearity; the original 253's is not. This results in two starkly different works of art; the former takes

15 As has been discussed in previous footnotes, spatial metaphors are very significant to this literary theory. The addition of the notion of “traversal” emphasizes that readers are not static in their approach to textuality; introducing the possibility of a multiplicity of “traversal functions” lets us envision linearity as a non-necessary standard, and theorize alternatives.

the reader through the tube's cars indiscriminately, while the latter, unburdened by traditional linearity, makes the most of its medium to guide the reader through what connects the passengers. What this comparative analysis teaches us is that the preexistence of linearity as the default traversal function of the novel prevents 253's paper version to achieve the same effect as its predecessor; the existence of a predefined way of reading this text automatically hinders the freedom of the reader to traverse it however they choose. Choosing to focus on the similarities in 253: *The Print Remix* is a deviant act, one that defies the conventions of its medium; doing so for the original is not. To use Roman Jakobson's terminology, as an intersemiotic translation of the original hypertext, 253: *The Print Remix* makes the most of the characteristics of the semiotic system it is translated into in duplicating 253 while also allowing for a new meaning to emerge. We have thus established that the choice of digital media creates an effectual difference, which stems from the absence of a traditionally and ideologically established precedent. Can it be argued, however, that it leads to an increase in the reader's freedom? To a certain extent, it does: formally, the reader of 253 is marginally freer than 253: *The Print Remix*. Importantly, this freedom is not. They are free to choose which links to click on, which threads to follow, but does choice equate freedom? Is the act of reading hypertext literature a form of creative readership? We can levy against 253 the same criticism we levied against the constrained oulipian texts: the form might be more suited to individual textual exploration, yet the structure is still governed by Ryman's authorship. He summarized it himself in the page where he details the functioning of the hypertext:

This novel will give you the illusion that you can know. Indeed, it can make you feel omniscient, Godlike. This is a pleasurable sensation. But please remember that once you leave 253, you are no longer Godlike. The author, of course, is.¹⁶

16 Ryman, G. "253 why 253 ?", 253, last accessed on 11/03/2023.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20140411004332/http://www.ryman-novel.com/info/why.htm>

The illusion of creative readership in the traversal of hypertexts breaks down as soon as we realize that the structure is still authored, and that the reader is still confined to a role of passive consumption:

hypertext [...] is not all that different from the old world of print, pen, ad paper. Hypertext is certainly a new way of writing (with active links), but is it truly a new way of reading ? And is all that jumping around the same as creating a new text ? (Aarseth; 78)

Hypertext, as a new medium stemming from and only existing within the confines of the digital, is a new way of writing. Comparing the print and digital versions of 253 brings us to the conclusion that digital media gives authors new tools, presents them with novel signifying means: “hypertext may not necessarily offer new narrative devices. It does, however, offer authors an alternative context in which to place them” (Bell 2010; 19). It represents another step in the artistic continuum, yet it hardly changes anything for the reader, who is still the passive observer of an already unfolded narrative. Worse, the hypertext medium’s effect on the reader could even be a detriment to their involvement.

b) Interactivity, Fiction, and The Fiction of Interactivity

First and foremost, it should be noted that not all works of hypertext literature possess the same characteristics. Categorizing the use of a tool (the hyperlink) as a genre (hypertext literature) has but one purpose: to mark its difference from the canon it most closely resembles. The unusual¹⁷ presence of hyperlinks thus become one of the works’ main defining features, yet their sole presence should not be the only object of study: the way they are being used is also worth being studied, as it can drastically modify the reader’s experience. More specifically, within the tri-

¹⁷ Unusual only in that it differs from the norm!

factorial paradigm we have been using (author/text/reader), the way the hyperlink is used by the author can alter the interaction between text and reader. Aarseth's study, for example, mostly focused on hypertexts which were conveyed via software. This meant that an author with basic coding skills could virtually control all facets of the user experience; the medium used to access the hypertext was wholly subjected to authorial control. In that sense, this version of hypertext literature created a domain that was even more restricting for the reader than a codex:

[Some] hyperfictions [...] do not allow [their] reader[s] free browsing, unlike any codex fiction in existence. The reader's freedom from linear sequence, which is often held up as the political and cognitive strength of hypertext, is a promise easily retracted and wholly dependent on the hypertext system in question. (Aarseth 1999;77)

This assertion is very valuable to this study, as it accentuates the fact that, just like a word never has one fixed meaning, a tool never has one single use. The hyperlink's nature as a digital tool means that its being included in a text does not determine the features of said text: it simply becomes one of these features, and is inscribed in a system of interacting features that result in the text being experienced. The argument being made in this study of hypertexts should not be misconstrued as a proclamation of their essential characteristics; this is not to say, however, that they have none. Indeed, while hypertext authors can potentially use the tools at their disposal in starkly different manners, there is one feature of the hypertext that can never be escaped: "the hypertext structure of nodes and links only allows one [way of reading] : hyperlinear reading, the improvised selection of paths across a network structure" (Aarseth; 79). All hypertexts, whether linear or non-linear, are necessarily *hyperlinear*; the hyperlink, as a tool which exists beyond textuality, lies in a space of total authorial control, as its existence cannot be ignored. In that sense, the hypertext is even more limiting than the codex for the reader: a codex, once in the reader's hands, is for them to use

however they want. There is a preexisting, traditionally and historically established assumption that it will be read linearly, yet the author is utterly unable to control the reader experience past production, meaning that the reader can choose to go back and forth, revisit previously read passages, escape linearity of their own volition. As far as hypertexts are concerned, however, the only possible reading experience is hyperlinear: the reader can simply not escape this fact and choose to consume the text as linear. In this regard, the conditions of consumption of the hypertext are fixed, its conceptual space's boundaries even more rigid than the novel's. The hypertext, in extending the author's domain, makes the author's what in the codex is the reader's: the pace of reading. Aarseth argues that *"even the most classical narrative carries with it an invitation to discontinuous reading: 'a rhythm is established, casual, unconcerned with the integrity of the text; our very avidity for knowledge impels us to skim or skip certain passages.'"* (Aarseth; 47). Roland Barthes, in his 1973 book *Le plaisir du texte* (The Pleasure of the Text), argues that discontinuous reading is in fact an essential part of the act of reading; he calls this "tmesis", a concept which refers to the fact that skimming and skipping are integral to reading, and that not every word is considered with the same intensity by every reader. It is to be noted that Barthes, in coining "tmesis", was also investigating the author/reader power structure, and argued that in unconsciously skimming through a text and skipping passages, the reader partly escapes authorial control. Placing "tmesis" at the core of the reader experience means that its being taken away by hypertextual structures necessarily modifies the framing of the act of reading, depriving the reader of the freedom to control it. Aarseth argues that "hypertext punishes tmesis by controlling the text's fragmentation and pathways and by forcing the reader to pay attention to the strategic links" (*ibid.*; 78), advancing that for the reader to make their way through the hypertext they have to repress the urge to skip, regulate their reading in accordance with the pace set by the author. The element of choice inherent to hypertext literature thus appears even more alienating, as, for the reader to choose, they have to play by the author's rules. Therefore, the materiality of the digital hypertext makes it, to some extent, an alienating

experience for the reader, disguised as a liberating one. The various signifiers of freedom (non-linearity, choice, ...) are mystified by the author-function, that restrict user access and prohibit the reader from consuming the text on their own terms. On top of the issue of authorial control, criticisms have also been levied against the effect created by the very ontological nature of the digital hypertext.

These criticisms concern the mode of traversal of the hypertext, that is the technical use of the hyperlink within the text: Bell argues that

the hypertext medium causes feelings of estrangement because whenever the reader comes to a link and is forced to make a choice, the illusion of an imagined world must break down, at least momentarily, as the reader recalls the technical circumstances of the electronic medium. (Bell; 16-17)

To Bell, the act of clicking a hyperlink is not the same as that of turning the page of a book. Indeed, the latter is long-established, which in turn renders it automatic, passive, deprived of its significance by its perceived innocuousness and the historicity of the medium. The former, conversely, though it may be rendered passive by the pre-structuration of authorship, is still active and intentional. The “feeling of estrangement” Bell theorizes exists in between the world of the text and that of the reader: the clicking of a link, because it is novel and unfamiliar, has the effect of emphasizing the necessary distinction between the different worlds that the user and the text inhabit. In his cognitive study of hypertext literature, Schneider argues that “the allegedly liberating activity of choosing links may in fact merely activate additional self-monitoring thought processes, which may distract from the story itself” (Schneider 2005; 200). This distinction, this self-monitoring, stems from the fact that hyperlinks are not embedded in the literary canon. Instead, they are usually used for utilitarian purposes: their primary use is to access information. It is in the distance that exists

between their use in hypertext literature (artistic) and their primary function (informative) that the uncanny resides. This material contradiction, at this stage in the development of digital literature, is still a feature to be dealt with; it is constructed, and may well disappear with time, but it should be taken into account when creating a work of art such as a hyperfiction. The tools of the digital age have not yet been associated with artistic consumption, therefore enforcing an unfamiliar usage leads to the creation of a disconnect between the medium and the text, which hinders reader experience. The criticisms that we have brought against hypertext as a medium are relevant and should be taken into account when analyzing hyperfiction: in its present state, digital literature is still perceived and, to some extent, consumed, as a deviant form of the centered canon of literature. As a medium for artistic expression, it possesses unique qualities and/or shortcomings, which are factors in the interpretative equation. However, it is crucial to stress that they are not essential features of the genre: texts and their medium function in relation to one another, and, if used efficiently, the elements we have cited as being detrimental to interactivity in hyperfiction can actually contribute to it.

c) Wikia-based Hypertext: Achieving Immersion and Creative Readership

To begin with, it is essential to emphasize the inherent multiplicity of the genre of hypertext literature. Aarseth's theoretical framework, established in the introduction, specifically stresses the importance of the idiosyncratic features of a text in the act of reading. The material nature of the texts he studied, their being installable software, certainly meant that they offered their author greater control, thus further limiting the freedom of the reader. Be that as it may, this is not true for all works of hypertext fiction.

hypertext is as much an ideological category as a technological one, constructed by its presumed difference from, and superiority to, paper media, and we should take care not to let this myth subconsciously influence our readings of individual texts. (Aarseth; 79)

There can be profound, ontological differences between works that share the label of hyperfiction. One of the central issues that govern the study of hyperfiction, as well as digital literature as a whole, is that of textuality. As established previously, every text's experience is dependent on its user as far as interpretation is concerned. With hypertexts, however, it is the material experience of the text that is dependent on the reader's actions, which raises an issue: what is the text of a hypertext? The label "hypertext" implies a text beyond the text; does it thus necessitate the creation of a brand new category, with its own analytical field? Would this not negate its place in the artistic continuum? Alice Bell attempts to solve the issue of hyperfiction textuality by examining the specificity of the hypertext as an artistic medium using the "Possible Worlds Theory":

at the centre of the modal system is the 'actual world' which is the world to which we all belong. The actual world is surrounded by an infinite number of alternative state of affairs, which are known as possible worlds. (Bell 2010; 20)

She argues that the diverging paths inherent to the hypertext, which exist even in more linear iterations of the format, make narrative analysis more complex than other mediums. Though these paths may sometimes converge into a "*telos*" to be attained, the reader is given access to multiple options in order to reach it. 253, for instance, was designed for the reader to ultimately lead the reader to a section entitled "The End of the Line", which details the train crashing and the ends of each car visited throughout the novel. However, the combination of the various interconnecting paths create a near infinite amount of possibilities, and there is no telling what textual information

the reader will be exposed to. This begs the question: how should the text be studied? How are we to reconcile the two facts that 1) the content of the text differs according to the reader, and yet 2) the hypertext stands as a unique text? To put it in the context of 253, an argument could be made that, if every reader has access to their own version of the text, then there is, in turn, no text. However, this theoretical distinction would simply prevent the literary study of the text, resulting in a self-defeating approach. Claiming that the text is read by individuals, but that these individuals all are exposed to different versions of the text, necessarily results in the negation of the existence of the text. Yet, it is merely a sophism: the text 253 exists, and this is made evident by the fact that all of the individuals having read it will recognize having read 253. The name of the text is a signifier which holds the potential for multiple meanings, but the multiplicity of meanings does not disqualify it from existence, in which case language itself would not exist. The argument in favor of the existence of the hypertext as a single, unified text, in spite of its reader-dependent variations, is in fact the same as that in favor of the existence of other forms of media, which are all dependent on the interpretations of their readers. It is, on a surface level, made more intricate by the differences in material textual content, the word and sentences that individual readers are given access to, yet this, to some extent, also applies to other forms of media because of a concept brought up earlier: that of *tnesis*. In the context of a codex, *tnesis* means skipping words or lines, propelled forward by the flow of the narrative and the will to know more: materially, it results in the erasure of textual content from the reader's experience. To a lesser extent, then, the experience of the codex is also reader-dependent, save for the fact that what is unintentionally skipped by the codex reader is not dictated by the text's structure. Yet, this effectual similarity should not lead us to disregard the difference in causes: the structural framework which funnels the reader experience does lead to two starkly different pieces of media. As for this, Alice Bell argues that

choosing one final path for analysis from the many on offer defies and ignores the uniqueness of hypertext fictions texts. It is an unsuitable approach because it attempts to distort it into a text which more closely resembles linear narratives. (Bell 2010; 14)

To resolve this analytical deficiency, she proposes Marie-Laure Ryan's interpretation of the Possible Worlds Theory. In her 1992 book *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, Ryan uses Possible Worlds Theory to construct a narrative theory which attempts to include the specific features of literature in the digital age. In associating literary theory and technological advancement, Ryan foregrounds contemporary questions around the nature of the text and our approach to it as readers. Alice Bell favors Ryan's interpretation specifically because of the ways she perceives the act of reading: Bell claims that Ryan

respects the uniqueness of narrative discourse. Her theory begins with the premise that, when we read a fictional text, we inevitably deictically relocate or, to use her terminology, 'recenter' into a different modal system. Crucially, therefore, she distinguishes between two systems of modality: the 'system of reality' (vii), which is the system in which we live and for which the 'actual world' forms the centre, and a 'textual universe' (viii) which is a modal system projected by a text. (Bell; 23)

This distinction between the textual universe and the system of reality is what seems to be at the root of the "feelings of estrangement" discussed earlier, the technological barrier that prevents the reader from fully achieving such an epistemological recentering into the textual universe. The material means of access to the text clash with the tradition of literature, thus slightly hindering the literary experience for the hypertext reader who is reminded of their ontological disconnection from the world they are given access to. To be clear, all texts are ontologically separate from the system

of reality; not all of them, however, constantly remind their reader of it through their distinctive feature. As mentioned earlier, the act of turning a page has been rendered innocuous by tradition, ontologically associated with immersion in literature. The disconnecting effect of the medium, its “mediation”, has been minimized, nullified, even. The same cannot be said for the clicking of a link, which is still predominantly utilitarian. What if, then, a medium managed to instrumentalize the utilitarian usage of the hyperlink to exploit its literary potential?

Merriam-Webster defines a wiki as a “website that allows visitors to make changes, contributions or corrections.”¹⁸ Two of the main characteristics of this format can be found in this definition: wikis are collaborative websites, which means that they are not the product of an individual effort but rather of a collective drive, and that their existence was only made possible by the rise in availability of the Internet that occurred over the past thirty years. The most famous wiki by far is Wikipedia, the online collaborative encyclopedia made up of its users’ contributions. Though these are now peer-reviewed and subject to removal, anyone can take part in the project, making it the single largest free collaborative database available to all. As evocative an example as it is, it is not Wikipedia which will be the object of this study. Indeed, though the weight of Wikipedia in the popular representation of the medium might make it seem as though the use it makes of the wiki is the only one there is, it should be noted that the wiki is but a format that can be used in a variety of ways. We will delve into a text which makes another use of the wiki, one whose end goal is not categorization but creation, one which, we will argue, is a novel form of literature and an evolution of the concept of hyperfiction: *The Backrooms Wiki*. On May 12th 2019, an anonymous user posted a picture of a room on the online forum 4chan. At first sight, it resembles office space, however some details struck a chord in those that observed it at the time: the linoleum floor and bright neon lights clash with the yellowed, mismatched wallpapers, the awkward shapes of the walls, and the framing of the image, the uncanny feeling further enhanced by the total

18 Wiki, Merriam-Webster, last consulted on 12/01/2023, available online at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wiki>

emptiness of the fully lighted room. The next day, another user would add the following text to the image:

If you're not careful and you noclip out of reality in the wrong areas, you'll end up in the Backrooms, where it's nothing but the stink of old moist carpet, the madness of mono-yellow, the endless background noise of fluorescent lights at maximum hum-buzz, and approximately six hundred million square miles of randomly segmented empty rooms to be trapped in [sic]

God save you if you hear something wandering around nearby, because it sure as hell has heard you [sic]¹⁹

The image and accompanying text were then posted to other platforms, and the popularity of what became known as “The Backrooms” grew rapidly, as the concept hinted at in the original post seemed to resonate with users all over the Internet, which congregated in communities to expand on the fictional universe. Because of the concept’s digital nature, there is a near infinite number of ways of propagating and interacting with it; as such, its reach is hard to quantify. However, a Vice article published in 2022 about the phenomenon claimed that “the subreddit r/backrooms [had] over 157,000 members who discuss the space in great detail alongside memes, maps and mockups of different rooms” (Lloyd 2022). One notable adaptation of the universe into a short film, *The Backrooms: Found Footage* (Parsons 2022), was viewed over 51 million times on Youtube: as for its seventeen sequels, they totaled over 96 million views. From a mere image, the Backrooms grew into a collaborative cross-media universe. Its specificity can be found in the fact that, as it is no one individual’s intellectual property, it is free for all to use; anyone who feels inspired by the concept

¹⁹“unsettling images”, 4chan. May 12, 2019, archived from the original on February 1, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220201004253/https://archive.4plebs.org/x/thread/22661164/#422661164>

Because this corpus of entries defies traditional publishing structures, it also defies citations guide. This paragraph, for instance, is but one in a thread of many; the linked URL leads to the thread, but no citation guide describes how to cite this specific body of text. (which serves to demonstrate how it can disrupt our understanding of “text”!).

and wishes to contribute to the development of the universe is free to do so, in whichever way they see fit. Because of this, the pieces of art that are set in the Backrooms universe are not centralized, which makes it fairly impossible to build a consistent canon that spans all of the contributions made to it. There are, in fact, as many iterations of the Backrooms as there are people willing to create them; the focus on this thesis will thus be on a single one of them: the Backrooms Wiki²⁰. Indeed, the necessary collaboration which defines the wiki format makes it the ideal medium for the creation of such a collective work of fiction, and this choice of focus will allow us to explore how the use of the wiki format leads to a different form of hyperfiction, one that bridges the gaps between the textual universe and the system of reality, and makes up for the previously exposed shortcomings of the genre.

To begin with, the wiki format allows for the achievement of immersion precisely thanks to its appropriation of utilitarian aesthetics: it is because it pretends to inform us on a phenomenon that is part of our world that it manages to bridge the gap between the utilitarian and the literary.

In her (2001) study, [Ryan] shows that varying degrees of what she defines as ‘spatial’, ‘temporal’ and ‘emotional’ immersion apply when reading digital works and in so doing she highlights the anti-immersive attributes of electronic literature. With regard to hypertext, she notes that ‘immersion remains a rather elusive experience’ (19) because ‘every time the reader is asked to make a choice she assumes an external perspective on the worlds of the textual universe’ (20). (Bell;15-16)

Traditionally, readers recognize the ontological dichotomy between the world of the text and their own, however, because of the very assumption that is central to the universe of *The Backrooms*, the ‘Textual Actual World’ becomes a subsection of the ‘Actual World’ (Bell;25) one ontological domain within the other; the reader belongs to the latter, yet reads about the former as though it was

20 *The Backrooms Wiki*, last accessed on 02/19/2024, <http://backrooms-wiki.wikidot.com/>

one to which he might be granted entry. As such, the possible worlds of each ontology are not separate; the ones provided by the text reinforce those of the actual world, giving the reader a new, wide array of alternate possibilities.

It is important to emphasise that Ryan's concept of 'recentering' is an epistemological as opposed to an ontological process. Clearly readers cannot become part of the ontological domain to which the narrator and the characters belong as this represents an impossible ontological manoeuvre. [...] In order to utilise Ryan's model, we must accept that readers do relocate to another system of reality when they read hypertext fiction. (Bell;31-32)

Herein lies the specificity of *The Backrooms*, which makes Ryan's model of the Possible Worlds Theory inapplicable: the system of reality to which its readers relocate is contained within the system in which they exist. Though aware of the fictional nature of the universe they are reading about, *The Backrooms*' users assume the blending of the ontological domains, and therefore their recentering is as ontological as it is epistemological. The specificity of the Wikia format thus is that its blending of the extradiegetic and the diegetic allows for the creation of immersion: in Wikia-based hypertext fiction, the technical circumstances are not external but integral to the experience; the user is not asked to immerse themselves in a world but to experience it from the outside, which counter-intuitively creates immersion. The "feeling of estrangement" is not created by the use of links alone, it is omnipresent, a necessary condition of the consumption of the work of art, which may serve to explain why it has predominantly been used for horror-related narratives. Bell claims that "there is an interdependent connection between the medium and the narrative which has a significant effect on the reader's experience" (Bell;17): the Wikia hypertext differs from other works of hyperfiction in that it instrumentalizes the specificity of its medium and of the tools of the genre and uses them to strengthen its effect(s). This, in turn, implies a theoretical shift in how we

analyse these works: if we are to consider *The Backrooms* as one, singular work of hypertext fiction, then the Possible Worlds Theory as exposed earlier has to be adapted to it; indeed, the textual universe of the Backrooms is built upon the premise that it is not separate but adjacent to our reality, therefore there is no clear-cut distinction between modal systems.

The absence of narrator or characters in a traditional sense is also noteworthy: Ryan argues that the possible worlds of the textual system are located within their mental processes, however there are no such processes in *The Backrooms*. If the literary Possible Worlds Theory were to be applied to such a work of art, its modalities would have to be rethought entirely, acknowledging that the textual universe and the system of reality are diegetically interconnected. This is not to say that the user is under the assumption that the Backrooms actually exist in their reality, but rather that the suspension of disbelief required for their immersion implies that they think of *The Backrooms* as a universe tangentially related to theirs, and to which they could one day have access to.

The displacement of hyperfiction within the ontology of the wiki also serves to liberate the reader from the grip of authorship. The texts studied by Aarseth and a wiki-based hypertext such as *The Backrooms* have starkly different qualities, which amount to very different acts of reading, especially as it relates to the question of authorship. Indeed, the collective form of authorship that wiki-fiction allows for represents the deconstruction of the author/reader power structure, through the nullification of the very concept of authorship. We touched, in the introduction to this thesis, on the increasing place granted to the individual within the creative act: a painting can only be thought of as having been painted by someone, a text as having been written by someone. That is not to say it is untrue: obviously, no art exists that has not been made by someone. However, there is no detaching the overinflated presence of the author and its ideological charge from the piece of art. What makes this feature of the contemporary artistic landscape worth mentioning is that *The Backrooms*, in blending the diegetic and the extradiegetic, effectively renders authorship inert. Indeed, the authors of the wiki's entries are all anonymous; though it is possible to know their

pseudonym, or the list of entries they have written, no one author controls the text. In addition to this, the identities of the authors are not being displayed: because it poses as documentation and not as fiction, authorship is diegetically insignificant. The ontology of *The Backrooms* create two levels of textuality: that of the entry, and that of the corpus. It is true that each entry is separately governed by its own authorship, as a structure assembled by an individual. However, because no one is intentionally assembling the structure of the corpus, but individuals are willingly and separately contributing to it, all of the author-functions contained within the text combine, amalgamate into a single semiotic mass that neutralizes the ideological charge of authorship. The complete erasure of authors' identities has the effect of suppressing any form of authorial hierarchy within the project: the plurality of individual authorships blend into a form of communal authorship, which realizes what Barthes called the move from author to scriptor²¹, one which decenters the author and reveals his role not as the sole producer of meaning, but as an assembler of signs which then become productive through the act of reading (Barthes 1968). Paradoxically, attempting to delete totally all authors from the equation had the effect of subliming their individualities while leveling them: all individual authors, within *The Backrooms* Wiki, are made existentially equal. Individual authorships, taken out of modes of storytelling that have been historically individualized, are given the opportunity to cooperate, blend together, work together to achieve a plurality of narratives united under a single, shared universe, governed not by the author but by the reader.

I made the claim, in the beginning of this part, that two elements stood in the way of the realization of creative readership within a work of art: the fact that its medium historically and materially fixes it, thus forbidding change, and that its author necessarily dictates the space it occupies. It appears that, in both regards, the wiki format allows for a form of readership that is active and creative thanks to the ontological features of the medium, and the communal authorship

21 In "Death of the Author", Barthes proposes "scriptor" as an alternative to the semantically, historically and philosophically charged "author" (which is in accordance with his semiotic move away from the individual author and towards sign-systems). Though I find value in this term, and mention it to align this thesis with preexisting literary theories (especially the centering of the act of reading), I have chosen not to use this term all throughout my text as I am not attempting to abandon/disqualify authorship, but to shed new light on it, reframe it in a way that serves its contemporary iterations.

it displays. First, as far as the medium is concerned, the fact that the wiki format exists in an online space and invites contribution means that it is ever-changing, constantly evolving; new entries are being added to *The Backrooms* everyday, expanding the corpus with new verbal information to be consumed by readers:

the ontology of the Web text is close to that of a painting, where the artists may modify and revise the same work in a process that may take many years. [...] The Web text may be modified many times a day, with little effort. (Aarseth; 81)

This leads to the inception of a text that has no fixed boundaries; the conceptual space, available to everyone at all times, is shifting with every new entry²². This, crucially, leads to the decentering of authorship within the textual structure, which in a purely Barthesian fashion sublimates the role of the reader²³: the opening up of the conceptual space makes engagement with it creative. The element of choice, which in texts governed by individual authorship was rendered passive, as the reader was subordinated to the demiurgic author, reveals its creative potential. This is all made possible by the absence of a feature which has become intrinsically linked to artistic production, and which serves to support the dominion of the author: intellectual property. In the conclusion to the first part of this thesis, I argued that the reader, in the oulipian novel, cannot be the source of combinatorial creativity within the conceptual space created by the work of art because this space was previously arranged by the author. However, I have not yet engaged with the philosophical difference between the space the author evolves in and that which the reader is given access to.

22 This begs another question: what if when these texts stop being contributed to? What about when the space stops shifting? Or to go even further: what if server space runs out? What of archived texts? What of deleted entries, lost to time? All of these concerns are outside the scope of this thesis, yet, if anyone were to focus specifically on web-based textuality, would have to be taken into consideration.

23 How ironic that Barthes's "Death of the Author" is realized through the infinity of authorships!

Part III. Fanfiction and Authorship: Levels of Authority

Let us make this argument more visual by engaging with a new concept, that of the noosphere. Developed by biogeochemist Vladimir Vernadsky, this notion refers to a new state of the biosphere (Pitt 2012; 6): as the hydrosphere is concerned with waters, and the atmosphere winds, the noosphere contains products of human reason: ideas. The introduction of this concept is useful to our purposes, as it contextualizes the author/reader power structure: more specifically, the noosphere is the largest conceptual space that contains all of human reasoned production; from which authors draw. The crucial characteristic of the noosphere is that it belongs to no one individual, is not subject to property: the work of art, however, is the material and ideological property of its author: the process of artistic creation can be understood as the combination of elements drawn from the noosphere by an author; the newly created product in turn becomes the author's intellectual property. The main difference between the author and the reader, therefore, resides not in their relation to the text but to the ideas and concepts contained within the text. Because the author draws from a space which is not ideologically attributed to anyone, the structure produced by their combination of elements because theirs. The reader, on the other hand, evolves within a sphere which has been constituted as the author's property. Of note here the use of existential lexicon: there is nothing essential about intellectual property. As a concept, it is wholly constructed, the product of a historical structure that is all at once material and ideological. In this part, which will focus on texts that are derived from others, previously established texts, we will pick apart the author/reader power structure as a historical construction, contextualize it within art history as a whole, and address its effects on the artistic landscape. But first, let us start with discussing the philosophical implications of authorship by focusing on the concept of "the original."

a) Semiotics of “The Original”

In 1972, artist and art critic John Berger wrote a four-part television series entitled “Ways of Seeing”. Later that same year, the theses introduced and explored in the series were adapted into a collection of essays, published under the same title. What Berger was avowedly trying to accomplish with these pieces was to offer an analytical framework of art that differed from the traditional Western canon by focusing on ideologies hidden within works of art. Though Berger was mostly concerned with paintings, his ideas spread far beyond this mode of artistic expression and inspired new multi-disciplinary approaches, especially when it comes to social issues: Berger is maybe most famous for having introduced the concept of the “male gaze” when discussing female representation in oil paintings, a concept which would later be popularized in feminist circles, and be elaborated on by women’s rights activists. What this goes to show is that Berger was not only concerned with art’s form; he extended his analysis to the social and ideological consequences of artistic production, and criticized the absence of political thought in the critical approaches to art. In the first essay of his collection, he weaves a complex and thoughtful theory that brings together linguistic and critical frameworks. Elaborating on Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Benjamin 1978), he argues that the introduction of new technological means, which has made it possible for just about anyone to reproduce a work of art, has had incredibly consequential repercussions on the world of art. Where the piece of art was once considered a unique entity, these changes led to the inception of a theoretical dichotomy: that of the “original” and the “reproduction”. He argues that

when the camera reproduces a painting, it destroys the uniqueness of its image. As a result its meaning changes. Or, more exactly, its meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings. (Berger 1972; 19)

In his opinion, the concept of “the original” is not an essential fact of artistic production but a construction; originals exist precisely because of, or rather thanks to their reproductions:

the uniqueness of the original now lies in it being **the original of a reproduction**. It is no longer what its image shows that strikes one as unique; its first meaning is no longer to be found in what it says, but in what it is. (Berger 1972; 21) [emphasis Berger’s]

This is not to say that, in being reproduced, the work of art that has been turned into the original loses its meaning, but rather that any meaning that can be found in it has been made secondary to its very existence. The original’s meaning becomes one of many, but its existence is made to stand alone. This, according to Berger, is as much a theoretical distinction as it is an ideological one. To study the political undertones of “the original”, Berger introduces the concept of mystification, which broadly means the obfuscation of reality through the distortion of perception. More specifically, Berger is referring to the Marxist mystification of the commodity, also known as commodity fetishism²⁴. According to him, the original

is defined as an object whose value depends upon its rarity. But because it is nevertheless ‘a work of art’ – and art is thought to be greater than commerce – its market price is said to be a reflection of its spiritual value. [...] Works of art are discussed and presented as though they were holy relics: relics which are first and foremost evidence of their own survival.
(*ibid.*; 21)

²⁴ In transferring this theory to the world of art, Berger elaborates upon it while reinforcing the religious parallels that were already present in Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* (Marx 1867).

The value of a work of art, understood as a commodity, can only be understood in terms of its exchange-value, and this value is tied to the ideological biases of the art market. Once a piece of art enters the art market, it loses its labor and use values, overshadowed by an exchange-value dictated both by its constructed spiritual value, attributed to it precisely by the existence of its reproductions. Berger's theory is concerned as much with material features as it is with ideological functions, and reveals a the mystified nature of our approach to the original/reproduction dichotomy. To adopt a more language-centered approach, "the original" is thus turned into a sign whose significance stems from its not being "a reproduction": this negative definition places the reproduction as inherently inferior to the original, but, as Berger claims, there is no material basis for this hierarchy.

He argues that, through reproduction, the meaning of the original is necessarily modified: "When a painting is put to use, its meaning is either modified or totally changed" (*ibid.*; 24). According to Berger, there is no reproduction that does not create a shift in meaning: even if the image is wholly reproduced, a change in context has an effect on the meaning it produces. Berger claims that what the increased capabilities for reproduction, a process which can now be undertaken by most individuals, led to, is the diminishing of art's authority. This lexical choice is invaluable, as it hints at the dual nature of *autorité*, a French word which can mean either authority or authorship. The two concepts, semantically related in the French language, are ideologically related in the study of art. The original is granted authority by its status as an original, yet this authority can easily be hindered by a change in authorship.

Berger was not blind to the potentialities incurred by the democratization of reproduction. In shedding light on the fact that it is the original that is defined negatively, he puts forward the idea that reproductions should be legitimized, as they are the representation of different forms of expression, voices which historically have not been given access to artistic production:

It is not a question of reproduction failing to reproduce certain aspects of an image faithfully; it is a question of reproduction making it possible, even inevitable, that an image will be used for many different purposes and that the reproduced image, unlike an original work, can lend itself to them all. (Berger 1972; 24-25)

Indeed, the reproductions of a work of art can use it in starkly different ways: they can instrumentalize it to strengthen the message of the original, to counteract it, or in service of an utterly different project. The reproduced image is like molten glass, ready to be molded into something that will necessarily be different from what it used to be: it can take any form, serve any purpose, provided that someone makes the choice of using it to fulfill said purpose.

However, this possibility for creation incurred by the democratization of reproduction, according to Berger, is not being exploited, mainly because of a form of ideological mystification which still situates reproductions as inferior to their predecessors:

mostly [...] reproductions are still used to bolster the illusion that nothing has changed, that art, with its unique, undiminished authority, justifies most other forms of authority, that art makes inequality seem noble and hierarchies seem thrilling. (*ibid.*; 29)

The very existence of reproduction as a popularized process has an incredible potential, yet “the means of reproduction are used politically and commercially to disguise or deny what their existence makes possible” (*ibid.*; 30): the signifier “reproduction” serves to deny its own potential. In this part, we will extend Berger’s theories to the field of literature, in studying works of fanfiction as reproductions of an original novel²⁵. This will lead us to discussing the originality of fanfiction, the status of fanfiction writers within the artistic landscape, and their ideological

25 John Berger made his observations on reproductions in 1972; in this next study, I also hope to apply them to contemporary iterations of the concept.

difference to the author they were inspired by. First, let us delve into the relation between fanfiction and authorship, and investigate the inner workings of derivative texts.

b) The Authority of Fanfiction: Distinction and Reproduction

To begin this discussion, it seems appropriate to first delineate the concept of fanfiction. Judith Fathallah, in her book *Fanfiction and the Author*, defines it as “the unauthorised adaptation and re-writing of media texts”, adding that it is “typically freely shared, makes no money and, though it has an analogue history, now exists primarily on the internet” (Fathallah 2017; 9). Let us stress three of these aspects, as they will be at the heart of our discussion: fanfiction, by its very nature, is unauthorised, free, and digital. To this, let us add a quick exploration of the term “fan”: Henry Jenkins, in his 1992 book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, explores the etymology, sociology and ideological resonance of the “fan”, and concludes that “the fan still constitutes a scandalous category in contemporary culture”, as it “remains a ‘fanatic’, a false-worshipper, whose interests are fundamentally alien to the realm of ‘normal’ cultural norms” (Jenkins 2012; 15). A fan’s defining trait is excess: it is what separates it from a typical consumer. To be a fan is to be defined (or to define oneself) by one’s relationship to a text, which, as it relates to the discourse around media consumption, is considered deviant. Jenkins points out that the negative perception of fan culture can be attributed to a process which sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called “distinction” (Bourdieu 1979), that is the social construction of high and low-cultures. Bourdieu argues that cultural taste, because it is socially constructed, is dictated by the dominant ideology of the upper-classes. The reason Jenkins touches on Bourdieusian distinction is that, to him, involvement in fandom is not neutral; it is a politically charged act:

rejecting the aesthetic distance Bourdieu suggests is a cornerstone of bourgeois aesthetics, fans enthusiastically embrace favored texts and attempt to integrate media representations into their own social experience. (Jenkins 2012; 18)

The characteristic excess of the “fan” is in direct contradiction to the detachment required of hegemonical cultural practices; it is, in fact, its semantic opposite, as it implies total involvement and dedication. Another way in which it is truly counter-cultural (in that it goes against cultural hegemony) is in the object of fandoms, generally considered products of mass culture, which automatically disqualifies them from being regarded as high-art:

Reading practices (close scrutiny, elaborate exegesis, repeated and prolonged rereading, etc.) acceptable in confronting a work of "serious merit" seem perversely misapplied to the more "disposable" texts of mass culture. (*ibid.*; 17)

This “perversion” is thus double: it lies in the objects fans take interest in, and the ways in which they enjoy this object. Fanfiction, in turn, is a step further towards the deconstruction of hegemonic cultural practices, in that it reveals their constructed nature. Ideological hegemony, in its tendency to posit itself as the natural order of things, conceals itself. How exactly can fanfiction combat this? In order to thread this argument, let us examine a work of fanfiction which is utterly outside hegemonic boundaries, both in its formal and ideological choices: *My Immortal*²⁶.

Published between 2006 and 2007 on the online forum FanFiction.net, *My Immortal* is a fanfiction which takes place in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* universe. Its main character, “Ebony Dark’ness Dementia Raven Way” is all at once a student of Hogwarts, the in-universe wizard

26 Once again, this object of study’s unusual publishing makes it complicated to properly cite (especially as, and this is part of my analysis, the author’s identity is unknown). As such, I have chosen to cite its archived version: “My Immortal”, *FanFiction.net*, 2006-2007. <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/6829556/1/My-Immortal>

school, a vampire, and a self-identified “goth”. There is no consistent plot throughout the chapters; one correct, though lackluster way to summarize it would be to say that it is concerned with “Ebony’s struggles in love and her adventures at Hogwarts” (Maley 2020; 4). Its forty-four chapters are littered with spelling mistakes, and the author’s notes, omnipresent in the text, are mostly written in phonetic spelling, which makes for a difficult read. The tropes it employs have been criticized as overused, the rhythm as awkward, and the work as a whole as agonizing (Riesman 2015). In spite of all of these formal criticisms, the text has attained cult status within the world of fanfiction, with comments on it ranging from “legendarily bad” (Riesman 2017), “the worst thing ever written” (Robertson 2013) to “the Internet’s most beloved – and notorious – fanfic” (Romano 2017). A textual analysis of *My Immortal* reveals its textual richness, made up of non-standard formal choices and playful inclusions of author’s notes as a supplement to the text (Maley 2020). What we will be focusing on, what this choice of object of study was motivated by, is one main feature of *My Immortal*: its disrespect to the canon of the work it is derived from. Indeed, critics have brought against it the fact that it represents “an incredibly [out of character] *Harry Potter* universe” (Jaffe 2013), one that is imbued with the quirks and fascinations of its author: in *My Immortal*, Hogwarts is located in England (as opposed to the original’s Scotland), Harry is a member of the Slytherin house and his scar was turned into a pentagram, Hermione Granger is referred to as “B’loody Mary Smith” and is an avowed Satanist, ... The diegetic differences²⁷ between *My Immortal* and the universe it was inspired by are many, and range from minor to major. In what way, then, does it relate to the original/reproduction dichotomy? Can it be considered a reproduction of the original work, *Harry Potter*? Berger (and Benjamin)’s reproduction was photographic: it was the mechanical reproduction of a work of art – in their case paintings – through the use of innovative technological means. What led them to question the status of the reproduction in the world of art was its visual similarity to the original: the difference they point at lies not in the object itself, but the effect it has both on the reader and on the original. *My Immortal*, by all

27 Which, in text, become aesthetic qualities!

accounts, is very different from the work it is inspired by. Calling it a reproduction and treating it as such would be a far-fetched conclusion. Rather, *My Immortal*, in its unapologetical showcase of difference, unveils a seminal characteristic of fanfiction: it is an *assemblage* of reproductions. In producing such a radically different, unsanctioned iteration of a preexisting universe, *My Immortal* offers us a reflection on the way in which fanfiction instrumentalizes previously established signifiers, effectively reproduces them in a wholly transformative fashion. By taking such a radical stance, it sheds light on the fact that fanfiction represents a necessary transgression of the original's canon, that it "deliberately undermine[s] the construction of the author's text as the only legitimate truth" (Fathallah 2017; 181). Fanfiction is semiotic subjugation: it takes signs that have been constructed by another (the original's author), and, crucially, their ideological charge, as the basis of its structure.

My Immortal's in-text universe might be starkly different from *Harry Potter's*, but the original's signifiers is what gives it its revolutionary charge: it blatantly disregards the author's intentions, adopts Rowling's signs in an almost anarchic endeavor. Jenkins argues that "though many fans claim absolute fidelity to the original characterizations and program concepts, their creative interventions often generate very different results" (Jenkins 2012; 176). *My Immortal* takes this to its greatest extent, as it introduces preexisting signs (characters, locations, relationships, identities, ...), and rewrites them entirely, reproduces them in different contexts, sometimes simply pastes their names on other bodies. The semiotic charge of the reproduced original is thus subverted: the meanings *My Immortal* contains would simply not be producible if not for the inclusion of these signs, the reader's experience is shaped by them, framed by the foundational intertextuality that it contains, which is all made possible by the medium used. Maley claims that "the internet creates a space for the author of *My Immortal* to step into the position of an author and create something outside of what is considered acceptable" (Maley 2020; 4): this is true for the

themes it touches on, but also for its radical transformation of intellectual property. The original and its reproduction are leveled, as the latter strips the former of its ideological superiority.

John Berger, as an example of readers using reproductions to appropriate originals, takes the example of “adults and children [who] sometimes have boards in their bedrooms or living-rooms on which they pin pieces of paper: letters, snapshots, reproductions of paintings, newspaper cuttings, original drawings, postcards” (*ibid.*; 30); these arrangements of elements, to him, are significant systems of signs. The association of items relates them to one another, creates semiotic links, shifts the interpretation of the individual pieces to match a grander framework, dictated by the choices of the person who put it together:

On each board all the images belong to the same language and all are more or less equal within it, because they have been chosen, in a highly personal way to match and express the experience of the room’s inhabitant. (*ibid.*)

My Immortal functions in a very similar fashion: the characters and locations are the board’s images, pinned along other signs within the text, personalized in their displacement. What, then, separates these boards from the originals they reproduce? As authored systems of signs, they are materially and theoretically similar to the original. In keeping with our discussion of wikia-based hyperfiction, there is no reason that these boards should not be considered as results of a creative process of their own. After studying the Oulipo, we have put forward the idea that what prevents the reader from attaining creativity is its being constrained by the rule of the author, and evolving within a bound semiotic framework, a conceptual space that is materially fixed. In this regard, the boards Berger cites should be considered creative endeavors, and so should works of fanfiction: the originals are turned into signifiers, combined together to produce new meaning, by an author who has total control over what they choose to include to signify their experience. In isolating elements

from preexisting texts, these individuals assemble them into a new, productive system of sign. Tracing this back to Jenkins's sociological approach to fanfiction, why are these texts considered lesser cultural products? He claims that it is because they are the result of a perceived "fanatical" involvement with texts, which breaks bourgeois cultural norms. Let us add to this the perceived qualities of the text's author-function: in Fathallah's words, "'Real' authorship is largely defined by its negative" (Fathallah 2017; 159). The seminal difference between works of fanfiction and Berger's boards is that the latter isolate elements from various sources and blend together, mixing various authorial identities, reducing the author-functions to moving parts of a grander semiotic system: such re-purposing is closer to intertextuality than it is to a claim of authorship. On the other hand, the former, in focusing on a single intellectual property, creates an authorial feud, which is, ultimately, one over ownership. The question fanfiction begs, by its mere existence, is the following: can one own ideas? This clash of authorships and identities develops into a grander interrogation over the ontology of ideas, a truly philosophical debate that requires taking an ideological stance, without which no answer can be attained. Mine, in this following part, will be against the concept of intellectual property, as I will investigate the mystifying processes that have been made to govern artistic production.

c) The Mythical Substance of Authorship

In extending the original/reproduction dichotomy to signs, I have, implicitly, touched on a much larger philosophical concept: the origin of ideas. To claim that the signs found in *My Immortal* are reproductions of those found in *Harry Potter*, and calling the latter the original, semantically assumes its "originality". It situates the work of fanfiction as inferior to the text it takes inspiration from, thus disqualifying the writer from an actual claim to authorship: "Fanfic is constructed as a stage on the way to 'real' authorship, author-ized by 'keep[ing] it Canon' and

respecting the Author's progeny" (Fathallah 2017; 150). In this regard, *My Immortal* should thus not be considered an authored text, as it blatantly disregards the *Harry Potter* canon. Yet, it is undeniable that it is a poetically authored text: traces of its author can be found all over the text, be it in the intense personalization of preexisting signs, or in the author's notes littered throughout the chapters. This discussion is slightly complicated by the fact that there is a debate over who the actual author of *My Immortal* is: its having attained cult status led fans all over the world to look for its author, only known by username. I shall not delve into the history of this search²⁸: what is relevant to my purposes is that, though many people have tried and failed to claim authorship of the text, to this day no one has been able to verify the identity of the original author. This, however, will not prevent us from discussing the quality of *My Immortal*'s authorship. In actuality, it will allow us to gaze beyond the individual, as this debate should not be reduced to *My Immortal* and *Harry Potter*: it is one that extends to the entirety of the noosphere. Can ideas be owned? In order to discuss this, let us introduce the work of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who famously asked the question: "what is property" (Proudhon 1840)? In his influential essay on the concept of property, Proudhon posits that it is conceived of as a natural right, an absolute, which is understood to be the moral equal of other absolutes, such as liberty or justice. To argue against this idea, Proudhon cites what he introduces as the only two possible justifications to the concept of property: that of occupation, and that of labor. On the former, he writes that

the right of occupation, or of the first occupant, is that which results from the actual, physical, real possession of a thing. I occupy a piece of land, the assumption is that I am the proprietor, until the contrary is proved. (Proudhon 1994; 44)

Yet, he claims, if the right to occupy is an absolute, then it should be equal to all. What of the right of occupation in the contemporary world, where most of the land is already divided? "If

²⁸ For more information on the topic see Romano 2017.

the first occupants have occupied everything, what is there for the latecomers to occupy?” (*ibid.*; 53). To him, understanding occupation as an absolute right necessarily implies the equal dividing of material, without which it could simply not be absolute; he thus dismisses this argument. The second justification he discusses is that of labor, under which one is entitled to property over an object for which he has labored: the value which one’s labor adds to an object is what enables property. To counter this claim, Proudhon puts forward the idea that most value is added socially, as it is continuously being tended to: “if the labourer who added to the value of a thing has a right of property in it, the one who maintains this value acquires the same right” (*ibid.*; 87). As such, the transformative aspect of labor cannot be enough to justify individual property. In addition to this, he extends this argument past individual production, claiming that

the smallest fortune, the slightest establishment, the beginning of the lowest industry all demand the combination of so many different kinds of labour and skill that one man could not possibly execute them all. (*ibid.*; 91)

Here, Proudhon emphasizes the collective nature of labor, materializing a Spinozistic ontology, which emphasizes the causal relationships between all objects. Spinoza argued that there was but one substance, one thing that exists in and of itself, which he interchangeably called God or Nature, and which was not separate but integral to the universe. His metaphysics were based on the principle of sufficient reason, which “states that every fact has a reason for obtaining; in slogan form, *there are no brute facts*” (Newlands 2023). All modes of substance have a reason to exist, are caused by another mode of substance. For lack of space, we shall not examine Spinozistic metaphysics in depth. Let us summarize them in three points: (1) there is only one substance: God or Nature, (2) there is nothing that exists without a reason to exist, and there is nothing that does not exist without a reason not to exist, (3) substance causes modes to exist, and modes cause each other

to exist. Spinoza and Proudhon's theories work hand in hand to demonstrate that there is no thing that cannot be attributed to another thing, no mode that is non-caused, or inconsequential. They both, in their own way, showcase the necessary causation of human existence. In this sub-section, we will argue that Proudhon's counter-claims to the justifications of material individual property can be applied to that of intellectual individual property, and thus that the material and ideological statuses of authorship are mythical and mystifying.

First and foremost, let us mention that his argument against occupation theory is made somewhat complicated by the fact that the immateriality of ideas make occupancy harder to define. Occupying the material world simply requires fencing off one of its portions. How does one occupy an idea? To expand on this, let us reintroduce the concept of the noosphere, understood as a space of the biosphere which contains all of human ideas. The right of first occupancy in the noosphere would thus be granted to one who brings a new idea to it, who expands it: could the immateriality of this sphere actually allow for the development of intellectual property? To understand why this reasoning is inapplicable, let us go back to the idea of substance and modes. For an author to create an utterly new idea, one over which he could claim ownership, no causal relationships should tie that idea to the mono-substance. It would have to be able to stand on its own, to be one in and of itself. For that, the author would have to create a system made up of means of communication never before used, and which does not base itself off of the material, modal world. In turn, the author itself would have to be separated from this world. As there is no author that does not exist in the material world, no artist that does not express themselves through previously established means of expression, this is simply impossible. The noosphere is a purely causal space, for there is no idea that does not stem from another. This implies that, as far as ideas are concerned, there is no separating the occupation and the labor argument against property: causation is all at once ideological and material.

Howard Becker, in his book *Art Worlds*, proposes what could be called a materialist-Spinozicist approach to the production of art, i.e. one that emphasizes the collective nature of artistic creation by focusing on the material connections that tie all the actors in the chain of production together. His argument stems from the fact that “the existence of art worlds, as well as the way their existence affects both the production and consumption of art works, suggests a sociological approach to the arts” (Becker 1982; 1). He rallies against “the idea of gift or talent [which] implies the notion of spontaneous expression or sublime inspiration” (*ibid.*; 18), and sheds light on the ideologically mystified causations of authorship. This is fairly obvious for modes of expressions that require a large, qualified crew: cinema, for instance, relies heavily on the division of labor. To quote Becker: “situations of art making lie somewhere between the extremes of one person doing everything and every smallest activity being done by a separate person” (*ibid.*; 9). The division of tasks is obvious in the latter extreme, and it complicates authorship: if each task is performed by an individual, who should be credited for the whole work? To speak in truly material terms, whose name should be used for advertisement purposes? To whom should the intellectual property rights be granted? Becker’s argument is very similar to Proudhon’s, in that he does not see one’s labor as justifying property over the whole. To him, this question can be summarized by thinking in terms of

the irreducible core of what an artist must do. Since the definition of the core activity changes over time, the division of labor between artists and support personnel also changes, leading to difficulties. How little of the core activity can a person do and still claim to be an artist? (Becker 1982; 19)

The social and historical construction of this “irreducible core” he points to makes the boundaries of the status of artist blurry, and, in qualifying all of the participants for ownership over the whole,

effectively disqualify them. What, then, of the other extreme, of the “one person doing everything”? Surely, they do all of the core activity, and more. As far as they are concerned, Becker makes an argument incredibly reminiscent of Proudhon’s, claiming that

the artist [...] works in the center of a network of cooperating people, all of whose work is essential to the final outcome. Wherever he depends on others, a cooperative links exists.
(*ibid.*; 25)

These similarities between Proudhon and Becker’s arguments go to show that there is a direct link between the ideological and the material and the ideological, between the noosphere and the rest of the biosphere, the ideas and the world. Since no artist works in a vacuum, no idea is conceived *ex nihilo*, there is only the one substance, of which everything is a mode, and all modes are equal. We are not making, here, an absolute relativist argument: not all works of art are of the same quality; in Becker’s words: “every way of producing art produces works of every conceivable grade of quality, however that is defined” (*ibid.* 2). Yet, they all possess one common quality: that of being the product of a necessarily collective activity, a fact which should lead to a complete rethinking of the concept of intellectual property.

As far as fanfiction is concerned, the author of *My Immortal* and J.K. Rowling actually resorted to similar processes: they built upon preexisting signs and concepts, made them their own and assembled them in productive ways. The difference, thus, is ideological, sociological and institutional: the status of author is granted to J.K. Rowling and not to the unknown author of *My Immortal* because of social recognition, the work’s established cultural capital, which lead to her work being perceived as a separate substance, one of which she is the sole creator. Under this conception, it makes sense that she would get credit from it: if fanfictions were modes (reproduction) of a substance (the original), then there would be no debate over authorship. But

because there are many causal relationships that tie the *Harry Potter* series to our material world (Becker's "cooperative links") and the ideas of the noosphere (preexisting constructs of wizardry, schools, social organizations, genre, novel, language, the list extends *ad infinitum...*), there can be no understanding it as a standalone substance. The reproduction/original dichotomy within the realm of fanfiction is thus but another causal relationship: just like all modes have causes and consequences, all originals have originals, and all reproductions have reproductions.

To conclude this part, let us examine one last quote from Proudhon, which lays out the mystified causes and consequences of both material and intellectual individual properties:

the law, in establishing property, has not been the expression of a psychological fact, the development of a natural law, or the application of a moral principle; it has in every sense of the word created a right outside of its own province. It has realised an abstraction, a metaphor, a fiction, and has done so without deigning to look at the consequences, without considering the disadvantages, without asking whether it was right or wrong.

(Proudhon 1994; 61)

The inception of digital spaces for the widespread diffusion of fanfiction lets authors escape this "right outside [the law's] province": the institutional, and ultimately ideological sanctioning off of ideas under intellectual property, which is as detrimental to the noosphere as material property is detrimental to the biosphere, is inefficient in these spaces. Free from the ideological state apparatus of intellectual property, all individuals are allowed to experiment, borrow and thrive. This lets authors exercise their absolute right of property over ideas; collective property, that is. To be clear, this was not brought about by the advent of the digital age: fanfiction existed before the Internet, before online forums were dedicated to it. Its digital form is simply more easily shared and consumed, which enhances its deconstructing effects. However, technological advancement is not

an unequivocally liberating force: in fact, one of its most recent developments has brought about new questionings, which has shuffled the decks of authorship, text and readership: artificial intelligence.

Part IV. Artificial Intelligence: A Tool and A Myth

The machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; they do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are they. (Haraway 2016; 65)

In 2016, Donna Haraway published an essay entitled “The Cyborg Manifesto”, which would go on to become a cornerstone of the field of post-humanist feminist theory. In it, she argues that the notion of “cyborg” should encourage us to look beyond socially constructed boundaries between “human”, “machine”, “animal”, ... she turns antinomies into dualisms, intended to be objects of study of the relationships between terms and concepts. In this final part of our thesis, we will follow her lead and apply this method to the relationship between AI and human literature. In doing so, we hope to demonstrate the potentialities of AI-generated literature not as a product of a superior intelligence but as an indicator of the larger order it exists in, a necessary synecdoche. This argument, however, requires a thorough investigation of the terms and concepts that govern the discourse over AI: first, we will conduct a philosophical and discursive exploration of the perceived superiority of the artificial objective over the human subjective, before questioning the concept of “artificial authorship”. Finally, we will finish this discussion by exploring the potentialities of AI as a tool of human creativity. First and foremost, let us delve into the terminology of AI and its associated concepts, and try to make sense of the discursive web they make up.

a) The Artificial and the Intelligent: Reassessing Perceptions of AI

No concept exists in a vacuum: every thing, every mode of substance is necessarily at least in part socially and historically constructed. What I hope to accomplish here is to highlight some of the key concepts that govern the perception of AI in contemporary culture, and, through their

historicization, shed light on the biases they create. In particular, we should question the reason/passion antinomy which informs the objectivity/subjectivity dichotomy, and is the result of centuries of philosophical tradition which can be traced back to at least as far as Ancient Greece. In *The Dream of Reason*, Anthony Gottlieb touches on the philosophical roots of the titular notion, starting with its Platonic definition:

Plato built a theory according to which the world is divided into two realms: one that is eternal and unchanging and which we come to know about through the exercise of reason; and another, shifting and changing one, which we learn about through the senses.

(Gottlieb 2000; 60)

This distinction would, over centuries of human thought, be developed, refined and elaborated upon, yet the underlying hierarchy it implies would maintain its hegemonic status in the Western world and its dominant ideology. Reason and its products are eternal, unchanging, real. Senses, passion, experience, however, are feeble and subject to change, and thus unreal, or at least of a lesser reality-value. This can be seen in Descartes's epistemology, which emphasizes the fallible nature of sensible information, for individual reason is the only certainty. Plato's cave and Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* share a similar assumption: that of the superiority of the mind over the body, that of rationalism over empiricism: "testing the *cogito* by means of methodical doubt is supposed to reveal its unshakable certainty. Hyperbolic doubt helps me appreciate that the existence of my body is subject to doubt, whereas the existence of my thinking is not" (Newman 2019). Though other philosophers have tested the limits of Descartes's theory, the perceived superiority of infallible objectivity over fallible subjectivity demonstrates that it still holds power (Stambovsky 1996). Anytime artificial intelligence is discussed, this ideological bias should be borne in mind, especially as it relates to the notion of progress, which Gayatri Spivak cites as the driving force of

Western society (Spivak 1988). The interactions of these concepts lead to a conceptualization of progress as objectivity, and objectivity as progress: this association results in the perceived superiority (and desirability!) of artificial intelligence, understood as devoid of human subjectivity and thus free from individual and/or collective biases. In this first-sub-section, let us investigate this issue, as it will be crucial to the development of a literary theory of AI-generated media: is artificial intelligence truly a purely rational entity? Is the fact that it functions using data-analysis enough to support its claim to total objectivity?

In analyzing its inner working, I shall make the claim that AI's perceived superiority is entirely mythical: the constructed perception of artificial intelligence as potentially superior to human intelligence is made up of

latent snares embedded in our popular understanding of these terms. In particular, this idea that data contain an objective truth beyond the reach of the subjective human is built on a pervasive misconception of what data are. (McDonald 2022; 5)

Macy McDonald, in this passage, is making an invaluable claim: that data, as the driving force of AI, has to be understood as necessarily social and political, as opposed to neutral. Indeed, they argue that the concept of "data" is neutralized: we think of data entries as facts, of statistics as truth, and, in turn, of what is made up of them as objective. This, however, completely mystifies the actual, material production of data. Here, the concept of mystification regains its original Marxist definition: data is a product, a created value, the production of which is concealed. When using AI algorithms, we are data consumers, yet utterly disconnected from the mechanisms which allowed for this data and its products to be available to us. Doctors Milagros Miceli and Julian Posada conducted research on Latin American data workers, and made the claim that this mystification is essential to the preservation of AI's perceived objectivity, as it

guarantee[s] a facade where AI is seen as neutral, unbiased, and efficient due to the lack of human intervention — and error — while keeping workers and factors of production hidden from the public lens. (Miceli & Posada 2022; 5)

What makes AI and machine-learning algorithms as a whole desirable is their perceived neutrality. This is, interestingly enough, also what makes them undesirable in the field of literature: the absence of subjectivity, of authorial intention. What is thought of as useful for market analysis is precisely what is detrimental to the literary potential of the medium. Yet, Miceli and Posada claim that AI is, in fact, not purely objective. In applying a Foucauldian method of analysis to study the power dynamics that take place in the field of data work, they came to the conclusion that data is in fact biased. Indeed, it does not simply come into existence; it is produced by a structure embedded in the social world, and therefore influenced by it:

Artificial intelligence politics are inextricably connected to the power relations behind data collection and transformation and the working conditions that allow preconceived hegemonic forms of knowledge to be encoded in machine learning algorithms via training datasets. (*ibid.*; 28)

The production of data is not neutral, and thus neither is data. McDonald, in order to counteract this mystified perception of data as natural fact, proposes to approach it as captured:

With the understanding of data as captured, we can change the conversation around opaque data assemblages from one concerned with truth of those systems, their accuracy and

transparency, to one questioning what has been captured, why, and what frameworks inform the gleaning. (McDonald 2022; 5)

This change of perspective has a tremendous effect on how we approach AI within the field of literature. Indeed, it introduces another variable within the author/text/reader distinction, or rather reveals it, as it was and is always present: the social dimension. We have, indirectly, touched on some of the ways in which the social environment within which these factors exist influences them. The reader's interpretation, as well as the author's intentions, are informed by the agents' understanding of the world, one which is socially constructed. Whether they unwillingly go along with hegemonic standards or knowingly try to inflect them, these standards are still present within the construction of the individuals. What this discussion of AI reveals is that the text itself is also, in parts, constructed by the superstructure within which it is produced and consumed. Does this however, mean that AI should be considered an agent? This is one of the questions I will attempt to answer moving forward. For now, let us simply reaffirm that the medium used by the author and through which the reader consumes the text has an ideological power, one which, as far as AI is concerned, is hard to circumvent, as it is embedded within the very fabric of the medium.

b) The Cyborg-Author: AI and Human Creativity

In March 2017, Ross Goodwin went on a road trip from New York to New Orleans. On the trunk of his car, he installed a camera; inside, he set up a microphone. The information gathered by these two sensors, combined with the car's GPS, were fed to an artificial neural network, tasked with narrating this journey, in a literary project emulating Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. In the following year, the AI-generated text would be published by the French publishing company Jean Boîte Éditions. This is certainly an incredibly innovative project, which sheds a new light on the

perspectives of AI-generated literature. On first pass, the main question it begs is that of authorship; on the cover of the novel, Goodwin is cited as the “writer of writer”, which would imply that the real writer is the neural network that composed the novel; the publishing company even markets it as the first novel written by a machine. Yet, can that really be argued for? `Or is there more to this duality of writers? Let us argue that *1 the Road* does not represent a total departure from our traditional understanding of literature, but another building block which includes AI into the field of literature and turns into into a tool of human creativity. Indeed, *1 the Road* seems to function in a very similar fashion to works we have studied earlier in this thesis: that of the Oulipo. Indeed, much like authors of the Oulipo, Ross Goodwin fashioned a pre-established structural constraint, which, on the surface, appears to detach him from the finished product. Similarly to Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, he created a program, the execution of which would result into a text which he, theoretically, would have no control over. We have argued that, in the case of Queneau’s collection, this distance between text and author is artificial: though Queneau has no control over the stanzas chosen by the reader, he still wrote the entirety of the text, thus dictating all of the results. Pascal Mougin, a professor at Université Paris-Cité invested in the interaction between AI and literature, identified the correlation between this text and the novels of the Oulipo, but he also pointed out their differences:

Il n’est plus ici seulement question de co-auctorialité (un auteur élaborant un protocole, une contrainte ou un cahier des charges exécutable par un tiers en vue de produire un texte, comme le proposent à l’occasion les oulipiens), mais il est question plutôt de méta-auctorialité. (Mougin June 2021)

This is not simply a matter of co-authorship (an author elaborating a protocol, a constraint or a list of requirements which can be executed by another in order to produce a text, as the oulipians would sometimes use), but rather of “meta-authorship”. (translation mine)

The “meta-authorship” Mougin points to lies in the fact that the author is responsible for the construction of the program (the structural constraint), as well as that of the executor (the neural network). The reader, when reading *1 the Road*, is not even given the pretense of interactivity that oulipian novels often offer. But what of the status of the executor? The AI is producing all of the letters; can it be considered author? Can it be producing a creative act? So far, we have used Novitz’s definition of creativity to qualify (or disqualify) creativity within the act of reading; using it in this case, however, is more arduous. What complicates it is the status of AI as author, and whether it can be the source of recombinational creativity. Was the artificial intelligence that put together the letters making up *1 the Road* truly creative? Answering this question, when begged regarding the other texts we have studied so far, required establishing the qualities of the conceptual space within which they existed. To answer it for *1 the Road*, however, is not as simple, for we first have to address another issue: that of the agency of AI. Indeed, if the authors of the Oulipo were creative within the conceptual space bound in part by the pre-established structural constraints, then, if the AI can be considered a free agent, then it can also attain creativity; the matter of agency will condition the rest of the factors that play into Novitz’s creativity. It may seem like an impossible riddle to solve, one which science-fiction writers have been exploring for decades; yet, once the material conditions of the production of AI have been exposed, it becomes surprisingly simple. Mougin, on the agency of AI claimed this:

elle repose sur une représentation fausse de l’IA, l’IA comme agentivité auto-apprenante et donc potentiellement séparée de l’humain, émancipée de sa tutelle. (ibid.)

it relies on a false representation of AI, AI as a self-learning agency, thus potentially separate from human, freed from its supervision. (translation mine)

This false representation stems from the mystification process we addressed above: the erasure of the conditions of production of the data fed to the machine-learning algorithms disconnects them from the material world, effectively turning them into free agents, unbound by human input. What Mougin argues is that this is only representational, and that in actuality, AIs are wholly determined. He goes so far as to say that AI is effectively not different from other tools used in literature:

la question n'est pas de savoir ce qui distinguerait une littérature spécifiquement humaine d'une littérature déléguée à la machine ; cette question repose sur une conception simpliste. Il n'y a pas d'un côté une littérature authentiquement humaine produite par un écrivain démiurge, seul maître à bord, et de l'autre, une littérature qui serait déléguée à une machine et donc qui serait éminemment suspecte parce qu'artificielle ou post humaine.

(Mougin October 2021)

the point is not to know what would distinguish a specifically human literature from a literature that has been delegated to the machine; this question relies on a simplistic vision. There is not, on one hand an authentically human literature produced by a demiurgic writer, omnipotent, and on the other, a literature which would be delegated to a machine and thus eminently suspect because it is artificial or post-human. (translation mine)

This passage's argument is strikingly similar to Aarseth's, yet shows a change of focus: where Aarseth highlighted the text as a factor of interpretation which influences the production and

consumption of art, Mougin argues against the omnipotence of the text. This is representative of a significant shift in the literary landscape, incurred in part by the evolution of AI. The perceived autonomy of this technology, which Mougin called an “advertiser’s myth” (Mougin June 2021) created the fantasy of a potentially fully autonomous text, one that is both medium and author, thus concealing the fact that all texts are, to some extent, autonomous, and that no AI-generated text does not bear the mark of an author. This is what I am attempting to recenter in this study of AI as a literary tool: how the material functioning of AI, combined with its ideologically (mis)informed perception, inflects the interpretation of the reader. In fact, let us argue that this limited autonomy, which is, let me reiterate, originally authored, constitutes AI’s specificity. To the question: was the AI that spelled out the text of *1 the Road* being creative, the answer is thus, no. *1 the Road* in fact beautifully exemplifies the lack of agency of AI, in an almost poetic fashion. Consider the conditions in which it was produced: Goodwin was inspired by Kerouac’s *On the Road* and thus decided to set up an AI in his car, to feed it the information he selected, before taking the wheel. He was the one to select all of the conditions of existence of this novel, the one in the driver’s seat, literally and metaphorically. The AI transcribed what it saw, but only saw what Goodwin let it, only transcribed it according to Goodwin’s standards. All of the text, ultimately, was written on Goodwin’s terms. The neural network was simply a tool, one to which he delegated parts of the creative process; those that did not require creativity. The machine may have “written” the novel, as the publishing company claims, but it was Goodwin who authored it. This brings us back to Becker’s idea of “the irreducible core of what an artist must do” (Becker 1982; 19): according to Mougin, AI’s mystification may lead to the muddying of the involvement of the artist with this core, but it is nothing more than a tool which supports the act of writing. What we can then study is how it affects the act of writing: the uniqueness of AI does not lie in its supposed agency, but in its potential multiplicity. Designating “AI” as a unified whole is somewhat misleading: all AI models

are the sum of the information that they are fed, and, as such, though they all belong in the same category each AI model is a separate tool.

1 the Road makes for a wonderful exploration of the relationship between AI and authorship for two reasons: first, because it constitutes a superb metaphor for the lack of agency of AI models. Second, because its AI model is so (relatively) simple. It was created for the express purpose of writing a modern version of Kerouac's *On the Road*, and as such was fed only the information necessary for the realization of this goal: in addition to the sensors previously discussed, Goodwin trained the neural network on "hundreds of books" (Merchant 2018), as well as providing it with location data made available to him by the geolocation company Foursquare, which would give the AI information on the places visited. By reducing the number of variables, we simplify the equation: the very fact that Goodwin made its own neural network (though we will slightly qualify this "ownership" later) places him as author. However, a single text is never representative of a medium: *1 the Road* allowed us to further demystify AI as a social product, thus emphasizing its inherent lack of agency. It should be noted that these incredibly specific conditions are not representative of the inner workings of the language models that are available to the public. Most of them are proprietary technology, and as such little is known about what their individual functioning is. We know, however, that ChatGPT-4, the leading online chat bot based on the language learning model (LLM) GPT-4, has about one trillion parameters, assessing the relationships between words. For the same reason, it is not known exactly how extensive the database LLMs are provided with, as well as where this data is found. Theoretically, all public data available can be a potential source: "the research paper introducing the LaMDA (Language Model for Dialogue Applications) model, which Bard is built on, mentions Wikipedia, 'public forums,' and 'code documents from sites related to programming like Q&A sites, tutorials, etc.'" (Nield 2023). In addition to this raw data, that allows them to establish statistical relationships between words, they are equipped with a "self-attention mechanism", which means that

words in a sentence aren't considered in isolation, but also in relation to each other in a variety of sophisticated ways. So, for example, a bot might not always choose the most likely word that comes next, but the second- or third-most likely. Push this too far, though, and the sentences stop making sense, which is why LLMs are in a constant state of self-analysis and self-correction. (*ibid.*)

The functioning of these LLMs immediately evokes Saussure's theory of language, according to which words are granted meaning in their relationship to other words; a sign is constructed by the other signs that are around it, as well as those that are not. The owners of LLMs feed them large amounts of texts, in hopes that eventually, they will get so good at establishing relationships between all of the words that they will be able to emulate language. This has two implications: first, that they will always be trailing behind. By definition, no such LLM can truly replicate language, as it is ever-shifting, constantly evolving to fit new needs and concerns. LLMs might get better at identifying new "meanings" (though they cannot conceive of them as such), and replicating them, but they will never be at the forefront of linguistic evolution. This first feature is significant, but much less so than the second: LLMs' necessarily hegemonic use of language. It stands to reason that the more data an LLM processes, the more it reinforces the hegemonic standard of language use, statistically speaking (and LLMs are statistically "thinking"). This, coupled with the previously discussed ideological bias that sees data and algorithm as possessing natural, objective truth, means that any AI-generated text that uses LLMs runs the risk of inadvertently reinforcing the hegemonic standard. Let us take the example of the procedurally generated show *Nothing, Forever* (Hartle & Habersberger 2022). In December of 2022, the show, made to be a parody of the sitcom *Seinfeld*, started in a continuous broadcast on the online streaming platform Twitch, and is still running to this day. The dialogue is generated using GPT-3 and performed via speech synthesis; as for the visuals,

they are produced using a variety of different generative softwares, such as Stable Diffusion or DALL-E. But let us focus on the use of language in the show: sometimes nonsensical, at times surprisingly self-aware, always slightly uncanny, it became revealing of LLMs' flawed design in February of 2023, as the channel hosting the show got banned off the platform for a series of distasteful jokes. Just like in *Seinfeld*, the then main character was an aspiring comedian, and would often perform stand-up routines. The one he would deliver on that day contained homophobic and transphobic jokes, perpetuating everlasting clichés about oppressed communities, which, in accordance with the platform Twitch's terms and conditions, resulted in the banning of the hosting channel. This demonstrates what Engley called

the political danger in believing that the algorithm is, as Lacan might say, a "subject supposed to know." What the phrase "there is no subject supposed to know" means is that there is no single person nor authoritative entity that can guarantee the consistency of your subjectivity. (Engley 2022; 6)

The uncritical use of AI represents a tangible risk: that of the perpetuation of harmful discourses which are embedded in hegemony. This was identified by Miceli & Rosada in their study of data-production, as they found that

unilateral views are already present at the requesters' end in the form of instructions that perpetuate particular worldviews and forms of discrimination that includes racism, sexism, classism, and xenophobia. (Miceli & Rosada 2022; 30)

This is made even more potentially dangerous by the representational fallacy that sees products of algorithms as objective truths. Miceli & Rosada discussed this issued by invoking the Foucauldian

method of *dispositif* analysis, which can be summarized by the assertion that “power, knowledge, and discourse finally converge in *dispositif*, a notion that expands discourse to include non-discursive practices and artifacts” (*ibid.*; 3). The *dispositif* of AI, therefore, is imbued with the thoughts and practices of the hegemony, if only for the fact that the data it is provided with is statistically analyzed. An AI can identify concepts such as “racism”, “sexism”, “transphobia”, but cannot produce a meaningful critique of them:

We think they have privileged and special access to our desires but they, instead, often replicate obvious harmful societal biases. In other words, the algorithm doesn’t know it knows and if it knows anything (such as how ideologically entrenched misogyny is) all it knows is how to reproduce it in an easily identifiable form but not how to comment on it or even hide it to enable its proliferation. (Engley 2022; 7)

This has considerable impact on the way the tool that is AI can influence art and literature. Goodwin’s neural network was designed by himself, and contained a relatively small database; yet, because of its method of analysis, it also contained the seeds of hegemony. It simply was not given enough space to definitively confirm it. One danger of the use of AI, then, is the uncritical replication of harmful standards, and their reinforcement by an ideological and representational bias. This being said, it should be borne in mind that AI is but a tool, which, in spite of its somewhat unpredictable nature, can be bent to the will of an author. Herein lies the potentiality inherent to LLMs and AI-generated media; they showcase the hegemony, demonstrate social trends, and thus can be a powerful tool for critique:

When we notice how an algorithm works, we are not seeing a graphic moment of its repressive and unaccountable reach but, rather, we are seeing it fail. [...] the algorithm

worked the way it was intended but it is within the successful working of the algorithm that the failure is evident. (Engley; 7)

This failure is not solely that of the algorithm; it is that of the system which produced it, the various structures composing it, and the superstructure governing them. In this sense, then, the tool that is AI has immense potential for satire, societal and political critique; LLMs, essentially, are grotesque renditions of human beings, spouting words that they do not understand, stringing signs without grasping their meanings, which creates standardized semiotic systems revealing of larger systemic trends. In this sense, then, AI is a specifically productive tool, as this automatic representation and mechanical reproduction of hegemonic discourse is unique to it. There is, however, another unfortunate side effect, one that does not lie in AI's use, but in its very ontology. This feature of LLMs is not naturally inherent, but is constructed by its inscription within a larger system of production, of which, we will argue, it becomes the organic critique.

c) Artificial Intelligence, Material Exploitation: Meanings of Artistic Automation

AI, when used in artistic endeavors, is no author. Our discussion of *1 the Road* certainly exposed this: it is always subservient to human input, and, in spite of discursive myths, utterly devoid of agency. Saying that AI is the sole author of a text is an obvious counter-truth: saying that it does not contribute to authorship, however, would also be untrue, though the reasons for which it is so are much less obvious. It at least is a part of the author-function in that the reader knows the text was written with the use of AI: this distinguishes it from other creative tools, in that its aura permeates the text. This discursively constructed aura lends itself to AI-generated texts, which, in turn, become suspicious. What parts were AI-generated? What was delegated to the machine? It is a significant representational leap, as audiences rarely ever wonder what parts the pen and paper

played in the writing of a novel, or the camera in the filming of a movie. Yet, both represent ways in which the tool influences the work: the choice of camera, grain, lens, angle, ratio, framing, lighting, ... all those modify the image, lend it meaning. The pen and paper, on the other hand, exemplify the inherently collective nature of art: few are the novelists who, on their own, plucked a quill and gathered ink, before chopping wood and processing it into paper. Art, much like all facets of existence within society, relies on delegation: yet, delegating to AI is frowned upon: “*la sous-traitance est même dans le cas du recours à l’IA d’autant plus inadmissible qu’elle semble intégrale*” (outsourcing is even more inadmissible when it comes to AI because it seems total [translation mine]) (Mougin June 2021). I have, in the previous part, demonstrated that delegation to artificial intelligence is never total, and the mere product of representational and ideological practices. Yet, the fact that this perception exists makes it an affect worth exploring, as it necessarily influences the experience of the text’s user. We shall make the argument that the perception of AI as delegation is a microcosm which replicates larger societal trends, a synecdoche as ideological as it is material. To do so, we shall reprise our discussion of the applications of Spinozist philosophy in the context of artistic production, by examining the thesis of French economist and philosopher Frederic Lordon.

In his 2010 book *Capitalisme, désir et servitude*, Lordon, an economist and scholar of Spinoza, demonstrates the links between the 17th century philosopher’s work and Marxist thought, in order to develop a heterodox economic theory. According to him, the very functioning of capitalist society relies on the subjugation of what Spinoza called the *conatus*, which can be defined as the drive to live, to preserve oneself; Lordon also calls it *puissance d’agir* (power of acting). To him, capitalists do not simply own the means of production, and accumulate surplus-value: they make theirs the *conatus* of the working class, by aligning their desires, which in turn produce affects. Because they have promulgated their master-desire (*désir-maître*), the affects it produces also influence the working class, and its members start acting accordingly, defending interests

which are not truly theirs. In light of this analysis, AI then represents the automatic subjection of the *conatus*, but also of its products. I touched already on how AI algorithms are materially fed by labourers in underprivileged communities (cf. Miceli & Posada 2022) but this constitutes no departure from the usual mode of production, one which is rarely ever considered revolting. How, then, can we understand the uproar that overtook the art world when AI started? AI was a predominant point of conversation of the 2023 WGA strike (Shah 2023), because of two main concerns: the fear of automation, and the theft of intellectual property. We shall explore both in detail, and use them to further our analysis of intellectual property as developed previously.

Indeed, the questions AI asks about intellectual property are significant: in my discussion of fanfiction, I argued that because of the inherently collective nature of art, intellectual property was illegitimate, and it is true, theoretically. Yet, unlike fanfiction, AI does not merely make for a theoretical threat to intellectual property: it represents a material danger to the livelihood of artists. When interviewed by Time magazine, a spokesperson for the WGA claimed that “it’s not so much about what AI is going to do, but what companies are going to use AI to justify” (*ibid.*). Much like other products of technological advancement in the past, AI could make production easier, yet in doing so would replace workers. WGA activists put forward the idea that a whole room of screenwriters could be replaced by an AI and a single proofreader. We have previously addressed the ideological dangers of such practices, especially in terms of AI’s replication of dominant ideologies. But there is also the fact that AI is trained on pre-existing works of art: “any artificial intelligence systems use the work of creatives to teach the tools to generate something similar, raising concerns around intellectual property” (*ibid.*). And this is what complicates our theoretical disqualification of intellectual property. AI does not simply borrow ideas after the fact: it steals *a priori*. As such, we cannot simply claim that intellectual property should be abandoned. Rather, let us examine the inherent contradiction that governs the arguments against the use of AI. Because they are contradictory: not that they contradict themselves, as they are valid critiques. They are,

however, in contradiction with the division of labour under capitalist society. To illustrate this, let us reframe the concept of the noosphere, the realm of ideas, which we shall use to recontextualise the functioning of AI. The noosphere is, by definition, made up of products. Thinking of ideas as products helps us understand how Marxist theory applies to them: ideas do not solely exist, they do not appear *ex nihilo*, they are thought by individuals who transformed, blended, amalgamated pre-existing ideas. Items of the noosphere are thus necessary products of the *conatus*: it is in this regard that it is separate from the biosphere. There is nothing natural about the noosphere, and, as such, it renders the myth of natural order wholly inapplicable. It is why we insist on using it as an illustration: because, more than any other image, it exemplifies the social dimension of art. As a totally constructed space, the rules which govern it are also constructed. It is also, crucially, freely accessible. Not everyone has access to material means of production, but everyone can use an idea to produce another. There is no material barrier preventing access to ideas; this is not to say that everyone has equal access to ideas, as there is a larger conversation to be had about privileges of thought (McCarthy Jones 2019), but rather that the immaterial nature of ideas demonstrate that all barriers to entry are wholly artificial. AI therefore represents the subjugation of the noosphere: that of the other for the self. Its necessarily social nature implies collective input, but it has to be borne in mind that it does so in a system of production which turns collective input into individual profit. AI, therefore, is necessarily exploitative: it feeds off of products of the *conatus*, and in doing so destroys those whose *conatus* produced them. This is nothing new: unions have been fighting against the negative effects of technological advancement on the job market for as long as they have existed. Automation has already negatively impacted the number of factory workers and shorthands (Jorion 2007), and is predicted to do so for, among others, transportation and food services workers (Darina 2023). The narrative that supported this was governed by the notion of freedom: automation was branded as liberating humanity of repetitive tasks, thus allowing alienated workers to break free. In expanding automation to the noosphere, the very concept of AI art deconstructs the myth of

automation, and works to demonstrate the alienation incurred by capitalism will not be ended by capitalist means. AI is specific in that it creates new poetic possibilities, but also in its political implications: it is a tool, and though its ideological significance is mystified by the fact that it is widely available and is mostly freely accessible, it should be borne in mind that the meaning it produces, discursively and materially, only exist in relation to the superstructure which governs the world it exists in. Automating labor is one thing; automating art is another. AI, materially, represents the automatic subjection of the *conatus*, made even more pervasive by its inherent absence of consent. Fanfiction deconstructs the mystifying dynamics that conceal the division of labor inherent to artistic production; AI-generated literature replicates them. It does not do so essentially, but because of the superstructure it exists in and was produced by. It is because it is owned and wielded by the capitalists that it serves their interests, and thus does not expand artistic possibilities, but limits them. AI is unique in that it represents a collectively accessible medium, that belongs to the individual (person or company). In fact, authors using AI are always, to some extent, subservient to those that own the medium:

Independent of the technological scale of media positions is the scale of social confrontation or communication, where the medium is the mechanism, not the master, of discourse. [...] Those who control a medium technically and economically are always in a position superior to those who do not. (Aarseth 1997; 167)

This implies the existence of an unbreakable power hierarchy, in that “those who are ‘at the disposal’ and those who ‘dispose’ are part of the *dispositif*’s strategy.” (Miceli & Posada; 4). AI algorithms, as artistic means of production, materially require the alienation of the *conatus* to function, but their being dependent on the superstructure shines light on the whole that they are a part of. It demonstrates that delegation to AI is an issue because those to which work is delegated

cannot consent to it: using AI means automatically breaching consent. In turn, this demonstrates that there is no consent under capitalism: Frédéric Lordon argues that capitalism blackmails workers into submitting their *conatus* in exchange for a wage (*chantage au salaire*), before ideologically concealing that fact (Lordon 2010)²⁹. AI, if anything, has shown that the art world is subjected to the same logic: artists are laborers, for they must sell their labor to subsist. The emergence of artificial intelligence, and its preventing artists from selling their labor, certainly shed light on this fact. AI thus has a dual nature which has to be taken into account when studying AI-generated texts: its hegemonic value allows for the possibility of satire, a critique of the system produced by the system. But let us not forget that this critique of AI will not be substantial until it is brought against the structures which produced it, and the organization of labor which profits from it.

29 Because this thesis does not primarily deal with political sciences, I have chosen not to expand on this. However, I believe that mentioning the works of Lordon is consequential, as he articulates philosophy (particularly Spinozist metaphysics), social sciences and political theory in a very productive way, which constitutes a thought-provoking opening (and potential continuation) to the research I have conducted.

CONCLUSION

I began this study by asking how constraints influence creativity: using the Oulipo as an example, I demonstrated that they do so in offering new pathways for meaning. Constraints incur creativity in that they force one to avoid them, to work against them. A constraint, self-imposed or not, is to be confronted. I have expanded the concept of constraint past the textual sphere: meta-textual qualities, understood as constraints, can also be creatively productive. In studying new forms of media, I have argued that there can be such a thing as a creative form of readership, one which escapes the grasp of authorship and thus deconstructs the author/reader, active/passive dichotomies. Readers are always active in that they interpret, but rarely can they construct their own narratives, confined to their reader roles. Yet, if the medium allows it, readers can become fully active, they can weave their own narratives from the material presented to them; in doing so, they amalgamate others' authorships, shape the text that they are reading. From there, I went on to discuss fanfiction as a repudiation of the claim to intellectual property; ideas are means of artistic production, they are what is used to create. Thus, I adapted theories and arguments against private property of the means of production to the art world, in order to make the claim that the collective nature of (artistic) production disqualifies any individual from claiming property over ideas. This being said, I contrasted this view with problems incurred by the emergence of artificial intelligence within the world of art, showing that free access to individual property would only serve to harm those that sell their artistic labor. There is no escaping the material implications of such a practice; not mentioning it would not just be idealistic; it would be irresponsible. The aim of this thesis was to reconcile the ideological and the material, to bring out the concealed conditions of production that affect art, before, during and after it is consumed. Understanding art as a product integral to its inscription within the social world, one which has been mystified by centuries of hegemonic separation of the divine and the human, reason and passion, art and labor. A text is always political: that much is

obvious. But let us bear in mind that the relationships between author, reader and text, between individuals and the mediums through which they experience texts, are also representative of existing power hierarchies. Equally important is the medium as a unique factor, a sign with a life of its own: AI may be a relatively recent development, yet it is but the logical continuation of a capitalist superstructure, one that favors individual profit over collective achievement, and, by its very existence, smothers means of self-expression. Let us hope that the public outcry against AI will extend to the whole it is a part of, to an organization of production that makes the many believe they need the few to subsist, when the few only subsist by exploiting the many. We should also question the conditions that brought about this public outcry: though cultural appropriation has become a serious topic of discussion and study, its history demonstrates that idea theft has not always been rallied against. This puts into perspective the privilege that AI breached, and should lead to a larger conversation: was AI rallied against because it steals ideas and jobs, or because it does so in a space that is not rendered invisible?

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