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# Michel Houellebecq's Transmedial Œuvre: Extension of the Realm of Creative Intervention

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- <sup>1</sup> As indicated by the *Rester vivant* exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo in Summer 2016, contemporary author Michel Houellebecq refuses to restrict his work to the medium of text but rather embraces multimedia interplays, references and fusions, extending the realms of his creative interventions. The resulting *transmedial œuvre* (Saint-Gelais 2011) reflects the passage of literature into the Digital Age, a period recognised for the imbricated rise of the Internet and mass media. Such developments have transformed the limitations, pressures and possibilities of artistic production. In this technological and mediatised context, Houellebecq directs and stars in films, participates on music albums, collaborates with artists and saturates his novels with photographs and multimedia references. Furthermore, Houellebecq adapts his texts, expanding them into film, exhibitions, comics, and music, spreading his influence *across* media. In this way, he destabilises the boundaries between media, mobilising the edges of his texts. As this paper will uncover, Houellebecq has already conquered several media forms and continues to do so as part of a process of transmediality. Despite an evident and purposeful engagement with media other than text, there is no substantial critical analysis of this aspect of Houellebecq's work or investigation into the methods, reasons and consequences. This article seeks to consider Houellebecq as more than a writer so as not to "render invisible a swathe of the measures that he has set up in the media spotlight (songs, poems, films, exhibitions, published correspondence, radio and TV shows, websites, etc.)" (Meizoz 2016).<sup>1</sup> This contributes to a broader understanding of Houellebecq while also shedding light on the media and technology-obsessed context. In addition to his use of a network of multimedia references in his novels (intermediality) in

order to inhabit “the skin of the ordinary spectator” (Houellebecq 2008: 17),<sup>2</sup> Houellebecq participates in three main types of multimedia activity: plurimedial combination, expansive adaptation and post-textual work. Each of these types reveals the extension of Houellebecq's worlds across media, contesting teleological interpretations of text as closed and autonomous. This challenges the *nature sacrée* (Barthes 1957) of the text and the author, refuting the restrictions and boundaries placed upon them. “Houellebecq,” autofictional character from *La Carte et le Territoire* states “I’ve just about finished with the world as narration - the world of novels and films, the world of music too. I’m now only interested in the world as juxtaposition—that of poetry and of painting”<sup>3</sup> (Houellebecq 2010: 259). Houellebecq's statement reflects the author's usage of media other than text, and an increasing preference to do so as part of a juxtapositional, non-linear vision of creative production. Joining a lineage of French authors who work across various media from Victor Hugo to Jean Cocteau, Houellebecq encourages new forms of artistic contribution in a growing *espace de possibilités* (Bourdieu 1983). Despite being a deeply literary author (as evidenced in his extensive intertextual referencing), his transmediality shows that he refutes both the marginalisation of the non-literary amongst other authorial projects and also the literary within the non-literary. This article seeks to emphasise the importance of addressing authors' multimedia works for their links and relevance to their literary work and broader cultural context.

- 2 Houellebecq's transmedial undertaking highlights that contemporary literature exists within a mediated context in which any developments, including technological and digital advances, impact how works are produced, how they interact and how they are received. The author and the text are under the influence of a *système de relations* (Bourdieu 1969: 89). Considering literature through this ontology dispels mythologized assumptions about the conditions of cultural production, highlighting instead the true social mechanisms at work. Houellebecq began his artistic career at the beginning of the 1990s, a transitional period in the development of the digital age. Readerships have adapted to these changes: “The connectivity of the web has fostered a paradigm shift in the mobilization of global communities of interest, able to act and react instantly and en masse to shared delights and perceived injustices” (Hutcheon 2006: 180). This open-communication nature of the Internet and the imbricated evolution of fan fiction have led to a [re-]questioning of the role and authority of the text and the author. Mass culture has also been highly influential as the *cultural dominant* (Simmons 1997). Within this system of dominance, no cultural product exists by itself but must possess the necessary capital in order to occupy the dominant position of any given field, including the literary field (Bourdieu 1998: 353). As such, authors are increasingly enticed to evolve under the pressures of mass media, to adapt to new technology and to seek hybrid ways of presenting the text. Houellebecq criticizes this pressure on the arts in Debordian (1967) terms, “The previous distinctions between films, clips, news, advertisements, human accounts, and reports faded in favour of a notion of generalised spectacle” (Houellebecq 1998: 68).<sup>4</sup> Rather than ignoring these contemporary cultural considerations, Houellebecq addresses them through his transmedial activity.
- 3 Transmediality stems from *transfictionality*, the concept of textual transcendence; “the phenomenon by which at least two texts, by the same author or not, are jointly concerned with the same fiction” (Saint-Gelais 2011: 7).<sup>5</sup> Transfictionality addresses virtual messages and stories that are not contained or closed within text but expand outwards, via other media or other authors in a variety of occurrences. These messages and stories form

fictional worlds that extend laterally with each addition made. These worlds are at once made of the individual pieces but also transcend them; “The fictional world is the product of these episodes but gives the impression of giving birth to them” (Besson 2013).<sup>6</sup> Evident examples are fan fiction, series like *Star Wars* and the reincarnations of characters such as Sherlock Holmes. Houellebecq's novels are transfictional due to tropes such as the sect “Les Élohimites” and the themes of cloning, sexual neoliberalism and religion, and the series “Au milieu du monde.” Moving on from mythological conceptions of a closed text and Author-god, transfictionality focuses instead on the idea of fictional worlds that are expanded temporally or diegetically by multiple narratives and multiple authors across media. Houellebecq's works provide an example of autographic transmediality, where the focus is on a message or world across media. This paper seeks to explore three types of transmediality across Houellebecq's work. It will first consider plurimedial combinations: the merging of multiple typically separate media in the formation of a new piece. Secondly, it will discuss expansive adaptations: how he adapts his texts into various other forms of media as a means to extend the messages and worlds outwards, at times in contradictory ways. The third type to discuss is post-textual work. This encapsulates non-literary creations, including short films and the exhibition “Rester vivant,” as well as his appearances in other media, in particular as an actor. Each of these types reveals an author who is working within a growing space of possibilities, embracing non-textual forms of media and questioning the demarcative lines between them.

## Plurimedial Combination

- 4 As media forms combine, plurimedial artifacts are created which “produce the effect of medial hybridity whose constituents can be traced back to originally heterogeneous media” (Wolf 2011: 5). In the creation of a hybrid piece, the message doesn't reside solely in one medium but exists across multiple media forms. The *seuils* become blurred and contested as each medium comes to rely on the other's presence in the new creation, forming an indivisible partnership. An example of plurimedial combination in Houellebecq's œuvre is the photo-novel *Lanzarote* (2000). This piece is composed of a fictional text and a collection of Houellebecq's own photographs of Lanzarote. The novel follows a frustrated middle-aged man on holiday and a cult on the island. The novel is fictional, however the presence of Houellebecq's photographs adds a sense of realism and authenticity to the piece. *Lanzarote* is described as a  *récit*  on the Flammarion cover, evoking non-fictional texts such as a  *récit de voyage*  or  *récit de vie* , further blurring the lines between autobiography and fiction. The various editions of *Lanzarote* present the photographs in different ways to different effects. The first edition of the hypotext places the photographs after the text but holds them together in the one  *coffret* . The reader is free to look upon the images at any point in the reading process, permitting multiple subjective ways of experiencing the piece. However, in newer editions, such as the 2004 English language version, the photos are inserted into the text at seemingly random intervals. They often come at pivotal points in the story; for example, a photograph of arid plants interrupts the climatic moment of a sex scene (58), disrupting the flow of the narrative thread and the dramatic tension. The interspersed photographs disturb the linearity and cohesion of the narrative in this edition yet they, as with the  *coffret* , add new subjective interpretive possibilities. The reader is pushed to consider the links between the image and the text, but this time in relation to particular scenes. Thus, whether the

photographs are presented separately or interspersed within the text, they present new semiotic and semantic possibilities for the reader to interpret.

- 5 As *Lanzarote* combines a fictional story with real photos, and image with text, the lines between the real and imagined and between autobiography and fiction become blurred and destabilised along with the boundaries between media. *Lanzarote* is both the text and the photographs; its world exists across the two media forms. Readers are called to interpret the overarching message of the image-text combination, to understand the piece through a transmedial lens. The themes of the text extend into the images; the photos continue the messages of the novel. There are no images of people, only empty land and plants; these life-less shots evoke the marginalisation of the characters and a sense of desolation. The photos constitute “imprints of poetry, those of desert lands that put man face to face with himself” (Roubard 2000).<sup>7</sup> Like poetry, they seek to be interpreted by the reader. When describing the ideal novel, Houellebecq asserted, “we should be able to open a novel at any page, and read it independently of its context [...] we need to conquer a certain lyrical freedom” (Houellebecq 1998: 40).<sup>8</sup> Through this plurimedial combination and the transmedial world that it conjures, Houellebecq privileges subjectivity and *lyrical freedom*. The text is not regarded as an untouchable sacred medium, exempt from multimedia interactions; rather text and image combine to present the story-world that can be read and experienced in subjective ways. Both media participate in the production of the themes of this piece and therefore neither can be neglected in its consideration. Other examples of plurimedial combination appear in Houellebecq’s exhibitions where he superimposes text upon image as will be discussed. Through this, Houellebecq encourages recognition of his photography, refusing to strictly limit himself to purely textual contributions.

## Expansive Adaptation

- 6 Just as *Lanzarote* exists across media, Houellebecq transmedially extends his texts in a vast range of adaptations. These transmedial adaptations of his own texts raise theoretical questions around originality, repetition and subjectivity. These adaptations do not seek to imitate the “original” piece (the hypotext) but instead change it in terms of medium and of content. Rather than creating clone-copies of the originals, Houellebecq employs adaptation as a means to expand the treatment of the issues in his novels into new directions with different media forms. Saint-Gelais argued that adaptations are not normally a form of transfictionality due to the “goal of diegetic equivalence, which is incompatible in principle with the archetypal transfictional processes of extrapolation and expansion” (Saint-Gelais 2011: 35).<sup>9</sup> In opposition to this statement, the transmedial type of adaptation that Houellebecq engages in does indeed employ diegetic developments. The adaptations are different from their hypotexts; they do not merely imitate and replicate but expand a virtual world. As the nature of Houellebecq’s adaptations are autographic, issues around authenticity and validity can be set aside. The worlds of his novels expand in new directions, at times in a coherent and consecutive manner, at others in a contradictory, *contrefictionnel* (166) way. The world folds outwards and the multiple media extensions exist laterally so “second is not to be secondary or inferior; likewise, to be first is not to be originary or authoritative” (Hutcheon 2006: XV). Within one fictional world can exist multiple possibilities, as noted by Doležel: “Fiction thrives on the contingency of worlds, which is distinctly affirmed through the idea of

multiple possible worlds” (Saint-Gelais 2011: 165).<sup>10</sup> Houellebecq’s adaptations assert this idea of multiplicity as each adaptation presents a new version of the fictional world. These extensions “put into question the limits that were supposed to be set in the original work” (71),<sup>11</sup> and therefore contest the teleological conception of the text as closed and authoritative. The issues that are raised are therefore about subjectivity, authority, and the role of the author. As one ending is replaced with another, the hypotext is just one of several possibilities refuting the “sacred” text ontology. Despite his own criticisms of monotheistic religions, to explore these multiple possibilities in his own works, Houellebecq paradoxically maintains an omnipotent stance over each subjective possibility.

- 7 Houellebecq is the director and screenwriter of the film *La Possibilité d'une île* (2008), an expansive adaptation of the novel of the same name (2005). The hypotext follows Daniel, a comedian, and his future clones who live on a post-apocalyptic earth. This film, despite staying with the same themes, has fundamental changes made to the plot; Daniel is entirely removed from the story which now concentrates instead on a false prophet. The film therefore opens the story in a different direction to the novel. Fans and critics expressed their disappointment: “It has nearly nothing in common with the novel” and “Extremely bad film, remote links to the novel (the cult, the theme of cloning)” (*Allociné* 2011).<sup>12</sup> Although the plot has been changed, the film preserves the topic of cloning. The cloning process depicted in both versions permits eternal life, however this life is deprived of love, sexual reproduction, attachment and joy. Cloning means existing without emotion or subjectivity; “In [*La Possibilité d'une île*], subjectivity proves to be the epistemological blind spot of humanity’s scientific quest; it is precisely that which cannot be observed with scientific tools” (Grass 2012: 139). The issues relating to cloning in the film and novel resemble the problems linked to adaptation; Houellebecq’s reflection on cloning can be read as a contribution to adaptation studies as both adaptation and cloning present issues of originality, subjectivity and repetition. According to Houellebecq, a clone-copy of either a human or a novel cannot truly produce new meaning. In altering the story in the film, Houellebecq avoids producing a clone copy of his novel, and instead extends the story laterally. This film is not a replica but a new subjective possibility, unlike the clones of Daniel that fill the hypotext. Thus through adaptation, Houellebecq has presented the issues of repetition and subjectivity in a meta-referential way. The theme of cloning had already appeared in *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998) in which Michel, a researcher, studies cloning in order to devise a means of reproducing without sex or love. The theme is also present in *Lanzarote*, through a sect seeking to achieve eternal life. Avoiding clone-copies, Houellebecq has dealt with the same themes through varied approaches in terms of storyline and media form, at times to the disappointment of the public and critics; “I had tried to adapt the themes but it was a complete failure with the public and the critics. In the end, maybe cinema is not made for that. Starting with the themes [...] is however a completely natural approach in the context of an exhibition” (Moulène 2012).<sup>13</sup> Notions of textual authority cannot be asserted against the existence of autographic *contrefictionnel* extensions. They indicate instead that there are many possible ways of presenting themes such as cloning in terms of both content and form. However, through governing the adaptations, Houellebecq paradoxically still asserts his own authority.
- 8 A second example of expansive adaptation is the graphic novel version of *Plateforme* (2014) written “en tandem” with Alain Dual and “co-signé” by Houellebecq (Vertaldi

2014). The piece is again a means to alter rather than repeat: “This graphic novel is nice for me, because I can improve in relation to the book” (ibid).<sup>14</sup> This graphic novel places excerpts from the novel into comic-strip frames but the vast majority of the original text has disappeared, at times modified, at others replaced by images. The graphic novel therefore closes textual parts of the hypotext and instead opens the story visually, giving the reader a new vision of the same world. Vertaldi describes the collaborative nature of the project, “Houellebecq and Dual corresponded throughout the creation of the book, as reflected in this email exchange from January 2012: ‘In the second square of strip 39, I would like to make Michel reply [...] with something flat and obvious first, before the indication that gives Valérie her chance’” (ibid.).<sup>15</sup> The visual elements added constitute an expansion of the key themes and issues evoked by the novel, such as prostitution and the commodification of the body. The graphic novel manipulates these issues, playing with the fetishization and objectification of the female body by presenting it in caricatured images. The text is not separated from the image but combines with it, allowing the message to inhabit both image and text to present the story world. In the final pages of the graphic novel, the terrorist attack of the hypotext is depicted through images alone. As such, it expands not only text into image but also extends the treatment of the novel’s themes by manipulating them through the visual form. In this graphic novel the text is not treated as sacred, but rather is one way amongst others to present the story. As Dual is a relatively unknown artist and the adaptation is into a popularised art form Houellebecq’s collaboration is unexpected and indicates a disregard for artistic puritanism. Houellebecq permits new popular means to experience his novels, opening it to the engagement of a different audience and accessing a new market position.

- 9 As well as the adaptations of Houellebecq’s novels, his poetry has been set to music. There are several CDs based on his poems with varying levels of his involvement including three CDs of music with Houellebecq reading his poems, *Présence humaine* with Bertrand Burgalat (2000), and *Le Sens du combat* (1996) and *Établissement d’un ciel d’alternance* (2007) with Jean-Jacques Birgé. In 2014, Jean-Louis Aubert produced an album of rock and folk songs based on *La Configuration du dernier rivage* (2013) entitled *Les Parages du vide : Aubert chante Houellebecq* (2014) with the permission and collaboration of Houellebecq. To assert Houellebecq’s involvement in the project, the CD cover contains what are described as *échanges*. This email correspondence between Aubert and Houellebecq not only tracks the creative process but also asserts the collaborative nature of the project. The title *échanges* highlights the means of communication, email correspondence, but also evokes the sharing of ideas as well as acting as a reminder of the exchange of capital (Bourdieu 1979) that is occurring. Houellebecq and Aubert gain cultural capital, as well as symbolic and economic capital thanks to this crossover of two notorious figures. Through this album, Aubert adopts the *posture* (Meizoz 2007) of a disciple to Houellebecq, and places himself within a lineage of artists who put poetry to music, such as Léo Ferré with Baudelaire. Through the merger of audiences, fans of retro French pop rock and readers of a Goncourt-winning novelist, the resulting piece opens new respective markets for both artists’ consumers. Moving beyond distinctions of high literature and low pop culture this album is a fusion that also acts as a testament to Houellebecq’s nostalgia for classic French rock. This idea of exchange (creative, cultural and capital) is evidenced in the title *Les Parages du vide : Aubert chante Houellebecq*. Houellebecq described one of his literary goals as to, “get poetry out of its ghetto”<sup>16</sup> on the TV show *Tout le monde en parle* (2000). By expanding his poetry into music, he is provoking a shift out of the literary “ghetto” and into the high streets of mainstream music. Houellebecq’s transmedial extensions into

popular music, and also into the graphic novel with *Plateforme*, provide Houellebecq with a new market position for his work while also permitting new ways of experiencing his creations. Through his collaboration on CDs and a graphic novel, he refutes limitations on the text and author, contesting artistic puritanism and marginalisation. Such adaptations demythologize the literary field and the power structures and dynamics that maintain it.

10 Houellebecq's photographic exhibition *Before Landing* at the Pavillon Carré de Baudouin in Paris in Winter 2014 re-opened the world of *La Carte et le Territoire*. The exhibition returns to the themes and issues of the novel, through both explicit and implicit references, extending and manipulating the themes into another medium. In the novel Jed Martin is an artist who photographs old Michelin maps of former countryside and obsolete industrial machinery. Jed's photos and the novel reveal nostalgia for an idealised rural France and disdain for the new France that is dominated by consumerism and tourism. Taken from an angle of 30 degrees, the same used by Jed, Houellebecq's shots portray the same vision. Houellebecq's photographs like Jed's, and like the novel more generally, focus with melancholic realism on the perdition of the French landscape and the museification of the country. Each section of the exhibition contributed to these overarching themes, from photographs of French regional products that reaffirmed the disappearing rural values of the countryside, to images of nature invaded by supermarkets. Textual interjections filled the exhibition rooms, statements reminiscent of the novel such as, "There are no new *museums* in reality. It's the *territory* which is becoming *museified*, France is turning into a huge open-air museum."<sup>17</sup> Two short documentaries further asserted the deindustrialisation and museification of France as a consequence of tourism, this time through moving image. This exhibition was described as an expansive adaptation: a selection of photos that "echo the visions of the novel" and represent "a visual extension that extends his novel *La Carte et le Territoire*" (*Dossier de Presse*, 2014).<sup>18</sup> Thus, although the photo exhibition contains little of the same text, has a different title, and is presented principally in a different medium, it is still recognised as a sort of expansive adaptation of the hypotext due to the identical thematic content, or content that is similar enough to be marketed as such.

11 One of the several standout pieces of text on the walls of the *Before Landing* exhibition was a plurimedial image with the text: "I didn't have any more real reasons to kill myself than the majority of people."<sup>19</sup> This line, though standalone at the time, is now also in *Soumission* (2016). The novel depicts the socio-political scene in France in 2022 when the Muslim brotherhood wins presidency. *Soumission* follows protagonist François in the build-up to this victory and then details the changes it brings including the end of female employment. The quotation used in *Before Landing* and *Soumission* provides a transmedial link between the pieces. A teleological interpretation of the text as a linear narrative contained within the text is challenged. As the concept of the frame is unsettled through shared transmedial messages across *Before Landing*, *La Carte et le territoire*, and *Soumission*, rather than analysing the individual works for their separate meanings and merits, consideration should also be given to the broader messages that exist across these works. One can consider that these three pieces all present an apprehensive vision of a France threatened by political, social and geographical changes. Though the visions of France's futures are contradictory, *contrefictionnel*, possibilities, they reveal an angst and pessimism about the country's future based on Houellebecq's contemporary anxieties. Such links indicate that each piece, including the non-textual photo exhibition,



contributes to the themes of Houellebecq's *œuvre* and therefore should not be marginalised or neglected.

Fig. 1. *Mission #001*



© Michel Houellebecq. Courtesy of the artist and Air de Paris, Paris. (Part of Carré de Baudouin Press Release).

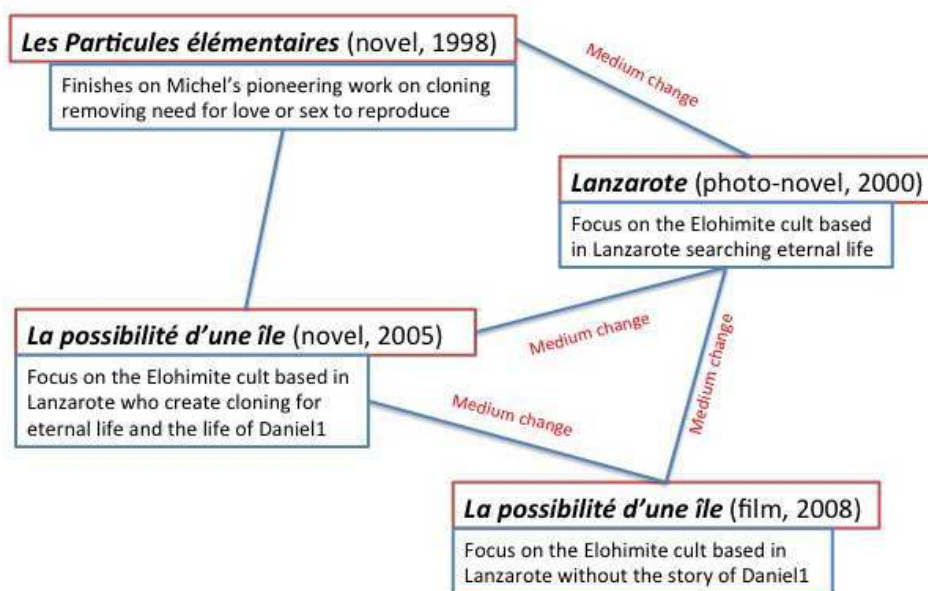
Fig. 2. *France #01*



© Michel Houellebecq. Courtesy of the artist and Air de Paris, Paris. (Part of Carré de Baudouin Press Release).

12 Houellebecq's adaptations can be better understood by considering them as forming "transfictional diaspora that replace the idea of text with that of networks that expand, at times in paradoxical ways" (Saint-Gelais and Wagner 2012).<sup>20</sup> These adaptations extend outwards into new subjective possibilities in a diasporic manner, drawing away from the concept of closed text. These diaspora can be beneficially illustrated through appropriation of a "modèle satellitaire" which "makes each derivative, whether complementary or transgressive, into a text that is fully turned towards the one that constitutes both the origin and centre of the system" (Saint-Gelais 2011: 313, see figure below).<sup>21</sup> This model shows how a world can cross media, at times paradoxically. The model suggests that there is no strict hierarchy, avoiding the notion of copy versus original. Houellebecq's expansive adaptations are a form of transmediality through which he designates the hypertext as one possibility amongst several. Thus, he challenges "a culture that, based on the notion of closure, founds its conception of the *œuvre* as being an autonomous whole, possessing a determined 'form', establishing its own 'code' and deploying a specific 'network of meaning'" (71).<sup>22</sup> The adaptations open the text to mass culture, placing Houellebecq into a more strategic market position as he expands his space of possibilities. This proves interestingly contradictory to Houellebecq's cultivation of a posture of a misanthropic reclusive author as he targets more (popular) parts of the market share. Houellebecq asserts that he is not only a writer, moving beyond the notion of mythologised author figure. The expanding virtual worlds found in Houellebecq's works are at once interconnected but also contradictory and non-linear. As such, they simultaneously attract audiences for their links while also putting into question teleological interpretations of textual integrity and authority.

Fig. 3. An example of a Satellite Model showing the linked network that presents the theme of cloning in Houellebecq's works.



© Ashley Harris.

## Post-Textual Works

- 13 Houellebecq's engagement with media includes participation in non-textual projects. This appears in two main forms: firstly, his appearances in other media, in particular as an actor, and secondly his non-textual creations. Houellebecq's non-textual media engagements reflect the posturing of the writer in contemporary culture; not restricted to writing, the post-textual author works on television, magazines, films, and exhibitions. Houellebecq has acted in three major films, *L'Enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* (2014), *Near Death Experience* (2014) and *Saint-Amour* (2016). In *Near Death Experience* and *Saint-Amour*, both written and directed by Delépine and Kervern, Houellebecq attempts two types of acting roles: the first is serious and sombre; the second is humorous and light. He has productively used his notoriety to gain these opportunities to act, and this same reputation provides the respective films with a means to attract an audience and gain economic and cultural capital. In Nicloux's film *L'Enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* (2014), Houellebecq himself is the star. The film depicts a fictional version of Houellebecq's real three-day disappearance in 2011 as a mafia kidnapping. This is a ludic allusion to the reaction of the press who suggested Al-Qaida at the time; as Houellebecq states in the film: "It's a modern age thing, you're not there for a week and they think you're dead."<sup>23</sup> This film plays with his disappearance, showing the spectator a fictional version of events described by *Arte Journal* as, "fiction et documentaire" (2014). The film relies on the viewer's knowledge of Houellebecq's reputation and his Barthesian myths; throughout the film he complains in slow drawl, often with a cigarette (held in his characteristic style between middle and ring finger) and drink in hand. He interrupts, passes rude remarks and dresses in baggy shirts and a parka. The scenes of the film are used to evoke the *mythologies* of Houellebecq that he and the media have cultivated. Houellebecq performs these mythologies, making the whole film a parody. The film challenges Houellebecq's mythologised image by upholding it, showing it to be increasingly ridiculous and exaggerated, proving to be a form of caricature: "both an 'imitation' (representation) and a satirical transformation" (Genette 1982: 9).<sup>24</sup> The caricature is so exaggerated that the mythologies are undermined, rendered comical. By acting his caricature, Houellebecq demythologises his own myth and that of the author more generally. Thus, whether he is playing someone else or himself, Houellebecq is productively using his notoriety to access more capital across media forms but also to continue contesting the mythologization of authorship and the limitations placed upon the author.
- 14 The first projects in Houellebecq's artistic career were two unreleased short silent films, *Cristal de souffrance* (1972) and *Déséquilibres* (1982). After achieving commercial success as a writer, Houellebecq directed the short film, *La Rivière*, a sixteen minute film for a series called "L'Érotisme vu par..." for *Canal+*. Just as the ideal novel should, according to Houellebecq, "conquer a certain lyrical freedom,"<sup>25</sup> this same objective is applied to this short film. There has no clear narrative thread but instead it is composed of sweeping shots of a river and forests, and follows a group of young women living in community. There is almost no dialogue and the shots are long, often focusing on the female body or material; a repeated shot of a wooden wall lasts around twenty seconds each time. The film is not hurried, but prolonged and pensive. Houellebecq describes the desire of silent cinema as to "constitute an investigation into the conditions of perception" (1998: 24).<sup>26</sup> Films without dialogue embrace perception and subjective interpretation. As was

indicated in the study of his adaptations, Houellebecq encourages the notion that a piece of creative work should be considered as containing multiple interpretive possibilities. The values of perception, subjectivity and lyrical freedom have influenced this film leaving the spectator to interpret the film.

- 15 In Summer 2016, Houellebecq created an exhibition for Palais de Tokyo called *Rester Vivant*, recycling the title of his 1991 essay. This 1500m<sup>2</sup> exhibition was composed of eighteen rooms of photographs, installations and films by Houellebecq and collaborators that formed a kaleidoscope of Houellebecq's creative works, passions, memories, ideologies and anxieties transmedially presented across media. Jean de Loisy, the *commissaire d'expositions* at the Palais emphasised that the exhibition was not “‘about’ him [...] but invented ‘by’ him” (Loisy 2015).<sup>27</sup> Loisy's emphasis on *par* highlights Houellebecq's creative role and also the unusual nature of an author being the creator rather than subject of such an exhibition. De Loisy stated, “It will be Houellebecq's world, you will go from room to room and a novel will take shape in your head, accompanied with images and sounds” (Loisy 2015).<sup>28</sup> This *roman* is not textual but multifaceted, multimedia and fluid. The *monde* extends across the boundaries of the media present. The exhibition consisted of paintings of his poetry, a jukebox of his music, photographs and installations based on the themes of his novels, amongst other pieces such as video extracts from his films. The overall effect was the illusion of a coherent and multimedia *monde houellebecquien* that goes beyond text and designates Houellebecq as more than an author.
- 16 Three main currents were notable in the exhibition: echoes of his previous works, collaboration and autobiography. For certain rooms, Houellebecq extracted material from earlier pieces, taking unaltered excerpts from the films *La Rivière* and *La Possibilité d'une île*, and photographs from the *Before Landing* exhibition and *Lanzarote*. One room, the *fumoir* contained a jukebox playing all albums including or influenced by Houellebecq, from Aubert to Iggy Pop to Carla Bruni. In other rooms, themes of earlier pieces were evoked but adapted into new media, producing further cases of expansive adaptation. One can consider a collaboration piece with Renaud Marchand, that had pages from *La Possibilité d'une île* spread across a table alongside a selection of coloured vials and gas canisters. The theme of cloning and adaptation reappeared as a board on the wall noted the chemical composition of characters Daniel and Esther, indicating that the coloured vials supposedly contain these components. Another room was filled with Houellebecq's photographs from trips abroad (the images were entitled “Tourisme #001,” etc.) above a floor mosaic of souvenir place mats, all coming together to evoke the principal theme of *Plateforme*, tourism. Through such rooms, Houellebecq again expanded the themes of his novels, allowing a new kind of interaction with them and re-emphasizing the multiplicity of ways to present a theme. In addition to the collaboration with Marchand, the exhibition also included collaborative work with Robert Combas who painted large colourful canvases with Houellebecq's poems written upon them. Houellebecq has addressed this technique of making something new from previous work using the image that opens the exhibition as his example; the statement “il est temps de faire vos jeux” was superimposed upon a darkening sky: “that phrase is an extract of one of my poems, ‘La Mémoire de la mer’, in *Le Sens du combat* [...] that fragment goes with the image, and creates an inseparable whole” (Houellebecq 2016: 21).<sup>29</sup> The line is separated from its hypotext and instead framed by a suggestive image; the semantic possibilities of the line are altered. Houellebecq's photo and this line of poetry are now “indissociable,” forming a new plurimedial combination. However, as this line remains a “fragment” of its original

poem, the two works constitute different subjective possibilities that share this transfictional link, confirming that Houellebecq is creating an expanding transmedial world constituted of subjective interpretive and creative possibilities. Certain sections of the exhibition were unmistakably autobiographical, in particular two rooms dedicated to Clément, his deceased corgi: “There, it’s as if there were an autobiographical chapter in the midst of non-autobiographical chapters” (Houellebecq 2016: 15).<sup>30</sup> The predominantly non-textual media of the exhibition are an unexpected choice of form for an author. Like his characters, Houellebecq is defining himself through media other than text. To describe his work on the exhibition he states, “I am actually more visual than anything else” (Houellebecq 2016: 13).<sup>31</sup> In a cultural context that still favours sacralised conceptions of author and text, this exhibition challenges the teleological notion of a “closed” and authoritative text and refutes artistic restrictions on the author. Houellebecq has created an exhibition in which he asserts himself as photographer, singer, poet, and filmmaker, removing focus from the text onto a transmedial world instead.

## Conclusion

- 17 By investigating three observable types of media activity, this article has shown that Houellebecq moves beyond text to create a transmedial œuvre. Through plurimedial combinations, Houellebecq contests “closed” interpretations of the text as a story-world extends across media. The text is not an untouchable sacred medium and other media cannot be neglected. This same is true of Houellebecq’s adaptations as they extend the themes and worlds of the hypotexts, exploring new, at times *contrefictionnel*, subjective possibilities. This diaspora of adaptation puts into question the concept of an authoritative hypotext, refuting the idea of copy versus original. This way of analysing adaptations places focus on the transmedial processes rather than focusing on adaptation as secondary. As more subjective possibilities are opened, notions of textual authority are disturbed. A paradox emerges as Houellebecq both asserts the multiplicity of interpretative possibilities while taking a dictatorially omnipotent approach to his work. Houellebecq’s post-textual short films and his 2016 exhibition reveal that he is presenting himself as a post-textual author, asserting himself as more than an author, an objective that is confirmed by his roles as an actor. These films show how Houellebecq continues to contest authorial myths while also productively using his notoriety to access various kinds of Bourdieusian capital. This article has sought to show the advantages of viewing an author’s work through a transmedial lens. Looking beyond the text has opened up new fertile ways of understanding Houellebecq’s œuvre and as such each of the types of activity mentioned in this article deserves to be addressed further as Houellebecq continues his career. These transmedial projects influence, link, and add to Houellebecq’s textual work and as such should not be marginalised or treated as inferior. Through his transmedial work, Houellebecq deconstructs the stability of the text, challenging its integrity while producing questions around its place and value within the current multimedia cultural climate. These techniques allow Houellebecq to protest against the restrictive artistic hierarchies as well as allowing him to address the domination of mass media. By using other media, Houellebecq manages to concurrently protest both the marginalisation of the authors’ non-literary work in the literary field and the marginalisation of literature in the larger cultural horizon. In doing so, he also addresses

and engages with the broader cultural context, placing himself into a more strategic market position. Through his transmedial work, Houellebecq thus promotes the new possibilities of artistic production within an expanding space of possibilities, a move that has meant challenging the limitation and mythologisation of the author and the text.

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## NOTES

1. All translations my own: "rendre invisible tout un pan du dispositif qu'il a mis en place dans la lumière médiatique (chansons, poèmes, films, expositions, correspondances publiées, émissions radio et tv, site internet, etc.)."
2. "La peau du spectateur ordinaire."
3. "J'en ai à peu près fini avec le monde comme narration – le monde des romans et des films, le monde de la musique aussi. Je ne m'intéresse plus qu'au monde comme juxtaposition – celui de la poésie, de la peinture."
4. "Les distinctions antérieures entre films, clips, actualités, publicités, témoignages humains, reportages tendirent à s'effacer au profit d'une notion de spectacle généralisé."
5. "Le phénomène par lequel au moins deux textes, du même auteur ou non, se rapportent conjointement à une même fiction."

6. "Le monde fictionnel est le produit de ces épisodes mais donne l'impression de leur donner naissance."
7. "Empreintes de poésie, celles des terres désertiques qui mettent l'homme face à lui-même."
8. "Un roman devrait pouvoir s'ouvrir à n'importe quelle page, et être lu indépendamment du contexte [...] il faudrait conquérir une certaine liberté lyrique."
9. "[V]isée d'une équivalence diégétique, incompatible en principe avec les opérations exemplairement transfictionnelles qui sont l'extrapolation et l'expansion."
10. "La fiction se nourrit de la contingence des mondes, laquelle est affirmée avec force à travers l'idée des mondes possibles."
11. "Remettent en question les limites censées être fixées dans l'œuvre originale."
12. "[Il] ne possède presque aucun point commun avec le roman" and "Film extrêmement mauvais, rapport lointain avec le livre (la secte, le thème du clonage)."
13. "[J]'avais tenté d'adapter les thèmes, mais l'échec public et critique a été total. Peut-être, au fond, le cinéma n'est-il pas fait pour cela. Partir des thèmes [...] est en revanche une démarche absolument naturelle dans le cadre d'une exposition d'art."
14. "C'est agréable, pour moi, cette BD, parce que je peux améliorer par rapport au livre."
15. "Houellebecq et Dual ont correspondu en permanence pendant la réalisation de l'album, à l'exemple de ce mail échangé en janvier 2012: "Dans la case 2 de la planche 39, j'aurais envie de faire plutôt répondre à Michel [...] un truc plat, évident, en premier, avant l'indication qui peut donner sa chance à Valérie'."
16. "Sortir la poésie de son ghetto."
17. "Il n'y a pas de nouveaux musées en réalité. C'est le territoire qui se muséifie, la France se transforme en un immense musée à ciel ouvert."
18. "font écho aux visions du roman" and "une extension visuelle qui prolonge son roman *La Carte et le Territoire*."
19. "Je n'avais pas davantage que la plupart de ces gens, de véritables raisons de me tuer."
20. "Diaspora transfictionnelle qui remplace l'idée de texte par celle de réseau en expansion parfois paradoxale."
21. "Fait de chaque dérivé, sage ou transgressif, un texte tout entier tourné vers celui qui constitue à la fois l'origine et le centre du système."
22. "Une culture qui fonde sur l'idée de clôture sa conception de l'œuvre comme totalité autonome, possédant une 'forme' déterminée, instaurant son propre 'code' et déployant un 'réseau de sens' spécifique."
23. "C'est un truc de l'époque moderne, on n'est pas là pour une semaine et on est considéré mort."
24. "À la fois une 'imitation' (représentation) et une transformation satirique."
25. "Conquérir une certaine liberté lyrique."
26. "Constituer une enquête sur les conditions de la perception."
27. "Sur' lui [...] mais inventée 'par' lui."
28. "Ce sera le monde de Houellebecq, vous passerez de salle en salle et un roman va se constituer dans votre tête accompagné par des images et des sons"
29. "Cette phrase est extraite d'un de mes poèmes, 'la mémoire de la mer', dans *Le Sens du combat* [...] c'est ce fragment-là qui va avec l'image, qui crée une totalité indissociable."
30. "Là, c'est comme s'il y avait un chapitre autobiographique au milieu de chapitres qui ne le sont pas."
31. "Je suis quand-même plus visuel qu'autre chose."



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## ABSTRACTS

This article analyses Michel Houellebecq's use of multimedia in order to reveal how he creates transmedial worlds that cross media thresholds. Through plurimedial combinations, expansive adaptations, and post-textual work, Houellebecq extends the realms of creative intervention. Through these three types of activity, Houellebecq troubles textual boundaries and the sacralised and mythologised notions of author and text. His transmedial undertaking addresses artistic marginalisation while encouraging new forms of creative production in a growing space of possibilities.

Cet article présente une analyse des œuvres multimédiatiques de Michel Houellebecq afin de démontrer la création de mondes transmédiaux. À travers la création de combinaisons plurimédiales, d'adaptations expansives et d'œuvres post-textuelles, Houellebecq vise l'extension du domaine des interventions créatives. Il déstabilise les seuils entre les médias et les conceptions sacralisées du texte et de l'écrivain. Houellebecq conteste la marginalisation artistique et encourage de nouvelles formes de production artistiques dans un espace de possibilités croissant.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** transmédiabilité, Michel Houellebecq, adaptation, transfictionnalité, multimédia

**Keywords:** transmediality, Michel Houellebecq, adaptation, transfictionality, multimedia

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