

WRITING THE CONTEMPORARY:
THE BANAL AND THE INFRA-ORDINARY
IN THE WORKS OF
JEAN-PHILIPPE TOUSSAINT AND NICHOLSON BAKER

Sara Eve McArthur Richardson

University College London

Ph.D



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Signed:.....

Some sections of Chapter 5 have already appeared in condensed form in my article 'Space, Projection and the Banal in the works of Jean-Philippe Toussaint and Nicholson Baker', *Space: New Dimensions in French Studies* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005)

To my father, mother, and husband, without whose support I never could have reached

The End.

ABSTRACT

This comparative study of Nicholson Baker and Jean-Philippe Toussaint addresses the importance of the everyday in contemporary literature and theory. I examine the contemporary in the contexts of knowledge, identity, politics, media, history, urban space, and psychology. What emerges is a consensus of pessimism concerning the contemporary subject in an increasingly homogenised, narcissistic, a-historical, information-saturated yet unmappable world. There are dissenting voices, however, some of which designate the everyday as a realm that escapes hegemonic culture. I undertake an exploration of contemporary literature, which exhibits a preoccupation both with pessimistic subject predicaments and with the everyday, in particular an approach to the latter which is akin to Perec's 'infra-ordinary'. My subsequent analysis of Toussaint and Baker yields some contradictions: the infra-ordinary seems both conceptually close to, and yet antithetical to the banal, itself integral to the everyday. To resolve this tension, a deeper understanding of the banal is required, and I make use of Sami-Ali to this end. Sami-Ali's psychoanalytic theory reveals the banal to be a critical distillation of the pessimistic subject predicaments I initially identified. The infra-ordinary, however, while close to the banal, ultimately opposes it. I argue that the infra-ordinary and the banal are thus opposing subsets of the everyday, optimistic and pessimistic construals of the same reality. I then question whether for Toussaint and Baker, the presence of the banal, in both form and content, renders their own texts banal. The answer is no: while sometimes employing a banal aesthetic, and negotiating and drawing on the banal, ultimately their texts counter and oppose it, through the use of the infra-ordinary and by other means. I conclude that Toussaint and Baker are quintessentially contemporary, both in their negotiation of the banal and the infra-ordinary, and in their development of a post-postmodern, or 'neo-realist' contemporary form.

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CHAPTER 1: THE CONTEMPORARY SUBJECT

Introduction

Cette surabondance [d'événements][...] pose un problème [...] aux contemporanéistes – dénomination à laquelle l'épaisseur événementielle des dernières décennies risque d'ôter toute signification.¹

A thesis which takes 'the contemporary' as its subject faces no small problem in defining its central concept. For a thesis written at the turn of the twenty-first century, 'the contemporary' is a term which more than ever eludes definition. The above quotation from Marc Augé identifies one reason for this, the sheer density of events, to which I shall turn later in this chapter.

There are other obstacles, however, deriving from the resistance of the word itself to definition. Its etymology is that of sharing the same time. This is its first and oldest meaning, as when we speak of a writer's contemporaries. Its more recent meaning is that which is present, current, or indeed 'modern'. While what is meant by 'contemporary' in this second sense will depend on context (whether one is speaking of contemporary art, contemporary politics, contemporary lifestyle and so on), 'the contemporary' meaning 'the present' has two further, and often overlapping, subdivisions. It can be used simply as an uneasily defined temporal span. 'The contemporary' is commonly used to signify: at this very moment, this year, any time in the last 10 years, the last 20, 30, 40 years, or even any time since the Second World War. There will be occasions when the use of the term is given an even greater span. One could speculate that in the twentieth century,

¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), pp. 40-41.

'contemporary' replaced 'modern' once modernism became associated with its particular forms and visions, and that something analogous is happening with postmodernism.

The particular forms and ideas which somehow typify 'our' particular period (whatever span we give it) thus constitute a further sense in which 'the contemporary' is commonly used. What distinguishes it from the modern and postmodern, terms with which it is often interchanged, is that 'the contemporary' will doubtless continue to be used to refer to quite different future time periods, with their own set of characteristics, rather than solidifying into a particular historical label. So 'the contemporary' resists firm definition in a number of ways: it is ambiguous not only as regards its referent but also in its function as a temporal shifter, in common with the word 'now'. The benefit of this resistance is that 'the contemporary' can frame a discourse that wishes to include both the modern and the postmodern, without limiting itself to either. What this resistance to definition entails is an inevitable provisionality in the use of the term 'contemporary' while this thesis pursues its aim; namely, to identify some of the forms and visions which characterise the uneasily bounded time of 'now', and thus to distinguish the contemporary from the merely current. To this end, I propose to explore what two currently publishing authors, at first glance very different from one another, reveal about the contemporary – in terms of both literature and the world beyond it.

There are various reasons for a comparative study of the texts of Jean-Philippe Toussaint and Nicholson Baker. Their apparent stylistic contrast belies a great many points of intersection, and thus can illustrate what contemporary literature shares across different, if overlapping, cultural heritages. They seem to have broken with the postmodern, yet without returning to a state of theoretical innocence. In studying their work it became apparent that a close and comparative study would also yield insight into what it means to write the contemporary. By 'write the contemporary', I mean that they not only describe but contribute to the creation of that which is distinctively contemporary.

In examining their texts, and how they fit into the literary landscape, I explore what makes them contemporary (rather than simply current) writers. I will argue that contemporary writing deserves the name not purely by virtue of the first meaning of the word, i.e., that it is of our own time. Such writing would be merely current writing, or contemporary in the narrow sense. To be contemporary in the fuller sense intended here, writers must also exhibit characteristics which belong to or help to define the current time. Thus it will be possible for writing to be current, yet not contemporary, and vice versa.

With this aim in mind, I must first address the question of what the contemporary means for us, at this point in time. The thesis opens therefore with two questions, the first of which is as follows: if we defer for the time being the choice of possible temporal parameters mentioned above, what are the multiple characteristics of the contemporary that enter our definitions regardless of temporality? (It will become apparent that some characteristics only obtain in the more recent past and others do so prior to even the notional boundary of the Second World War). The second preliminary question which frames this thesis is this: using the conclusions arrived at in answering the first question, is there such a distinctive thing as contemporary writing, and if so, what forms does it take? In answering the first question I will examine a variety of influential and related ideas, and show how two concepts associated with the everyday, namely, the banal and the infra-ordinary, can be used to encapsulate a number of preoccupations for writers (in this thesis, novelists) and theorists today. These two concepts will assist us in defining the contemporary, in that they suggest ways of making sense of a wide variety of phenomena that are specific to our time.

To answer the second, related question concerning the form of contemporary writing, I argue that the *œuvres* of Jean-Philippe Toussaint and Nicholson Baker represent two important and complementary examples of the contemporary as characterised in the remainder of this chapter. I argue that in both their post-postmodern form, and in their negotiation of the banal and the infra-ordinary, two sides of an inescapable contemporary

idea, they demonstrate their engagement with, and insertion into, that which defines the contemporary in literature.

The aim of Chapter 1, then, is to begin by addressing the first question of the thesis, namely, to identify the characteristics that are peculiar to our own time. I explore various ideas about the contemporary, most of which are pessimistic about the role and capacity of the subject as agent, and trace the connections between them. I also identify dissenting voices of optimism in relation to our contemporary first world societies and look at how these contradict notions of the death of art/politics/meaning/culture/the subject and so on. This optimism identifies the 'everyday' as a domain which resists the pessimists' diagnosis.

Chapter 2 explores how the ideas addressed in Chapter 1 manifest themselves in the literary arena, by examining a number of Toussaint's and Baker's peers. This serves to contextualise my later discussion of their texts. I demonstrate how the pessimistic and optimistic attitudes are clearly key preoccupations of the writers I have selected, as well as of other authors writing today. It becomes apparent that the 'everyday' can be construed not only in positive terms, but also as a more pessimistic view of subject experience.

Chapters 3 and 4 introduce Toussaint's and Baker's work in the context of the contemporary predicaments and paradoxes set out thus far. I suggest in Chapter 3 that Michel de Certeau's everyday 'ruses' and 'pratiques' that are visible in Toussaint's and Baker's texts, are akin to Perec's 'infra-ordinaire', and I adopt Perec's term for a clearer definition of this more optimistic view of the everyday. I demonstrate how the infra-ordinary is a central preoccupation of Toussaint's and Baker's work. Chapter 4 examines the form of Toussaint's and Baker's texts. I argue that they employ forms which constitute both a departure from and continuation of experimental (both modern and postmodern) predecessors, and that this departure consists of a return to the real and to narrative. I also contend that their form is uniquely suited to the subject of the infra-ordinary.

Chapter 5 sees the analysis of their works drawing out an apparent conflict: not only do Toussaint's and Baker's texts exhibit the optimistic infra-ordinary, but also many of the more pessimistic subject positions discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. Furthermore, the infra-ordinary itself, as subset of the everyday, seems both close to and yet opposed to the banal. In order to disentangle these related but conflicting aspects of the everyday, further theorisation is required. This comes in the form of Sami-Ali's psychoanalytic theory of the banal. I use Sami-Ali's theory to draw together the various pessimistic theories of the contemporary. I argue that, viewed from this perspective, the banal emerges as the alternative and pessimistic mode of the everyday. Chapter 5 concludes with the questions that Sami-Ali's theory provokes in relation to Toussaint and Baker: if characteristics of the banal are visibly present in Toussaint's and Baker's texts, does this mean that their work is itself necessarily banal, or can there be such a thing as a banal aesthetic?

Chapter 6 attempts to answer these questions. I draw on Sami-Ali's idea of what a banal aesthetic might look like and how it might function, and expand the notion with reference to Arthur Danto's contextual theory of art. I also argue there that the banal and the infra-ordinary are antagonistic subsets of the everyday, and that the banal can be resisted both by the infra-ordinary and by a banal aesthetic – both of which are forms of 'projection', for Sami-Ali the antithesis of the banal.

Toussaint's and Baker's work is demonstrably 'contemporary' because despite the apparent presence of the banal, it in fact counteracts it either via a banal aesthetic or by other forms of projection (of which the infra-ordinary is one). In doing so, both writers negotiate the banal and the infra-ordinary, ideas that in one form or another are central to influential theories of contemporary life and art. I conclude that no understanding of the contemporary is complete without some reference to these two opposing currents of the everyday, and that Toussaint's and Baker's work, which negotiates them both in content and in form, can justifiably be said to be 'writing the contemporary' in the sense that I gave to that expression, above.

One final point should be noted before proceeding: it will become apparent that although some features of this analysis have a global application, the contemporary with which this thesis is chiefly concerned is the contemporary of affluent, first world societies, and it is fully acknowledged that for millions of human beings, it is a contemporary that has nothing in common with their own. With this qualification, I turn now to the question of theorising the contemporary.

This chapter focuses – as does the whole thesis – on the *subject*. The place of the subject is always implied by any attempt to theorise; the etymology of the word ‘theory’ is looking and contemplation, and hence that of singular perspective.² It is appropriate, then, that the subject should be an organising principle of the thesis, concerned as it is with both the insertion of the subject into social reality, and with the forms of literary attempts to define that subjectivity.

The place of the subject is first examined in terms of the possibility of theorising at all. I then examine how the contemporary subject is faced with a number of social and cultural paradoxes. The first of these is that of a society whose cult of the individual increases in proportion to the homogeneity of individuals. This is linked to the prevalence of ‘non-lieux’ in everyday life. A second paradox concerns an ever-increasing access to information that may actually inhibit the production of meaning, and how this contributes to a loss of agency and a sense that the forces affecting our lives have become in some way inconceivable, or ‘unmappable’.

Further paradoxes are then explored in relation to our perception of time, which lead on to the question of whether we have in fact arrived at ‘the death of the subject’. I conclude this chapter by suggesting a rather more optimistic view of the subject as continuing to exist in the interstices of the hegemonic culture.

² See *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. by James A. H. Murray and others, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, repr. London: BCA, 1994), p. 902.

1.1 The Uncertain Theorist

For many, the contemporary is closely associated with postmodernism. The very existence of the category of ‘contemporary theory’ is, as Fredric Jameson has noted, a postmodern phenomenon, involving as it does the effacement of boundaries and distinctions between high and popular culture, and the eclectic mixture of different disciplines:

A generation ago there was still a technical discourse of professional philosophy [...] alongside which one could still distinguish that quite different discourse of the other academic disciplines – of political science, for example, or sociology or literary criticism. Today, increasingly, we have a kind of writing simply called ‘theory’ which is all or none of those things at once.³

However, notwithstanding the large part that postmodernism must play in this analysis of the contemporary, ‘the contemporary’ will not here be taken as simply reducible to ‘the postmodern’. The latter term suffers both from imprecision (much discourse on the postmodern begins by confessing the impossibility of defining it), and also from a too narrowly theoretical remit – one suspects, with Jameson, that what is most postmodern is theorising the postmodern itself:

Postmodernism, postmodern consciousness, may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility, which consists primarily in the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications.⁴

My discussion of the contemporary will exceed the postmodern. This may not be a problem for postmodernists, however, if they hold, like Jameson, that ‘the postmodern is [...] the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses [...] must make their way.’⁵ But if contemporary theory, at any rate, is a predominantly postmodern activity, what characteristics do the variants share? Their central feature seems to be one of groundlessness, or of decentring. Lyotard famously described the postmodern as

³ Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), p. 112.

⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. ix.

⁵ *Postmodernism*, p. 6.

‘l’incrédulité à l’égard des métarécits’, towards the idea that one could have a privileged discourse grounded in truth, that could evaluate all other discourses in its own terms.⁶ Contemporary theory seems obliged to insist on its lack of privileged status, to deny any metanarrative pretensions. As Jameson says, contemporary theoretical discourse ‘must not emit propositions, and it must not have the appearance of making primary statements or of having positive (or “affirmative”) content’.⁷ This is a difficult position for theory to be in, since the act of theorising would seem to presuppose the very goals which are forbidden to it. So how did it arrive at this state of affairs?

One might argue that groundlessness is the logical outcome of the act of theorising. Since the Enlightenment, with its goal of emancipation from the oppression of superstition and prejudice, theory has most often taken the role of unmasking ideology. Atheist, Marxist, feminist, and psychoanalytic discourses are a few of those aimed at the demystification of a prevailing order whose truths were then recast as nothing more than fiction, or belief, or myth, and whose purpose was usually revealed as domination. However, the demystification did not stop at specific discourses (religious, capitalist, patriarchal etc.); it turned on itself. As Slavoj Žižek asks:

Does not the critique of ideology involve a privileged place, somehow exempted from the turmoils of social life, which enables some subject-agent to perceive the very hidden mechanism that regulates social visibility and non-visibility? Is not the claim that we can accede to this place the most obvious case of ideology?⁸

The worry that anti-ideological discourse is itself ideological has played out in a number of ways. Structuralist and post-structuralist critiques of language have been very influential, even in relation to language that claims to de-mystify. Where Derrida exposed the privileging of speech over the supposedly secondary and degraded activity of writing, for Michel de Certeau it is rather theoretical or written knowledge which is given priority over

⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1994), p. 7.

⁷ *Postmodernism*, p. 392.

⁸ *Mapping Ideology*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), p. 3.

orality. Writing – that which defines political, scientific (supposedly non-narrative) discourse – is contrasted with ‘le monde magique des voix et de la tradition.’⁹ Rhetoric and narrative are seen as degraded forms deriving from the oral, and requiring explanation in terms of expert or purely denotative ‘written’ language. These kinds of critique have helped to bring writing, and thus theory, under suspicion, as acts of distancing, flattening, and translation: ‘elle [la domination du travail scripturaire] suppose une “traductibilité de tous les langages (iconiques, gestuels ou sonores) dans la langue naturelle quotidienne”’.¹⁰

The effect of such ideas has led to the conception of meaning as not present or substantive, but as somehow arising ‘in between’. In one such conception, ‘in-between’ equates, for Lyotard, to the figurative, the repressed other of rhetoricity that comes to disrupt conceptual and discursive signification, both from beyond discourse (the referent) and from within it (the plasticity of letters).¹¹ What such theories of language share is a prioritisation of relationships over entities, instead of the reverse, which traditionally prevails. As Anthony Wilden explains: ‘the Cartesian “revolution” made the crucial absolutist and analytical error (for us) of unjustifiably conferring a privileged ontological status on entities (“substance”) as opposed to relationships (“attributes”, “accidents”).’¹² For Baudrillard, even the poles of opposition on which meaning relies (real/fake, sender/receiver, form/content, referent/representation) have collapsed into one another, rendering discursive distance impossible, and meaning provisional.¹³

Where, then, does this leave the subject who wishes to theorise? One could say that it leaves her primarily in a state of uncertainty, but that in this she should not feel alone. The rise of uncertainty has been documented not only in the arts but in the realm of

⁹ Michel de Certeau, *L’Invention du quotidien: 1, Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), p. 199.

¹⁰ *L’Invention du quotidien*, p. 234.

¹¹ ‘On peut passer à la figure en manifestant que tout discours a son vis-à-vis, l’objet dont il parle, qui est là-bas, comme son désigné dans un horizon: vue bordant le discours. Et on peut passer dans la figure sans quitter le langage parce qu’elle y est logée [...]’, Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, Figure* (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1971), p. 13.

¹² Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972; repr 1977), p. 215.

¹³ See the more detailed discussion of this later in the chapter in Section 1.3.

science. Its impact has been felt widely, since scientific knowledge makes claims of direct correspondence with reality, and, as Lyotard notes: 'le savoir scientifique exige l'isolement d'un jeu de langage, le dénotatif; et l'exclusion des autres.'¹⁴ The discoveries of quantum mechanics and atomic physics that calculate probability rather than determine states of reality, or Heisenberg's principle that binds increased uncertainty to increased accuracy of measurement, parallel the modern and postmodern intuitions that the referent may be in principle unknowable.

The uncertainty or groundlessness facing a contemporary theorist is thus not limited to her own domain. Perhaps the best way to describe the subject's position in regard to theorising is to say that uncertainty translates into Richard Rorty's succinct formulation: 'the idea that truth [is] made rather than found'.¹⁵ This persistent idea has grown since the Enlightenment to become a defining characteristic of knowledge as we enter the 21st century. It renders attractive an assessment of ideas not in terms of their truth value, but in the context of the system in which they were produced. In cybernetic theory, particular ideologies are no longer seen as based on a set of beliefs and concepts that facilitate domination, but on the blind yet effective demands of the system that engendered them. This intellectual move somewhat resembles the replacement of God with natural selection as the force behind evolution.

The subject who wishes to theorise may therefore be encouraged or discouraged by the surrounding context of critical uncertainty and 'performance not truth'. If pessimistic about theory's ability to address the ideological, she might consider Žižek's perspective on the role of contemporary theory. If we are tempted to feel that the idea of a critical distance between ideology and reality is itself ideological, and that 'the only non-ideological position is to renounce the very notion of extra-ideological reality',¹⁶ Žižek reminds us that

¹⁴ *La Condition postmoderne*, p. 45.

¹⁵ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; repr. 1997), p. 3.

¹⁶ *Mapping Ideology*, p. 17.

such a postmodern ‘solution’ is ‘*ideology par excellence*’¹⁷ – since it must entail the rejection of critical thinking itself, and submission to the status quo. (This abdication of critical responsibility is precisely the position which anti-postmodernists insist postmodernists adopt, or are forced to accept.) Instead, Žižek suggests that we maintain an ‘impossible position’:¹⁸

ideology is not all: it is possible to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance from it, *but this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any positively determined reality* – the moment we yield to this temptation, we are back in ideology (original emphasis).¹⁹

An empty position, an uncertain position, might we not conclude that theorising is a self-defeating position? On the contrary, embracing uncertainty may be more liberating than its opposite; as Jameson says of the ‘winner loses’ dynamic in grand unifying theories: ‘what happens is that the more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or logic – the Foucault of the prisons book is the obvious example – the more powerless the reader comes to feel.’²⁰ And not only the reader: the more convincing the vision of a system that dominates us, the less plausible it seems that the theorist, and only he, should be the one to step outside of it and free himself by theorising.

So totalisation need not be what theory aims at in order for it to be valuable. Indeed, articulation of a position can still have value even if that position is avowedly groundless. We just cannot argue for it in terms of identifying ‘facts’ or correspondence to reality. However, this does not necessarily entail some kind of amoral end of meaning and futility of discourse, as the common objection to deconstruction and other theories that insist on their own contingency would have it. As Richard Rorty writes in his book on this very issue, theorising while at the same time refusing any metaphysical claims to Truth is still possible. But one cannot use any of the old metaphysical methods or vocabulary to do

¹⁷ *Mapping Ideology*, p. 17.

¹⁸ *Mapping Ideology*, p. 17.

¹⁹ *Mapping Ideology*, p. 17.

²⁰ *Postmodernism*, p. 5.

so. For Rorty, the project of advancing a theory or point of view, and convincing others, is only viable if we acknowledge that we do so not because we possess any privileged access to truth, but from personal predilection. This sounds like mere subjectivism (a term of abuse which presupposes the possibility of *objectivism*) but is better thought of as the ability to hold deep and motivating beliefs which one recognises nonetheless as contingent.

Without arguments based on access to Truth, or claims to better fitting Reality, how can one seek to persuade and convince? For Rorty this is done by means of redescription, in the hope that this redescription, the use of new vocabularies, will tempt others away from their existing vocabularies and world views and towards those of the theorist. A subject who wishes to theorise could thus overcome potentially disabling feelings of impotent aporia by following Rorty's declaration of the precepts he intends to follow: 'I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favour look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics.'²¹

With these precepts in mind, I will now explore some ideas that usefully describe the contemporary subject's insertion into social reality, into what Charles Taylor has called our 'webs of interlocution'.²² I will also adopt his idea that the self cannot be abstracted from self-perceptions, but is rather constituted by them. With this principle in mind, I turn now to the first set of self-perceptions: the paradox of the homogenous individual.

²¹ *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 9.

²² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; repr. 1998), p. 39.

1.2 Homogeneity and *Non-Lieux*

It should be remembered that the very notion of subject, of self, is a comparatively recent one. As Charles Taylor has remarked: ‘talk about “identity” in the modern sense would have been incomprehensible to our forebears of a couple of centuries ago.’²³

The subject conceived of as a unique agent possessing free will and interiority only developed alongside other early modern transformations. As de Certeau, among others, has noted, in pre-modern cosmological orders one could only make sense of the individual in terms of his place in that order. Only once these structures began to be dismantled could a subject, now preoccupied with creating his own place, come into being: ‘c’est parce qu’il perd sa place que l’individu naît comme *sujet*’ (original emphasis).²⁴

In *Sources of the Self* Taylor has explored in detail the modern subject’s constituent features, and traced their sources from Plato to the late twentieth century. He identifies a number of interrelated strands that continue to define what we think of as a subject: inwardness and radical reflexivity; the power of disengaged reason; mastery of the self and of the world; the affirmation of ordinary life; a sense of embeddedness in nature; the obligation to universal benevolence; and self-exploration, self-expression, self-creation.

What most of these features have in common is an idea of the self not as a repository of meaning, but as *source* of meaning. We still think of the self as a unique, discrete entity, which is capable of re-making the world, as much if not more than the world makes it. However this sense of self as substantive source has come under threat from several directions. Doubtless, there have been earlier threats to this image of the self, in the form of psychoanalysis or Marxism, for example. Yet somehow the sense of the self as unique agent has persisted. A more recent threat, however, is that of homogeneity, which attacks our sense of uniqueness, where the consciousness of each of us is as singular

²³ *Sources of the Self*, p. 28.

²⁴ *L’Invention du quotidien*, p. 204.

as our fingerprints. The cult of the individual is now stronger than ever, yet at the same time homogenisation of individuals has never been greater.

By the ‘cult of the individual’ I mean something rather more than the capacity for distinctive self-exploration and self-expression, which dates back at least to Montaigne. What I am calling the ‘cult of the individual’ is rather a frenetic pressure to define oneself as an individual distinct from the masses, in the face of unprecedented freedom of choice and putative powers of self-invention. In his anthropological work *Non-Lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Marc Augé sees the ‘individualisation des références’²⁵ as a central feature of contemporary – or in his terms, ‘supermodern’ - western societies, where the individual has become the prime point of reference through which is refracted and evaluated all information. Not only this, but the contemporary individual wants or feels urged to perform that evaluation herself: ‘dans les sociétés occidentales, au moins, l’individu se veut un monde. Il entend interpréter par et pour lui-même les informations qui lui sont délivrées.’²⁶

The rhetoric of uniqueness and self-actualisation is all-pervasive. Our ‘life-choices’ have apparently never been so numerous, and in this is our freedom constituted. Making the right choices for a fulfilling life is, in the affluent first world, the subject’s central challenge. Taylor identifies this strand of the modern identity as ‘the primacy of self-fulfilment’²⁷ and as ‘the human potential movement’²⁸ and it seems fairly universal. The most important thing in life is to ‘make our mark’, ‘stand out from the crowd’, and ‘Just Do It!’.

Yet as individuals we also live in the era of mass communication, mass production of goods, mass transportation, and mass media. The greater the number of things available to us, the more we come to resemble one another. For Baudrillard, mass culture is not so

²⁵ *Non-Lieux*, p. 54.

²⁶ *Non-Lieux*, p. 51.

²⁷ *Sources of the Self*, p. 508.

²⁸ *Sources of the Self*, p. 511.

much produced *for* us, as it *produces* us. The stockpiling of humanity into museums, cinemas, traffic jams, queues, holiday resorts, but also refugee and concentration camps – all these phenomena reveal the true meaning of ‘mass production’: ‘c’est ça la “production de masse”, non pas au sens d’une production massive ou à l’usage des masses, mais la production de la masse.’²⁹

Perhaps it is too simplistic to state that human individuals now form a single undifferentiated mass. Certainly that mass is further subdivided by the vogue for classification. Market research, psychometric testing, magazine quizzes: ‘what type of girlfriend/office worker/parent are you?’. Psychology, sociology, anthropology: all have their classificatory impulses, and all are plundered by commerce for hiring, creating and selling. Our tastes and tendencies are exhaustively researched and enumerated, then delivered back to us so that we may better know ourselves. As de Certeau writes, ‘le réel désormais bavarde’.³⁰

It seems that though trapped in solitude we are still sorted into tribal groups, one moment exhorted to stand out from the crowd and at another to be blind to the differences between us. How else can we explain the insulting yet financially proven phenomenon of qualitative market research, where interviewing five carefully selected individuals enables the researchers accurately to predict the reactions of millions? As Jameson writes in *Postmodernism*, no individual escapes naming, labelling, grouping: ‘even if Big Brother is not everywhere watching you, language is; media and specialized or expert language that seeks tirelessly to classify and categorize, to transform the individual into the labeled group.’³¹ What for each subject is private and unnameable, may be lost in the process. But even these groups, these ‘types’, differ little from one another. The market research demographic to which you belong only determines what products you will buy,

²⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), p. 103.

³⁰ *L’Invention du quotidien*, p. 270. Georges Perec had famously identified this phenomenon in *Les Choses* (Paris: Juillard, 1965).

³¹ *Postmodernism*, p. 322.

not your aspiration to consume, which, unless you inhabit the very margins of society, is universal.

Mass production, classification, similitude of messages: these are some of the pressures towards homogeneity. Why then do we not feel them as such, why is this not the age of anxiety about merging into one's neighbour? Although we can perhaps detect a fascination with/anxiety about the loss of individuality in the form of science fiction and science fact (cloning, artificial intelligence, and the like), we are distracted from this anxiety by a sense of individuality that is, to an extent, illusory. In a western democracy, where the information explosion is meant to empower, and freedom of speech is supposedly a human right, we are meant to feel that any subject can exercise his powers of reason to decide what to believe. More than this, we are supposed to feel that as agents we too can speak and contribute.

Yet Baudrillard has noted the circularity with which this information flows, visible in opinion polls, focus groups, single issue 'vox pops', and other forms of information-gathering. For Baudrillard, 'toute la sophistication strangulatoire de la captation de parole, de l'aveu forcé sous couleur de liberté d'expression, du rabattement du sujet sur sa propre interrogation'³² does nothing more than give the illusion of agency; the subject who wishes to speak back to the producers of cultural messages, whether these be politicians, journalists, or marketing men, finds that his own opinions are offered back to him as just more messages, produced on the same model. Most news programmes now offer the opportunity to 'text your opinion now', a 'representative' sample of which is then read back out to the viewers. As Baudrillard writes: "VOUS êtes l'information, vous êtes le social, c'est vous l'événement, vous êtes concernés, vous avez la parole, etc."³³ In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman has also identified the circularity of

giving your opinion to a pollster, who will get a version of it through a dessicated question, and then will submerge it in a Niagara of similar opinions, and convert

³² *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 51.

³³ *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 51.

them into – what else? – another piece of news. Thus, we have here a great loop of impotence: the news elicits from you a variety of opinions about which you can do nothing except to offer them as more news, about which you can do nothing.³⁴

The impotent individual, the individual whose agency is an illusion, is not incommensurate with the injunction to be a subject. Augé emphasises, in regard to the individualisation of reference, ‘les illusions dont procède cette individualisation des démarches et les effets de reproduction et de stéréotypie qui échappent en totalité ou en partie à la conscience des acteurs.’³⁵

Homogeneity is facilitated by the interpenetration of culture and commerce. The pressure to define identity through brands is strong, and well understood. Homogeneity entails that it takes very little to distinguish ourselves from the norm. Baudrillard highlights this in his analysis of the contemporary vulgarisation of glory: ‘il y en a donc absolument pour tout le monde, puisque plus l’ensemble du système est conforme, plus il y a de millions d’individus que distingue une infime anomalie.’³⁶ The Warholian fifteen minute celebrity is certainly a truism now, as is the phenomenon of celebrity for its own sake.

The myth of individuality and the pressure towards homogeneity can perhaps be read as the continuation of an age-old capitalist dynamic. The fear of homogeneity has an ideological purpose in encouraging consumerism as much as the illusion of individuality. Lyotard’s analysis of the reduction and simplification of messages in transit, offers a further cybernetic explanation for the homogenisation of culture, and thus of ourselves.³⁷ The question of homogeneity is also addressed in Marc Augé’s theory of the contemporary, and of contemporary space in particular.

In *Non-Lieux*, Augé examines certain kinds of spaces from an anthropological perspective – what he calls ‘l’anthropologie du proche’, focused as it is on our own Western first world societies, rather than on the exoticised, and what used to be called

³⁴ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (London: Heinemann, 1986), p. 69.

³⁵ *Non-Lieux*, p. 52.

³⁶ *Amérique*, p. 59.

³⁷ See *La Condition postmoderne*, p. 100.

‘primitive’, societies of the developing world.³⁸ Augé argues that we now inhabit an era of ‘surmodernité’, ‘sur’ denoting excess, one aspect of which is an excess of space. Herein lies another contemporary paradox: as the space to which we have access increases, so the planet appears to contract. As Augé says: ‘nos premiers pas dans l’espace réduisent le nôtre à un point infime dont les photos prises par satellite nous donnent justement l’exacte mesure.’³⁹ At the same time, however, the change of scale implied by space exploration, combined with the acceleration of means of transport and our total penetration of the planet via mass-media, increases the space we feel ourselves to inhabit. This spatial overabundance has certain consequences: one of these is that the parts of this new expanded world available for us to adopt as our own, are, as Augé notes, ‘largement fictifs [...] on pourrait dire qu’ils sont essentiellement des univers de reconnaissance’.⁴⁰ So we may have no first-hand knowledge of New York, Sydney or Bangkok, but we are able, at the sound of those names, to summon a familiar image from a travel brochure or television programme.

Excess of space both produces and is produced by the movement of population and increases in urban concentrations (Baudrillard’s ‘production de masse’). These entail the multiplication of means of transport and their associated places of departure and destination, as well as the replacement of older town centres by the satellisation of amenities, in the form of purpose-built leisure and commercial centres. It is these new kinds of man-made places, among others, that Augé has called ‘non-lieux’. As we multiply and move around, these ‘non-places’ are created specifically for the individual in his role as consumer, as passenger.

The distinction that Augé makes between place and non-place derives from an opposition between place and space, where place signifies ‘anthropological place’. Anthropological place always expresses a given group’s identity: it symbolises both

³⁸ *Non-Lieux*, p. 15.

³⁹ *Non-Lieux*, p. 44.

⁴⁰ *Non-Lieux*, p. 46.

collective and individual identity, is both concrete and symbolic, and is used as organic social reference for the inhabitants. What all anthropological places have in common is that 'ils se veulent (on les veut) identitaires, relationnels et historiques.'⁴¹ In contrast, space is abstract and non-anthropological. It is a term generally applied to area, to a distance between points, or a temporal expanse, 'outer space' being one such example. As such, it is in opposition to anthropological place: 'si un lieu peut se définir comme identitaire, relationnel et historique, un espace qui ne peut se définir ni comme identitaire, ni comme relationnel, ni comme historique définira un non-lieu.'⁴²

For Augé, then, non-place is aligned with 'space', and opposed to 'place', by virtue of its abstraction. Airports, hotel chains, shopping malls – created as a function of transport, leisure and consumption, these non-places are urban, communal and uniform in style. They are depersonalised, familiar yet anonymous, belonging to everyone and yet to no-one. According to Augé, non-places are defined not just by their purpose and appearance, but by the relations of individuals to these places. These are relations of solitude, similitude, anonymity and contractuality. The space of non-place 'délivre celui qui y pénètre de ses déterminations habituelles', which are replaced by a coercion into the roles of passenger or consumer.⁴³ This occurs because non-places are designed to process large numbers of individuals who need never interact directly. Your shopping trolley or train ticket or boarding pass function as your acceptance of your role within non-place, your justification for being there and your contract with the authority that governs the non-place you have entered. This authority will for the most part communicate with you by means of text, in the form of cash machine readouts, advertising, directional signs, instructions and prohibitions: 'Do not alight here'; 'Please take your advice slip'; 'We apologise for any inconvenience' and so on. All messages are addressed simultaneously and indiscriminately

⁴¹ *Non-Lieux*, p. 69.

⁴² *Non-Lieux*, p. 100.

⁴³ *Non-Lieux*, p. 129.

to each and any of us. As Augé says, they ‘fabriquent l’homme moyen’.⁴⁴ So the pressure towards homogeneity derives in part from the non-places contemporary subjects traverse.

For Augé, travel is the archetype of our experience of non-places. Unrooted in the places he passes through, or passes by, the traveller constructs a fictional relationship between himself and the landscape, one of discontinuity and fragmentation. There is:

un double déplacement: du voyageur, bien sûr, mais aussi, parallèlement, des paysages dont il ne prend jamais que des vues partielles, des ‘instantanés’, additionnés pêle-mêle dans sa mémoire et, littéralement, recomposés dans le récit qu’il en fait ou dans l’enchaînement des diapositives dont il impose, au retour, le commentaire à son entourage.⁴⁵

The places we visit have also frequently become exhausted as spectacle before we arrive; for example, idyllic locations too often reproduced in brochures, on billboards, on television and in newspapers. Once there, Augé argues, ‘l’individu s’éprouve comme spectateur sans que la nature du spectacle lui importe vraiment’.⁴⁶ Our gaze reverts back to ourselves, we contemplate ourselves contemplating a particular view, become conscious of ‘striking a pose’, and this increases the solitary nature of our experience.

Non-places are thus actual places, but also in some sense a mode, such as that of travel, that can be enacted anywhere. The question of what it is to be a contemporary subject cannot ignore the effects of ‘supermodernity’ that Augé identifies – excess of space, excess of time (of which more later), the individualisation of reference, and the existence of non-places that we enter nearly every time we leave the house.

⁴⁴ *Non-lieux*, p. 126.

⁴⁵ *Non-lieux*, p. 109.

⁴⁶ *Non-lieux*, p. 110.

1.3 Information and Simulation: Signs of Excess

*Under electric technology the entire business of man becomes learning and knowing.*⁴⁷

Linked to the foregoing paradoxical subject predicaments is the phenomenon of excess of information. We now have unprecedented access to, and are bombarded by, huge quantities of information from all kinds of media. Most of us are engaged in activity that requires or contributes to this constant flow. As Steve Tomasula remarks: ‘today, [...] makers of things seem to be an endangered species. [...] we’re at workstations, manipulating the symbols that everyone craves and that consequently drive our economy.’⁴⁸ The contemporary world is marked by the noise, the sheer volume of competing information on all matters. Informational excess has been identified as one more symptom of the all-encompassing market, which tends to create surplus value: ‘partout l’information est censée produire une circulation accélérée du sens, une plus-value de sens homologue à celle, économique, qui provient de la rotation accélérée du capital.’⁴⁹

For Postman, this absorption of information into capitalist values of exchange began with the first high-speed, long-distance medium for information: telegraphy gave a form of legitimacy to the idea of context-free information; that is, to the idea that the value of information need not be tied to any function it might serve in social and political decision-making and action, but may attach merely to its novelty, interest, and curiosity. The telegraph made information into a commodity, a ‘thing’ that could be bought and sold irrespective of its uses or meaning.⁵⁰ If the business of man is now learning and knowing, the commodification of information perversely counteracts the power of information to instruct and emancipate. The erosion of use value – where information is cut adrift from

⁴⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 58.

⁴⁸ Steve Tomasula, ‘Three Axioms for Projecting a Line (or Why It Will Continue to Be Hard to Write a Title sans Slashes or Parentheses)’, in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 16:1 (1996), p. 100. Augé attributes this excess of information to an increased demand for meaning.

⁴⁹ *Simulacres et Simulation*, pp. 120-1.

⁵⁰ *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, p. 65.

its original purpose, and consumed in a decontextualised form – decreases the involvement of the individual who absorbs it:

You may get a sense of what is meant by context-free information by asking yourself the following question: how often does it occur that information provided you on the morning radio or television, or in the morning newspaper, causes you to alter your plans for the day, or to take some action you would not otherwise have taken, or provides insight into some problem you are required to solve? [...] Most of our daily news is inert, consisting of information that gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to any meaningful action.⁵¹

Baudrillard makes a similar link between the ubiquity of information and desensitization on the part of the recipient. He writes of ‘une trame ininterrompue de signes’ and ‘un univers saturé. Désaffecté, mais saturé. Insensibilisé, mais plein à craquer.’⁵² He compares the saturation of information to the seamless display of the supermarket, which offers a continuous illusion of plenty and totality. Holes made in the display, as products are removed, are immediately filled, so that a depthless, homogenous facade is maintained. One might say that the deadening saturation of information similarly permits no ‘hole’ in the display, no room for the real that does not immediately announce itself. De Certeau tells us that ‘le grand silence des choses est mué en son contraire par les médias. Hier constitué en secret, le réel désormais bavarde. Il n’y a partout que des nouvelles, informations, statistiques et sondages.’⁵³

Lack of silence also means the end of ‘otherness’ and the end of privacy. As Jameson has noted, the expansion of the public into the private results in ‘an enormous enlargement of the idea of rationality itself, in what we are willing to “understand” (but not endorse), as what we can no longer have removed from the visible record as “irrational” or incomprehensible, unmotivated, insane or sick.’⁵⁴ There is nothing left of which we cannot inform ourselves and incorporate into our ‘world view’. For McLuhan, even the

⁵¹ *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, p. 68.

⁵² *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 127.

⁵³ *L’Invention du quotidien*, p. 270.

⁵⁴ *Postmodernism*, p. 354.

unconscious has become conscious: ‘the subliminal life, private and social, has been hoicked up into full view’⁵⁵.

Besides the deadening effects of decontextualisation and the erosion of a private or ‘other’ reality, information saturation has been charged with destroying the very meaning it purports to provide: ‘là où nous pensons que l’information produit du sens, c’est l’inverse. L’information dévore ses propre contenus. [...] Au lieu de faire communiquer, *elle s’épuise dans la mise en scène de la communication*’ (original emphasis).⁵⁶ What counts is the act of communicating rather than any specific content. For Baudrillard, the purpose of information is no longer to instruct or empower: ‘partout la socialisation se mesure par l’exposition aux messages médiatiques. Est désocialisé, ou virtuellement asocial celui qui est sous-exposé aux media.’⁵⁷ Baudrillard’s contention is that mass culture neither directly controls and indoctrinates us, nor does it consist of messages which we can objectively evaluate. Instead it is a system of code reinforcement, of socialisation.

What the various analyses of informational excess have in common is the sense that content has somehow become overshadowed by the fact of its proliferation. Which is to say that McLuhan’s celebrated statement, ‘the medium is the message’, still holds. McLuhan argued that when there is a change in scale introduced into society by any new technology which serves as an extension of human capabilities (e.g. the ability to communicate is extended in terms of distance and speed), it is that extension that results in changes to that society – not any supposed ‘content’ of that new technology.⁵⁸

Baudrillard concurs with McLuhan that the medium is the message, and makes clear the consequences of such a claim. If the medium *is* the message, then the commonsense dynamic of message transmitted by a medium which shapes it no longer obtains. If there is no message any longer, that is to say, if content is no longer relevant,

⁵⁵ *Understanding Media*, p. 47.

⁵⁶ *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 121.

⁵⁷ *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 120

⁵⁸ *Understanding Media*, p. 7.

then there can be no medium either, in the sense of a vehicle for information. Thus the two opposing poles of 'medium' and 'message' implode into one another; the medium can no longer be isolated from the real – it is diffracted, diffused within it. As such it can no longer be said to alter the information it transmits.

For Baudrillard the breakdown of the division between medium and message correlates to the end of the division between sender and receiver, as well as between subject and object, fact and interpretation, active and passive, means and ends. This conflation theorises the homogeneity of mass culture not as a consequence of ideological manipulation, nor as a reflection of mass consciousness, but rather as a process of socialisation, obedient to the logic of systems:

Jamais il n'a été aussi clair que le contenu – ici la culture, ailleurs l'information ou la marchandise – n'est que le support fantôme de l'opération du médium lui-même, dont la fonction est toujours d'induire de la masse, de produire un flux humain et mental homogène.⁵⁹

Informational excess, then, is a further factor in homogenisation. Baudrillard's analysis of the collapsing of poles of opposition, as with medium/message, is a recurring theme of *Simulacres et Simulation*. The very notion of simulation is predicated on the erosion of a distinction between the categories of sign and referent, map and territory, real and fake.

Baudrillard's premise is that, in the contemporary world, the imaginary of representation, the difference between the real and the symbolic order, has been eroded. Real and fake are now mythical rather than functional categories for us. The absence of the real is at the heart of simulation. He explains: 'dissimuler est feindre de ne pas avoir ce qu'on a. Simuler est feindre d'avoir ce qu'on n'a pas. L'un renvoie à une présence, l'autre à une absence.'⁶⁰

Moreover, simulation compromises the real as category. Baudrillard offers the example of a simulated illness; this involves not merely the pretence that one is ill, but

⁵⁹ *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 102.

⁶⁰ *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 12.

includes the manifestation of symptoms. The person simulating illness is thus neither truly sick nor truly well, and the boundary between the two is blurred. In the same way, the notion of simulation throws into question the separation between true and false, real and imaginary. It further has the consequence that if, as in the case of the hypothetical illness, certain symptoms, that we normally think of as ‘naturally’ occurring, can be produced, then in theory, all that is natural is also simulable. Thus, as he argues in *Amérique*, events are replaced by television, landscape by photography, and so on.⁶¹ As Christopher Lasch writes, citing Daniel Boorstin: ‘we live in a world of pseudo-events and quasi information, in which the air is saturated with statements that are neither true nor false but merely credible.’⁶²

With the collapsing of distance between real and imaginary, original and copy, comes ‘la transparence simulée de toutes choses’.⁶³ If the question of whether reality is masked or distorted becomes moot, what remains is neutral; not ambiguous, not conflicted, but transparent, indifferent, coinciding exactly with itself. This for Baudrillard, is the ‘hyperreal’: ‘il ne s’agit plus d’imitation, ni de redoublement, ni même de parodie. Il s’agit d’une substitution au réel des signes du réel’.⁶⁴ This inability to distinguish between real and fake, reality and representation, is perhaps one of the primary concerns of contemporary theory. Jameson has identified something of a consensus among theorists: ‘some of us [...] have tried to show the waning and obsolescence of categories like “fiction” (in the sense of something opposed to either the “literal” or the “factual”).’⁶⁵ All of which challenges the use of theory as ideology critique, discussed earlier, since culture and reality, base and superstructure, now are so utterly merged:

⁶¹ *Amérique*, p. 35.

⁶² Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), p. 75.

⁶³ *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 227.

⁶⁴ *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 11.

⁶⁵ *Postmodernism*, p. 277

Today, culture impacts back on reality in ways that make any independent and, as it were, non- or extra-cultural form of it problematical (in a kind of Heisenberg principle of mass culture which intervenes between your eye and the thing itself), so that finally the theorists unite their voices in the new doxa that the “referent” no longer exists.⁶⁶

Simulation is characterised by ‘une *précession du modèle*’⁶⁷ (original emphasis), whereby all interpretations of an event, or fact – of the real – are born at the intersection of models that precede them, thereby rendering the division between fact and interpretation obsolete. This does not imply that events have no significance, or that they are in some way not really occurring, but rather that they coincide so completely with models for interpretation that precede them, that one cannot set them at a distance as ‘real’, and distinguish interpretations or representations of those events from the events themselves. In the same way, the world in which we live is so thoroughly generated by, and coincident with, the models by which we interpret it that the notion of relative ‘reality’ or ‘artificiality’ of that world is now redundant. All the world, all referents, are real and artificial at one and the same time.

This does not mean we accept the new state of affairs with equanimity. ‘Lorsque le réel n’est plus ce qu’il était, la nostalgie prend tout son sens.’⁶⁸ Not only the real, but myths of origin, truth, objectivity – all become more precious and essential to maintain. The anxiety we feel in regard to simulation is therefore combined with what Baudrillard identifies as another strategy of simulation: ‘escalade du vrai, du vécu, résurrection du figuratif là où l’objet et la substance ont disparu. Production affolée de réel et de référentiel, parallèle et supérieure à l’affolement de la production matérielle.’⁶⁹

This ‘escalade du vrai’, the desire to access the reality of lived experience, can be seen in the dramatic rise in recent years of so-called ‘docusoap’ and ‘reality tv’ programmes. In *Simulacres et Simulation*, Baudrillard identifies how the first of this kind of programme

⁶⁶ *Postmodernism*, p. 277

⁶⁷ *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 32

⁶⁸ *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 17

⁶⁹ *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 17

generated ‘une sorte de frisson du réel, ou d’une esthétique de l’hyperréel, frisson d’exactitude vertigineuse et truquée, frisson de distanciation et de grossissement à la fois, de distorsion d’échelle, d’une transparence excessive.’⁷⁰ The most popular programme of this kind in recent times has been Channel 4’s *Big Brother* (the UK version of a world-wide programme format), whose contestants are confined to a house and filmed 24 hours a day, the footage of which is then broadcast. The choice of title for this programme of light entertainment has now superseded Orwell’s original coinage, rendering Neil Postman’s statement in the preface to *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that ‘no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history’⁷¹ unintentionally ironic. The *Big Brother* contestants are reported to have found it extremely difficult living outside of the house and its 24 hour surveillance after the programme’s end, bereft of a world where ‘l’insignifiant est exalté par la prise de vue.’⁷² Their world seems less real because it is not filmed. Something inversely similar happens to the spectators, of course; suddenly the reality of lying around in one’s flat, catatonic with boredom, comes to seem a simulation of a televisual event.

For Baudrillard, however, nostalgia for the real is not a reaction against simulation, but simulation’s necessary strategy of disguising the fact that the real no longer exists. We can see this strategy at work in the increased use of the term ‘real’ to imply good, as well as authentic and meaningful. This is particularly noticeable in American vernacular: ‘keeping it real’, ‘it’s been really real’, and of course ‘Coke is the real thing’.⁷³

I would argue that nostalgia for the real and anxiety over its disappearance are both rooted in the same popular awareness of simulation that permeates contemporary culture. On the one hand, our culture is full of apocalyptic visions of simulation (science fiction ‘cyber punk’ novels such as those of William Gibson, and numerous films including *The*

⁷⁰ *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 49.

⁷¹ *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, p. vii.

⁷² *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 49.

⁷³ See Umberto Eco’s comments on this subject in *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Picador, 1987), p. 7.

Truman Show, *Existerz* and *The Matrix*, are a few examples). On the other, we try to counteract simulation by devouring ‘reality television’, hoping perhaps to increase our exposure to the real. As Adorno writes in relation to mass culture in *The Culture Industry*, ‘reality becomes its own ideology through the spell cast by its faithful duplication.’⁷⁴ Adorno is writing here of the attractions of realism as artistic mode – but the same could be said of the cult of the real, reaching obsessional proportions in the contemporary world.

The converse also obtains. If simulation renders the real mythical, it has equal consequences for illusion: ‘du même ordre que l’impossibilité de retrouver un niveau absolu du réel est l’impossibilité de mettre en scène l’illusion. L’illusion n’est plus possible, parce que le réel n’est plus possible.’⁷⁵ The production of the imaginary, or the fake, is therefore as desirable and necessary as that of the real, in order to disguise the fact that the distinction between real and fake no longer exists.

The contemporary subject thus has further paradoxes to contend with: the real and the fake no longer exist, yet they are constantly invoked. We are saturated with information, yet seemingly no better able to understand the world it describes. These difficulties are compounded when the contemporary subject attempts to engage with the power structures in her society.

This is difficult because of a contemporary feeling that we can no longer discern the sources of social control. Is it simply the flow of money, the multi-national companies? Or is it politicians, with an ever-increasing consolidation of state power that hides behind the myth that the state is subjugated by big business?⁷⁶ Whether one chooses big corporations or governments as most powerful, we lack the models to identify precise causes and effects. As Jameson writes in *Postmodernism*: ‘the discussions in a boardroom are

⁷⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘The Schema of Mass Culture, in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 55.

⁷⁵ *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 36.

⁷⁶ See John Pilger, *The New Rulers of the World*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2004) p. 119.

thus difficult to link up narratively to changes in daily life that are themselves only perceivable *ex post facto*, and not in the making.⁷⁷

Things are further complicated by the phenomenon of mutual manipulation, where the oppressor and oppressed are no longer clearly delineated; we participate willingly in our own subjugation to market forces. As Marcuse has it, ‘this society turns everything it touches into a potential source of progress *and* of exploitation, of drudgery *and* satisfaction, of freedom *and* of oppression.’⁷⁸

1.4 The Subject in Time

*Présence du passé au présent qui le déborde.*⁷⁹

Theoretical writing on the contemporary has made much of the subject’s relationship with time. A key idea seems to be that we live in an era obsessed with the present, unable to connect with either past or future. Lasch writes, ‘to live for the moment is the prevailing passion – to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity.’⁸⁰ The world around us advertises this present moment constantly. The news media offer ever more frequent and repetitive updates; fashion, entertainment and celebrity all recycle with increasing frequency and those of the recent past are dismissed with contempt (‘that is so last year/month/week’). Augé, for his part, discusses the phenomenon of the eternal present under the heading of ‘excess of time’. In the a-historical non-places of airports, supermarkets, service stations – where background radio recycles the last 24 hours of news, and today’s newspapers signal the present with their headlines,

tout se passe comme si l’espace était rattrapé par le temps, comme s’il n’y avait pas d’autre histoire que les nouvelles du jour ou de la veille, comme si chaque histoire

⁷⁷ *Postmodernism*, p. 350.

⁷⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1991; repr. 2002), p. 81.

⁷⁹ *Non-Lieux*, p. 97.

⁸⁰ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 5.

individuelle puisait ses motifs, ses mots et ses images dans le stock inépuisable d'une intarissable histoire du présent.⁸¹

We are so used to living in a present that is always new and changing, that, as Jameson writes, 'the word *new* doesn't seem to have the same resonance for us any longer; the word itself is no longer new or pristine.'⁸²

A fascination with the present goes together with what some see as a forgetfulness, and others as an outright rejection of the past. For Jameson, it is 'as though our utter forgetfulness of the past exhausted itself in the vacant but mesmerized contemplation of a schizophrenic present that is incomparable virtually by definition.'⁸³ Lasch writes of 'the waning of the sense of historical time',⁸⁴ which means that 'we are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future.'⁸⁵

Yet the past has not disappeared completely – in fact, it is everywhere, but in a very different form to that invoked above by Lasch. The past now exists as History, as spectacle – packaged in a manner that divorces it from our own lives. Augé discusses the aestheticised past in the form of preserved 'old town' districts and monuments, plaques and artefacts behind glass. Organic relations of continuity between past and present are supplanted by historical tourism.⁸⁶ Jameson calls this phenomenon the 'nostalgia mode', citing retro or 'nostalgia' film as an example, 'which conveys "pastness" by the glossy qualities of the image, and "1930s-ness" or "1950s-ness" by the attributes of fashion'.⁸⁷ Jameson concludes that 'we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach.'⁸⁸ The

⁸¹ *Non-Lieux*, p. 131.

⁸² *Postmodernism*, p. 310.

⁸³ *Postmodernism*, p. xii

⁸⁴ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 5

⁸⁵ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 5

⁸⁶ *Non-Lieux*, pp. 130-139.

⁸⁷ *Postmodernism*, p. 20

⁸⁸ *Postmodernism*, p. 25

impermeable barrier between the present and History is what Augé calls the ‘présence du passé au présent qui le déborde’.⁸⁹

The desire for History extends into all areas of life. In America (although American global culture means that it is pertinent to other first world societies), Baudrillard identifies an obsession with history, in the form of exhaustive stockpiling of memorabilia, tracing of genealogy, and historical reconstruction. He writes of a desire to ‘tout recenser, tout stocker, tout mémoriser.’⁹⁰ But as both Baudrillard and Umberto Eco have noted, recuperation and reconstruction of the past result in simulacra, aiming as they do at something ‘more real’ than the original – at the copy of an original that never existed. Of the Getty Museum, Baudrillard writes: ‘les peintures anciennes apparaissent comme neuves, brillantes et oxygénées, décapées de toute patine et craquelures, dans un lustre artificiel à l’image du décor “*pompeian fake*” qui les entoure’ (original emphasis).⁹¹ Eco illustrates the same phenomenon when he discusses his visit to the Palace of Living Arts in Los Angeles, which reproduced ‘in three dimensions, life-size, and, obviously, in full colour, the great masterpieces of painting of all time.’⁹² He describes the statue of Leonardo painting the Mona Lisa, and Rembrandt’s Aristotle, among others. The museum displayed statues reproduced in wax, ‘therefore more real because they are in color whereas the originals were in marble and hence all white and lifeless.’⁹³ This is what Baudrillard describes as ‘la réédition du premier, mais *en plus vrai*’ (original emphasis).⁹⁴

Eco’s description becomes increasingly comic, especially once he sees the Venus de Milo, who is ‘leaning on an Ionic column against the background of a wall with figures painted in red. I say “leaning”, and in fact this polychrome unfortunate has arms.’⁹⁵ Eco concludes: ‘The Palace’s philosophy is not, “We are giving you the reproduction so that

⁸⁹ *Non-Lieux*, p. 97.

⁹⁰ *Amérique*, p. 43

⁹¹ *Amérique*, p. 36.

⁹² *Travels in Hyperreality*, p. 18.

⁹³ *Travels in Hyperreality*, p. 20.

⁹⁴ *Amérique*, p. 44.

⁹⁵ *Travels in Hyperreality*, p. 20.

you will want the original,” but rather, “We are giving you the reproduction so you will no longer feel any need for the original.”⁹⁶ However, we do not need to visit this extraordinary museum to see historical simulation at work – one only has to think of the ‘heritage industry’, all those restored historical buildings, cleaned and renovated to resemble an imagined past state, to see this effect in a less dramatic form.

Our dislocation from the past, and our inability to access it except as citation⁹⁷ is a result, for Jameson, of the waning of modernity and the advent of postmodernity. Uneven social development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries meant that peasant fields once coexisted with the new factories. The past was something therefore still ‘present’ and part of life. By the time postmodernism has been conceived of as such, ‘the past itself has disappeared (along with the well-known “sense of the past” or historicity and collective memory).⁹⁸ Ours is ‘a more homogenously modernized condition.’⁹⁹

Our perpetual present is thus another contemporary paradox: it is no longer new, or ‘pristine’, but largely consists of multiple, fragmented simulacra of the past. Yet even this present is under attack from the acceleration of history: ‘aujourd’hui, les années récentes, les *sixties*, les *seventies*, bientôt les *eighties*, retournent à l’histoire aussi vite qu’elles y étaient survenues. Nous avons l’histoire sur les talons. Elle nous suit comme notre ombre, comme la mort’ (original emphasis).¹⁰⁰

In some ways, increasingly rapid historicisation seems to incarnate the anxiety that has plagued philosophers from St Augustine to Bergson that the *now* can never be isolated, seized, because it is always ‘in danger of being squeezed out between the past and the future’.¹⁰¹ The increasing speed at which we live increases this sense of a present slipping

⁹⁶ *Travels in Hyperreality*, p. 19.

⁹⁷ *Non-Lieux*, p. 138.

⁹⁸ *Postmodernism*, p. 309.

⁹⁹ *Postmodernism*, p. 310.

¹⁰⁰ *Non-Lieux*, p. 38. Augé was writing in the 1980s, but his remarks are if anything more relevant to the nascent 21st century.

¹⁰¹ A.R.Lacey, *Bergson* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 59.

away and becoming past – and this is a past that is lost, irrelevant, and disregarded, according to Lasch.¹⁰²

The speed and historicisation of the present affects the future, too; no sooner is the future imagined, particularly as regards science and technology, than it becomes reality. If the acceleration of history serves to historicise the present, futurism does so from the other side – constantly envisioning the future serves to place our own present already at one remove, into the past.

The contemporary subject thus confronts a series of paradoxes in her experience of time. The present moment is privileged above all others, yet partially composed of fragmentary and nostalgic simulations of the past. The exalted present is also constantly historicised and therefore disappearing. History is everywhere, but the *subject* of history, able to coordinate past and present into coherent experience, is perhaps no more. These combine to form what Jameson has called a ‘crisis in historicity’.¹⁰³

1.5 The Death of the Subject?

The preceding sections addressed a number of paradoxes faced by the contemporary subject, highlighting the historical uniqueness of her predicament: our individuality is under threat from homogeneity; simulation and excessive information saturate our reality and inhibit understanding; our inner privacy is gone; we seem to exist not as substantive selves but as part of an immense and incomprehensible network; we are unable to conceive of the forces that shape our existence; even our experience of time is fragmented and unreal.

The suspicion arises that we are perhaps no longer subjects at all. Certainly, the death of the subject has been suggested by numerous contemporary thinkers. Jameson summarises:

¹⁰² James Gleick explores this phenomenon at length in *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, (London: Little, Brown & Co., 1999).

¹⁰³ *Postmodernism*, p. 25.

Since the ideology of groups comes into being simultaneously with the well-known 'death of the subject' (of which it is simply an alternate version) – the psychoanalytic undermining of experiences of personal identity, the aesthetic attack on originality, genius and modernist private style, the waning of 'charisma' in the media age and of 'great men' in the age of feminism, the fragmentary, schizophrenic aesthetic (...) – the consequence will be that these new collective characters and representations that are groups cannot any longer, by definition, be subjects.¹⁰⁴

So is the subject, which emerged in the Renaissance, disappearing once again? I would argue that so long as one acknowledges these radical changes, it makes little difference whether one chooses to declare that the subject is dead, or rather that new kinds of subjects have supplanted the old. On this view the place of the contemporary subject is defined by other criteria, such as, for Jameson, the 'existential messiness' of the 'decentred subject'.¹⁰⁵

There is, however, a pessimistic perspective that unites all the characteristics of the contemporary subject elaborated thus far. For Christopher Lasch, the contemporary subject and the society which he both produces and is produced by, is defined above all else by the psychoanalytic condition of narcissism. In *The Culture of Narcissism*, he argues that one pathological disorder now dominates among patients submitting for analysis, and that this disorder characterises not only certain individuals but society as a whole. Lasch writes that the patient most often presenting today 'complains of "vague, diffuse dissatisfactions with life" and feels his "amorphous existence to be futile and purposeless"'.¹⁰⁶ He is plagued by anxiety and doubt, rather than by guilt and obsession. He is a narcissist.

As Lasch elaborates the narcissist's condition, it becomes apparent that it echoes nearly all aspects of the contemporary subject's predicament. Like a postmodern theorist,

¹⁰⁴ *Postmodernism*, p. 348.

¹⁰⁵ *Postmodernism*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁶ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 37.

the narcissist ‘seeks not to inflict his own certainties on others’¹⁰⁷ – he is far too preoccupied thinking about himself and the effect he has on those around him. Yet his self-reflection belies the poverty of his inner life. Our era is marked by ‘a quality of intense preoccupation with the self’, where ‘advertising encourages men as well as women to see the creation of the self as the highest form of activity’.¹⁰⁸ Yet at the same time the cult of the self is on shaky ground: ‘poets and novelists today, far from glorifying the self, chronicle its disintegration.’¹⁰⁹ Therapies ‘minister to the shattered ego.’¹¹⁰ In *Restoration of the Self*, Heinz Kohut confirms the fragmentary ego of the narcissist. One such case history describes a narcissist who suffers from ‘episodic exacerbations in the weakness of his self-cohesion.’¹¹¹

The narcissist has ‘no interest in external events except as they throw back a reflection of his own image.’¹¹² He is thus suited to what Lasch calls the ‘society of spectacle’: ‘modern life is so thoroughly mediated by electronic images that we cannot help responding to others as if their actions – and our own – were being recorded and simultaneously transmitted to an unseen audience or stored up for close scrutiny at some later time.’¹¹³ Excess of spectacle leads to cynical awareness of illusion, indifference to the distinction between it and reality, and ‘this indifference betrays the erosion of the capacity to take any interest in anything outside the self.’¹¹⁴ For Lasch, the contemporary self is the ‘performing self’, whose ‘only reality is the identity he can construct out of materials furnished by advertising and mass culture, themes of popular film and fiction, and fragments torn from a vast range of cultural traditions, all of them equally

¹⁰⁷ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. xvi.

¹⁰⁸ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 92.

¹⁰⁹ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 30.

¹¹⁰ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 30.

¹¹¹ Heinz Kohut, *Restoration of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1977), pp. 152-3.

Taylor refers to both Kohut and Lasch in *Sources of the Self*, p. 28.

¹¹² *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 47.

¹¹³ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 47.

¹¹⁴ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 87.

contemporaneous to the contemporary mind.¹¹⁵ This fits with the analysis of history and travel as simulacra and as *non-lienx*.

The society of spectacle is integral to late capitalist economies, where the proletariat are now consumers. Sustained consumerism relies on dissatisfaction and anxiety about how we appear to others. The narcissist is thus the perfect consumer, constantly evaluating his status through the eyes of others: ‘perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious, and bored.’¹¹⁶

The narcissist’s condition seems also to explain contemporary attitudes to time: ‘The narcissist has no interest in the future because, in part, he has so little interest in the past.’¹¹⁷ This means he cannot be comforted by happy memories of the past to face the unbearable fact of ageing. The narcissist’s relationship with history is magnified in society as a whole, which engages with the past only as nostalgia: ‘A society that has made “nostalgia” a marketable commodity on the cultural exchange quickly repudiates the suggestion that life in the past was in any important way better than life today.’¹¹⁸ No past, no posterity. Lasch quotes Tocqueville: ‘those who went before are soon forgotten; of those who will come after, no one has any idea: the interest of man is confined to those in close propinquity to himself.’¹¹⁹ Lack of interest in past and future extends to the narcissist’s own conditions, politically speaking: ‘after the political turmoil of the Sixties, Americans have retreated to purely personal occupations.’ They convinced themselves that what matters is: ‘psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health-food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing...’¹²⁰ This is because in an age where the subject cannot hope to change her circumstances or rebel against the glossy domination of bureaucracy and advertising simulacra, her political apathy is replaced by zeal for

¹¹⁵ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 91.

¹¹⁶ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 72.

¹¹⁷ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. xvii.

¹¹⁸ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. xvii.

¹¹⁹ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 9.

¹²⁰ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 4.

personal development. Lasch argues that narcissists create a certain kind of society, which in turn fosters those tendencies and brings them out in individuals.

On this evidence, the contemporary subject is dead, dying, or suffering from a morbid pathology. But there are dissenting voices in this sea of pessimism.

1.6 The Everyday and the Art of 'l'Entre-Deux'

This chapter has set out various views on the predicament of the contemporary subject, the overall tone of which is pessimistic. However, declarations of the subject's powerlessness in the face of the decline in freedom, individuality, and fulfilment, are not endorsed by everyone. I have mentioned Jameson's 'winner loses' logic of totalising theories, as well as Žižek's reminder that belief in the end of the possibility of criticism is ideology par excellence.

Some theories of the contemporary subject are more optimistic. Michel de Certeau, in *L'Invention du quotidien*, argues that a subject's experience cannot be determined simply from the cultural production that surrounds her: 'La présence et la circulation d'une représentation [...] n'indiquent nullement ce qu'elle est pour ses utilisateurs.'¹²¹ De Certeau compares the adaptation and appropriation by the receivers of cultural output to language speakers, where competence is never identical to performance. He sees adaptation and appropriation of our imposed reality in the everyday 'ruses' or 'pratiques' that subjects engage in. Cultural producers may be powerful, but their control only extends so far. He compares the difference between producers and receivers as that of strategy versus tactics. The 'pratiques quotidiennes'¹²² of which de Certeau speaks involve the way in which subjects appropriate and individualise environments and products. Methods of shopping,

¹²¹ *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. xxxviii.

¹²² *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. xliiv.

cooking, domestic routine, walking, and other daily activities serve to adapt what is given into what is most personal – and kept this way by its apparent invisibility:

Bien qu'elles aient pour matériel les *vocabulaires* des langues reçues (celui de la télé, du journal, du supermarché ou des dispositions urbanistiques), bien qu'elles restent encadrées par des *syntaxes* prescrites (modes temporels des horaires, organisations paradigmatiques des lieux, etc.), ces 'traverses' demeurent hétérogènes aux systèmes où elles s'infiltrent et où elles dessinent les ruses d'intérêts et de désirs *différents*. (original emphasis).¹²³

The idea is to 'faire avec' that which is given to the subject.¹²⁴ Where most theories deal with 'stratégies globales', de Certeau wants to investigate 'l'opaque réalité de tactiques locales.'¹²⁵ This opaque reality (secure in its invisibility) is the adapting of a given law, habitat, culture, language, work environment and so on, using the inventiveness and creativity of the subject. It is this that de Certeau calls 'un art de l'entre-deux'¹²⁶ There is common ground here with Augé's description of the experience of anthropological place, which is formed 'à travers les connivences du langage, les repères du paysage, les règles non formulées du savoir-vivre'.¹²⁷ Customs are developed that are not appropriated by the 'society of spectacle' because they are so plural and changing. Even Lasch gestures towards areas of escape in the narcissistic society, where he identifies the family as an environment more resistant to fashion and consumerism: 'Family [...] inherently tends to promote custom',¹²⁸ and custom resists imposed cultural strategies.

For de Certeau, then, these practices and ruses signify a certain agency on the part of the subject, heralding not the end, but a new and optimistic view, of the subject, essential in today's fragmented society: 'L'atomisation du tissu social donne aujourd'hui une pertinence *politique* à la question du sujet' (original emphasis).¹²⁹

¹²³ *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. 57.

¹²⁴ *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. 58.

¹²⁵ *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. Lii.

¹²⁶ *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. 52.

¹²⁷ *Non-lieux*, p. 127.

¹²⁸ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 74.

¹²⁹ *L'Invention du quotidien*, Liii.

What protects these practices against assimilation into global culture is to an extent their invisibility, their unconscious deployment: 'il s'agit d'un savoir que les sujets *ne réfléchissent pas*' (original emphasis).¹³⁰ Because of this, the practices resist theorisation.

Instead, de Certeau proposes narration, this act being itself a 'pratique' in his view.¹³¹ He proposes to 'analyser les pratiques microbiennes, singulières et plurielles'.¹³² This affirmation of the everyday, the unspoken and unexamined areas of daily life, is shared by a number of contemporary novelists, and will be discussed further in the following chapter. This preoccupation may not seem particularly contemporary if understood as simply the continuation of a long-standing trait of the modern subject; Charles Taylor identifies the affirmation of ordinary life as dating back to the rise of the bourgeois individual and Puritan ethics. However, as I shall argue in the next chapter, what differentiates the contemporary version is the sense in which it provides, through its very invisibility, an alternative for the subjectivity that feels annexed by virtue of its over-exposure.

Conclusion

I have tried to show in this first chapter how the contemporary subject occupies a position much altered from that of the first half of the twentieth century, and to suggest that the changes described are intensifying with time. The subject today thus finds herself in the difficult position of retaining all the self-interpretations deemed integral to selfhood that Taylor enumerates (inwardness, disengaged reason, self-mastery, self-expression and creation, universal benevolence, as well as the affirmation of ordinary life), when a number of those strands seem increasingly untenable. In particular, the identification of selfhood with powers of singular self-expression and creation is in tension with the subject's

¹³⁰ *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. 110-11.

¹³¹ The call for narration not theorisation has a parallel in Sontag's statement that 'in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art', Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', in *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 14.

¹³² *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. 145.

experience of uncertainty, homogeneity, dislocation from social conditions, and the postmodern aura of endless citation and impossibility of the new.

I will argue over the course of this thesis that negotiating and engaging with this tension is characteristic of an important strand of contemporary writing, and the next chapter aims to demonstrate this by looking at the literary forms given to the predicaments of the subject elaborated thus far. Chapter 2, then, explores how contemporary literature, and in particular, novels, engage with the theoretical ideas outlined so far. I seek first to demonstrate this in relation to the content. I then look at the forms given to this content, and how, if at all, they differ from modern or postmodern aesthetics. The contention here is that we are seeing something like a 'return to narrative' or post-postmodern neo-realism, of which one could argue that an updated version of 'l'écriture blanche' forms an important subset. The chapter concludes by examining 'l'écriture blanche' and why this aesthetic is so particularly suited to a focus on the everyday. The chapter as a whole aims to draw these elements together into a picture of the contemporary novel, in order to provide the context for the discussion of Toussaint's and Baker's work in Chapter 3. What I hope to have done in this first chapter is to map a broad field within which Toussaint and Baker are situated. However, not all of the ideas addressed thus far will necessarily map neatly, and in their totality, onto both authors.

CHAPTER 2: THE CONTEMPORARY IN LITERATURE

2.1 Contemporary Content - Writing *About* the Contemporary

This second chapter does not aim to give a comprehensive overview of the contemporary novel. Instead, I have chosen six authors via whose work I will examine some key strands of contemporary writing. This will provide some context for the close analysis of Toussaint and Baker which follows. For greater relevance, I have concentrated on American and French writers (although he is Belgian, Toussaint's texts are embedded in French literary heritage).

A further distinction must be made before proceeding, which is essentially that made by Dominique Viart in his article "Écrire avec le soupçon – enjeux du roman contemporain".¹³³ Viart identifies various kinds of novel with which he will *not* be concerned: the 'artisanal' novel which seeks to emulate traditional forms, the commercial novel written to a sales-inducing formula, and the apparently contemporary novel which only seems so because it 'fait chorus sur les clichés du moment et se porte à grand bruit sur le devant de la scène culturelle'.¹³⁴

Viart does not consider these sorts of novels relevant to questions of contemporary writing because

toutes ces formes d'écriture ont surtout pour particularité de ne guère se préoccuper ... de l'écriture. Qu'il s'agisse pour les uns d'écrire selon une élégance héritée de l'enseignement académique, pour les autres de mimer les parlars du moment ou de ne surtout pas se soucier de la façon dont ils écrivent, seuls comptent les personnages et leurs histoires – ou leur absence d'histoire.¹³⁵

Viart acknowledges that a preoccupation with form or lack thereof is not always a straightforward distinction, and that some texts will of course span the categories set out

¹³³ Dominique Viart, "Écrire avec le soupçon – enjeux du roman contemporain". *Le roman français contemporain*. Online. Ministère des Affaires étrangères. Available: <http://www.adpf.asso.fr/adpf-publi/folio/textes/roman.pdf>. 29 August 2005.

¹³⁴ "Écrire avec le soupçon", p. 135.

¹³⁵ "Écrire avec le soupçon", pp. 135-6.

above. But with these criteria in mind, I have chosen three American and three French novelists whose work exemplifies a wide range of pertinent contemporary features. These are: Douglas Coupland, Bret Easton Ellis, Don DeLillo, François Bon, Patrick Deville, and Michel Houellebecq. Houellebecq is for me an interesting case whose work does indeed demonstrate a preoccupation with writing, and yet in other ways *Extersion du domaine de la lutte*, which I shall be looking at in this chapter, seems also at times a novel which attempts to ‘cash in’ on the zeitgeist.

Finally, despite the caveats concerning temporal parameters made in Chapter 1, the novels considered have all been written since the 1980s; necessarily so, since a key feature I wish to discuss concerns their response to the postmodern novels and nouveaux romans written in the 1950s to 1970s.

In looking at the contemporary in terms of the subject matter of these novels, I will first look at the presence of cultural references, including references to consumer culture. Drawing on the expository material in Chapter 1, I will then go on to explore how the novels address ideas about the place of the subject, both in terms of apparent threats to the subject, and in terms of a preoccupation with the everyday. In doing so, it will become apparent that the everyday is viewed in these novels as sometimes positive and emancipating, sometimes destructive and deadening.

Culture

The content of these novels is contemporary firstly by virtue of a heightened awareness of the time in which they are written. The narrator of Douglas Coupland’s *Shampoo Planet*, for example, is obsessed with all that is modern.¹³⁶ His bedroom is called the ‘Modernarium’, with its ‘sleek Italian minifridge’ and ‘extremely tasteful black modular sofa units’.¹³⁷ He shares this preoccupation with his girlfriend: ‘Stephanie and I comprise our own list of the chemicals needed in order to be a truly modern person: “Tetracycline.” “Steroids.”’

¹³⁶ ‘Modern’ in the late eighties and early nineties, was commonly used to mean something like a combination of ‘contemporary’ and ‘futuristic’, but was less frequently used in this sense by the early 21st century.

¹³⁷ Douglas Coupland, *Shampoo Planet* (USA: Simon & Schuster, 1992; repr. 1993), p. 25.

“Freon.” “Aspartame.” “Peroxide.” “Silicon.” “MTV”¹³⁸ MTV appears again in the cultural periodic table at the back of *Shampoo Planet*, as do ‘Spandex’, ‘Asteroid’, ‘Edible Oil Product’, ‘Talk Show’, and ‘Simulation’, amongst others. Similarly, in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* we find reference to various era-defining acronyms: ‘Random Access Memory, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, Mutual Assured Destruction.’¹³⁹ Both writers focus on contemporary fears: nuclear war, ecological collapse, death caused by environmental toxins. In *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, Michel Houellebecq identifies the contemporary ethos of the corporation: ‘Bien avant que le mot ne soit à la mode, ma société a développé une authentique *culture d’entreprise* (création d’un logo, distribution de sweat-shirts aux salariés, séminaires de motivation en Turquie)’ (original emphasis).¹⁴⁰

Contemporary reference in these texts also extends to popular consumer culture – demonstrating the extent to which it has invaded all aspects of our lives, including, now, our novels. Patrick Deville’s *Le Feu d’artifice* is littered with brand names: cars, electronic equipment, food and drink, are all specified in this way. On a single page we find reference to ‘Déménagexpress’, ‘Olivetti’, ‘Laurent Perrier’, and ‘Mont-Blanc’ and ‘Waterman’ pens.¹⁴¹ The vodka consumed by the characters in large quantities throughout the novel is given precise brand distinction: ‘Louis était resté jusqu’à la fermeture du bar de l’Astoria à boire des vodkas Stolichnaya (ni Moskovskaya ni Wyborowa, pas non plus de Zubrowka)’.¹⁴²

Bret Easton Ellis’s work includes many such references. In *Less Than Zero*, the majority of these are to popular music. The references differ in comparison to *Le Feu d’artifice* in that Deville’s brands have a greater longevity, and so will take longer to make the text appear dated (Heineken, Vogue, Mercedes). Ellis’s novel already seems dated to some extent, with its references to Sting and the Human League as the hip popstars of the time.



¹³⁸ *Shampoo Planet*, pp. 190-191.

¹³⁹ Don De Lillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 1986), p. 303.

¹⁴⁰ Michel Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (Paris: Maurice Nadeau, 1994), p. 22.

¹⁴¹ Patrick Deville, *Le Feu d’artifice* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1992), p. 13.

¹⁴² *Le Feu d’artifice*, p. 94.

The contemporary thus exists in these novels in the form of these references to the real world. However, it is not clear that these amount to anything more than a Barthesian ‘effet de réel’ – a realist illusion created by the addition of insignificant but familiar details from the world outside the novel, including, for example, proper names.¹⁴³ As Viart says, much current literature is ‘attentive aux modes et aux humeurs du temps, elle en propose le reflet exacerbé et souvent provocant.’¹⁴⁴ However, such references are evidence of writing that is of, rather than about the contemporary, since ‘nul doute que cette littérature *traduise* quelque chose de l’état social, mais elle ne le *perse* pas’ (original emphasis).¹⁴⁵

While Deville’s and Ellis’s references may function more as a *décor*, I would argue that Douglas Coupland’s novels accomplish the *thinking-through* of contemporary culture that Viart refers to above. More than a mere dusting of the narrative with up-to-the-minute brand names and cultural idiom, Coupland’s parody (or perhaps pastiche, since there is so little to choose between the parody and its real counterpart) is of a reflective and theoretical kind. Here, a discussion of shampoo by the narrator reveals how homogenous identity is purchased via apparently ‘individual’ brands:

Which shampoo will I use today? Maybe PsychoPath[®], the sports shampoo with salon-grade microprotein packed in a manly black injection-molded plastic motor-oil canister. Afterward? A bracing energizer splash of Monk-On-Fire[®], containing placenta, nectarine-pit extract, and B vitamins. And to hold it all together? First-Strike[®] sculpting mousse manufactured by the pluTONium[™] hair-care institute of Sherman Oaks, California.¹⁴⁶

The trade-marked product names, packaging description, and mimicking of cosmetic industry jargon demonstrate a keen awareness of the full range of sophisticated contemporary marketing tools.¹⁴⁷ The conversion of such apparently consumer-unfriendly

¹⁴³ Barthes, Roland, ‘L’effet de réel’, *Littérature et réalité*, ed. by R.Barthes, L.Bersani et al (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982), pp. 86, 89.

¹⁴⁴ “Écrire avec le soupçon”, p. 135.

¹⁴⁵ “Écrire avec le soupçon”, p. 135.

¹⁴⁶ *Shampoo Planet*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁷ Tools that have not changed since they were analysed by Roland Barthes in ‘Publicité de la profondeur’, *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957), pp. 82-85.

terms as ‘psychopath’, ‘plutonium’, and ‘first strike’ into brand names conveys the market’s ability to absorb anything, even nuclear war, and reduce it to a brand identity.¹⁴⁸ The ingredients list – absurd, exotic, ‘organic’ – and entirely plausible – contrasts with the extreme product names. Finally, the amused detailing of these products reveals a narrator who is at once knowing and cynical, yet accepting of his role as consumer.

Coupland’s novels tread an ambiguous line between mocking the manipulation of the late-twentieth-century consumer, and joyfully embracing consumer culture. In *Shampoo Planet*, the America of waste, eco-destruction, and synthetic, superficial, branded lives is also the America of the bright, expansive, exciting future. Such optimism derives perhaps in part from a sense that Coupland’s characters may embrace consumer culture, but they do so in full knowledge of how the system works. This ironic distance gives them some freedom, perhaps echoing de Certeau’s conviction, mentioned above, that ‘la présence et la circulation d’une représentation [...] n’indiquent nullement ce qu’elle est pour ses utilisateurs’.¹⁴⁹ A similar distance with regard to consumer manipulation can be seen in Coupland’s *Generation X*, which is punctuated by cultural neologisms and their definitions. One such example is ‘2+2=5-ism’, a reference to Winston’s capitulation under torture in 1984 to an impossible belief. For Coupland, this term denotes: ‘caving in to a target marketing strategy aimed at oneself after holding out for a long period of time. “*Oh, all right, I’ll buy your stupid cola. Now leave me alone*” (original emphasis).¹⁵⁰

This ‘knowing’ quality, whether cynical, resigned, or amused, also characterises the work of the other novelists examined in this chapter. Beyond the mere presence of cultural and consumer markers we find engagement with the predicaments of the contemporary subject outlined in Chapter 1.

¹⁴⁸ Should one be tempted to conclude that Coupland has here strayed too far into parody with such extreme brand names, one has only to consider the real cosmetic line ‘Urban Decay’ with its eyeshadow colours such as ‘Acid Rain’, ‘Oil Slick’, ‘Smog’ and ‘Uzi’. See www.urbandecay.com.

¹⁴⁹ *L’Invention du quotidien*, p. xxxviii.

¹⁵⁰ *Generation X*, p. 161.

Theory

It is perhaps unsurprising that contemporary novels are preoccupied with significant ideas of their own era. What is striking is that they often do not merely exhibit, but explicitly discourse upon them. Characters in contemporary novels often expound sophisticated theoretical positions without concession to psychological plausibility. Entertaining examples of this can be found in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*. The following excerpt is worth quoting at length, since a single passage addresses the contemporary issues not only of theoretical uncertainty or groundlessness, but also relativity in science, and the instability of meaning. The narrator is attempting to get his son, Heinrich, to tell him whether or not it is raining:

'Is it raining,' I said, 'or isn't it?'
 'I wouldn't want to have to say.'
 'What if someone held a gun to your head?'
 'Who, you?'
 'Someone. A man in a trenchcoat and smoky glasses. He holds a gun to your head and says, 'Is it raining or isn't it? All you have to do is tell the truth and I'll put away my gun and take the next flight out of here.'"
 'What truth does he want? Does he want the truth of someone travelling at almost the speed of light in another galaxy? Does he want the truth of someone in orbit around a neutron star? Maybe if these people could see us through a telescope we might look like we were two feet two inches tall and it might be raining yesterday instead of today.'
 'He's holding the gun to *your* head. He wants your truth.'
 'What good is my truth? My truth means nothing. What if this guy comes from a planet in a whole different solar system? What we call rain he calls soap. What we call apples he calls rain. So what am I supposed to tell him?'
 'His name is Frank J. Smalley and he comes from St. Louis.'
 'He wants to know if it's raining *now*, at this very minute?'
 'Here and now. That's right.'
 'Is there such a thing as now? 'Now' comes and goes as soon as you say it. How can I say its raining now if your so-called 'now' becomes 'then' as soon as I say it?'¹⁵¹

The discussion continues in this vein without Heinrich conceding a definite answer, until his father admits defeat: "First-rate," I told him. "A victory for uncertainty, randomness and chaos. Science's finest hour."¹⁵² We see here both an understanding and a gentle

¹⁵¹ *White Noise*, pp. 23-34.

¹⁵² *White Noise*, p. 24.

mocking of the issues of theoretical uncertainty discussed in Chapter 1.¹⁵³ Other theoretical preoccupations discussed in Chapter 1 can be found in *White Noise*. De Lillo addresses the idea of simulation as model preceding and indistinguishable from the event, when the narrator's family is evacuated from their town following an 'airborne toxic event'. In a makeshift camp away from the disaster area, he attempts to get information about their exposure from one of the camp co-ordinators:

'That's quite an armband you've got there. What does SIMUVAC mean? Sounds important.'
 'Short for simulated evacuation. A new state program they're still battling over funds for.'
 'But this evacuation isn't simulated. It's real.'
 'We know that. But we thought we could use it as a model.'
 'A form of practice? Are you saying you saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation?'¹⁵⁴

Coupland's characters are endowed with a similarly witty theoretical articulacy. The narrator of *Shampoo Planet*, Tyler, a twenty year old student of 'hotel/motel management', is knowledgeable about more than just shampoo; for instance on the subject of how the adopted sixties style of some of his 'hippie' friends is no more than a simulation of an unretrievable past: 'They're the McDead, Jasmine. The sixties are like a theme park to them. They wear the costume, buy their ticket, and they have the experience.'¹⁵⁵

The cheerful tone of both Coupland's and DeLillo's texts contrasts strongly with that of Deville, Houellebecq, and Ellis's altogether darker and more nihilistic visions of the same world. Ellis's characters are perfect consumers, perfect narcissists – in Lasch's words: 'perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious, and bored.'¹⁵⁶ *Less Than Zero* impassively charts the aimless, immoral, and empty lives of the young rich in Los Angeles, lives spent consuming, watching MTV, taking drugs, having sex, going to parties, having lunch with estranged parents – all of which activities seem to equate to each other, and none offering

¹⁵³ Deville's *Le Feu d'artifice* is also punctuated with the theme of uncertainty in science, including discussions of such areas as astrophysics and chaos theory. *Le Feu d'artifice*, p. 103.

¹⁵⁴ *White Noise*, p. 139

¹⁵⁵ *Shampoo Planet*, p. 24.

¹⁵⁶ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 72.

any respite from the endless apathy and ennui. The following quotation illustrates the apathy and lack of affect of Ellis's characters. Clay, the narrator, is talking on the telephone to his friend Daniel who may or may not have got a girl, Vanden, pregnant, who may or may not be getting an abortion:

Daniel asks if he should get in touch with Vanden and I'm surprised at how much strength it takes to care enough to urge him to do so and he says that he doesn't see the point and says Merry Christmas dude and we hang up.¹⁵⁷

Ellis's characters may talk to or at each other, but rarely listen, and seem locked in their own numb, identical worlds. Coupland explored this lack of interaction with more humour in *Microserfs*, where the computer-programmer characters have to consciously make space in their schedules for 'face-time' since conducting relationships almost solely via email has become the norm.¹⁵⁸ This chimes with Baudrillard's observation that increased communication results in a decrease of existing forms of interaction.

An awareness of the paradox of the simultaneous pressure toward individuality and homogeneity is present in both Coupland's and Ellis's work. In Ellis this is present not so much as an articulated anxiety, but as a sense of misery and deadness that pervades his texts. In *Less Than Zero*, the characters are distinguishable only by the cars they drive and the clothes they wear, which is to say, not at all. They are all young, tanned, blonde, with white teeth – identical. Here Baudrillard's prediction that only the minutest deviation from the norm is required to make us stand out is fulfilled; Clay returns from New Hampshire without a tan, and this is remarked upon by nearly every character he meets, until he rectifies the situation. If it is hard for the reader to distinguish between these homogenous individuals, it is just as hard for the characters themselves. The loss of individuality, together with a lack of desire and psychic emptiness that Lasch identifies as narcissistic,

¹⁵⁷ *Less Than Zero*, pp. 55-56.

¹⁵⁸ Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs* (London: Harper Collins, 2004), pp. 135, 173.

surface periodically in the narrator's sense of unease. Clay's anxiety about his loss of self can be seen in the following quotation:

I stop once I see a billboard that I don't remember seeing and I look up at it. All it says is 'Disappear Here' and even though its probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little and I step on the gas really hard and the car screeches as I leave the light.¹⁵⁹

The increasing homogeneity of contemporary subjects is a concern that recurs in Houellebecq's *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. A contemporary descendant of Roquentin, the narrator has graduated from Sartrean nausea to actual vomiting, such is his disgust at the modern world: 'la société dans laquelle je vis me dégoûte; la publicité m'écœure; l'informatique me fait vomir.'¹⁶⁰ The latter reaction is particularly unfortunate, given his employment as computer engineer. As such, he is plausibly articulate on the subject of information proliferation, and its relationship to homogenisation: 'sous nos yeux, le monde s'uniformise; les moyens de télécommunication progressent'.¹⁶¹ The narrator expands on this theme in relation to the new clients he meets with every new project, which transforms into a realisation that they all resemble one another:

L'expérience m'a rapidement appris que je ne suis appelé qu'à rencontrer des gens sinon exactement identiques, du moins tout à fait similaires dans leurs coutumes, leurs opinions, leurs goûts, leur manière générale d'aborder la vie.[...] Il n'empêche, j'ai également eu l'occasion de me rendre compte que les êtres humains ont souvent à cœur de se singulariser par de subtiles et déplaisantes variations [...] – sans doute dans le but d'obliger leurs interlocuteurs à les traiter comme des individus à part entière.¹⁶²

Again, in a way reminiscent of Baudrillard's analysis of contemporary fame, the narrator's clients distinguish themselves through the minutest of variations – one likes tennis, another golf. One likes herring, the other doesn't.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ *Less Than Zero*, p. 30.

¹⁶⁰ *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 95.

¹⁶¹ *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 21.

¹⁶² *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 26.

¹⁶³ *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 26.

Coupled with this awareness of homogeneity is a pervasive sense of loneliness and isolation from others, as can be seen from the examples from Ellis above. In becoming typified, the singular subject embedded in webs of family and community seems to disappear. Many of the selected texts are characterised by this sense of solitude. Deville's *Le Feu d'artifice* traces the trajectories of four individuals who meet, separate, meet again, in the most haphazard way. Their relationships – or rather interactions – are accidental, transient, revocable. No-one is committed to anyone else, motives for staying together are a combination of caprice, the desire for excitement or avoidance of boredom, and sexual desire. The narrator is just as content to spend his evenings with Victor, the proprietor of his current hotel, who demands nothing of him: 'c'était une complicité muette et sereine qui dépassait Victor et n'avait rien à voir avec l'amitié.'¹⁶⁴ Juliette befriends the fourth character, Rosie, in the middle of the novel, who then accompanies the remaining three on their other journeys, without any explanation as to why. The various characters in *Le Feu d'artifice* are frequently described in moments of solitude, and often gazing at the sky or landscape – having intense yet isolated experiences of the world around them: 'Louis était resté jusqu'à la fermeture au bar de l'Astoria [...], était revenu à pied vers l'hôtel juste avant l'aube, et s'était assis sur le muret au-dessus de la plage. Il fixait les dernières étoiles et les feux des paquebots qui croisaient au large [...].'¹⁶⁵

Houellebecq addresses this contemporary phenomenon of solitude (with its modern antecedents) in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. The narrator has no relationships which require his time, and so has trouble filling his days. 'Cependant, il reste du temps libre. Que faire? Comment l'employer? Se consacrer au service d'autrui? Mais, au fond, autrui ne vous intéresse guère.'¹⁶⁶

What strikes one as so peculiarly contemporary is this sense that one is totally free, and that this freedom has become a burden – what to do with one's free time? How to

¹⁶⁴ *Le Feu d'artifice*, p. 87.

¹⁶⁵ *Le Feu d'artifice*, p. 94.

¹⁶⁶ *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, pp. 16-17.

decide what to do and who to be? One only has to compare novels of preceding decades with their themes of the individual seeking to strike out, to free himself from the claustrophobia of family and community (Bellow), or from the duties of marriage (Updike). Those kinds of journeys of self-discovery, of freeing oneself from the influence of constraining relationships, seem to the contemporary reader an anachronism. Yet the freedom we take for granted seems often empty and lonely, and the search for meaning and purpose a futile one.

François Bon's *Autoroute* is also concerned with solitude in its particularly contemporary form. A study of the motorway system, it explores in 'mockumentary' form the same 'non-lieux' which Augé took as objects of anthropological study. The film-maker, Verne, who wishes to make a film capturing real life on the motorway, understands the Augéan principle that motorways avoid the places to which they lead, so that they exist in some peripheral parallel world:

Imagine qu'on dissolue la terre, tout, montagne, océans, villes, terres, pour ne plus garder que ces rubans par quoi on circule: et tout continuerait là-dessus comme si rien d'autre du monde n'existait. [...] Suspendus dans l'univers, planète de ceux qui roulent en ne regardant que les bords.¹⁶⁷

Autoroute shares this preoccupation to some extent with *Le Feu d'artifice*, whose endless journeying without destination also foregrounds the non-lieux of travel – wherever the characters go, the places seem the same, as highlighted by the interchangeability of their hotels: 'puis Juliette s'était mise à réserver leur chambre sur des réseaux Mercure ou Novotel, Ibis ou Formule-1, établissements disséminés sur le lacis routier qui dessert les zones de fret et les grandes surfaces Rallye.'¹⁶⁸

As discussed in Chapter 1, non-lieux are characterised by the solitude and anonymity of those who frequent them. In *Autoroute*, it becomes increasingly apparent that the motorway system not only fosters solitude, but almost prohibits anything else. This is

¹⁶⁷ François Bon, *Autoroute* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999), p. 19.

¹⁶⁸ *Le Feu d'artifice*, p. 74.

manifested by the people met along the way, including a toll-booth attendant, a hydrographer specialist, children lost without their parents, a Japanese photographer, and a lone female truck driver. It is fitting then, that the man whom the narrator and Verne, the film-maker, discover marooned in a service station car park, unwilling to return to society, has chosen this place to achieve perfect isolation. Strangely, it is the sense that in his life outside the motorway he is also isolated – dislocated from a precise place in a structured society, floating so freely that the world will not miss his abdication from it – that leads to his overwhelming need to step out and remain on the motorway, thus formalising his isolation. The man knows how contemporary is this state of affairs:

Qui s'inquiéterait de votre désertion? Ce n'est plus comme au temps des armées et de la marine, quelquefois on aimerait croire à une société d'hommes tenant tout entière parce qu'ils seraient tous là, à leur endroit assigné et précis, et qu'aucun ne manque.¹⁶⁹

At the same time, it is the total penetration of the country by the motorway system, like so many arteries, that fills him with dread. Anywhere can lead to anywhere – there are too many connections: 'Quand je me suis arrêté, au péage là-bas, et que je n'ai plus voulu repartir, c'était cela ma frayeur: que de n'importe où on pouvait rejoindre Orléans.'¹⁷⁰

The overabundance of connections is another contemporary theme which recurs in these novels. In the case of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, it is the proliferating high speed connections of information technology that are explored; the narrator is a computer engineer surrounded by devotees convinced that the need for more and faster information is axiomatic. Needless to say, the narrator does not share this evangelism:

Tout mon travail d'informaticien consiste à multiplier les références, les recoupements, les critères de décision rationnelle. Ça n'a aucun sens. Pour parler franchement, c'est même plutôt négatif; un encombrement inutile pour les neurones. Ce monde a besoin de tout, sauf d'informations supplémentaires.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ *Autoroute*, p. 99.

¹⁷⁰ *Autoroute*, p. 99.

¹⁷¹ *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 95.

The Everyday

Overall, the texts selected here, as being representative of a significant trend, in one way or another take as their subject the various predicaments of the subject set out in Chapter 1. This, after all, was why they were chosen. One can view the pessimistic accounts (of the homogenous individual, the narcissist, the saturation of information, simulation and so on) as constituting a vision of everyday life as boredom, banality, absence of affect, nihilism, and so on. In contrast with de Certeau's idea of the everyday, this version is the deadening end result of civilisation, from which there is no escape.

Victor of *Le Feu d'artifice* remarks to the narrator that 'des jours comme celui-ci, il faudrait être pris en otage par un psychotique pour se sentir vraiment vivant.'¹⁷² The narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* returns repeatedly to the theme of the banality and futility of everyday existence, particularly that of office life:

J'ai si peu vécu que j'ai tendance à m'imaginer que je ne vais pas mourir; il paraît invraisemblable qu'une vie humaine se réduise à si peu de chose; on s' imagine malgré soi que quelque chose va, tôt ou tard, advenir. Profonde erreur.¹⁷³

The charting of everyday life as a degradation, a banalisation of human potential, has many precursors. It is a key theme of modernism, and recurs throughout the twentieth century, in both postmodern and realist form. Obvious precursors to the numbness and indifference of both Ellis's and Houellebecq's characters include Camus's Meursault and Sartre's Roquentin, as well as Perec's 'tu' in *Un Homme qui dort*, and Bellow's Joseph in *Dangling Man*, which Perec's text seems to strongly echo.¹⁷⁴

Yet some of these texts offer a different kind of exploration of the everyday. Here, Perec is again a precursor, but this time for the conviction (shared with de Certeau) that the everyday can also mean that which escapes notice, and therefore escapes banalisation. In *L'Infra-ordinaire* Perec sets out his project of attempting to capture 'ce qui se passe chaque jour et qui revient chaque jour, le banal, le quotidien, l'évident, le commun, l'ordinaire,

¹⁷² *Le Feu d'artifice*, p. 86.

¹⁷³ *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 55.

¹⁷⁴ Georges Perec, *Un homme qui dort*, (Paris: Denoël, 1967; repr. Paris: Gallimard, 1998), and Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man* (London: John Lehman, 1946).

l'infra-ordinaire, le bruit de fond, l'habituel'.¹⁷⁵ What is brought out by Perec's term 'l'infra-ordinaire' is the invisibility of those aspects of the everyday that fall beneath notice. In a world where otherness and the exotic have disappeared (unless you are taken hostage by a psychotic), the infra-ordinary focuses on the *endotic* as uncharted territory which has thus far escaped assimilation and simulation.

Bon's Verne declares his project, which parallels Perec's: 'ce que je veux, c'est filmer l'ordinaire, jusqu'à ce qu'il prouve cette étrangeté qu'il recèle.'¹⁷⁶ Coupland is also interested in the experiences to be had in the interstices of a commercialised and marketed world, the very opposite of "fake yuppie experiences that you had to spend money on, like white water rafting or elephant rides in Thailand."¹⁷⁷ Viart has noted how prevalent is this theme of the infra-ordinary in contemporary literature: 'aussi se prend-elle à des objets nouveaux que la modernité la plus récente désigne à son attention: les détails négligés dont l'apparente insignifiance se révèle riche de sens'¹⁷⁸.

So there is an ambivalence here in regard to the everyday, a recognition that it can be lowly or depressingly banal, and yet, as the infra-ordinary, provide a source of creative richness or escape. The interest of contemporary literature in the everyday is perhaps nothing new. Yet an awareness that it is nothing new is precisely what distinguishes the contemporary version of this preoccupation. For the everyday in its contemporary, infra-ordinary form provides hope for escape – not only from the simulated, banalised world where it seems that everything has been done before, but from the *overwritten* world, where it seems that nothing new can ever be written. An awareness of this state of affairs has been inherited from the postmodernists, and in the next section, I will discuss how this awareness shapes the form of the contemporary novel, as well as the extent to which the latter both continues and breaks from modern and postmodern aesthetics.

¹⁷⁵ *L'Infra-ordinaire*, p. 11.

¹⁷⁶ *Autoroute*, p. 18.

¹⁷⁷ *Generation X*, pp. 104-105.

¹⁷⁸ "Écrire avec le soupçon", p. 143.

2.2 Contemporary Forms - Continuity

Experiment

As with postmodernism, the forms of contemporary literature are defined first and foremost by their multiplicity. However, this section will concentrate on certain key traits of contemporary form, which serve best to situate Toussaint's and Baker's work in the next chapter. What will become apparent during the remainder of this chapter is that the form of the contemporary constitutes both continuity with and departure from modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. This section will be concerned with the areas of continuity, and in the next, I address areas of departure. However, rather than complete rupture or innovation, what we often find is a return to an earlier aesthetic, and it is this combination of forward and backward movement, as it were, that gives the contemporary novel its distinctive form.

The sense of continuity with both modernism and postmodernism lies partly in the contemporary novel's interest in literary experiment and literary theory. Issues concerning the representation of reality and the subversion of classical realism are visible both in the departure from naturalist or realist form (which remains the dominant mode in current novels in general), and in reflexivity, where the text designates itself as construction and interrogates its own status.

Le Feu d'artifice, which is written in the first person, seems initially coherent – the narrator narrates only those events of which he can have knowledge, and manages to include Louis's adventures to which he is not party by virtue of a device whereby Louis tells him or faxes him his activities in the form of a diary. But the reader becomes aware that impossible knowledge is inserting itself into the text, as for instance when Juliette changes into her alter ego 'La Guêpe' and destroys her room – these are events kept secret from both Louis and the narrator, so that conflict arises between single viewpoint and omniscient narration. In general, *Le Feu d'artifice* is a novel much concerned with false or

indeterminate identity, regarding both itself and its characters – of which it is not always clear how many there are. Once the narrator has discovered that Juliette is also La Guêpe and Lucille, all three of whom disappear and reappear in turn, he still fantasises that: ‘pendant une fraction de seconde, j’ai cru que nous pourrions vivre ici tous les sept, Rosy et la Guêpe, Juliette et Louis, Lucille et moi.’¹⁷⁹ Juliette is not the only wearer of disguises – the narrator, as we discover at the end of the novel, is ‘really’ Louis – but is this only a swapping of names or is it one of complete identities? ‘Louis’ tells the narrator on the last page that he is going to tell their story, making him, the narrator, the central character. Furthermore, he says that ‘Je vais t’appeler Louis’.¹⁸⁰ This leads to a dizzying circularity whereby, if *Le Feu d’artifice* is the text of that story, the narrator is both simultaneously Louis, true to his word that he will write the story in this way, and yet cannot be, because at the end, it would be the narrator who would have to declare his intention to himself. Otherwise the two characters would keep swapping endlessly, each time the story was told.

Extension du domaine de la lutte is perhaps less overtly experimental. However, there is direct discussion by the narrator of the nature of the novel, and the shortcomings of realism, which signal a theoretical awareness: ‘les pages qui vont suivre constituent un roman; j’entends, une succession d’anecdotes dont je suis le héros.’¹⁸¹ The narrator’s acerbic tone soon makes it clear that he does not regard himself as the hero of anything, and that he does not hold writing in much higher regard, particularly that with pretensions to psychological realism:

Mon propos n’est pas de vous enchanter par de subtiles notations psychologiques. [...] Il est des auteurs qui font servir leur talent à la description délicate de différents états d’âme, traits de caractère, etc. On ne me comptera pas parmi ceux-là. Toute cette accumulation de détails réalistes, censés camper des personnages nettement différenciés, m’est toujours apparue, je m’excuse de le dire, comme pure foutaise.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ *Le Feu d’artifice*, p. 134.

¹⁸⁰ *Le Feu d’artifice*, p. 158.

¹⁸¹ *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 18.

¹⁸² *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 20.

Bon's *Autoroute* is perhaps the most experimental of all the novels discussed here. The text is divided into fifteen short chapters covering a seven day journey on the motorway, each of which details the events experienced on a specific date, at a specific time and in a specific location. Much trouble is taken by both the narrator and film-maker, and indeed by the author, to convince the reader that she is being presented with snapshots of reality, and that the instructions of Verne, the film-maker who has hired the narrator to keep a written record, are being assiduously carried out, namely, 'rien d'autre qu'écrire, c'est-à-dire même pas inventer, juste noter.'¹⁸³ Highly detailed and often technical descriptions are combined with the inclusion of real places and supposedly real people: a television star they meet along the way, and Verne himself, his nickname, we are told, concealing a real film-maker, whose films and photography 'ont marqué ce virage du cinéma français avec Bresson et quelques rares de leurs pairs.'¹⁸⁴

The novel's appendices – and novel it is, despite its documentary appearance – are intended to 'prove' the veracity of text, as is claimed in the first chapter: 'on trouvera en annexe les quelques documents qui prouvent qu'il ne s'agit pas ici d'un roman, mais d'un récit vrai, malgré sa fin surprenante.'¹⁸⁵ Of course, reference to the 'surprising ending' is a novelistic device par excellence, intended to create suspense and lend these apparently aleatory segments of text a linear structure and momentum. So *Autoroute* is a novel that not only adopts a non-traditional episodic documentary form, but that denies its own constructedness in the face of the very same. The separation of appendices from body text is also experimental in that, while it presupposes a hierarchy between main text and supporting documentation, this is subverted by the absence of qualitative difference between the two types of text.

Autoroute engages with theoretical concerns over the representation of reality on several levels. Thematically, the project undertaken by the film-maker Verne and the

¹⁸³ *Autoroute*, p. 8.

¹⁸⁴ *Autoroute*, p. 9.

¹⁸⁵ *Autoroute*, p. 13.

narrator is to capture a hitherto unseen reality, sought in the peripheral world of the motorway system. Verne is to record on film, and the narrator in writing, their experiences during their seven days of driving. The question of which mode is more able to capture and record this reality is implicit throughout the text; sometimes the narrator will record directly what he sees, at other times he will describe a sequence of film or a photograph taken of that reality. However one can argue that this ambivalence is resolved by the fact that ultimately we are reading a book, and not watching a film.

The text uses multiple framing – sometimes the text indicates that what has just been read are the actual notes the narrator has made for Verne, and sometimes the narrator seems to record the events at one remove, including his act of note-taking, suggesting a possible *mise en abyme* (since he could then write an account of writing an account of writing his original account, and so on).¹⁸⁶ The lengthy technical description of Verne's camera's specifications in Annexe 1 is a way of describing the tools which are used to capture reality; this in turn serves to draw attention to the tool that is doing the same in literary form, namely the writing itself. *Autoroute* is thus a text that interrogates itself and its intentions in a way that, whilst intensely focused on the real, subverts many traditions of classical realism. It is through self-interrogation and reflexivity that most of these subversions occur; even if chronology is not being seriously troubled, narrators are not unreliable, and the reader is not being alienated, there is still an insistence on recognising the constructedness of the text.

One particular strand of reflexivity is that of citation and intertext, where the text refers to its status by reference to other texts, whether those of peers or predecessors. So, for example, Bon's inventories of collected objects in *Autoroute* recall Perec's list-making, as his annexed list of food and drink consumed by himself and Verne during the trip recalls Perec's 'Tentative d'inventaire des aliments liquides et solides que j'ai ingurgités au cours de

¹⁸⁶ Similarly, *Le Feu d'artifice* includes sections of text which seem at first to derive from the narrator but at the end of which it becomes apparent that we are reading a fax directly from Louis – the boundary between text within the narrative and the narrative itself is blurred. *Le Feu d'artifice*, p. 65.

l'année 1974'.¹⁸⁷ More explicit intertext is evidenced by reference to a sound-proofing wall 'modèle Échenoz, daté 1986',¹⁸⁸ which occurs in the middle of a direct unacknowledged quotation from *Lac* by literary peer Jean Echenoz, in a passage about a motorway. In *Le Feu d'artifice*, the narrator confesses his interest in Oulipian word games such as 'des vers holorimes, ou des vérités intrinsèques du type: *Cette phrase, vérifiez, comporte bien cinquante-huit caractères.*' (original emphasis).¹⁸⁹ The presence of citation or intertext not only serves to draw attention to the written status of the text, but also to the existence of other texts and hence to literary precursors and influences, to the question of which I now turn.

The experimental features of the novels discussed above constitute a formal continuum with both modernism and postmodernism, and centre around how and whether literature can represent reality. The troubling of realist assumptions and aesthetics has had many proponents, but, for the French authors in particular, Roland Barthes and the nouveaux romanciers are likely influences. Barthes's structural analysis in 'Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits'¹⁹⁰ served to demonstrate that the 'rules' of the realist novel were simply conventions, and thus open to reinvention. Barthes identified classical realism as a mode in which bourgeois humanist assumptions were transformed from mere culture into nature. This naturalisation of contingent, class-bound morality is for Barthes achieved by the centrality in realism of 'le récit'. The realist mode mimics factual reportage, whereby events which have actually occurred are simply recorded. As Arthur Danto writes: 'discursive language, say in novel writing, is artistically identified as description, which is what enables fiction to be convincing: we acquiesce in the fiction that we are being given facts.'¹⁹¹ This illusion is enhanced in French by use of the *passé simple*, the literary tense which situates events definitively in the past. The 'récit', then, contains for Barthes a

¹⁸⁷ *L'Infra-ordinaire*, pp. 97-106.

¹⁸⁸ *Autoroute*, p. 16. The original passage is to be found in Jean Echenoz, *Lac* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1989), p. 142.

¹⁸⁹ *Le Feu d'artifice*, p. 79. (58 characters including punctuation).

¹⁹⁰ Roland Barthes, 'Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits', in *L'Aventure sémiologique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985), pp. 167-206.

¹⁹¹ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981; repr. 2001), p. 127.

‘mythologie de l’universel, propre à la société bourgeoise, dont le Roman est un produit caractérisé: donner à l’imaginaire la caution formelle du réel, mais laisser à ce signe l’ambiguïté d’un objet double, à la fois vraisemblable et faux.’¹⁹² This ambiguity lies in the idea that fiction, false in its details, is supposed to nonetheless contain the seeds of universal truth, concerning what is often called ‘the human condition’. For Barthes, this simply meant that bourgeois society could dress up its own mores as eternal truths of mankind, using classical realism as its vehicle.

The ambiguous true/false structure of realism that Barthes highlights results for Danto from fact and fiction occupying different ontological orders, something like the difference between a real rock and a metaphorical rock, or a cat and a dream-cat:

The difference between factual and fictive description is not that the former is true and the latter false – for something may after all be meant as factual and be false without thereby being elevated to the status of fiction, and fictional prose may in literal fact be true – but in the fact that the former is artistically identified as description and the latter literally identified as that.¹⁹³

Recognition of this ambiguity, present in the texts discussed here, again has precursors: for example, the insistence of *Autoroute* on its status as factual record recalls Sartre’s ‘Avertissement des Éditeurs’ at the beginning of *La Nausée* (which in turn parodies an eighteenth-century device of the same kind).

De Certeau has also explored the relationship between realist fiction and non-fiction; realist fiction mimics reportage, and reporting real events in turn involves narration and rhetoric. Each ‘joue son autre’.¹⁹⁴ *Autoroute* signals an awareness of this interdependence, not only in its mimicking of the documentary form, but in its reference to the use of narrative, even in our everyday speech, to make sense of lived experience: the narrator speaks of moving on to the next ‘chapitre’ in the journey, underlining that he/the

¹⁹² Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1953; repr. 1972), p. 28.

¹⁹³ *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 127.

¹⁹⁴ *L’Invention du quotidien*, p. 122.

text knows it is time for the next chapter, but also that speaking of ‘chapters in our lives’ is just one of the narrative devices we use when describing our own histories.¹⁹⁵

Denial of this interdependence of fiction and non-fiction is a central feature of realism; what unites its numerous variants is perhaps the repression of its own conventions. As Danto writes, this is characteristic of ‘realism, whose only definition is that it intends to avoid the question of reality implicated in that of art’.¹⁹⁶

Robbe-Grillet and the other nouveaux romanciers developed an aesthetic that deliberately disturbed realist conventions, making it impossible for the reader to sustain the illusion of transparency by means of the intrusion into the text of its own construction. They thus became notorious for this kind of formal experimentation, where narrative chronology is rendered impossible, narrators are deluded or unreliable, other persons besides the third person singular are used by the narrator, the text will refer to itself sometimes to the point of pure circularity, and readers will generally have expectations aroused and then frustrated. Of course, in Robbe-Grillet as well as in other modernist rejections of realist conventions, the aim is sometimes to get closer to the truth of experience by means of shocking experimental form (for example, experiments with chronology or stream of consciousness can aim for a closer correlation to phenomenal experience). In the nouveaux romans, however, the ability of writing to represent reality remained ever in question. For some critics, this meant an abdication, a retreat into formal sterility. However, Viart has argued that for writers such as Sarraute, Simon, Pinget, Duras, and Butor, these criticisms were misplaced, as they were merely trying to escape the existing clichés of form, and to find a fresh approach to the eternal questions of the subject, of experience.¹⁹⁷

The contemporary French texts discussed here can thus be seen as presenting an aesthetic continuum with the formal experimentation of their predecessors. The blurring of

¹⁹⁵ *Autoroute*, p. 78.

¹⁹⁶ *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 75.

¹⁹⁷ “Écrire avec le soupçon”, pp. 138-9.

the distinction between the narrator and other characters, and the confusion as to the narrator's identity, discussed above in relation to Bon and Deville, recall Barthes's influential 'La Mort de l'auteur', which explained how fictional writing necessarily effaces the author: 'linguistiquement, l'auteur n'est jamais rien de plus que celui qui écrit, tout comme *je* n'est autre que celui qui dit *je*: le langage connaît un "sujet", non une "personne"' (original emphasis).¹⁹⁸ The texts I have chosen thus demonstrate an awareness of how the status of fiction necessarily renders undecidable the question 'who is the writing subject?', in contrast to other writing (letters between real people, for example) where a text can more legitimately be described as emanating from its author. Even the less experimental *Extension du domaine de la lutte* initially transgresses the convention for first person or third person singular, adopting the second person as did Butor in *La Modification* (vous) and Perec in *Un Homme qui dort* (tu).

Reflexivity

*Fiction needs to see itself as fiction: a humanly created world of language and symbol constructed by a questing artist who may reveal but cannot copy reality.*¹⁹⁹

The experimental features of the contemporary novel are, as I have said, nothing new. Moreover, the recognition that it may be impossible to write anything new, a key theme of postmodernism, is present in the contemporary novel – so that this recognition, in turn, is itself nothing new, and represents a continuity with earlier forms. The reflexivity which we find in modernism, often as a rejection of realism and an insistence on the text's constructed status, is intensified in postmodernism. Understandably so, since the sense that one cannot write anything truly new any more will inevitably send the writer back to the text in the form of citation and other reflexive moves. This feeling that one cannot write anything new has a number of sources: a constant drive for innovation will ultimately

¹⁹⁸ Roland Barthes, 'La Mort de l'auteur', *Le Bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), p. 63.

¹⁹⁹ Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel*, 2nd edn (Oxford: OUP, 1992), p. 196.

lessen the impact of the new, while the cultural realm expanding to cover all others means that ‘the world of things has become a world of signs’.²⁰⁰ In America, the humanist realism of the kind practised by Bellow, Roth and Updike seemed to the postmodernists to have run its course, reality itself having come to resemble existing texts rather than inspiring new ones. As Malcolm Bradbury writes: ‘the world outside being over-written and over-plotted, the novel could do nothing more than rewrite or deconstruct it.’²⁰¹ This is still such a common phenomenon that we take it for granted. How easily we tend to describe life in terms of artworks: ‘that was such a Woody Allen moment’, we might say, or ‘I’m having a Proustian recollection.’

So instead of those elements of the novel which seemed no longer tenable – authorial omniscience, narrative coherence, psychological plausibility and conventional ending – the postmodern author became ‘the playful inheritor of a world already made into a story.’²⁰² The intensified reflexivity, sometimes called ‘metafiction’ or ‘surfiction’, does not merely allude to a text’s status or demonstrate some signs of self-consciousness, but abandons all claims to represent reality and often appears hermetically sealed against outside reference. This might be achieved through multiple citations, a constant changing of style, implicating the reader into complicity, or descent into fantasy and surrealism. American writers provided some highly entertaining (and often much disparaged) examples of this kind of writing.

One example of heightened postmodern reflexivity is Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White*, whose effects are achieved in a number of ways. The text demonstrates its self-consciousness by blurring the line between literature and what seems to be literary criticism or psychoanalysis of the characters. Thus a new page begins: ‘*The psychology of Snow White*. What does she hope for? “Someday my prince will come.” By this Snow White means that she lives her own being as incomplete, pending the arrival of one who will “complete” her’

²⁰⁰ ‘Three Axioms for Projecting a Line’, p. 100.

²⁰¹ *The Modern American Novel*, p. 201.

²⁰² *The Modern American Novel*, p. 201.

(original emphasis).²⁰³ Any interpretation is therefore anticipated by the text and so precluded. Similarly, when the character Jane says ‘Goodnight Hogo. Take your dark appeal away. Your cunningly wrought dark appeal’, the effect is of the text commenting on itself in a literary critical manner.²⁰⁴

The boundary between author and narrator, and what Danto might call the special ontological status of the narrative, the suspension of disbelief by the reader, is utterly broken when the author appears to intervene in the text and to address the reader ‘directly’. At the end of part one of *Snow White* we find a questionnaire for the reader supposedly to complete, which includes the following questions:

6. Is there too much *blague* in the narration? ()
Not enough *blague*? ()²⁰⁵

and:

13. Holding in mind all works of fiction since the War, in all languages, how would you rate the present work, on a scale of one to ten, so far?
(Please circle your answer)
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 ²⁰⁶

The last question in particular highlights the sheer number of literary works which inhibit originality, but also offer resources to plunder. The decision of Barthelme to base his text on the Snow White tale makes sense in this light, since no story could be more well-known and ‘overwritten’ than the fairy tale. In addition, this playful and interactive use of a questionnaire to reinvent the form of the novel highlights a key feature of postmodernism, that of implicating the reader. John Barth does something similar with his ‘Frame-Tale’ in *Last in the Furhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice*, which consists of a double-sided strip

²⁰³ *Snow White*, p. 70.

²⁰⁴ *Snow White*, p. 171.

²⁰⁵ *Snow White*, p. 82.

²⁰⁶ *Snow White*, p. 83.

of text with dotted lines and instructions for the reader to cut it out, twist, and glue the ends together, to form a Moebius strip. On one side of the strip is written ‘Once upon a time there’ and on the other, ‘was a story that began’, thus forming an infinite circularity (and, one might say, rendering in literal form Derrida’s famous ‘il n’y a pas de hors-texte’). Such experimentation in the physical arrangement of text is later found in *Generation X*’s interruption of the text by single frame comic strips, slogans, and dictionary-style entries coined for contemporary phenomena, such as the Augéan: ‘Historical Overdosing: To live in a period of time when too much seems to happen. Major symptoms include addiction to newspapers, magazines, and TV news broadcasts.’²⁰⁷

To return to *Snow White*, and the postmodern feeling that nothing new can be written, it is important to understand that this also means (since the world has been made into stories which precede us) that nothing new can be *done*, either. Here is Prince Paul of *Snow White*, regretting that he can no longer plausibly own a horse:

‘If I had been born well prior to 1900, I could have ridden with Pershing against Pancho Villa. Alternatively, I could have ridden with Villa against the landowners and corrupt government officials of the time. In either case, I would have had a horse. How little opportunity there is for young men to have personally owned horses in the bottom half of the twentieth century!’²⁰⁸

So the idea of adventure and rebellion, of cutting a rugged figure of destiny, in fact of simply owning a horse without it seeming a *pose* – are all precluded for postmodern man. Something like this feeling pervades the anti-hero of Perec’s *Un Homme qui dort*, who has recognised the extent to which all of life’s choices, including the extraordinary ones, have already been anticipated by bourgeois culture:

You can only destroy the seventh wonder of the world once: there was only one Herostratus. You can only stop writing and go gun-running in Abyssinia once: there was only one Rimbaud. No matter how in-Human his rejection of the values

²⁰⁷ *Generation X*, p. 9.

²⁰⁸ *Snow White*, p. 78.

that besiege the man asleep may be, bourgeois culture will find a way of reducing it to the commonplace, or the 'already written'.²⁰⁹

Although it may be cast less in terms of bourgeois culture, the feeling that one is unable to escape already written roles, which are anyway increasingly homogenised, pervades all the contemporary texts I have cited, from the attempts in *Generation X* to find an experience that is not a yuppie sell-out, to the resignation and disgust of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, via the amused acceptance of *White Noise*.

In other postmodern texts, the inevitable restriction to the already written is manifested by dizzyingly circular self-reference, leading to a semantic *mise en abyme*. In John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, the short story 'Title', described as 'a triply schizoid monologue' in the author's notes prefacing the volume, is concerned simultaneously with an argument between two people, the attempt of the author/narrator to complete the story being narrated, and a discourse on the state of culture and literature. A typical excerpt runs:

Why do you suppose it is, she asked, long participial phrase of the breathless variety characteristic of dialogue attributions in nineteenth-century fiction, that literate people such as we talk like characters in a story? Even supplying the dialogue-tags, she added with wry disgust.²¹⁰

Again, we have the transgression of conventions, the impossibility of deciding who is speaking/writing, and the infinite circularity of a text writing about itself writing about itself, and so on, a circularity literalised in 'Frame-Tale' mentioned above.

American postmodern reflexivity is thus marked by humour and playfulness; notwithstanding, it has attracted numerous critics, who mourn the passing of humanist realism, psychological portraits, and epic journeys of discovery into the human condition. Lasch writes of postmodern authors:

²⁰⁹ Andrew Leak, 'Phago-citations: Barthes, Perec, and the Transformation of Literature', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13:1 (1993), p. 66.

²¹⁰ *Lost in the Funhouse*, p. 104.

By means of irony and eclecticism, the writer withdraws from his subject but at the same time becomes so conscious of these distancing techniques that he finds it more and more difficult to write about anything except the difficulty of writing. Writing then becomes itself an object of self-parody.²¹¹

For Lasch the sterility of postmodern writing at once signals the end of art and the descent of the subject into inexorable narcissism. But if what Lasch would prefer is for writers to continue the tradition of the 'great American novel', it does seem impossible now (without being mistaken for pastiche or parody) to write, for example, something along the lines of Bellow's epic *The Adventures of Augie March*, with its collection of unique and intricately drawn Characters, when in our time identity is being homogenised and such characters are becoming less plausible in both print and real world. As already noted, Lasch himself admits this difficulty, since the contemporary self's

only reality is the identity he can construct out of materials furnished by advertising and mass culture, themes of popular film and fiction, and fragments torn from a vast range of cultural traditions, all of them equally contemporaneous to the contemporary mind.²¹²

Furthermore, how can the homogenised self develop a singular vision of the world which for so long has distinguished the artist? Mark Tribe, in his article 'Postmodern Time', notes that 'it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to maintain this (illusory) uniqueness in the face of a world that is hypersaturated with technologically mediated representations.'²¹³ It seems to me that in responding to this state of affairs, the self-conscious, eclectic, cannibalising postmodern author is thus perhaps an honest one. Whether one deplores or celebrates such a state of affairs, it is clear that an awareness of it persists in modified form in contemporary literature. The experiments are less dramatic, hermetic, and didactic, but they are there. The supposedly documentary nature of *Autoroute*,

²¹¹ *The Culture of Narcissism*, pp. 96-97.

²¹² *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 91.

²¹³ Mark Tribe, "Postmodern Time", 1993. Online. Available: <http://www.nothing.org/mark/time>. 20 January 2006.

belied by signs of its fictional status, inherits precisely this kind of reflexivity, albeit in subtler form. It can be seen in the stylised nature of everyday speech overheard by the narrator, too articulate and rhetorical or philosophical to be plausibly casual. As an example, Verne and the narrator overhear the somewhat fraught conversation of a couple who have run into a previous lover of one of them, and all three of whom have decided to go for a drink. The following is an excerpt of their dialogue:

Femme aux cheveux longs: 'Tu as proposé: Allons au moins prendre un verre, j'aurais dû dire non? Ce qui s'est fini il y a trois ans m'est indifférent, j'existe ailleurs, autre ville, autre mémoire, et personne n'est propriétaire de ce qui a été soi-même.'²¹⁴

As with DeLillo's theoretically articulate characters, the objection of Bruce Bawer and other critics is that 'people don't really talk like that',²¹⁵ but this is of course to miss the point with regard to novels which are only too aware, that however people *do* talk, it is not the conventions of realism that deliver that truth, conventions which have anyway become unusable now that they exist within the quotation marks of postmodernity.

Writing the Self

*Écrire de soi ne va pas de soi, et le texte demeure tendu entre sa tentation et son impossibilité.*²¹⁶

Closely bound up with the postmodern forms of reflexivity and self-consciousness, is the question of subjectivity, as noted above in relation to the homogenous self. This is another key theme of postmodernism that continues into the contemporary novel; the sense in which texts cannot help but revert to and reflect the writing self, whether they are explicit self-portraits or not.

²¹⁴ *Autoroute*, p. 67.

²¹⁵ Bawer writes 'does any twelve-year-old actually talk this way?' in reference to Bee, Jack's son in *White Noise*. Bruce Bawer, *Diminishing Fictions: Essays on the Modern American Novel and Its Critics* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1988), p. 259.

²¹⁶ "Écrire avec le soupçon", p. 142.

One important way in which this is the case is by virtue of the reflexivity discussed above. Necessarily, if a text diverts attention away from the world and back onto itself, by extension that attention is being drawn back onto the writer him or herself. Taylor makes this point about modernism, and it continues to be true of our contemporary writers: ‘there is a new reflexive turn, and poetry or literature tends to focus on the poet, the writer, or on what it is to transfigure through writing.’²¹⁷ What Taylor means here is that even if an experimental text makes no reference whatsoever to the question of narrator subjectivity, the mere fact of experimentation serves to focus the reader’s attention on the constructedness of the writing, and therefore to be aware of the authorial process. The self of the writer cannot be completely occluded.

A contemporary preoccupation with subjectivity can be detected in other ways. The texts I consider here all take the first person singular as their chief narrative voice (although *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Le Feu d’artifice* slip briefly into ‘tu’ and ‘il’ respectively). The omniscient 3rd person, which tends to efface the self of the narrator, is avoided.

Furthermore, several of the novels adopt the form of ‘memoir’ or diary, a confessional form intended for the recording of interior life. The narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* declares the necessity of his writing in this way: ‘ce choix autobiographique n’en est pas réellement un: de toute façon, je n’ai pas d’autre issue.’²¹⁸ *Generation X* takes a diary format, with the ‘entries’ of each chapter tied to the time of writing: ‘it’s three hours or so after Tyler’s phone call’,²¹⁹ and so on. *Le Feu d’artifice* is structured in a similar way, with Louis’s daily ‘journal’ providing much of the narrative. Even *Autoroute*, whose narrator has been hired to record simply and neutrally the world of the motorway system, also becomes a record of the narrator’s inner life and reactions to the events that occur.

²¹⁷ *Sources of the Self*, p. 481.

²¹⁸ *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 19.

²¹⁹ *Generation X*, p. 125.

Thirdly, these texts make explicit their concern with identity and the representation of subjectivity. Coupland's characters are much preoccupied with self-examination. A typical example from Tyler in *Shampoo Planet* runs thus:

What secrets have I traded these past months for other secrets? What sweetness for corruption? Light for darkness? Lies for truths? Curiosities satisfied in return for anxieties? Overall there appears to be a net loss. I feel there has to be one more major revelation coming my way, because I think there's some insight I've just plain missed. Or is this sense of overlooking simply what happens as one gets older? I finish my cola.²²⁰

In *Le Feu d'artifice*, when Louis is tiring of Juliette's volatility, he wonders whether this life is really his own:

'Ça n'est pas ma vie, disait-il. Cette vie.'
Il avait dû se tromper d'avenir dans un vestiaire du temps où il faisait du sport, et repartir avec celui d'un autre sur l'épaule.²²¹

A preoccupation with the subject is once again evidence of continuity with previous forms. Its precursors date back to the birth of the novel in the eighteenth century, derived from the practice of keeping journals, which in turn, as Taylor traces it, is a result of the long turn inward starting with St Augustine and gathering momentum in the Renaissance.²²² What are new in modern and postmodern treatments of subjectivity, however, are the apparently contradictory but in fact complementary directions which its explorations have taken. As has already been noted, the fact of attending to the act of writing necessarily entails attending to the writer. However, as Taylor writes:

Twentieth-century art has gone more inward, has tended to explore, even to celebrate subjectivity; it has explored new recesses of feeling, entered the stream of consciousness, spawned schools of art rightly called 'expressionist'. But at the same time, at its greatest it has often involved a decentring of the subject: an art

²²⁰ *Shampoo Planet*, p. 298.

²²¹ *Le Feu d'artifice*, p. 99.

²²² 'From Bunyan to Pepys to Boswell, and arguably even to Rousseau, the Protestant culture of introspection becomes secularized as a form of confessional autobiography, while at the same time helping to constitute the new form taken by the English novel in the eighteenth century at the hands of Defoe, Richardson, and others.' *Sources of the Self*, p. 184.

emphatically not conceived as self-expression, an art displacing the centre of interest onto language, or onto poetic transmutation itself, or even dissolving the self as usually conceived in favour of some new constellation.²²³

The paradoxical attention to the subject and yet displacement or problematising of subjectivity continues to characterise late twentieth and early twenty-first-century writing. This mode has had its critics. For Lasch, the problem is not so much the confessional mode, which he recognises as central to what he considers to be great humanist literature; rather it is the empty pseudo-self of the contemporary narcissist which has nothing to offer its readers. Where once ‘the artist bared his inner struggles in the belief that they represented a microcosm of the larger world’,²²⁴ now he mocks the whole process so that ‘the record of the inner life becomes an unintentional parody of inner life.’²²⁵

Lasch is thinking here in particular of Barthelme, and it is true that when it comes to self-regarding authors, one cannot get more explicit than his mid-text questionnaire about how the reader thinks he is doing. Of course *Snow White* is such a highly self-aware text that it would be surprising if Barthelme were not precisely sending up postmodernity’s self-obsession. Yet this is merely grist to Lasch’s mill, since the pseudo-self-awareness of the narcissist means that ‘the author now speaks in his own voice but warns the reader that his version of the truth is not to be trusted.’²²⁶ For Bawer the point is rather that the contemporary confessional form is somehow inherently self-indulgent and neurotic. In his essay ‘true confessions’ in *Diminishing Fictions*, he writes: ‘in such a work, the writer’s main purpose typically appears to be less artistic than personal: he may seek, variously, to delineate his deepest emotions, to expiate his guilt, to prove his innocence, to account for his failures or weaknesses or neuroses.’²²⁷

²²³ *Sources of the Self*, p. 456.

²²⁴ *The Culture of Narcissism*, pp. 20-21.

²²⁵ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 20.

²²⁶ *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 20.

²²⁷ *Diminishing Fictions*, p. 285.

It is interesting that Bawer attacks the writer who confesses his shortcomings – which often include what one might call identity anxiety. There are other kinds of confessions, where the writer's purpose is self-aggrandisement, regardless of what misfortunes he may endure (one only has to think of Mailer or Bukowski or even Hemingway in this vein). The truly contemporary subject is beset by uncertainty, as we have seen, and this includes uncertainty about the writing subject's identity. Viart notes how central is this theme: 'la critique portée sur la limpidité subjective a fait son effet, et la multiplication des savoirs – analytique, biologique, sociologique...– brouille toujours un peu plus la possibilité même d'une conscience de soi entière, singulière et cohérente.'²²⁸

One can in fact see this preoccupation as two-fold; on the one hand, as de Certeau notes, the act of writing is in a sense an act of separation which produces a subject distinct from the object it considers: 'geste cartésien d'une découpe instaurant, avec un *lieu* d'écriture, la maîtrise (et l'isolement) d'un sujet devant un *objet*' (original emphasis).²²⁹ On the other, as we have seen, a central theme of the contemporary is that of uncertainty, and the questions of what and how it is possible to know:

Le roman contemporain brasse ainsi prodigieusement les questions du savoir. Non seulement il fait du manque à savoir et du questionnement des savoirs l'un des exercices de l'écriture, mais il se déploie aussi lui-même comme le lieu d'une *critique des savoirs* (original emphasis).²³⁰

In this way writing can embrace both uncertainty and the possibility of engagement, of 'critique'. Hence the presence in all the novels discussed here of epistemological and metaphysical questions, even if these are lightly, and not didactically, presented. I shall offer some examples of this philosophical dimension in the section to follow.

Having explored the ways in which the contemporary novel constitutes an extension of its modern and postmodern heritage, I explore in the next section the extent

²²⁸ "Écrire avec le soupçon", pp. 140-141.

²²⁹ *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. 199.

²³⁰ "Écrire avec le soupçon", p. 151.

to which it departs from it, and address at least one important strand of contemporary literary form, which might be described as ‘neo-realist’, the post-postmodern, or the ‘retour du récit’. Within this strand I conclude the chapter by focusing more closely on a sub-set of this strand, one that has sometimes been called ‘l’écriture blanche’, since this will serve to situate Toussaint (and to some extent Baker), in Chapter 3.

2.3 Contemporary Forms - Departure

*Dans les constructions romanesques futures, gestes et objets seront là
avant d’être quelque chose.²³¹*

Alain Robbe-Grillet’s words of 1961 referred to a type of novel which, like his own, would refuse the anthropomorphic metaphors of classical realism, and instead embrace a careful ‘phenomenological’ neutrality. In this final section, I will contend that this neutral quality of ‘être-là’ is at the heart of an important current in contemporary writing, and proves the prescience of Robbe-Grillet’s statement.

The last section explored how the contemporary novel can be seen in terms of continuity with earlier modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. In this section, I want to explore how these texts have departed from their immediate predecessors, and how this departure takes the form of a return to even earlier forms. Even as these texts are inheritors of their anti-realist and experimental predecessors, they are effecting what has been called a ‘retour du récit’, and returning once again to realism, albeit in a modified way.

Neo-Realism and the ‘Retour du Récit’

We have seen in the previous section the extent to which the contemporary novel maintains a tradition of disturbing the conventions of realism. However, this tradition is muted, or even contradicted, by a simultaneous return to those narrative conventions. What is distinctive about all these novels is the way in which experiment sits closely with

²³¹ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1961), p. 20. (Original emphasis).

the desire to once again tell a story. One consequence of this is a certain air of sincerity, contrasting with the hermetic self-mockery of the heights of postmodernism. There is a gentle, yet earnest sense of return, not only to the world outside the text, but also to the realist aesthetic. Viart remarks:

La présence du réel, que la littérature des années soixante-dix semblait désespérer de convoquer dans l'espace des livres, est suffisamment forte pour s'imposer au monde littéraire. Donné pour inaccessible au verbe par la décennie structurale et cantonné au statut de 'référént', le réel est donc à nouveau considéré.²³²

Autoroute can be seen in this way, with its clear desire to seize the real, yet unable at the same time to relinquish the theoretical knowledge which troubles that possibility. Thus the disturbing of conventions and reflexivity in *Autoroute* seem less alienating and didactic and more thoughtful, philosophical – such as the raising of questions over whether writing or film can best represent reality, discussed in the previous section. The presence of a kind of sincerity perhaps explains why some postmodern traits have been abandoned; for example, there is a marked absence of parody and pastiche in the novels considered here.

The return of the real is manifested in a number of ways. The inclusion of real people, as in *Autoroute*, is a sign of the novel wishing to look beyond the 'récit du récit' and towards a 'récit du monde'. Furthermore, the return of the realist narrative can be seen in the novels' linear trajectories, which take a central character through some kind of transformation, even if the conclusion does not necessarily bring resolution or dénouement. Both *Generation X* and *Shampoo Planet* end with the narrator leaving for a new life offering the possibility of escape or fulfilment. *Autoroute* concludes with the disappearance of Verne, a dramatic end to a succession of (linear) events. Both *White Noise* and *Extension du domaine de la lutte* set up the suspense of a final act by the narrator, although in both cases the result is anti-climactic, and both texts finish abruptly, without resolution. *Le Feu d'artifice* may suggest a somewhat Proustian circularity at its end, but there is no

²³² "Écrire avec le soupçon", p. 152.

difficulty in reconstituting the chronology of events as they occur. Similarly gentle troubling of the narrative comes in the form of extensive use of colloquial speech in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, and the mixing of registers to be found there, as also in *Le Feu d'artifice*. The narrative of *Le Feu d'artifice* is also fragmented and episodic, a series of apparently disconnected 'events'. This structure is partly created by the unpredictable character of Juliette (a volatile 'Betty Blue' type), who drives the narrative, and partly by the travelling theme. The characters are often in cars, driving without necessarily going anywhere. Yet this does not amount to an alienating experiment, since the main narrative does not overturn the realist conventions of the story being told, however aleatory and unpredictable it may seem.

Overall, then, experimentation combined with resumption of some realist conventions, results in a playful inclusion of theory, in place of the alienating, didactic manifestoes of modernism and postmodernism. Viart suggests the purpose of this kind of writing is

non pour revenir à la représentation, à la subjectivité ou au réalisme comme si aucune critique n'en avait été faite, mais justement pour en reprendre le questionnement: comment dire le réel sans tomber sous le coup des déformations esthétiques et idéologiques du réalisme?²³³

The thoughtfulness of these texts is an important aspect of this neo-realist or post-postmodern aesthetic. It is manifested in part by the inclusion of philosophical and theoretical reflections, in regard not only to the text itself, but also to the world outside it. Watching the eponymous firework display at the end of *Le Feu d'artifice*, the narrator muses that the bursts of light and colour are 'comme l'effort ténu et sans espoir [...] de l'être fragile sur le néant tranquille et sûr de la nuit qui reprenait ses droits.'²³⁴ When not drinking vodka, dropping brand names, and jumping in and out of cars, the narrator is fond of reading St Augustine and Seneca, and texts with titles such as: 'Formes et structures dans la

²³³ "Écrire avec le soupçon", p. 139.

²³⁴ *Le Feu d'artifice*, p. 157.

phénoménalité.²³⁵ The articulate reflections of the narrator of *Extersion du domaine de la lutte* on both literature and society have been discussed in the previous section, and Coupland's novels are full of Baudrillardian observations about modernity (or the super-modern). As Tyler in *Shampoo Planet* says: 'Europe tries to be so modern, but the effort always sort of, well... *flops*. [...] France has never heard of Sunday shopping. And in Belgium I saw a nuclear cooling tower with *moss* growing on its convex northern slope. Modern?' (original emphasis).²³⁶ To which one can compare: 'L'Amérique est la version originale de la modernité, nous sommes la version doublée ou sous-titrée.'²³⁷ *White Noise* contains a nugget of theory or philosophy on almost every page, including many thought-provoking essays dressed up as dialogue between characters.

It is clear that this return to earlier conventions is a deliberate aesthetic decision when one considers other forms the contemporary novel is taking. Postmodern heritage combined with an increasing interest in and growth of information technology has given birth to the electronic 'hypertext', which even discards the novel's paper medium. Bertrand Gervais's article 'The Broken Line – Hypertexts as Labyrinths' in *Contemporary U.S. Literature: A Collective Assessment* explains that:

Hypertexts exist only as an electric impulse: their form requires a word processor capable of linking fragments of text together, called knots, and sometimes even images and sounds, as in hypermedia productions. They can be loaded from a disk or downloaded from the Internet, but they cannot leave the computer, without altering their basic functions.²³⁸

Such apparently futuristic supplanting of the print medium by the 'era of videosigns and

²³⁵ *Le Feu d'artifice*, pp. 102, 103.

²³⁶ *Shampoo Planet*, p. 96.

²³⁷ *Amérique*, p. 76.

²³⁸ Gervais cites *Afternoon, a Story* by Michael Joyce (1987), Stuart Moulthrop's *The Color of Television* (with Sean Cohen, 1996), and *Hegirascope* (World3, 1995), among others. Bertrand Gervais, "The Broken Line – Hypertexts as Labyrinths". *Contemporary U.S. Literature: A Collective Assessment*, Autumn 1998. Online. Available: <http://www.paradigme.com/sources/SOURCES-PDF/Sources05-1.pdf>. 20 January 2006.

cybersigns'²³⁹ is an alternative contemporary literary strand that co-exists with the contemporary authors discussed here, who are clearly still interested in texts as books.

To return to the question of return – to the real, and to realist narrative: the assessment Viart makes of Echenoz, Gailly, Oster and Laurent pertains equally well to the novels discussed here, namely that they

cultivent le ton placide et désabusé des narrateurs qui met une distance entre le propos du roman et sa réalisation. Ils manifestent ainsi une pulsion narrative qui s'accommode mal d'un épuisement du littéraire et préfère s'installer ironiquement dans la fadeur du réel plutôt que de renoncer.²⁴⁰

It is to this sense of returning to narrative but with full awareness of the theoretical pitfalls and of literary history to date, that Viart's title "Écrire avec le soupçon" refers. Fieke Schoots's *'Passer en douce à la douane': l'écriture minimaliste de Minuit* discusses this same ambivalence with regard to the contemporary novel in France.²⁴¹

The question remains, why this return? Why not an endless extension of experiment? Part of the answer to this question lies in the postmodern sense that nothing is new, and that writing is always citing. Once this realisation takes hold, there are only so many ways of demonstrating this textual awareness before that extra level of awareness becomes a tired cliché as well. John Barth felt in 1979 that the task of the writer at that point was 'less to define a clear theoretical position in relation to realism or elite modernism than to set to work to write what he called "the best next thing."²⁴² What he envisaged in his essay 'The Literature of Replenishment' (sequel to the 1967 'The Literature of Exhaustion')²⁴³ as his 'ideal postmodernist author' was one who 'neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century parents or his nineteenth-

²³⁹ "The Broken Line", p. 28.

²⁴⁰ "Écrire avec le soupçon", p. 160.

²⁴¹ Fieke Schoots, *'Passer en douce à la douane': l'écriture minimaliste de Minuit* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997).

²⁴² *The Modern American Novel*, p. 241.

²⁴³ Both in John Barth, *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1984).

century premodernist grandparents. He has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back.²⁴⁴ It is an attitude that continues to inform the post-postmodern contemporary writers discussed here.

Another partial answer may lie in a desire since the 1980s for more social realism, as marginalised ethnic and religious voices sought to be heard. Their recognition reflected an awareness that American and European societies had become multiple, not singular realities (a feature Jameson has pointed out). This multiplicity is reflected in the sheer variety of forms within neo-realism, which Malcolm Bradbury illustrates with this list: ‘experimental realism, photo-realism, hyper-realism, ironic realism, critical realism, fantastic realism, magic realism, and dirty realism.’²⁴⁵ Dirty realism is also known as ‘k-mart realism’ and is exemplified by Raymond Carver’s work: ‘a flat form of writing, hyper-detailed and socially specific’,²⁴⁶ often very regional, and dealing with the lower classes in society.

Of course, as with the other contemporary traits set out so far, there are precursors to this return. Bradbury discusses the resurgence of realism in the midst of postmodernism in the sixties and early seventies, in the form of New Journalism. This form responded to the same sense that fact and fiction were categories coming to seem enmeshed – but did so not by derealising their narratives but by blurring the boundary between fact and fiction. What began as journalism with Hunter S Thompson and Norman Mailer became journalism in novel form by Mailer again, Truman Capote (*In Cold Blood*), and later, Tom Wolfe. These novels were characterised by highly accurate and up to the minute social description, and the inclusion of some real-life figures, but were still presented as fiction. The ‘fully researched’ novel is still much in vogue today. But Bradbury notes that some version or other of realism has returned in every decade of the twentieth century, alongside whatever extremes of the avant-garde may have also existed, from the rise in social realism

²⁴⁴ ‘The Literature of Replenishment’, *The Friday Book*, p. 203.

²⁴⁵ *The Modern American Novel*, p. 268.

²⁴⁶ *The Modern American Novel*, p. 268.

in the thirties, to the birth of the Jewish American voices in the forties and fifties. The contemporary neo-real, then, is just one such modified return.

Amid all this variety, however, lies a particular form of the neo-real which I now wish to discuss in more detail. This is sometimes called ‘minimalist’ writing, ‘romans impassibles’, and ‘l’écriture blanche.’ The latter seems to me to incorporate a variety of useful signifiers, and will be the term I use.

‘L’Écriture Blanche’ and the Everyday

‘L’écriture blanche’ is a term given to writing characterised by a neutral, non-literary tone, or apparent absence of style, and a depthless transparency. ‘Blanc’ in this context signifies not only lack of coloration (neutrality) and blankness as in a ‘voix blanche’, with its lack (of emotion, of judgment, of subjectivity, of style), but also connotes something that is not quite the full version, or ‘real thing’, as in the expressions ‘mariage blanc’ and ‘examen blanc’.

The mood of such writing can range from bleak to playful and witty, and can have a simple, spontaneous feel, so that many of the signs of literature – elaborate metaphor, for example – seem to have been effaced, often replaced by reliance on a more oral style. This simplicity is also often manifested in economy of vocabulary and characterisation, together with a reliance on indicative, denotative language. Grammar is kept simple and sentences often short. Causality may be absent or hard to detect. Subjectivity is either effaced or rendered ambiguous, or both, and there is an attention to surface, rendering interpretation difficult.

It seems to me that all the novels discussed in this chapter have some affinity with ‘écritures blanches’. They range from the disturbingly bleak and misanthropic *Less Than Zero* and *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, through the more ambivalent *Le Feu d’artifice*, to the rather more optimistic *White Noise*, *Shampoo Planet*, *Generation X* and *Autoroute*.

In *Le Feu d'artifice*, the narrator is casual and sardonic about betraying Louis with Juliette, distancing himself from an event whose emotional content is not confided to the reader: 'Juliette a posé trois doigts sur ma nuque. Nous nous sommes embrassés par-dessus les photos qui s'envolaient. C'était un baiser un peu acide, à cause du jus de tomate et de l'amitié trahie.'²⁴⁷ The reference to an acid kiss here conveys wit rather than emotion.

This sense of distance, of the narrator being at one remove from events that involve him personally, is partly a result of the reflexivity discussed earlier, where the novel is self-conscious about its own 'written' status. Even where the narrator of *White Noise* has been told he may have had fatal exposure to the toxic emissions, he recognises in himself the same strange detachment that the reader recognises in the novel as a whole:

I think I felt as I would if a doctor had held an X-ray to the light showing a star-shaped hole at the center of one of my vital organs. Death has entered. It is inside you. You are said to be dying, and yet are separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure, literally see on the X-ray photograph or computer screen the horrible alien logic of it all. It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself.²⁴⁸

This 'eerie separation' well describes the tone of *White Noise* as a whole, as it does that of *Less Than Zero* and *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. James Annesley identifies something similar with his term 'blank fictions'. For Annesley, American writers such as Ellis produce work that is 'blank' in terms of its 'indifferent tone', and 'seamless, glassy language'.²⁴⁹ The indifference of Ellis's characters, even in the presence of extreme violence, has been discussed earlier in the chapter. This, together with its misanthropy, is something *Less Than Zero* has in common with *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, whose narrator attempts coolly to incite a colleague to murder as a way of resolving his feelings of inferiority.

So even where feelings are being confided, there is often a detached, ironic quality to the language in these texts. The 'I' in whose voice these texts are written in fact reveals

²⁴⁷ *Le Feu d'artifice*, p. 45.

²⁴⁸ *White Noise*, pp. 141-142.

²⁴⁹ James Annesley, *Blank Fictions* (London: Pluto Press, 1988), p. 137.

very little about himself, refuses much in the way of psychological depth or characterisation. The absence of subjectivity can be understood in the context of the indeterminacy of the subject already discussed, and of the author/narrator/character ambiguity of which these texts show theoretical awareness. A detachment from subjectivity in these texts is therefore an understandable mode. It also focuses attention back on the text, since it can sometimes seem as though thoughts and feelings are emanating from the writing itself, rather than the writing acting as a vehicle. The same effect derives from the studied neutrality of tone – carried to extremes, the effect is less transparent prose than a strange artificiality, which again focuses the reader's attention on the text's construction. Thus a rejection of the traditional signs of literature paradoxically serves to replace them with new signs of literature, this time those of 'l'écriture blanche'.

These texts recognise their own reticence with regard to subjectivity. The characters are often aware of their own indifference. As Babette of *White Noise* says: "Nothing surprises me anymore."²⁵⁰ The question of motivation is sometimes as concealed from the characters themselves as from the reader; they are no more able than we to explain the apparently random succession of events: 'Mais il y a déjà longtemps que le sens de mes actes a cessé de m'apparaître clairement; disons, il ne m'apparaît plus très souvent. Le reste du temps, je suis plus ou moins *en position d'observateur*' (original emphasis).²⁵¹ An effacement of subjectivity is also manifested by a heightened attention to surface, in place of the depth of interiority – both Coupland's texts and *Autoroute* do this in different ways, Coupland through his interest in brands, packaging, the luminous surface of marketing, and Bon through his focus on the literal surfaces of the motorway, with its concrete and car parks, tollbooths and central reservations.

'L'écriture blanche' is a term used by Viart to describe 'ces romans "minimaux" qui déroulent des histoires faites de riens', where 's'ils se refusent à toute densité, s'ils écrivent

²⁵⁰ *White Noise*, p. 132.

²⁵¹ *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 177.

de surface, c'est aussi une autre façon de dire, par défaut, l'impossibilité d'une plénitude littéraire désormais trop factice.²⁵² The term was originally coined by Barthes in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*. Barthes envisaged a neutral, denotative, and stripped down style which 'perd volontairement tout recours à l'élégance ou à l'ornementation'²⁵³ as an antidote to the mythmaking realist connotation discussed earlier in this chapter. This new mode of writing would reject all the signs of well-written or crafted Literature, where 'rien n'est donné sans métaphore, car il faut signaler lourdement au lecteur que "c'est bien écrit"'. As Barthes explains: 'ces métaphores, qui saisissent le moindre verbe, ne sont pas du tout l'intention d'une humeur qui chercherait à transmettre la singularité d'une sensation, mais seulement une marque littéraire qui situe un langage, tout comme une étiquette renseigne sur un prix.'²⁵⁴

It is as though the use of metaphor has solidified into mere style, and thus ceased to serve its original purpose. Barthes explains how the rejection of the signs of 'fine writing' is merely the next logical step in an evolution of writing that cannot help reacting against and abolishing the style of its predecessors, until 'elle atteint aujourd'hui un dernier avatar, l'absence; dans ces écritures neutres, appelées ici "le degré zero de l'écriture"'.²⁵⁵ Writers such as Camus and Robbe-Grillet seemed to fulfil Barthes' ambition of recovering writing's innocence, by limiting themselves to spare denotation. In doing so, they would achieve the transparency that realism claimed, but failed, to deliver:

L'écriture neutre est un fait tardif, elle ne sera inventée que bien après le réalisme, par des auteurs comme Camus, moins sous l'effet d'une esthétique du refuge que par la recherche d'une écriture enfin innocente. L'écriture réaliste est loin d'être neutre, elle est au contraire chargée des signes les plus spectaculaires de la fabrication.²⁵⁶

²⁵² "Écrire avec le soupçon", p. 160.

²⁵³ *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, p. p. 56-57.

²⁵⁴ *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, pp. 51-52.

²⁵⁵ *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, pp. 9-10.

²⁵⁶ *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, p. 49.

As will be noted from the quotation prefacing this section, Robbe-Grillet proposed that writing should neutrally describe the non-human world without imposing human concerns, as can be seen also from his famous statement: 'Or le monde n'est ni signifiant ni absurde. Il est, tout simplement.'²⁵⁷

As time went on, more writers adopted this style, indifferent in tone, non-judgmental, and reticent with regard to the 'je' who is writing, so that it 'se place au milieu de ces cris et de ces jugements, sans participer à aucun d'eux'.²⁵⁸ One can thus interpret this form as a mode of (sometimes reluctant) acceptance, rather than of transfiguration.

'L'écriture blanche' is thus one variant of the minimalism which can be found in the twentieth century, in both the American realist short story and in postmodernists such as Barth and Barthelme. The influence of these earlier writers can be seen in the contemporary texts discussed here. One example of this is the suppression of punctuation, which in turn adds to the monotonous rhythm and indifferent tone. We can see this repeatedly in Ellis: 'I'm sitting in Spago with Trent and Blair and Trent says he's positive that there were people doing cocaine at the bar and I tell him why don't you go join them and he tells me to shut up.'²⁵⁹ *Snow White* is similarly short on commas, as well as exhibiting other features of 'l'écriture blanche'.²⁶⁰

As with their other traits, these texts are aware of the theoretical import of their choice of form. *Extension du domaine de la lutte* cites both Sartrean nothingness and Perecquian flat indifference: 'La forme Romanesque n'est pas conçue pour peindre l'indifférence, ni le néant; il faudrait inventer une articulation plus plate, plus concise et plus morte.'²⁶¹ Neo-realism, and within it, 'l'écriture blanche', is thus an important strand of contemporary literary form. Moreover, it is perfectly suited to the renewed preoccupation

²⁵⁷ *Pour un nouveau roman*, p. 18.

²⁵⁸ *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, p. 56.

²⁵⁹ *Less Than Zero*, p. 105.

²⁶⁰ See p. 35 of *Snow White* for an example of its indifferent tone, and the sense of ennui which is also to be found in Ellis and Houellebecq.

²⁶¹ *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, pp. 48-49.

with the everyday discussed in the first section of this chapter. Documenting the everyday – whether as the banality of commercial simulation, or as the infra-ordinary which escapes it – is a response to the excesses of the overwritten world, a resistance to the suspicion that all experience is anticipated and absorbed. Whichever ‘everyday’ is chosen as subject matter, the choice of restraint and neutrality is an appropriate formal response to the overwritten world. Just as the exotic and the thrilling are given a wide berth as subject matter, so too are the signs of the literary, both the elaborately crafted illusions of classical realism and didactic, alienating, modern experimentation. Contemporary neutrality is thus the latest in a long line of approaches to the everyday: from naturalism in painting, in its substitution of scenes of ordinary men and women for traditional historical or religious subjects; through various forms of realism which aim to discard romantic illusions, to show reality as it really is; and on to modernism’s attempts to access experience, if not reality, and only within the confines of the artwork itself. It is only perhaps postmodernism that abandoned claims to epiphany, as Taylor calls it (after Joyce), and with it any claims that art could provide special access to reality or experience. It is this claim, tentative and qualified as it may be, that can be detected in the return to narrative that the contemporary neo-realists seem to be embracing.

However, this is not the end of the story. Barthes was well aware that ‘rien n’est plus infidèle qu’une écriture blanche. Les automatismes s’élaborent à l’endroit même où se trouvait d’abord une liberté, un réseau de formes durcies serre de plus en plus la fraîcheur première du discours’.²⁶² The problem is that ‘l’écriture blanche’ becomes just another style, with its own connotations of avant-garde rebellion. We can see this with Robbe-Grillet’s perhaps unfair reputation as purely experimental formalist. As such, it can once again be recuperated.

Thus, contemporary writers are faced with the limits of their form, and, as I hope to have shown, exhibit awareness of the theoretical implications of writing. Yet this is not

²⁶² *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*, p. 57.

the only threat to their project of recording the everyday. The problem in particular with seeking richness in the overlooked texture of life unassimilated by the commercial spectacle is that the act of doing so cannot help but overwrite those very areas which had been hitherto left untouched. As Verne says in *Autoroute*, his goal is to ‘se promener avec une caméra là où normalement on ne va pas pour filmer, photographier ou écrire, simplement parce que tel est notre monde, et que ce monde-là n’est pas encore dans les livres et les films.’²⁶³ No, not yet – but it is now.

To conclude: features of ‘l’écriture blanche’ are employed by these writers in the knowledge that the avoidance of ‘style’ is always in danger of becoming yet another style itself. This means that the contemporary ‘retour du récit’ is an ambivalent project characterised by formal ambiguity; perhaps this is why Viart writes that: ‘je placerais volontiers le roman contemporain sous le signe du *paradoxe*’ (original emphasis).²⁶⁴ Contemporary (rather than merely current) literature is never simply ‘romanesque’ – the form that the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* rejects as unsuitable to our age. It never simply recounts or describes, but always engages or questions received ideas, whether implicitly or explicitly. This is Viart’s ‘writing with suspicion’ which for him characterises contemporary writing. Another way of putting it is that any return to the real, or ‘retour du récit’, has taken place in the full knowledge that Lyotard’s statement still holds: ‘la question esthétique moderne n’est pas: Qu’est-ce qui est beau, mais: Qu’est-ce qui est de l’art (et de la littérature)?’²⁶⁵

²⁶³ *Autoroute*, p. 8.

²⁶⁴ “Écrire avec le soupçon”, p. 161.

²⁶⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Réponse à la question: qu’est-ce que le postmoderne?’, *Critique*, 38:419 (1982), 357-367, p. 361.

CHAPTER 3: TOUSSAINT AND BAKER - CONTENT

Introduction

The last two chapters explored two central questions: how we might define the contemporary from the perspective of the subject, and how to describe the forms contemporary novels give to that perspective. The responses to both attempted to give some context to the more detailed comparative study that follows. In Chapters 3 and 4, I introduce the texts of Nicholson Baker and Jean-Philippe Toussaint, and show how their work figures in the landscape of the contemporary novel set out in Chapter 2. Taken together, Baker and Toussaint are exemplars of the contemporary in terms of both form and content.

The first section of this chapter explores the presence in their writing of the subject predicaments discussed in Chapter 1. The second section explores what I argue is a central preoccupation of Baker and Toussaint, the infra-ordinary as a subset of the everyday. Chapter 4 goes on to examine how their texts fit formally into the context of contemporary neo-realist and minimalist writing discussed in Chapter 2.

Baker is the author of seven novels, and three works of non-fiction: *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber*, a collection of essays; *Double Fold*, which concerns the destruction of library collections and their replacement by electronic media; and *U and I*, a book about Baker's literary relationship with John Updike. Toussaint has written eight novels, and directed four films, two of which (*Monsieur* and *La Sévillane*) are adaptations of his novels, and a further adaptation (*La Salle de bain*) has been directed by John Lvoff.²⁶⁶ Since this thesis is a comparative literary study, and since there are no films for comparison by Baker, I will not be referring to Toussaint's films.

²⁶⁶ *La Salle de bain*. Dir. John Lvoff. Les Films des Tournelles. 1989; *Monsieur*. Dir. Jean-Philippe Toussaint. Les Films des Tournelles. 1989; *La Sévillane* (adaptation of *L'Appareil-photo*). Dir. Jean-Philippe Toussaint. Les Films des Tournelles. 1992; *Berlin 10h46'*. Dir. Jean-Philippe Toussaint/ Torsten C. Fischer. Les Films des Tournelles. 1994; *La Patinoire*. Dir. Jean-Philippe Toussaint. Les Films des Tournelles. 1999.

The novels of both largely take the form of interior monologues of single narrators. These narrators record their relatively solitary and uneventful existence, and their reflections on the same. Toussaint's novels are characterised by dry humour and gentle absurdity, often coexisting with darkness and bleakness. The deceptive simplicity of his sparse and unadorned narratives conceals texts that are tightly and densely constructed. Baker's texts seem initially to starkly contrast with Toussaint's reticence, through their emotional volubility and excitability, their eclectic mingling of scholarly digressions and love of arcania with minutely detailed descriptions of explicit sex and twentieth-century gadgetry. However, as the next two chapters demonstrate, what they share far outweighs these apparent differences.²⁶⁷

3.1 The Contemporary Subject

The Uncertain Theorist

I began Chapter 1 by identifying theoretical uncertainty as contemporary. An interest in theoretical and philosophical thinking, as well as allusions to ambivalence or uncertainty, form a significant part of the content of Toussaint's and Baker's work. Numerous references to philosophers or theorists and to their works (to be covered later in more detail) combine with the philosophical musings of the narrators themselves. This has led Sophie Bertho to write that 'c'est l'activité de la pensée qui prend ici une importance considérable, qui les [les narrateurs] fait exister en tant que personnages.'²⁶⁸

The narrator of *L'Appareil-photo* concurs: 'je serais plutôt un gros penseur, oui'.²⁶⁹ Anywhere he can sit undisturbed prompts this activity, a toilet cubicle for example: 'du moment que j'avais un siège, moi, du reste, il ne me fallait pas dix secondes pour que je

²⁶⁷ Some of Toussaint's and Baker's later texts were published during the writing-up period of this thesis. The close analysis is therefore weighted in favour of the earlier ones.

²⁶⁸ Sophie Bertho, 'Jean-Philippe Toussaint et la Métaphysique', Michèle Ammouche-Kremers, *Jeunes Auteurs de Minuit* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), p. 18.

²⁶⁹ Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *L'Appareil-photo* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1988), p. 50.

m'éclipse dans le monde délicieusement flou et régulier que me proposait en permanence mon esprit'.²⁷⁰ Similarly, the narrator of *La Salle de bain* finds the bathroom into which he retreats the perfect place for contemplation: 'je coulais là des heures agréables, méditant dans la baignoire, parfois habillé, tantôt nu.'²⁷¹ *La Télévision*'s procrastinating researcher lists thinking as one of his favourite activities, besides swimming and 'l'amour physique, qui était jusqu'à présent mon activité préférée, en dehors de la réflexion, évidemment.'²⁷² This narrator prefers to 'work' by means of pure thought, rather than actually committing words to the page: 'en songeant à mon étude, non pas tant de façon appliquée et concrète, pour réfléchir à tel ou tel point précis de mon travail, mais de façon purement béate, vague et légère, flâneuse et vagabonde [...]'.²⁷³ The importance of philosophical reflection is further evidenced by the narrators' thoughts *about* thinking itself, as for example in *L'Appareil-photo*: 'mieux vaut laisser la pensée vaquer en paix à ses sereines occupations et, faisant mine de s'en désintéresser, se laisser doucement bercer par son murmure pour tendre sans bruit vers la connaissance de ce qui est.'²⁷⁴

A thematics of contemplation and meditation is also evoked by direct reference to famous thinkers. *La Salle de bain* has multiple references to Pascal: the narrator finds a copy of the *Pensées*, in English, in a hotel room; the novel echoes the fragmentary form and numbered paragraphs of the *Pensées* – its geometrical structure suggesting not only Pythagoras²⁷⁵ but also Pascal the mathematician; the narrator challenges Pascal's famous dictum²⁷⁶ in his attempts to remain quietly in a room. The Pascalian reference is overdetermined in *L'Appareil-photo* where we find an allusion to Pascal in the name of the

²⁷⁰ *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 31.

²⁷¹ Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *La Salle de bain* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985), p. 11.

²⁷² Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *La Télévision* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1996), p. 12.

²⁷³ *La Télévision*, p. 135.

²⁷⁴ *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 32.

²⁷⁵ *La Salle de bain* is prefaced by Pythagoras' theorem, and the three sections of the text are entitled 'Paris', 'Hypoténuse' and 'Paris'.

²⁷⁶ 'Tout le malheur des hommes vient d'une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos dans une chambre.', Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 139, ed. by Philippe Sellier (Paris: Bordas, 1991), pp. 215-216.

narrator's girlfriend, Pascale). In the bathtub, of course, there is also the echo of Archimedes.

In terms of not only philosophy, but philosophy of uncertainty, there are some allusions to Wittgenstein in Toussaint, suggesting an interest in questioning the certainties of analytic philosophy: the numbered paragraphs of *La Salle de bain* can be read as alluding not only to the *Pensées*, but also to *Philosophical Investigations*. There are subtler, perhaps unintended, traces of Wittgenstein. In *La Réticence*, the narrator points out a donkey to his infant son: 'Tu vois, l'âne? lui dis-je, mais c'était mon doigt qu'il regardait plutôt'.²⁷⁷ In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein uses a similar image to illustrate the role of guesswork and context when interpreting actions of others: 'Such a case would present similarities with one in which a person naturally reacted to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction of the line from finger-tip to wrist, not from wrist to finger-tip'.²⁷⁸

The importance of thinkers and thought is equally marked in Baker's work. In *The Mezzanine*, Howie reads Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* during his lunch hour. Baker notes his fondness for William James in *U and I*,²⁷⁹ and Arno in *The Fermata* confesses to stopping time while at work in order to finish reading Diana Crane's *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde*.²⁸⁰ Baker's *The Size of Thoughts* signals its theme with its title, and contains discussions on the manner in which 'large thoughts' gradually permeate consciousness:

One pauses, looks up from the page, waits; the eyes move in meditative polygons in their orbits; and then, somehow, *more* of the thought is released into the soul, the corroborating peal of some new, distant bell – until it has filled out the entirety of its form, as a thick clay slip settles into an intricate mold, or as a ladleful of batter colonizes cell after cell of the waffle iron.²⁸¹

²⁷⁷ Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *La Réticence* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1991), p. 96.

²⁷⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell 1958; repr. 1995), p. 75.

²⁷⁹ Nicholson Baker, *U and I: A True Story*, 2nd edn (London: Granta, 1992), pp. 39, 45.

²⁸⁰ Nicholson Baker, *The Fermata* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 47.

²⁸¹ Nicholson Baker, *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996; repr. London: Vintage, 1997), pp. 12-13.

Baker's *The Mezzanine* and *Room Temperature* are narratives of consciousness, tracing the associative paths of the narrator's linking thought processes, in a form that mimics the mind's digressions. In *Room Temperature*, Mike, the narrator, in response to the question "Hey, so what are you thinking about?", remembers telling his father he has been attempting precisely this act of tracing:

I told him I had been trying to reconstruct all the transitions between all the subjects (Bach on the radio, the theory of lift, the possibility of infinite-speed gearboxes, new bicycle designs that took better advantage of the thigh muscles, etc.) that we had talked about since we had driven off at six-thirty that morning.²⁸²

Room Temperature and *The Mezzanine* present a similar kind of reconstruction, but of topics of thought rather than of conversation. The value placed on thought by Baker's narrators is high; when considering whether to ask the question "penny for your thoughts?", he is struck: 'But Jesus, I thought, a penny! Who came up with this ridiculously cheap valuation? A shilling, a quarter, a kingdom!'.²⁸³

The contemplative interiority which characterises Toussaint's and Baker's texts is not in itself uniquely contemporary. More specifically contemporary is the sense of uncertainty or groundlessness that is present in their work, whether in the form of a gentle mocking or undermining of the grand aims of metaphysics, or in the form of a more direct discussion of the impossibilities of certainty. This can be seen in Toussaint's *La Salle de bain*, where the narrator meditates on the philosophical significance of raindrops travelling down a window pane, but finishes by mocking his own profundity:

Il y a deux manières de regarder tomber la pluie, chez soi, derrière une vitre. [...] La deuxième, qui exige de la vue d'avantage de souplesse, consiste à suivre des yeux la chute d'une seule goutte à la fois, depuis son intrusion dans le champ de vision jusqu'à la dispersion de son eau sur le sol. Ainsi est-il possible de se représenter que le mouvement, aussi fulgurant soit-il en apparence, tend essentiellement vers l'immobilité, et qu'en conséquence, aussi lent peut-il parfois sembler, entraîne continûment les corps vers la mort, qui est immobilité. Olé.²⁸⁴

²⁸² Nicholson Baker, *Room Temperature*, 2nd edn (London: Granta, 1991), p. 18.

²⁸³ *Room Temperature*, p. 18.

²⁸⁴ *La Salle de bain*, p. 36.

More direct reference to uncertainty or unpredictability, this time in the realm of science, can be found in *Monsieur*. The narrator of this novel is intrigued by the thought experiment known as ‘Schrödinger’s Cat’.²⁸⁵ As Monsieur notes, the hypothetical cat is in limbo, one cannot know whether it is dead or alive without looking and thereby altering its prior state of uncertainty: ‘le simple fait de le regarder altérerait de façon radicale la description mathématique de son état, le faisant passer de l’état de limbes à un nouvel état, où il était soit positivement en vie, soit positivement mort, c’était selon.’ In fact, ‘tout était selon’,²⁸⁶ *Monsieur* concludes, in contemporary relativist mode. There is further reference in *Monsieur* to the relativity of time,²⁸⁷ and also of motion, in the topic of Ludovic’s homework assignment.²⁸⁸ These texts thus exhibit the theoretical interdisciplinarity that Jameson identified, together with the sense of ambiguity or provisionality confronting a theorising subject.

Baker’s characters also manifest a contemporary awareness of modern science; in *Vox*, Jim alludes to the Heisenberg principle when discussing his sexual voyeurism. When watching women, he wishes he did not exist, since ‘a watcher disturbs the purity of the event’.²⁸⁹ What these examples suggest in both Toussaint and Baker is an awareness of and response to uncertainty in the philosophical and scientific realms. By association, there is a connection to the realm of critical theory and its own uncertainty or decentring, as discussed in Chapter 1.

²⁸⁵ This famous paradox is intended to illustrate how the laws of quantum physics come to seem inconceivable when scaled up to larger entities. The hypothetical cat is placed in a box, with some radioactive material, a geiger counter, and a cyanide capsule. If the geiger counter measures the decay of one atom of the radioactive material, a device will be triggered that will break the cyanide capsule, killing the cat. The quantum probability of the atom decaying after one hour is 50%. The paradox concerns the concept in quantum physics known as the superposition of states. After an hour, then, the cat cannot be said to be either dead *or* alive, but 50% dead and 50% alive, or, put another way, both dead and alive.

²⁸⁶ Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *Monsieur* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1986), p. 27.

²⁸⁷ *Monsieur*, p. 74.

²⁸⁸ *Monsieur*, pp. 76-77.

²⁸⁹ Nicholson Baker, *Vox*, 2nd edn (London: Granta, 1998), p. 66.

Non-Lieux, Solitude, and the Homogenous Subject

Another contemporary theme is that of solitude. The paradox of increased isolation in a time of greater communication and connections was discussed in Chapter 1. All of Toussaint's texts except for *Monsieur*, and all of Baker's, are written in the first person, making the narrator also the central character, and as we shall see, serving both to blur author/narrator boundaries and to emphasise the autobiographical slant of their works.

The central characters are extremely solitary. The narratives of both Toussaint and Baker follow their protagonists as they perform a multitude of everyday activities, the vast majority of which are performed alone: walking, travelling, going to the supermarket, listening to the radio, putting on socks, wearing flip-flops, sweeping a room, washing one's face, and masturbating. The characters in *Monsieur* and *La Salle de bain* deliberately seek out solitude, in the latter novel retreating first into the bathroom and then into a hotel room and hospital room in Venice. In the hotel room, the narrator engages in the usual solitary activities of reading, listening to music, and so on, but also holds an international darts tournament in his room, playing all the countries himself.²⁹⁰ There are few other characters with whom the central characters interact (with the possible exception of *Monsieur*, who, although continually solicited by others, repeatedly seeks to evade their society). The characters Toussaint's narrators do meet are often extremely taciturn (the hotel patron and fisherman in *La Réticence*) or simply limited by the language barrier (the hotelier and other Venetians, and the Polish painter in *La Salle de bain*):

L'absence d'une langue commune ne nous décourageait pas; sur le cyclisme, par exemple, nous étions intarissables. Moser, disait-il. Merckx, faisais-je remarquer au bout d'un petit moment. Coppi disait-il, Fausto Coppi. Je tournais ma cuillère dans le café, approuvant de la tête, pensif. Bruyère, murmurais-je. Bruyère? Disait-il. Oui, oui, Bruyère.²⁹¹

²⁹⁰ *La Salle de bain*, p. 84.

²⁹¹ *La Salle de bain*, p. 62.

What interaction there is with other characters is further suppressed by the briefest and vaguest of descriptions, as for example between the narrator and Pascale in *L'Appareil-photo*: 'nous échangeâmes quelques généralités pendant que je prenais connaissance de l'actualité',²⁹² 'nous parlions de tout et de rien, tranquillement',²⁹³ and 'nous bavardâmes de choses et d'autres, entreprîmes de lier davantage connaissance'.²⁹⁴ In *La Salle de bain*, the conversations between the narrator and his girlfriend Edmondsson are similarly occluded. This is all the more noticeable when their content is intriguing to the reader, such as the conversations subsequent to the narrator's abrupt departure from Paris which might explain his behaviour. In this case, all content is hidden, leaving only: 'Accroupi contre le mur, j'eus à voix basse une longue conversation avec Edmondsson'.²⁹⁵

In Baker's *The Fermata* this lack of interaction with others is taken to extreme levels by the narrator stopping time, whereby he becomes the sole consciousness in the universe, at which point interacting with others is replaced by interfering with others – removing women's clothes as they are frozen in time. In *Vox*, connection takes place at a distance, as the two speakers 'meet' each other on a telephone chat line. *A Box of Matches* is the journal of a man who rises very early indeed in order to be alone, 'the sole node of wakefulness at the heart of the sleeping world'.²⁹⁶ *Checkpoint* is the dialogue between two friends, one of whom is a loner, an outsider who wants to assassinate George W. Bush. *Room Temperature*, while narrated by a married man, is the account of a quiet afternoon spent giving his infant daughter her bottle while alone with his thoughts.

The central characters of these texts are thus, to varying degrees, distinguished by the solitary existence particular to the contemporary individual discussed in Chapter 1. Such interactions as there are, are often with strangers, or semi-strangers, and close relationships are only alluded to obliquely. (An exception here is Baker's *Room Temperature*

²⁹² *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 11.

²⁹³ *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 13.

²⁹⁴ *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 13.

²⁹⁵ *La Salle de bain*, p. 65.

²⁹⁶ Nicholson Baker, *A Box of Matches* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), p. 16.

which details many intimate moments of married life.) Solitude intensifies in *non-lieux*, and the relations of subjects to non-places are both exhibited and subtly subverted by Baker and Toussaint.

Toussaint's characters pass through a succession of locations whose identity seems interchangeable. The destinations (Paris, London, Venice, Milan, Tokyo) are mere ciphers, no more evocative than destinations on an airport departure board. The places in question seem indistinguishable from the place the characters have just left – especially since these characters are for the most part content to remain in their ubiquitous hotel rooms.²⁹⁷ These supposedly 'real' places, then, function exactly as do Augé's 'univers de reconnaissance'.²⁹⁸ As Dominique Fisher writes of Toussaint's texts: 'De Paris, à Venise, à Milan, à Londres, mêmes lieux ou *non-lieux* dupliqués à l'infini.'²⁹⁹

Places of transit recur, in the form of a driving school, airports, ferry depots, train stations, and service stations, along with the corresponding modes of transport themselves. In *Autoportrait*, Toussaint describes the disorientation inherent in long-haul air travel:

J'avais déjà connu un sentiment analogue de perte momentanée de mes repères temporels et spatiaux quelques jours plus tôt dans l'avion qui me conduisait au Japon, quand, somnolant sur mon siège, je m'étais soudain rendu compte en regardant par le hublot qu'il ne faisait plus ni jour ni nuit dehors, mais tout à la fois jour et nuit, que je pouvais tout aussi bien apercevoir la lune sur la droite de l'appareil qui brillait dans le ciel dans le prolongement de l'aile de l'avion, que le soleil, au loin, vers lequel nous nous dirigeons [...].³⁰⁰

In *L'Appareil-photo*, on a cross-channel ferry, the narrator confides a similar sense of losing his bearings, of being nowhere, no longer in England nor yet in France: 'j'avais une

²⁹⁷ This kind of travel recalls Marshall McLuhan's observation that the traditional purpose of travel, to encounter the unfamiliar, has reversed: 'people never really leave their beaten paths of impercipient, nor do they ever arrive at any new place. They can have Shanghai or Berlin or Venice in a package tour that they need never open.' McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 198.

²⁹⁸ *Non-Lieux*, p. 46.

²⁹⁹ Dominique Fisher, 'Les non-lieux de Jean-Philippe Toussaint: bricolage textuel et rhétorique du neutre', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 65:4 (1996), p. 618. This grouping of cities is reminiscent of the designer slogan 'Paris-London-New York' and its equivalents.

³⁰⁰ Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)*, (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2000), p. 17.

conscience particulièrement aiguë de cet instant comme il peut arriver quand, traversant des lieux transitoires et continûment passagers, plus aucun repère connu ne vient soutenir l'esprit.³⁰¹

In addition, a large proportion of the characters' activities involves shopping, travelling or leisure of one kind or another. In *La Salle de bain*, the narrator rejects visits to museums in Venice in favour of shopping and playing tennis. Toussaint's descriptions of non-places concentrate on details which emphasise their ubiquity, details which generalise rather than singularise. In *La Salle de bain*, the description of a hotel room in Venice is reduced to 'les notices punaisées sur la porte, les consignes de sécurité, le prix des chambres, du petit déjeuner'.³⁰² In this way the text performs the same function as the non-places themselves; it renders this hotel room as universally recognisable as any other.

In Toussaint's texts, however, the narrators flout the conventions of non-place that encourage solitude, similitude, anonymity, and 'average' behaviour according to the role of passenger or consumer. In supermarkets, for example, the narrator of *La Salle de bain* randomly pats children's heads as he passes, or, in *La Réticence*, the narrator asks a stranger to look after his son while he shops, and then kisses her to demonstrate to his child that the lady in question is nice: 'Elle est très gentille, Marie-Ange, dis-je à mon fils, tu ne veux pas lui faire un bisou? Regarde, moi je fais un bisou à Marie-Ange, dis-je (et je fis un bisou à la dame, qui parut un peu étonnée)'.³⁰³ Such small deviations from convention are unexpected both by the occupants of non-places and by the reader, which in part accounts for their humour. The apparently passive character of *Monsieur*, although seemingly at the mercy of the will of his neighbours and landlord, is sufficiently resistant to the conventions of non-place that he has his wrist broken as a result:

Un monsieur, à côté de lui, essayait de lui demander quelque chose. Comme Monsieur ne répondait pas, terminant la lecture de son article, le monsieur, souriant

³⁰¹ *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 102.

³⁰² *La Salle de bain*, p. 55.

³⁰³ *La Réticence*, p. 22.

prudemment, crut bon de lui répéter la question. Monsieur baissa le journal et le considéra rêveusement de haut en bas. Le monsieur s'approcha de lui et, brutalement, le bouscula.³⁰⁴

Toussaint's narrators may exhibit a certain blankness (of which more later), but Augé's 'average man' they are not. A subversion of the standard interactions of the average consumer, for example, can be seen in a passage in *Autoportrait* concerning the narrator's attempt to buy a slice of terrine from an un-cooperative Berlin shopkeeper. She perversely cuts the first slice far too thinly: 'mais vraiment minuscule, on pouvait plastifier un passeport avec une telle épaisseur de gelée, nettoyer ses lunettes. *Dicker*, j'ai dit.'³⁰⁵ The sharp tone in which this is delivered serves to intimidate rather than enrage the Berliner, who sets about attempting to satisfy Toussaint/the narrator's exact requirements of thickness:

Comme ça? a-t-elle dit. Plus grosse, j'ai dit. Elle a déplacé le couteau vers la droite. Comme ça? a-t-elle dit. Un tout petit peu moins grosse, j'ai dit. Elle a relevé les yeux, m'a regardé, mais elle n'a plus résisté, elle était sous ma coupe maintenant. Elle a de nouveau déplacé le couteau vers la droite. Non, non, pas si grosse! j'ai dit. Elle a déplacé le couteau vers la gauche, [...] légèrement à droite, légèrement à gauche, légèrement à droite, elle n'y arrivait pas, elle n'arrivait pas à me satisfaire. Dommage, vous y étiez, j'ai dit.³⁰⁶

Finally, the slice is acceptable, and the shopkeeper cannot do enough for her customer, but the narrator is not mollified: 'Je suis parti sans dire au revoir (je n'aime pas les gens désagréables).'³⁰⁷ It will become apparent that this kind of subversion, a certain kind of manipulation of and mild maliciousness towards others, is a feature of all of Toussaint's principal characters. They frequently contravene expectations, whether of society in general or of *non-lieux* in particular. In *L'Appareil-photo* the narrator argues with a gas-canister vendor, and assumes an unjustified role of authority in turning away a potential driving school candidate while he is temporarily left alone in the premises. The antipathy

³⁰⁴ *Monsieur*, p. 15.

³⁰⁵ *Autoportrait*, p. 22.

³⁰⁶ *Autoportrait*, p. 22.

³⁰⁷ *Autoportrait*, p. 24.

of the narrator of *La Salle de bain* to conventional tourist attitudes is also evident in his and Edmondsson's attempt to make Venice sink faster by jumping up and down on the pavement.

Augé's non-places are equally present in Baker's texts. Baker's spaces are urban, contemporary, communal, and impersonal, including shops and malls, office interiors, freeways, subways, hospital rooms and so on. The *Mezzanine* recounts the lunch-hour of an employee of an office on the mezzanine floor of the book's title, during which he goes shopping, and examines the conventions of 'bagging' and giving change. *The Fermata* opens as its narrator has just stopped time 'on the sixth floor of the MassBank building in downtown Boston', where he works as a temp.³⁰⁸ He later visits 'the Gap clothing store in the Copley Place Mall' (where time is still frozen), removes the shirts of all the women shopping there, and spends a few hours cruising up and down the freeway.³⁰⁹ The interlocutors of *Checkpoint* spend the entire novel in a hotel room in Washington D.C.

In *The Fermata*, office space is a fortiori a non-place for Arno, since he is a temp, a role which is itself both anonymous and transitory: 'I may work as many as forty different assignments in a given year – some for a week or two, some for a few days.'³¹⁰ The actions of Baker's narrators in the workplace, such as stapling, sending memos, signing a co-worker's get-well card, are performed by millions of people every day, in, one assumes, a near identical fashion and therefore connote the same uniformity, repetition and impersonality that Augé links to non-places.³¹¹

If the real places named in Toussaint are ciphers, indicating the essential sameness of every place, those in Baker's work, such as New York, Boston and Rochester, operate similarly, and serve less to locate the narratives within these referents, than to signal that

³⁰⁸ *The Fermata*, p. 4.

³⁰⁹ *The Fermata*, p. 284.

³¹⁰ *The Fermata*, pp. 42-43.

³¹¹ Although the workplace is not specifically identified as non-place by Augé, I would argue that the uniformity of experience in the workplace is not solely due to the requirements of a job, but also to the standardised environment of most office space, thus meriting my inclusion of it as a non-place.

global urban spaces have become so uniform that only their names can serve to distinguish them. This is highlighted in *Vox*, where Abby and Jim simply disclose that they live ‘in an eastern city’ and ‘a western city’,³¹² respectively.

Within these cities, Baker’s narrators reflect on their experience of transport, on subways, freeways, aeroplanes, escalators and elevators. In *The Fermata*, Arno finds that motorways offer the fascinating possibility of ‘car-crashes’,³¹³ where he falls ever so briefly in love with the fellow drivers that he passes. In *The Mezzanine*, Howie explains his dislike of the conventions associated with elevators: ‘raising your eyes with everyone in the car to watch the floor numbers change; assuming the responsibility of holding the “Door Open” button or the rubber door-sensor with a pious expression as people boarded’.³¹⁴ Elsewhere in *The Mezzanine*, he identifies the attraction of the men’s washroom for new employees as deriving from familiarity with one’s role in non-place:

For new-hires, the number of visits can go as high as eight or nine a day, because the corporate bathroom is the one place in the whole office where you understand completely what is expected of you. Other parts of your job are unclear: you have been given a pile of xeroxed documents and files to read; you have tentatively probed the supply cabinet and found that they don’t stock the kind of pen you prefer; relative positions of power are not immediately obvious.³¹⁵

Howie, the narrator of *The Mezzanine*, displays an intricate knowledge of the conventions of behaviour in non-places, within which solitude is the most comfortable state. This can be seen in his description of elevator etiquette, or in his panic-stricken avoidance on the escalator of a fellow office-worker, Bob, whom he recognises, yet does not know: ‘His face was so familiar that his ongoing status as a stranger was really an embarrassment’.³¹⁶ He sees that Bob will pass him on the down escalator as Howie is about to go up, ‘where we would have to make eye contact and nod and murmur, or stonily stare into space, or pretend to inspect whatever belongings could plausibly need inspection on an escalator

³¹² *Vox*, pp. 8-9.

³¹³ *The Fermata*, p. 189.

³¹⁴ Nicholson Baker, *The Mezzanine*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Granta, 1990), p. 76.

³¹⁵ *The Mezzanine*, p. 71 (footnote).

³¹⁶ *The Mezzanine*, p. 60.

ride, wrenching past that second of forced proximity as if the other person did not exist.³¹⁷ Howie resolves the problem by turning away just before getting on the escalator, and walking away. It would seem that unlike Toussaint's narrators who deliberately and confidently contravene the unspoken conventions of non-place, Baker's narrators eagerly adopt the behaviour that non-place demands. But Baker subtly transgresses the non-anthropological nature of non-places by investing them with subjective significance. Justifying his decision to stand, rather than climb the moving escalator, Howie reflects on his role as passenger, concluding that 'it was natural, it was understandable, it was defensible to want to stand like an Easter Island monument in this trance of motorised ascension through architectures of retailing'.³¹⁸ Baker's writing operates against the uniform and contractual environment of non-place by drawing out and imposing over it precisely that which Augé argues is suppressed in non-place, namely a passenger's 'identité singulière', which is only retrieved 'au contrôle de douane, au péage ou à la caisse enregistreuse'.³¹⁹ By making the very relations Augé describes the object of his fascination, Baker transforms the average man of non-place into, for example, an 'Easter Island monument'.

Thus Toussaint and Baker do not merely represent solitary individuals frequenting the ubiquitous anonymity of non-places, but their works also figure a transgression or re-appropriation of these spaces. Their actions or interpretations might seem insignificant, and exemplify a kind of behaviour common to all of us at one time or another, but the powerfully coercive nature of non-place renders such appropriation or transgression the exception. Any habitual commuter can testify to the deadening experience of non-place overall, regardless of the moments that periodically relieve it.

As we saw in Chapter 1, *non-lieux* promote homogeneity via their construction of 'the average man'. The predominance of consumer brands also has a role to play in

³¹⁷ *The Mezzanine*, p. 60.

³¹⁸ *The Mezzanine*, p. 102.

³¹⁹ *Non-Lieux*, p. 130.

promoting homogenisation of identity. In common with some of the texts discussed in Chapter 2, Baker's work contains many references to brands, particularly in *The Mezzanine* and *The Fermata*: 'Gillette', 'Polaroid',³²⁰ 'Jell-O',³²¹ 'Casio',³²² 'Vaseline',³²³ and 'UPS',³²⁴ are a few such examples. However, brands are not simply displayed in order to anchor the narrative in a particular time, or to underscore their all-pervasiveness in real life -- as with Ellis and Deville. Baker's narrators invest branded products with idiosyncratic significance, and explore their relationship with them in their own terms:

Yet emotional analogies were not hard to find between the history of civilization on the one hand and the history within the CVS pharmacy on the other, when you caught sight of a once great shampoo like Alberto VO5 or Prell now in sorry vassalage on the bottom shelf of aisle 1B, overrun by later waves of Mongols, Muslims, and Chalukyas - Suave; Clairol Herbal Essence, Gee, Your Hair Smells Terrific; Silkience; Finesse; and bottle after bottle of the Akbaresque Flex.³²⁵

If we compare this passage about shampoos with the extract from Coupland discussed in Chapter 2, it is apparent that rather than simply acknowledge or satirise the ubiquity of contemporary brands, Baker transforms their evolution into an allegory of human civilisation, and records responses which redescribe commercial significance into something unique and subjective. Just as commerce has appropriated art for its own purposes, Baker's art appropriates brands and products and re-invests them with an alternative, non-commercial significance. This is all the more effective since, once something has become a product, it is often seen in some way to be artistically degraded. If no work of art is safe from capitalist appropriation, then perhaps Baker's appropriation is a form of retaliation. In accepting that products are now fully interwoven into human experience, Baker demonstrates that product connotations need no longer be governed uniquely by the law of exchange. Instead, they may be invested with alternative

³²⁰ Both in *The Fermata*, p. 45.

³²¹ *The Fermata*, p. 113.

³²² *The Fermata*, p. 4.

³²³ *The Fermata*, p. 191.

³²⁴ *The Fermata*, pp. 123, 133, 134, 136-140.

³²⁵ *The Mezzanine*, p. 114.

connotations, or simply appreciated as aesthetic objects; as ends in themselves. In this we can see a conviction close to de Certeau's, that the recipients of commercial messages do not merely assimilate but are able to 'talk back to' or transform by usage. We see this aesthetic appreciation of the banal commercial object in Baker's identification of nail-clippers as 'beautiful':³²⁶ 'a big clear drum of ninety-nine-cent Trim-brand clippers sitting near the drugstore's cash register like a bucket of freshly netted minnows is an almost irresistible sight.'³²⁷

Baker is also interested in the private, which homogeneity, classification, and a saturation of information all tend to erode. This is what, in *The Mezzanine*, excites Howie in the non-event of two shoelaces breaking within a day of each other:

Apparently my shoe-tying routine was so unvarying and robotic that over those hundreds of mornings I had inflicted identical levels of wear on both laces. The near simultaneity was very exciting – it made the variables of private life seem suddenly graspable and law-abiding.³²⁸

Howie's excitement over the miniature and hidden 'variables of private life' resists the homogenisation of the individual, whose private life has been documented to death.

While Baker overwrites and reappropriates, Toussaint's response to homogeneity is one of exclusion and satirisation. The ubiquity of brands, for example, is signalled by their absence; his texts contain almost no references to brands at all. In fact, apart from a reference to a cd-rom in *La Télévision* (and the broadly contemporary focus on television itself), references anchoring the text to a particular time (brands, but also technology, historical events, etc) are conspicuously omitted. Toussaint's texts have a spartan, timeless quality, derived in part from this careful exclusion. Toussaint has indicated in interview his

³²⁶ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 52.

³²⁷ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 52.

³²⁸ *The Mezzanine*, p. 15.

determination to keep branded products out of his novels: ‘de ma vie, je n’ai naturellement jamais écrit qu’un de mes personnages avait bu un Coca, il y a des limites, quand même’.³²⁹

Information Saturation

Another contemporary phenomenon present in these texts is that of information saturation. Toussaint seems to oppose it with his minimalist form, his aesthetic of exclusion, discussed in more detail in the following chapter. There are also direct allusions in *La Télévision*. More gentle than the naked contempt of the narrator of *Extersion du domaine de la lutte*, the narrator of *La Télévision* mocks the reverence towards information technology when he is researching Musset. He asks assistance of a librarian:

Il alla ouvrir une armoire métallique, devant laquelle il s’agenouilla un instant, avant de se relever avec une disquette ultrafine à la main, qu’il secoua lentement devant mes yeux avec une expression enjôleuse de mystère mêlé de connivence. Musset, me dit-il à voix basse. Musset? dis-je. Musset, confirma-t-il en baissant les paupières. Tout Musset, ajouta-t-il. Tout Musset, m’écriai-je. J’en rajoutais un peu (comme si je n’avais jamais vu une disquette).³³⁰

However, a more central concern of *La Télévision* is suggested by its title. In the following extract, the narrator remarks on the increasing influence of television, not only in its broadcast form, but in the form too of space devoted to it in newspapers:

J’avais remarqué depuis quelque temps que l’espace réservé aux programmes de télévision n’avait cessé de croître dans les journaux, régulièrement, depuis une dizaine d’années, de manière lente et insidieuse, imperceptible et inéluctable. [...] Il était d’ailleurs raisonnablement à craindre que, dans un avenir proche, les programmes de télévision, qui, pour l’instant encore, demeuraient cantonnés dans les dernières pages des journaux, ne finissent par établir une tête de pont du côté des premières pages pour progresser alors également de l’avant vers l’arrière des journaux en vue d’établir finalement leur jonction, ne laissant plus alors à la partie saine du journal qu’un étroit corridor préservé, où l’on parlerait encore, directement, des affaires du monde.³³¹

³²⁹ Ingrid Aldenhoff, interview with Jean-Philippe Toussaint. Online. Éditions de Minuit. Available: <http://www.leseditionsdeminuit.fr/titres/2000/autopoportrait-etranger.htm>. 20th January 2006.

³³⁰ *La Télévision*, p. 80.

³³¹ *La Télévision*, pp. 65-66.

What this passage highlights is not only the ability of television to penetrate media other than itself, but also that it threatens to entirely substitute itself for ‘les affaires du monde’. One is reminded of the phenomenon of increasingly weighty weekend newspapers and proliferating titles of magazines and journals, which is symptomatic of the excessive production of information identified by Baudrillard, where even wastage is desirable. (You take possession of your weekend paper, weighing perhaps a kilo or two, and discard the business, jobs, sport, money, lifestyle, or travel sections, depending on your taste.) This information, as Baudrillard says, ‘se redistribue dans tous les interstices du social’.³³² Like the holes in supermarket shelves, gaps in communication are being constantly filled. Even as he reneges on his vow to stop watching it, the narrator of *La Télévision* repeatedly ponders the pernicious effects of television, including how this bombardment of information inhibits thought and encourages passivity: ‘Ainsi notre esprit, comme anesthésié d’être aussi peu stimulé en même temps qu’autant sollicité, demeure-t-il essentiellement passif en face de la télévision.’³³³ When watching television, he says, ‘j’avais conscience d’être en train de m’avilir’.³³⁴

Baker’s texts are also concerned with information saturation. As noted in the previous section, Howie’s fascination with the mysteries of shoe-lace wear can be read as an attempt to find some area of private life for the novel to explore that has not already been documented to death. Baker has also written polemically, in both *Double Fold* and in ‘Discards’ in *The Size of Thoughts*, about the transformation of printed information into electronic format. This involves microfiching then destroying books in *Double Fold* and doing the same to catalogue cards in ‘Discards’. *Double Fold* is the story of Baker’s painstaking research into the historical causes for and propaganda surrounding the project of destroying fragile books after photographing or digitizing them, in order to save libraries space. In his discussion of what he calls the book-destroying ‘anti-artifactualists’, he

³³² *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 121.

³³³ *La Télévision*, p26.

³³⁴ *La Télévision*, p22.

identifies a general trend among librarians to feel that electronic information simply has to be the answer, the future. The response is a widespread desire to create more and more information, accessible to all, instead of locking it away inside something so leadenly physical as a book: ‘If you unwrapped three million word-mummies – if you mined them from the stacks, shredded them, and cooked their brittle bookstock with the help of steady disaster-relief money – you could pump the borderless bitstream full of rich new content.’³³⁵

Although these examples chiefly identify the substitution of one kind of information for another (television pages for news) and the transformation of information into different formats (books into microfiche or electronic data), there is clearly also in Toussaint and Baker a keen awareness of the bombardment of information, both in the form of televisual broadcasts, and in the desire for information proliferation (in the form of increased access) that in part motivates the digitisation of books. One is thus reminded of Baudrillard’s and Jameson’s contention that the ever-increasing volume of information is simply one aspect of the capitalist logic of ever-increasing wealth and production; as it circulates, information is intended to acquire a surplus value of meaning, just as commodities acquire surplus value through circulation.³³⁶

But more importantly than this, both Baker and Toussaint are writing about the as yet unwritten, about the private, unspoken texture of daily life. In doing so, are they not themselves contributing to the very excess of information, the disappearance of the Other (or the exotic), for which the electronic age is berated? Furthermore, the love of scholarship, which generates new meanings and new information, is absolutely central to

³³⁵ Nicholson Baker, *Double Fold* (New York: Vintage, 2002), p. 240.

³³⁶ There is, however, some ambivalence in Baker’s texts in regard to electronic information. For example, he makes full use of searchable cd-roms in his essay ‘Lumber’ in *The Size of Thoughts*, and speaks with admiration of the ‘infinite riches’ of the *English Poetry Database*. *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 228.

Baker's work, and is present to a lesser extent also in Toussaint's.³³⁷ These questions are taken up in more detail in the subsequent chapters, but it is useful to highlight them here as evidence of their ambivalence toward this (and other) subject predicaments.

Yet clearly scholarship per se is not unique to the contemporary, in the way that information bombardment and decontextualisation are. Howie echoes Postman when he suggests that it is irrelevant information that we should avoid, and should concern ourselves instead with the things that are really central to our lives, such as perforation...

People watch the news every night like robots, thinking they are learning about their lives, never paying attention to the far more immediate developments that arrive unreported, on the zip-lock perforated top of the ice cream carton, in reply coupons bound in magazines and on the 'Please Return This Portion' edging of bill subs, on sheets of postage stamps [...] on paper towels, in rolls of plastic bags for produce at the supermarket, in strips of hanging file-folder labels.³³⁸

This quotation raises the question as to whether it is a *type* of information that Baker wishes us to attend to (domestic minutiae not international news), or whether in the face of such overwhelming saturation, such minutiae represent the last undocumented area of life left to us. This question will be considered in more detail in due course. The above quotation also highlights that what for Baker is central and important is what we would normally consider trivial and domestic. In fact, prior to the publication of *Checkpoint* in 2004, the apoliticism of Baker's texts was a striking feature. The closest they came to considering the broader social and political world came in *The Size of Thoughts*, where he considers 'whether things are getting better or worse'.³³⁹ Typically, however, he judges this in terms of minor phenomena: 'When I tip the paper boy these days, he doesn't say thank you. On the other hand, there is Teflon II. Reflective street signs. The wah-wah pedal'.³⁴⁰ Contained in this

³³⁷ Baker's love of footnotes is echoed in the glowing description of Musset's Pléiade edition of *Le Fils du Titien* by the narrator of *La Télévision*: 'succulente édition avec tout son appareil critique de notes précieuses et délicieuses à ronger lentement comme des petits os de lapin.' – *La Télévision*, p. 87.

³³⁸ *The Mezzanine*, p. 74.

³³⁹ *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber*, p. 7.

³⁴⁰ *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber*, p. 9.

microcosm of 'how things are', however, is the suggestion that things such as a sense of community and moral values are in decline, while capitalist innovation surges forward.

Both Toussaint's and Baker's general avoidance of engagement with political issues, and preoccupation with the small-scale, domestic, and near-at-hand, can be seen as alluding to the apoliticism resulting from the difficulty in identifying and resisting power structures identified earlier. Their contemporary apoliticism, however, is transformed in Baker's latest novel, *Checkpoint*, which could not be more political, concerning as it does the assassination of incumbent president, George W. Bush. The cover of the 2004 Chatto & Windus paperback edition shows a target with a picture of George Bush pinned to the bull's eye, a rather daring and inflammatory act given the political climate in America in the years since the terrorist attacks of 2001.

During the dialogue between Ben and Jay, which, as in *Vox*, constitutes the entirety of the novel, the issue of the unmappability of power emerges. Ben explains how as a historian he has access to government information from the 1950s and 1960s the like of which he could not possibly have for 2004, partly because the information is classified and people are scared to talk, but also partly because of the conceptual difficulties in isolating power structures, and cause and effect:

It's so big that there are no insiders because the inside is all around us. That's the thing. You need a fair amount of condensing and distilling and sheer forgetting to go on before historians like me can get to work.³⁴¹

Checkpoint represents the contemporary subject's political predicament in its most current and up-to-date form, and thus will date faster than Baker's earlier novels. It identifies not only the obstacles to political understanding and action, but also the recent rage and impotence felt by many in the wake of the second Gulf war, which galvanised portions of societies that had hitherto been apolitical. However, it also, in the dissuasive voice of Ben,

³⁴¹ Nicholson Baker, *Checkpoint* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2004), p. 38.

incarnates the continuing pragmatism of the contemporary subject, the rejection of the kind of radical and violent interventions that characterised political protest in the sixties.

The Subject in Time

Chapter 1 explored the contemporary subject's paradoxical experience of time. The present moment is privileged above all others, yet composed of fragmentary nostalgic simulations of the past, constantly historicised and therefore disappearing. It is questionable whether a subject of history still exists, despite the presence of History everywhere in the form of period simulacra.

Time as subject matter is obviously not unique to the contemporary novel. As Anthony Wilden has noted in *System and Structure*, 'since the growth of the modern novel [...] duration is not a simple décor, not an a priori outside the characters and outside their time, but more like a character in itself.'³⁴² I take this to mean that where time is foregrounded as theme or structure, it affects the narrative as much as the characters themselves. I want to show that Toussaint and Baker continue this foregrounding, and engage with the problem of time in a distinctly contemporary fashion. I discuss how this is achieved *formally* in Chapter 4. Here, I will look at how both authors demonstrate their preoccupation with time on the *narrative* and *thematic* levels.

Baker alludes to the contemporary obsession with the present moment identified by Augé, Jameson and Baudrillard, when *The Fermata's* Arno remarks on the perpetual present of newsstands:

Unlike a bookstore, a newsstand unifies its huge range of subject categories by its overriding sense of nowness. It is a Parthenon of the immediate present, a centrifuge of synchronicity. Each magazine is saying, This is what we think you want to know about our subspecialty right this second, in (you scan the covers) July July July August July July July August August July.³⁴³

³⁴² *System and Structure*, p. 64.

³⁴³ *The Fermata*, p. 230.

This quotation illustrates Augé's point about the seemingly eternal present of non-places, where 'tout se passe comme si l'espace était rattrapé par le temps, comme s'il n'y avait pas d'autre histoire que les nouvelles du jour ou de la veille'.³⁴⁴

An obsession with the present can take different forms; it can, for example, be observed in the endless pursuit of novelty and the rapid historicisation of the present discussed in Chapter 1. It can also manifest itself in terms of a desire to arrest and prolong the present moment. Both Toussaint's and Baker's work seems to incorporate this desire, most strikingly in Baker's *The Fermata*, where the narrator is able to literally halt time for everyone except himself. Arno is fascinated with the world in its immobile state, or 'the Fold' as he sometimes calls it. While 'others might put it [his gift] to fuller avaricious or intellectual use: government secrets, technological espionage, etc',³⁴⁵ Arno simply uses his power to afford him the sight of naked women, frozen in time:

The ability to investigate all aspects of her careless aliveness, where her clothes stretch, her body's textures, her expression, her smells, the way she happens to be standing or moving, as they are fused in a single total instantaneous female delta-self, is the great lure of the Fold.³⁴⁶

But sexual voyeurism is not Arno's sole interest; much of *The Fermata* consists of detailed description of the strange stationary world Arno has produced, such as the state of the sea when time is paused:

Swimming in the Fold was something I hadn't done up to that point: the water's viscosity varied, areas of paused turbulence in a crashing wave dissolving like lumps in batter as I swam through them. Shells and pebbles were suspended in the undertow like forest underbrush. I ran my finger along the quiet sharp crest of a wave and flicked a hanging drop of seawater into vapor with my fingernail.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁴ *Non-Lieux*, p. 131.

³⁴⁵ *The Fermata*, p. 22.

³⁴⁶ *The Fermata*, p. 158.

³⁴⁷ *The Fermata*, p. 122-123.

Here Baker is imagining the possibility of experiencing the truly eternal present – the paradox of a single moment itself experienced through time. Time is not only frozen but somehow it has depth; Arno is able to swim through a ‘slice’ of a moment and experience it, spatially extended, at his leisure. What is so seductive about this quotation is not only the beauty and strangeness Baker evokes (it is the infra-ordinary achieved not by magnification but by immobilisation), but also the power to seize the present moment indefinitely. It echoes and draws on the very contemporary desire I have already identified.³⁴⁸

The present takes priority over the historical in *U and I: A True Story*, where Baker decides that he must write a book about John Updike while he is still living, rather than write something on Donald Barthelme, who had just died at the time of writing:

The intellectual surface we offer to the dead has undergone a subtle change of texture and chemistry; a thousand particulars of delight and fellow-feeling and forbearance begin reformulating themselves the moment they cross the bar. The living are always potentially thinking about and doing just what we are doing: being pulled through a touchless car wash, watching a pony chew a carrot, noticing that orange scaffolding has gone up around some prominent church. The conclusions they draw we know to be conclusions drawn from how things are now.³⁴⁹

Although Baker is by no means devaluing dead writers, he is nonetheless promoting the fact of sharing the present with a living writer as something necessary for his appreciation of Updike (as opposed to writing about Barthelme). In this we again detect a prioritisation of the present (as well as the ‘con-temporary’). Both *Room Temperature* and *The Mezzanine* are examples of a short period of time expanded to yield an entire novel – an infant’s feeding time and a lunch-hour, respectively. The dialogues of both *Vax* and *Checkpoint* are present-tense conversations of direct speech, set adrift from past and future. This seems to

³⁴⁸ Not only seize, but interact with; what good is a frozen moment if you are a mere observer? Arno’s ability to trace ‘the quiet sharp crest of a wave’ and flick ‘a hanging drop of seawater into vapor’ is a fantasy close to omnipotence.

³⁴⁹ *U and I*, p. 9.

indicate a preoccupation with seizing the present moment, as opposed to commemorating the past, for example.

Bertrand Westphal has written of Toussaint's central characters that: 'leur objectif avoué est la présentification absolue.'³⁵⁰ *La Salle de bain* in particular reads like this, given its imperfectly circular structure, whereby the narrator retreats into the bathroom, emerges, and retreats again at the end of the novel. The narrator of that novel is attracted to immobility, as in, for example, the paintings of Mondrian:

Ce qui me plaît dans la peinture de Mondrian, c'est son immobilité. Aucun peintre n'a voisiné d'aussi près l'immobilité. [...] La peinture, en général, n'est jamais immobile. Comme aux échecs, son immobilité est dynamique. [...] Chez Mondrian, l'immobilité est immobile. [...] Moi, il me rassure.³⁵¹

The narrator of *L'Appareil-photo* is also attracted to the idea of time marching on the spot.

On a car-ferry, he has the following sensation:

Nous avançons irrésistiblement, et je me sentais avancer aussi, fendant la mer sans insister et sans forcer, comme si je mourais progressivement, comme si je vivais peut-être, je ne savais pas, [...] ma vie allait de l'avant, oui, dans un renouvellement constant d'écumes identiques.³⁵²

Though moving in time, the repetition of identical moments indicates that time is somehow standing still. This is a most desirable state of affairs, akin to the chess problem that he considers in the service station toilets, a problem that he decides is no problem at all:

Je m'attardais là tranquillement, songeant à ce problème d'échecs qu'avait composé Breyer où toutes les pièces étaient en prise, ce qui tenait au fait que lors des cinquante derniers coups aucun pion n'avait été déplacé ni aucune pièce capturée. Ce problème [...], qui m'occupait délicieusement l'esprit pour l'heure, représentait à mes yeux un *modus vivendi* des plus raffinés.³⁵³

³⁵⁰ Bertrand Westphal, 'Le Quadrillage de l'arène: temps et histoire chez Jean-Philippe Toussaint', *Versants: Revue Suisse des Littératures Romanes*, 25 (1994), 117-130, p. 122.

³⁵¹ *La Salle de bain*, p. 84.

³⁵² *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 95-96.

³⁵³ *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 49.

Here, the absence of movement and progression in the game contrasts favourably with the ineluctable progression of time in the real world. Immobility is preferable to movement because it appears to resist mortality. This sense of melancholy at the passing of time, this anxiety over mortality, recurs elsewhere in Toussaint's work. At the end of *Autoportrait* he writes that writing itself is something that seems to resist the passing of time:

Jusqu'à présent, cette sensation d'être emporté par le temps avait toujours été atténuée par le fait que j'écrivais, écrire était en quelque sorte une façon de résister au courant qui m'emportait, une manière de m'inscrire dans le temps, de marquer des repères dans l'immatérialité de son cours, des incisions, des égratignures.³⁵⁴

If time appears to pass slowly for the reader of these texts, there are also instances of time passing slowly for the narrators themselves. *The Fermata* offers the most notable example of this; when Arno drops into the Fold, he experiences a single instant stretched out for as long as he wishes (although the perception of his personal time is not affected). For Toussaint's narrators, time goes as slowly as one would expect when busy doing nothing, as in the hotel room in *La Salle de bain*: 'L'après-midi n'en finissait pas, comme toujours à l'étranger, où les heures, le premier jour, paraissent appesanties, semblent plus longues, plus lentes, interminables.'³⁵⁵

A concentration on the present is combined with a contemporary ambivalence towards history. As discussed in relation to Augé in Chapter 1, the contemporary is characterised by a split in the continuum between past and present, and the transformation of the past into a simulacrum. Howie identifies this in relation to the retro design of 1950s kitchen blenders on his favourite mug:

Why did they have to wait until appliance plugs had changed from round to square, and blenders had become, *like their avant-garde mug*, spare white creations made by Braun and Krups, before they could illustrate the old golden-agey cartoonish kind of blender? Why do these images have to age before we can be fond of them? (original emphasis)³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ *Autoportrait*, pp. 119-120.

³⁵⁵ *La Salle de bain*, p. 55.

³⁵⁶ *The Mezzanine*, p. 78.

Howie is expressing an awareness that objects from the past are only recorded, kept in the public mind, and appreciated, when overlaid with the glaze of nostalgia. The 'spare white creations' of contemporary technology utterly usurp their predecessors, destroying continuity with their past versions, except in the form of 'golden-agey cartoonish' simulacra.

The personal histories of Toussaint's and Baker's characters are also conspicuously absent. Little mention is made of the past lives of the central characters, and this contributes to the sense that only their present exists. Howie traces in great detail the history, or imagined history, of the man-made objects that surround him, yet omits particulars of his own past. What little is revealed in terms of his character formation is also described in terms of the same minutiae:

I was set: I was the sort of person who said 'actually' too much. I was the sort of person who stood in a subway car and thought about buttering toast - [...] I was the sort of person whose biggest discoveries were likely to be tricks for applying toiletries while fully dressed.³⁵⁷

Toussaint's central characters are equally reticent regarding their past. The most we learn about the narrator of *La Salle de bain* is that he was a researcher 'dans un passé récent'.³⁵⁸ The use of the indefinite article indicates that the narrator is disconnected from this past - it is not his past, but 'a' past, a past with an independent existence from the present of *La Salle de bain*.

The wider context of social history is also largely absent from Toussaint's and Baker's texts, with the exception of *Checkpoint*. The only markers tend to be those of technology and branded products in Baker, and even these are barely mentioned in Toussaint. History in Baker's texts is reduced to the history of the insignificant. In *The*

³⁵⁷ *The Mezzanine*, p. 54.

³⁵⁸ *La Salle de bain*, p. 21.

Mezzanine, as can be seen from the quotation about shampoos discussed earlier, the history of civilisation is ranked alongside the history of consumer products. The absence of History, as opposed to personal history, in Toussaint, is such that its occasional emergence into the text comes as a surprise. In *Monsieur*, for example, the narrative makes a sudden diversion away from the actions of the central character of Monsieur, when he finds himself in a café seated next to a history student. The student is conducting an interview with a man who was a pupil of the Lycée de Chartres at the beginning of the Second World War.³⁵⁹ Monsieur, true to his tendency of becoming embroiled in plans and projects that are not his own, ends up taking dictation of the elderly gentleman's reminiscences. This fragment surfaces quite suddenly in the text, and the interview replaces the Monsieur-centred narrative for the space of four pages. In other novels, the sole reference to history is via the occasional historical figure – Pascal in *La Salle de bain*, or Titian in *La Télévision*. Bertrand Westphal has noted this feature of Toussaint's texts, remarking: 'L'Histoire surgit au gré du hasard, l'espace de quelques fragments, sous un angle quasi insignifiant, pour s'estomper aussitôt.'³⁶⁰

However, the apparent replication in their texts of contemporary attitudes to time is belied by a certain ambivalence. In Toussaint, for example, the pursuit of the present moment, and particularly in *La Salle de bain* the desire to stop time and the pursuit of immobility, is also subtly contradicted. We saw above the narrator pondering the progress of a raindrop down a window pane, and concluding that immobility does not, in stopping time, preserve life, but rather is equivalent to death itself.³⁶¹ So while movement leads to death, it is immobility which is death itself. This, too, is a Pascalian idea; one of the *Pensées* reads: 'Notre nature est dans le mouvement, le repos entier est la mort.'³⁶²

³⁵⁹ *Monsieur*, p. 80.

³⁶⁰ 'Le Quadrillage de l'arène', p. 118.

³⁶¹ See p. 5 of this chapter.

³⁶² *Pensées*, no. 529 bis, p. 396.

Baker, however, manifests an even greater ambivalence, particularly in regard to the past. His histories of man-made objects, technology, and branded products, can be read, as I suggest above, as a means of excluding or trivialising the more significant History of major social events. Philip E Simmons certainly reads it this way: ‘In Baker’s fiction [...] mass culture promises to replace history entirely; what history there is in the novel is that of the development and use of consumer goods.’³⁶³

But Baker’s texts can also be read, firstly, as evidence of a fascination with history itself, with the acts of remembering, recording, and conserving, whatever their object, and secondly, as part of his radical redescription of those same consumer goods, which function to obliterate the past, to advertise and aggrandise the present moment, and to endlessly renew themselves. Baker’s remembrance and reappropriation of the forgotten kinds of ice-cube trays, straws, and shampoos, contradict the disposability of commodities:

At first there were aluminum barges inset with a grid of slats linked to a handle like a parking brake - a bad solution; you had to run the grid under warm water before the ice would let go of the metal. I remember seeing these used, but never used them myself. And then suddenly there were plastic and rubber ‘trays,’ really molds, of several designs – some producing very small cubes, others producing large squared-off cubes and bathtub-bottomed cubes.³⁶⁴

The difference between Baker’s retrieval – a meticulous, subjective description of the unspoken experience of man-made objects – and that involved in retro styling such as the images of 1950s blenders on a mug, should be evident from this quotation. The former connects us to the items in question, the latter disconnects us. We find this too in his non-fiction; *The Size of Thoughts* contains a carefully researched history of the evolution of film projection, as well as more personal memories of building model airplanes.

³⁶³ Philip E. Simmons, ‘Toward the Postmodern Historical Imagination: Mass Culture in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* and Nicholson Baker’s *The Mezzanine*’, *Contemporary Literature*, 33:4 (1992), 601-624, p. 603.

³⁶⁴ *The Mezzanine*, p. 45.

What encourages this reading of Baker's attitude to history rather than that of Simmons is the evidence of Baker's general commitment to conservation and record keeping, to historical retrieval, with which he polemically engages. In *The Size of Thoughts*, he laments the destruction of card catalogues in libraries, as they are replaced by electronic databases. Arguing for their preservation, he writes:

Think of an unbound manuscript, the only one like it, composed of a great many leaves of three-by-five-inch cardboard – a million of them, in fact – each leaf covered recto and sometimes verso with detailed descriptions of certain objects that the world has deemed worthy of organized preservation. The authors of this manuscript have worked on it every day for a hundred and twenty years. It is, then, the accreted autobiography of an institution whose job it is to store and retrieve books and book-like materials.³⁶⁵

Note that in this quotation it is not the books themselves, nor even the descriptions of those books, whose loss Baker mourns, but rather the history, or Benjaminian aura of those descriptions and redescriptions. Baker's passion for the conservation of history reaches its peak in *Double Fold*, an extended essay on the destruction of books by libraries. What Baker argues here very convincingly, is that not only should the loss of books be quantified in terms of those that were not filmed or scanned effectively, resulting in a loss of data, but that something of the history and aura of an old book is irrevocably lost when reduced to electronic form:

The truth is that all books are physical artefacts, without exception, just as all books are bowls of ideas. They are things and utterances both. And libraries, [...] since they own, whether they like it or not, collections of physical artefacts, must aspire to the condition of museums. All their books are treasures, in a sense; the general stacks become a sort of comprehensive rare-book room – not staffed and serviced as rare-book rooms are, obviously, but understood as occupying the same kind of unreformattable sensorium.³⁶⁶

Elsewhere, Baker's fondness for history can be seen in the form of traditional scholarship and his preference for nineteenth-century mechanics over twentieth-century electronica. It

³⁶⁵ *The Size of Thoughts*, pp. 140-41.

³⁶⁶ *Double Fold*, pp. 224-225.

helps to explain his love for the ergonomic simplicity of perforation, as it does his preference in vending machines for the older ‘clinking Newtonianism of the gumball machine and the parking meter’.³⁶⁷

It should be evident, therefore, that in regard to time, as to the other predicaments of contemporary subjectivity, Toussaint’s and Baker’s works exhibit an ambivalence, which is to say that they simultaneously reflect and resist defining features of the contemporary. This tension, this ambivalence, is central to their work, and is further demonstrated by their response to contemporary questions about the very nature of the subject.

The Death of the Subject?

The question of the ‘death of the subject’ was discussed in Chapter 1. I want to look now at how contemporary anxiety about the erosion of a traditional unified subject manifests itself in the work of my two authors. It should be borne in mind that this erosion, in regard to representing the subject in literature, is further exacerbated by attacks on psychological realism of the kind discussed in Chapter 2. A rejection of psychological realism destroys the illusion that characters in novels are in some sense equivalent to real human beings. The contemporary novel is written in the aftermath of Barthes’s statement that ‘narrateur et personnages sont essentiellement des “êtres de papier”’.³⁶⁸

Toussaint’s central characters are all characterised by a certain anonymity; their presence in the texts seems to betray an absence. The first-person narrators of Toussaint’s novels are all unnamed. The name of the central character of Toussaint’s only third-person narrative, Monsieur, is, as Olivier Bessard-Banquy writes in ‘Monsieur Toussaint’, ‘à la fois un titre et une absence de titre complet’.³⁶⁹ The names of other characters are sometimes referred to by an initial, or are ambiguous in some other way, such as the initially

³⁶⁷ *The Mezzanine*, p. 80.

³⁶⁸ *L’Aventure sémiologique*, p. 195.

³⁶⁹ Olivier Bessard-Banquy, ‘Monsieur Toussaint’, *Nouvelle Revue Française*, 543 (1998), 106-113, p. 111.

ungendered 'Edmondsson' in *La Salle de bain*, and 'Delon' in *La Télévision*. A certain blankness also derives from the lack of information supplied to the reader about the central characters. Despite the form of interior monologue which these novels take, and the importance of reflective thought, there is a distinct lack of descriptions of emotional states; what the characters think or feel is rarely expressed except occasionally in the form of rather abstract, existential statements, such as: 'la souffrance était l'ultime assurance de mon existence, la seule.'³⁷⁰ In extreme moments, the absence of emotion is even more striking. When the narrator of *La Salle de bain* throws a dart into his girlfriend's forehead, his immediate reaction is restricted to: 'Je m'approchai d'elle, retirai la fléchette (je tremblais). Ce n'est rien, dis-je, une égratignure.'³⁷¹ He makes no further reference to his action until he later returns to Paris and sees her again, where he remarks: 'L'hématome qui bleussait son front ajoutait à son charme, me semblait-il, mais j'éprouvais des scrupules à le lui faire remarquer.'³⁷² Disconnected from his own emotions, he also seems to lack empathy towards others. This feature will be discussed further in the next chapter, in the context of minimalism and neutrality of form.

Toussaint's characters seem to have few desires or preferences. Monsieur is perhaps the most passive of all his characters, apparently content to be swept this way and that by the demands of others. Even in relaxation this trait is evident: 'insensiblement, Monsieur se laissa couler dans le hamac, porté par des brises légères, les jambes croisées, les yeux ouverts, suivant en pensée le rythme des balancements, ne les précédant pas, ne les provoquant pas.'³⁷³ The passivity of Toussaint's protagonists, together with the gently ironic tone of the narration, is reminiscent of Musil's Ulrich in *The Man Without Qualities*, a possible precursor. For the man without qualities, 'his extraordinary indifference to the life

³⁷⁰ *La Salle de bain*, p. 95.

³⁷¹ *La Salle de bain*, p. 88.

³⁷² *La Salle de bain*, p. 122.

³⁷³ *Monsieur*, p. 28.

snapping at the bait is matched by the risk he runs of doing utterly eccentric things.³⁷⁴ In Toussaint's texts, motivation for the central characters' actions is often lacking, perplexing the reader and sometimes other characters, as when Monsieur announces his intention to depart for Cannes: 'Comme sa fiancée, s'en étonnant, voulut savoir ce qu'il allait faire à Cannes, Monsieur dit qu'il ne savait pas, qu'il verrait bien. D'autres questions? Non. Parfait.'³⁷⁵

This absence at the heart of the narrators, and thus of the texts, is sometimes made explicit. In *La Salle de bain*, the narrator refers to his age as 'vingt-sept ans, bientôt vingt-neuf',³⁷⁶ omitting his twenty-eighth year. Monsieur manifests his desire for effacement by aiming for a certain invisibility, particularly in group business meetings: 'Monsieur s'asseyait à la dix-septième place en partant de la gauche, celle où, par expérience, il avait remarqué que la présence passait le plus inaperçue'.³⁷⁷ While this sentence at first glance seems merely to indicate Monsieur's desire for self-effacement, on closer analysis its meaning is somewhat more complex. Firstly, a seat must be to the left of *something*, but of what? Of Monsieur as he enters the meeting room? Of the seat where he once used to sit? Again this Toussaintian use of the shifter introduces a subtle uncertainty. Secondly, what does it mean to *notice* that in this position one is *unnoticed*? How do you notice what is unnoticeable? Monsieur knows this 'par expérience', which begs the question what experience that was – as observer of the person seated in that position? Or by placing himself in that position, *in the place of the other*, something he constantly literally does, in occupying the spaces of others throughout the novel. As is often the case with Toussaint, the simplest sentences belie ambiguity and complexity.

Absence occurs at the narrative level; in *L'Appareil-photo*, the narrator has difficulty in obtaining photographs of himself – firstly, in his procrastination over his passport

³⁷⁴ Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike (London: 1991, Picador), p. 12.

³⁷⁵ *Monsieur*, p. 25.

³⁷⁶ *La Salle de bain*, p. 15.

³⁷⁷ *Monsieur*, pp. 11-12.

photos, and secondly, having developed photographs of himself with a stolen camera, he realises that: ‘Aucune des photos que j’avais prises moi-même cette nuit-là n’avait été tirée, aucune, [...] à partir de la douzième photo, la pellicule était uniformément sous-exposée, avec ça et là quelques ombres informes comme d’imperceptibles traces de mon absence.’³⁷⁸

An analogous absence of self-image occurs in *La Réticence*, where interaction with others is so suppressed it sometimes seems as though the narrator is haunting the town of Sasuelo. He finds that reflective surfaces do not show his image:

Juste en face de moi [...] se trouvait un grand miroir en bois dont la surface était si sombre que, bien que je me fusse trouvé à moins de trois mètres de lui, on ne distinguait aucun reflet de mon corps dans la glace.³⁷⁹

The use of ‘on’ instead of ‘je’ in ‘on ne distinguait...’, suggests dissociation and depersonalisation. On another occasion, this time in a puddle, he is nowhere to be seen: ‘Je me rendis compte alors qu’au centre de la flaque miroitait le reflet argenté de la vieille Mercedes grise, autour duquel, cependant, par je ne sais quel jeu de perspectives et d’angle mort, il n’y avait aucune trace de ma présence.’³⁸⁰ The most conclusive absence in *La Réticence*, however, is that of the character Biaggi, whom the narrator has come to Sasuelo to visit. He never appears in person in the text, and there is an enigma, or a kind of game of ‘hide and seek’, played between the narrator and Biaggi’s imagined movements. This *jeu*, one could say, is here ‘reflected’ in the fugitive ‘je’ of the narrator’s absent reflections.

When Toussaint’s protagonists are able to see their own reflections, there is often a sense of separation between them and the watching self, as if the subject were somehow split in two. In *La Salle de bain*: ‘Je surveillais la surface de mon visage dans un miroir de poche et, parallèlement, les déplacements de l’aiguille de ma montre. Mais mon visage ne laissait rien paraître. Jamais.’³⁸¹ In *La Réticence*, the narrator comes to feel that a stranger is

³⁷⁸ *L’Appareil-photo*, p. 116.

³⁷⁹ *La Réticence*, pp. 58-59.

³⁸⁰ *La Réticence*, p. 35.

³⁸¹ *La Salle de bain*, p. 12.

looking back at him: ‘Je voyais le reflet de mes yeux qui paraissaient bleu-vert, [...] c’était un regard terriblement inquiet qui me regardait là dans la pénombre, comme si c’était de moi que je me méfiais, comme si c’était moi en réalité que je craignais.’³⁸² What this quotation suggests is not only dissociation, but impossibility; the infinite regress of a ‘regarder un regard’. It is a problematic of self-portraits which becomes explicit in *Autoportrait (à l’étranger)*. These and other quotations cited suggest subjects that are either empty or divided; in either case, not the substantive selves of traditional realism. As discussed in Chapter 2, existential uncertainty is common to both modern and postmodern conceptions of the subject. There is also a specific precedent for Toussaint’s narrators’ mistrust of their reflections in Perec’s ‘tu’ of *Un Homme qui dort*:

Quels secrets cherches-tu dans ton miroir fêlé? Quelle vérité dans ton visage? [...] Ce reflet [...] semble n’avoir pour toi aucune sympathie, aucune reconnaissance, comme si, justement, il ne te reconnaissait pas, ou plutôt comme si, te reconnaissant, il prenait soin de n’exprimer aucune surprise.³⁸³

The doubling or splitting of identity alludes to questions about the demarcation between authors, narrators, and characters, and this will be discussed further in the final section. But this doubling in mirrors also suggests the theme of narcissism, as indeed does the apparent lack of psychic content which typifies Toussaint’s characters.

Narcissists are only capable of ‘pseudo-insight’, so fixated are they on how their image is reflected back by others. Furthermore, the need to posit a good and admirable self in stark contrast to the bad and unreliable world outside, leads inevitably to self-delusion. Toussaint’s narrator-characters have this tendency towards self-delusion, especially in *Morsieur*, *La Télévision*, and *La Réticence*. In *La Télévision*, it relates to his ability to resist watching television:

³⁸² *La Réticence*, p. 113.

³⁸³ *Un Homme qui dort*, pp. 130-31.

Il me semblait même, à ce moment-là, mais sans l'avoir jamais vraiment vérifié, que j'aurais pu m'arrêter de regarder la télévision du jour au lendemain sans qu'il m'en coûtât le moins du monde, sans que j'en ressentisse le moindre désagrément, en d'autres termes que je n'en étais nullement dépendant.³⁸⁴

As the novel progresses, the narrator must justify his occasional lapses:

Il allait de soi, bien entendu, que, dans mon esprit, arrêter de regarder la télévision ne s'appliquait nullement en dehors de chez moi. [...] J'avais, c'est entendu, arrêté de regarder la télévision, mais ce n'était pas pour autant que j'allais devoir me livrer à toutes sortes de contorsions absurdes dans la vie quotidienne.³⁸⁵

The narrator here treads an ambiguous line between delusion and knowing self-mockery; this reference to metaphorical 'contorsions absurdes' alludes to his physical versions of the same, since earlier the narrator has had to climb out of his neighbour's locked bathroom and back through the kitchen window, all to avoid the discovery that he has hidden their fern in the fridge. This signals that he/the text knows full well how unconvincing are his justifications. This kind of textual self-awareness is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

The ambiguity of self-delusion/self-awareness is paralleled by the narrators' periodic adoption of what one might call 'fausse naïveté', where there is a pretense of innocence or simplicity. In *La Télévision*, for example, the narrator offers this insight to the doctor on the subject of his wife's pregnancy: 'Je supposais en effet que c'était une petite fille car le gynécologue n'avait pas vu de verge à l'échographie (et, souvent, quand il n'y a pas de verge, c'est une petite fille, avais-je expliqué).'³⁸⁶ A few pages later, to the reader, he offers the following analysis of television: 'La télévision offre le spectacle, non pas de la réalité, quoiqu'elle en ait toutes les apparences (en plus petit, dirais-je, je ne sais pas si vous avez déjà regardé la télévision)...'.³⁸⁷ The humour in the latter quotation derives from the ambiguity between deadpan irony and ingenuous simplicity.

³⁸⁴ *La Télévision*, p. 9.

³⁸⁵ *La Télévision*, pp. 155-56.

³⁸⁶ *La Télévision*, p. 9.

³⁸⁷ *La Télévision*, p. 13.

In terms of reticent or absent characters, Baker's characters seem less afflicted by existential anxiety, but there are parallels with Toussaint's characters' reticence. Though they indulge in confessional, emotional monologues, Baker's narrators often neglect to refer to particulars of their own existence or past. Friends or family are often referred to by an initial, in nineteenth-century style; Jim and Abby, in the ultimate anonymity of their chat-line telephone call, reveal their names only at the end of the novel. In *The Mezzanine*, Howie works at an unspecified job for an unspecified corporation; in *The Fermata*, Arno's job as a temp guarantees a certain forgettable, unanchored existence which he relishes - he remarks that 'temps are prima facie alienated by virtue of their vocational rootlessness.'³⁸⁸

The confessional attitude of Baker's characters, which attempts to disarm and influence the reader, often gives the impression of acute self-delusion, especially in *The Fermata*, where Arno attempts to justify his disturbing activities with what he claims to be normal and decent motives:

I haven't perhaps done such a good job of establishing my sanity in this sketch of my life, [...] but I'm not by any means a crazy person. I don't have a flat affect. I'm friendly and likeable. [...] Nobody else should be entitled to take off women's clothes at will, at the snap of a finger or the flip of a switch, but I think I should be, because, for one thing, my curiosity has more love and tolerance in it than other men's does.³⁸⁹

Arno's strenuous assertions are nonetheless undermined by the extreme solipsism of his actions. The desire to control, which the ability to stop time allows him to satisfy, is also manifest in the above address to the reader, in that Arno is here attempting to control judgments made about him. Although it might seem paradoxical, narcissistic solipsism can manifest itself as an exaggerated preoccupation with what others might think – it is simply the self expanding outward into the world. The interest then is directed not to the other people as such, but what the narcissist imagines are other people's perceptions of *him*. This

³⁸⁸ *The Fermata*, p. 155.

³⁸⁹ *The Fermata*, pp. 155-56.

preoccupation is common to all of Baker's narrators, including those of his non-fictional work. *The Mezzanine* contains the following example, as Howie waves to some mailroom workers on their lunch-break:

One of them waved back, but before I turned away I was fairly sure that I caught sight of another of them [...] leaning towards the others while looking at me in order to say something mildly malicious about me to them, something like: 'A couple of weeks ago, I was walking past the guy's office? I look in: he's right in the middle of pulling a hair from his nose. He goes *doink!* and then he makes a face, *mngg*, eyes watering, and then this *shiver* goes through him. Probably he made a mistake and pulled out three at once.' I knew it was some story like that, because I heard 'No's!' and laughter at just the right interval after I'd waved to them.³⁹⁰

What is also interesting here is how Howie's idiosyncratic fascination with the experience of nose-hair pulling is projected onto the mailroom workers. However, neither Toussaint's nor Baker's characters completely fit the narcissist mould. Toussaint's characters care little for what others think, and are more than happy to endure disapprobation in order to speak their mind. In *La Salle de bain*, the narrator and his girlfriend dine with the previous tenants of their apartment, and the narrator offers the host the wine he has brought:

L'ancien locataire, homme distingué, regardant la bouteille, estima que c'était du très bon vin, mais nous confessa avec un rire prudent qu'il n'aimait pas le bordeaux, préférant le bourgogne. Je répondis que moi, je n'aimais pas tellement la façon dont il était habillé.³⁹¹

The Mezzanine's Howie seems to be an example of Lasch's shallow, empty narcissist, when he reduces his account of his self to: 'I was the sort of person who said "actually" too much. I was the sort of person who stood in a subway car and thought about buttering toast – buttering raisin toast, even'.³⁹² Yet although this might seem an example of Lasch's psychic emptiness, it can also be read as a fascination with the everyday outside world, a fascination that is contrary to Lasch's conception. Howie is thus the exact reverse of the restless, anxious, bored consumer. We see a similar excitement when he remembers

³⁹⁰ *The Mezzanine*, p. 62.

³⁹¹ *La Salle de bain*, p. 38.

³⁹² *The Mezzanine*, p. 54.

learning how to put on deodorant while already dressed, but when he makes the narcissistically grandiose statement ‘I felt like Balboa or Copernicus’, this is rather evidence of Howie’s capacity for gentle self-mockery.³⁹³

Furthermore, with his finely developed sense of empathy and goodwill towards others, Howie is nothing like Ellis’s nihilists discussed in Chapter 2, as the following description of his concern over the janitor’s feelings demonstrates:

I took hold of the handrail he had not been polishing (it would have been odd to grasp the handrail he *had* been polishing – like walking on a newly mopped floor: it would have heightened the always nearby sense of the futility of building maintenance – better to wait until the man had finished the whole handrail before I contributed to the inevitable dulling process that would force him to polish it all over again next week).³⁹⁴

Here Howie is concerned not for how the janitor perceives him, but for his (imagined) feelings in relation to the ‘futility of building maintenance’ that is his job.

In conclusion of this first section, then, it should be apparent both that Toussaint and Baker engage with the predicaments of the contemporary subject, and that their texts do more than simply exhibit or discuss them, they also manifest resistance towards the pessimistic views of the subject as set out in Chapter 1. In the next section, I explore a further shared contemporary preoccupation – the infra-ordinary.

3.2 The Infra-Ordinary

In discussing Toussaint’s and Baker’s texts, I have already made use of notions such as the everyday, the ordinary, the domestic, the unseen aspects of daily life, the near at hand, and so on. However, Perec’s term ‘l’infra-ordinaire’, discussed in Chapter 2, distinguishes more finely this important strand in their work. The infra-ordinary is both the invisible and overly visible, the very opposite of the rare and exotic. The pursuit of the infra-ordinary is an important project for Perec: ‘Peut-être s’agit-il de fonder enfin notre propre

³⁹³ *The Mezzanine*, p. 51.

³⁹⁴ *The Mezzanine*, p. 63-64.

anthropologie: celle qui parlera de nous, qui ira chercher en nous ce que nous avons si longtemps pillé chez les autres. Non plus l'exotique, mais l'endotique.³⁹⁵ In Chapter 1 I suggested the contemporary world to be one where otherness and the exotic have almost disappeared. In response, perhaps, the infra-ordinary focuses on the endotic as that which escapes cultural notice, and thus remains, in a sense, unknown. There are clearly parallels here with Augé's 'anthropology of the near'.

Infra-Ordinary Objects

In Baker's work, the infra-ordinary is perhaps most evident in the form of the mundane objects that fascinate the narrators. In *The Mezzanine*, Howie attempts to describe changes in the way we feel about such things as 'gas pumps, ice cube trays, transit buses, or milk containers'.³⁹⁶ The way we feel about these objects constitutes 'the often undocumented daily texture of our lives (a rough, gravelly texture, like the shoulder of a road, which normally passes too fast for microscopy)'.³⁹⁷ This then, is the infra-ordinary of the overlooked, where 'infra-' means something like 'beneath the level of visibility', as in infra-red. Baker makes this link himself, when describing the writing process: 'when my eyes were squeezed shut in an effort to see, using the infra-red of prose, whatever it was that I most wanted at that moment to describe'.³⁹⁸

The ubiquity of these objects enables Baker to draw on a vast store of unarticulated common experience. By prioritising their place in his texts, Baker refuses the notion of such experience as disposable, inferior, subordinate. *The Mezzanine* contains an eight-page chapter entirely devoted to shoes, shoe-laces, learning to tie them, and related topics. The preceding chapter is devoted to other domestic objects, principally grocery bags and drinking straws: 'I did still like plastic elbow straws, whose pleated necks resisted bending

³⁹⁵ *L'Infra-ordinaire*, p. 11. For further discussion of the origins of this idea, see Enrique Walker, 'Paul Virilio on Georges Perec', *AA Files*, 45/46 (2002), 15-18.

³⁹⁶ *The Mezzanine*, p. 41.

³⁹⁷ *The Mezzanine*, p. 41.

³⁹⁸ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 63.

in a way that was very similar to the tiny seizesups your finger joints will undergo if you hold them in the same position for a little while.³⁹⁹ Appended to the paragraph preceding this quotation is more than an entire page of footnotes concerning the evolution of straws from paper to plastic, and the physics of plastics and soft drinks that may have been responsible for the phenomenon of the ‘floating straw’. Further on, Howie reflects on his fondness for grocery bags:

I had loved bags since I was very little and had learned how to refold the large thick ones from the supermarket by pulling the creases taut and then tapping along the infolding center of each side until the bag began to hunch forward on itself, as if wounded, until it lay flat again.⁴⁰⁰

Later, in a footnote, the same close attention is paid to the shape and evolution of staplers: ‘Staplers have followed, lagging by about ten years, the broad stylistic changes we have witnessed in train locomotives and phonograph tonearms, both of which they resemble. The oldest staplers are cast-ironic and upright, like coal-fired locomotives and Edison wax-cylinder players.’⁴⁰¹

We can see that there is a process of metaphorisation and personification at work here. Bending straws are compared to finger joints and grocery bags look ‘wounded’ when lying flat. There is also a uniting of banal objects in entirely new ways, as is evident in descriptions of ice-cubes as ‘bathtub-bottomed’⁴⁰² and the following description of a soft contact lens: ‘when I folded it in half and rubbed its slightly slimy surface against itself to break up the protein deposits, I often remembered the satisfactions of making omelets in Teflon fry-pans.’⁴⁰³ Baker’s metaphors thus tend to redescribe one everyday object in terms of another, creating a new, fused image. He tends not to attempt to exalt the everyday by comparing it to the spectacular or exotic; in this way he remains true to the belief that there

³⁹⁹ *The Mezzanine*, p. 4.

⁴⁰⁰ *The Mezzanine*, p. 6.

⁴⁰¹ *The Mezzanine*, p. 14.

⁴⁰² *The Mezzanine*, p. 45.

⁴⁰³ *The Fermata*, p. 7.

is ‘unexpected foreignness and beauty in the lumber at one’s feet’, and there he stays.⁴⁰⁴ Throughout the novel, there are discourses on paper towels, hand-driers, elevators, business cards, photocopying machines, earplugs, doorknobs, and milk-cartons, to name only a fraction. There is a particular interest in gadgetry and in man-made technology. It is in fact more accurate to say that *The Mezzanine* does not so much contain these discourses as it is composed of them. Baker’s preoccupation with such objects persists throughout his work in varying degrees. In his collection of essays, *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber*, he devotes one chapter to model airplanes, and another to nail-clippers. While deliberating why it is that ‘the market for clippers is apparently unsaturable’,⁴⁰⁵ he observes that:

They can alter their profile in a single puzzle-solving flip-and-pivot of the lever arm, [...] from minnow shape to grasshopper shape and back again. They were our first toy Transformers: metallic dual-phase origamis that seem triumphantly Japanese and yet happen to be [...] a product of the small town of Derby.⁴⁰⁶

Although these objects are banal in their familiarity and ubiquity, Baker’s minute descriptions and uncovering of shared responses to them evokes the sensation of a newly discovered world. It also becomes apparent that the objects of fascination for Baker are often so small in size that they are also literally beneath the visible level. In *The Mezzanine*, the narrator imagines descending into the groove of a vinyl record, or into the groove left in ice by a skate. In *Room Temperature*, he describes a sweater down to the appearance of its individual fibres, which form a ‘corona of lighter outer fibers frizzing out three-eighths of an inch or more from the slubbed and satisfyingly clutchable weave that formed the actual structure underneath’. For the narrator, this means that

The sweater, along with me, its wearer, appeared to fade without a demonstrable outer boundary into the rest of the room, as tuning forks or rubber bands will seem

⁴⁰⁴ Baker suggests Emerson as a precursor for his own interests: ‘Emerson was expressing, in fact, the nineteenth century’s constantly repeated desire - the wish to find unexpected foreignness and beauty in the lumber at one’s feet.’, *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 300.

⁴⁰⁵ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 52.

⁴⁰⁶ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 52-53.

in their blurred vibration to transform their material selves into the invisible sound they generate.⁴⁰⁷

This fascination with the microscopic led Richard Stengel to term Baker a ‘miniaturist’ in his review of *Vox*.⁴⁰⁸

The dual interest in both the overlooked and the overly familiar extends elsewhere. In Baker’s essay on the word ‘lumber’ in *The Size of Thoughts*, he demonstrates his preoccupation with unearthing forgotten origins of, in this case, words. The choice of word is significant, since lumber can mean that which is forgotten and discarded:

Once or twice in the past it briefly enjoyed the status of a minor cliché, but now, for one reason or another, it is ignored or forgotten. Despite what seems to be a commonplace exterior, the term ought to be capable of some fairly deep and marimbal timbres when knowledgeably struck.⁴⁰⁹

An interest in the overly familiar also applies to writers themselves, in Baker’s choice of John Updike as subject for his book *U and I*: ‘It felt excitingly provocative to write a book about commonplace, familiar John Updike.’⁴¹⁰

Objects (and words, and people) are one form of the infra-ordinary. But the infra-ordinary in Baker’s texts does not merely consist of the minute description of their object of study, but crucially also of the unspoken relationships between people and objects, as in the following on the conventions of ‘bagging’:

Small mom and pop shopkeepers, who understood these things, instinctively shrouded whatever solo item you bought - a box of pasta shells, a quart of milk, a pan of Jiffy Pop, a loaf of bread - in a bag: food meant to be eaten indoors, they felt, should be seen only indoors. But even after ringing up things like cigarettes or ice cream bars, obviously meant for ambulatory consumption, they often prompted, ‘Little bag?’ ‘Small bag?’ ‘Little bag for that?’ Bagging evidently was

⁴⁰⁷ *Room Temperature*, p. 4-5.

⁴⁰⁸ Richard Stengel, “1-900-aural-sex”. *Time*. 3 February 1992: n.pag. Online. Available: <http://j-walk.com/nbaker/voxtime.htm>. 20 January 2006.

⁴⁰⁹ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 207. In *L’Infra-ordinaire*, Percec includes his meditations on the word ‘bureau’ - how it evolved from the word ‘bure’ meaning a rough cloth table-covering right up to its role in words such as ‘bureaucracy’. *L’Infra-ordinaire*, p. 89.

⁴¹⁰ Laura Miller, *Salon Interview with Nicholson Baker: Lifting up the Madonna*. Online. Available: <http://www.salon1999.com/10/features/baker1.html>. 28 November 2004.

used to mark the exact point at which title to the ice cream bar passed to the buyer.⁴¹¹

Baker's infra-ordinary is characterised by an insistence on subjective experience, the dense and sensitive descriptions of which have attracted Proustian comparisons. The following example gives some sense of this:

I said, 'Oh God' into the sopping paper, immeasurably soothed. Face-washing seems to work as acupuncture is said to: the sudden signals of warmth flooding your brain from the nerves of the face, especially the eyelids, unmoor your thinking for an instant, dislodging your attention from any thoughts that had been in progress and causing it to slide back randomly to the first fixed spot in memory that it finds - often a subject that you had left unresolved earlier in the day which returns now as an image magnified against the grainy blackness of your closed eyelids.⁴¹²

The ordinary and overlooked act of face-washing is slowed, as Baker identifies and evokes the hitherto unremarked details of the experience. The sensation of warmth and relief involved is powerfully recalled in the mind of the reader. The ordinary becomes infra-ordinary; no longer is this an unremarkable experience. On the contrary, it (and by extension all mundane human experience) is remarkable. The Proustian comparison derives from the triggering of memory by physical sensation, although in this case it is touch, rather than taste or smell.

While the infra-ordinary is equally central in Toussaint's texts, his approach is somewhat different. This is perhaps best drawn out by an alternative sense of the prefix 'infra-', which can also mean subordinate to (as infrastructure is subordinate to structure). The infra-ordinary as that which is subordinate to the ordinary, as well as the incidental which is subordinate to the main narrative, best characterises Toussaint's approach. Some of his titles – *La Salle de bain*, *L'Appareil-photo*, and *La Télévision* – indicate his interest in the most prosaic of everyday objects, leading one reviewer to joke: 'à quand *Le Caméscope*, *Le*

⁴¹¹ *The Mezzanine*, p. 6.

⁴¹² *The Mezzanine*, p. 95.

*Placard à balais?*⁴¹³ The difference with Baker becomes apparent when comparing twin descriptions of a carrier bag. Baker's description, in *The Mezzanine*, reads as follows:

At first the Papa Gino's bag was stiff, but very soon my walking softened the paper a little, although I never got it to the state of utter silence and flannel softness that a bag will attain when you carry it around all day, its hand-held curl so finely wrinkled and formed to your fingers by the time you get home that you hesitate to unroll it.⁴¹⁴

In Toussaint's *La Réticence*, the narrator's shopping bag has become wet in the rain:

Le sachet était déjà entièrement recouvert d'une mince pellicule de pluie, avec quelques gouttelettes çà et là qui ruisselaient le long du plastique blanc et froissé, tandis qu'à l'intérieur du sac se devinait la présence d'une bouteille d'eau minérale et de quelques berlingots de lait dont les contours anguleux avaient déformé les fragiles parois du sachet.⁴¹⁵

There are three things to notice about Toussaint's description. The first is that this minute description of the plastic bag with its the 'mince pellicule de pluie' is reminiscent of Robbe-Grillet's famous description of a tomato quarter in *Les Gommages*, with its 'mince couche de gelée verdâtre',⁴¹⁶ signalling an affinity with or continuance of a certain kind of 'chosisme'. The impersonal, apparently 'objective' precision of both Robbe-Grillet and Toussaint contrasts markedly with Baker's subjective and metaphorical description of the Papa Gino's bag, which reveals as much about the narrator as it does about the bag itself (note the repetition of personal pronouns - 'my walking...I never got it...you carry it...your fingers...you get home...you hesitate'). The second is that Toussaint's description is entirely focused on the shopping bag itself. Like Baker's, it focuses closely on the details of this ubiquitous yet invisible domestic item, but it excludes the responses of the narrator.

⁴¹³ Gabriel, Fabrice and Sylvain Borneau, 'La Résolution du Bonheur', *Les Inrockuptibles*, 29 January 1997, 12-16, p. 12.

⁴¹⁴ *The Mezzanine*, p. 8.

⁴¹⁵ *La Réticence*, p. 30.

⁴¹⁶ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Les Gommages* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1953; repr. 1990), p. 161. The opening of *La Réticence* has similarly mathematical precision. Describing a dead cat in the port, with a dead fish in his mouth: 'de laquelle dépassait un fil de pêche cassé d'une longueur de trois ou quatre centimètres.' *La Réticence*, p. 11.

This highlights an important feature of minimalism for Toussaint - 'minimalism presents the viewer with objects of charged neutrality [...] objects that reveal everything about themselves, but little about the artist'.⁴¹⁷ This may be the case, but it is worth noting that even an apparently 'objective' description such as Toussaint's is of course itself utterly subjective – it is no more or less than a description of how the narrator/author 'sees' the bag. Thirdly, Toussaint's bag is itself altogether colder than Baker's: it is cold, wet, white plastic, and as such it resists the moulding to the human form that Baker's paper bag indulges in – both literally and metaphorically (as can be seen in the earlier quotation, where the bag 'began to hunch forward on itself, as if wounded').⁴¹⁸

While the narrator of *La Salle de bain* will describe his bathroom or hotel room with detailed precision, but leave blank his emotional life, Howie can barely contain his excitement when pondering the evolution of minutiae: 'Perforation! Shout it out! The deliberate punctuated weakening of paper and cardboard so that it will tear along an intended path, leaving a row of fine-haired white pills or tuftlets on each new edge! It is a staggering conception'.⁴¹⁹ As in Baker, the objects in Toussaint's texts are subordinate in terms of their importance in the world. But their subordinate status is not transformed in the same way. In the perforation example above, what is incidental in the world is clearly exalted to central narrative status. Baker signals clearly to the reader that these apparently lowly items more than merit their promotion to centre stage. But in Toussaint, narrative passages which retain their unexcitable and incidental quality in the manner of their writing are not contrasted with the narrative action which the reader expects to take precedence - it is simply not there. Thus the infra-ordinary object in Toussaint is doubly subordinate – in terms of its status both in the world and in the text. This might seem contradictory, but whereas in Baker, the excitability of the narrator indicates from early on that the focus of the text is the infra-ordinary, in Toussaint, one can easily find oneself awaiting the 'main

⁴¹⁷ *Minimalism*, eds. Biggs, Curtis & Pyre (Liverpool: Tate Gallery, 1988), p. 7.

⁴¹⁸ *The Mezzanine*, p. 6.

⁴¹⁹ *The Mezzanine*, p. 74.

narrative' right until the end. So although Toussaint's infra-ordinary descriptions become the main narrative by default, due to the absence of any other narrative, there is a sense in which they retain something of a subordinate aura, even though logically, they *are* no longer subordinate or incidental.

This is the case even in the novel *Faire l'amour*, which, since it is set in Japan, would not seem a priori to adhere to the infra-ordinary rejection of the exotic. However, as Augé has pointed out, even the most exotic locations are part of our universe of recognition – our knowledge of Japan might only extend to our familiarity with sushi, for example. Furthermore, descriptions of the unfamiliar are of an equally minute focus, and are often of objects and places of an equivalent banality in that country. We can see this in his description of a pre-packed meal: 'Je n'avais pas choisi et fus un peu déçu, quand je déballai le paquet-cadeau, de trouver, à côté des baguettes et de la sauce au soja enserrée dans un petit poisson en plastique au lilliputien bouchon rouge, huit rectangles de riz identiques enroulés dans des feuilles de cerisiers.'⁴²⁰

Toussaint also makes use of what Viart has called 'la forme de l'inventaire',⁴²¹ similar to Perec's list-making. In *La Salle de bain*, the narrator lists the objects he unearths while searching through his storage room for a sweater: 'Des coquillages, pierres de collection, agates en lamelle, timbales, coquetiers, napperons, mouchoirs, dentelles, châles, huiliers, pendentifs, boîtes laquées, tire-bouchons, outils anciens, couteaux de berger, couteaux en argent, tabatières en ivoire, assiettes, fourchettes, santons, netsukes.'⁴²² What might first appear to be a list of banal objects is given a surreal twist, since it does not merely contain the usual odds and ends to be found in any house, but also ivory snuff boxes and 'netsukes' – a Japanese ornament for securing a purse to the sash of a kimono. The purpose of such lists is not merely the realist impulse to simply record what is there (especially since it includes the exquisite and exotic). In Perec's case, the reader of *L'Infra-*

⁴²⁰ Jean-Philippe Toussaint, *Faire l'amour* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2002), p. 135.

⁴²¹ "Écrire avec le soupçon", p. 153.

⁴²² *La Salle de bain*, p. 37.

ordinaire is exhorted to observe more carefully and more neutrally, without imposing hierarchies of significance. On this view the infra-ordinary is a means to train perception rather than merely an end in itself. The listing of buildings in ‘La Rue Vilin’, or of food and drink in ‘Tentative d’inventaire des aliments liquides et solides qui j’ai ingurgités au cours de l’année mil neuf cent soixante-quatorze’, not only records little pieces of reality, but also trains the eye and the mind to notice what previously it had both missed and dismissed.

The Fermata’s Arno shares this desire to look and see more attentively:

I could see with extreme clarity the thick opaque ground perimeter of the rimless lenses, and the side-pieces crossed at their kneelike earward ends, and the eyelash hair, whose curve enhanced my appreciation of the curvature of the prescription, and the dust that built up so gradually that I hadn’t noticed it, and the nose-pods that were filthy but whose filth was irrelevant because nobody else could see it, and the paired reflection of some branchy blueness in the faintly scratched surface – all this nineteenth-century precision that I wore on my face every day, and never had the opportunity to study because all I did was take the glasses off at night and fold them automatically and put them by my bed and put them on again in the morning. [...] I saw my glasses better than anyone who didn’t need glasses could ever see them.⁴²³

This question of what to attend to highlights that the infra-ordinary is itself a shifting term; both the ‘ordinary’ and the infra-ordinary depend on the perspective of the writer – what is exotic to one is utterly banal to another. Baker’s *The Mezzanine* highlights the relativity of the infra-ordinary, with its structure of body text and footnotes in which one cannot distinguish any difference between is supposedly central and what is incidental.⁴²⁴

Infra-Ordinary Places

The infra-ordinary is also manifested in these texts in the form of places, both the non-places that Augé identifies, and domestic space. The latter highlights the Pereccquian

⁴²³ *The Fermata*, pp. 119-120.

⁴²⁴ François Bon’s *Autoroute* adopts a similar device, where the text is split between the main diary and additional notes at the back – this hierarchy comes to seem spurious since material similar to that in the notes is often included in the diary.

insistence on the interior, the near to home, the endotic over the exotic.⁴²⁵ Monsieur seeks an apartment that he can inhabit undisturbed by his neighbours and landlord; the narrator of *La Télévision* spends time not only in his apartment, but in his neighbours' apartment, watering their plants, and then watching their television. Toussaint's *La Salle de bain* signals its interest in domestic and interior spaces both in its title and in its central narrative. The narrator encloses himself in a series of meticulously described rooms - his bathroom, a hotel room, and a hospital room. Warren Motte writes of *La Salle de bain*: 'As he draws his focus closer and closer, Toussaint insists upon the details of his small world [...] the bathroom, as a locus, is full.'⁴²⁶ This draws out a further connotation of the infra-ordinary; the prefix infra- can occasionally signify 'within', as in 'infraterritorial'.

Baker's texts also focus on domestic spaces. *Room Temperature* takes place in the living room of the narrator as he gives his infant daughter her bottle of milk; in *The Fermata*, Arno exploits his power to halt time as much to spy on the private worlds of strangers' apartments as on their sexual experiences, and secretly enters Joyce's apartment in an attempt to find out more about her. Throughout *Vox*, the two interlocutors remain on the telephone in their respective apartments – on the opening page, Abby progresses rapidly from a description of her clothes to a more detailed description of her bed and bedspread, and Jim responds with a description of the view from his window and of his plant pot. One sexual anecdote unfolds in the domestic setting of the bathroom, as the bathtub is being cleaned, another on the couch in a living room, under a blanket, while a third involves painting the hallway.⁴²⁷ In the opening pages of *Vox*, Abby notes that “‘It doesn't feel really dark to me until the little lights on my stereo receiver are the brightest things in the room’”⁴²⁸ and later describes her exact position in her apartment as she talks to Jim:

⁴²⁵ Not only in *L'Infra-ordinaire*: Perec's *Espèces d'espaces* documents and questions the spaces we inhabit and take for granted, from the bed, to the bedroom, through the house, the street, the city and outward to outer space. Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espaces* (Paris: Galilée, 1974).

⁴²⁶ Warren Motte, 'Toussaint's Small World', *Romanic Review*, 86:4 (1995), 747-60, p. 751.

⁴²⁷ See *Vox*, pp. 141-149, 111-125, and 83-88, respectively.

⁴²⁸ *Vox*, p. 9.

I'm not in the bedroom anymore. I'm sitting on the couch in my living room slash dining room. My feet are on the coffee table, which would have been impossible yesterday, because the coffee table was piled so high with mail and work stuff, but now it is possible, and the whole room, the whole apartment is really and truly in order.⁴²⁹

In *The Mezzanine*, Howie recalls the pleasures to be gained from attentively sweeping his room:

I found that the act of sweeping around the legs of the chair and the casters of the stereo cabinet and the corners of the bookcase, outlining them with my curving broom-strokes, as if I were putting each chair leg and caster and doorjamb in quotation marks, made me see these familiar features of my room with freshened receptivity.⁴³⁰

The pleasure Howie gains is not only the tactile pleasure of manipulating an old-fashioned broom, but also the attention which he is thus encouraged to direct towards the usually unnoticed 'familiar features' of his room. In this respect Howie is having an infra-ordinary experience similar to that had by the reader in reading about it.

The office setting of *The Mezzanine*, however, is that of the non-anthropological *non-lieu* rather than the 'anthropological place' of the home, and it is these non-places, as much as domestic settings, that function as locations for the infra-ordinary in Toussaint and Baker's work. *The Mezzanine* and *The Fermata* are for Baker the texts most preoccupied with the workplace, and explore the kinds of activities therein that usually evoke uniformity, repetition and impersonality. In Baker's texts, however, these actions become singular, personal. In *The Fermata*, Arno draws unexpected satisfaction from his daily audio-typing, especially if it has been recorded by the woman he desires, Joyce. When transcribing, Arno finds that 'it is as if I'm sunk into the pond of what she is saying, as if I'm some kind of patient, cruising amphibian, drifting in black water, entirely submerged except for my eyes,

⁴²⁹ *Vox*, p. 24.

⁴³⁰ *The Mezzanine*, p. 20.

which blink every so often'.⁴³¹ For Arno, each word is like 'a thick, healthy lily pad'⁴³² floating up to him, and if he hears a pause on the tape where Joyce hesitates, 'the stretch of black still water between the intermittent green floating words can momentarily expand into infinitude.'⁴³³

Arno's sensitivity to 'the editability of the temporal continuum'⁴³⁴ is articulated in this quotation where the unutterably banal activity of transcribing dictation is transformed twice into the infra-ordinary: firstly by Arno's ability to find depth in the experience which enables him to be elsewhere (sunk into a pond) as he types, and secondly by the writing which draws out the metaphor of the 'black still water between the intermittent green floating words'.

It is often the unspoken yet shared subjective responses to non-places that interest Baker, as when Howie notes the reversal of priorities that spontaneously occurs when one leaves a job:

You once showed up at that building every day and solved complicated, utterly absorbing problems there; unfortunately, the problems themselves [...] turn out to have been hollow: [...] you find yourself unable to recreate the sense of what was really at stake, for it seems to have been the Hungarian 5/2 rhythm of the lived workweek alone that kept each fascinating crisis inflated to its full interdepartmental complexity.⁴³⁵

However, while work crises pale into insignificance, Howie notes that:

The escalator ride, the things on your desk, the sight of colleagues' offices, their faces seen from characteristic angles, the features of the corporate bathroom, all miraculously expand: and in this way what was central and what was incidental end up exactly reversed.⁴³⁶

⁴³¹ *The Fermata*, p. 38.

⁴³² *The Fermata*, p. 38.

⁴³³ *The Fermata*, p. 38.

⁴³⁴ *The Fermata*, pp. 38-39.

⁴³⁵ *The Mezzanine*, p. 92 (footnote).

⁴³⁶ *The Mezzanine*, p. 92 (footnote).

This reversal is mirrored in the deliberate reversal of priorities entailed by the infra-ordinary. We can compare this with Toussaint's descriptions of office life in *Monsieur*, which identify common but unspoken behaviour in the workplace, as when Monsieur attends his weekly meetings, and tries to find the seat where he is least likely to be noticed, discussed earlier. Toussaint identifies a minor transgression of the workplace with which we are all familiar (the desire to remain unnoticed in a meeting), but escalates it to comic effect as Monsieur mimics the body movements of his colleague in order to remain invisible: 'Monsieur veillait scrupuleusement à rester dans l'axe [du corps de Mme Dubois-Lacour], reculant lorsqu'elle reculait, avançant lorsqu'elle se penchait en avant, de manière à n'être jamais trop directement exposé.'⁴³⁷ Monsieur's avoidance of the role expected of him in the workplace serves to resist its conventionalising effects, while the description of such behaviour in the text renders usually banal aspects of the workplace fascinating. Such is the transformation into the infra-ordinary. Places in Toussaint and Baker therefore either feature as the *non-lieux* which are there to be transformed or transgressed, or as the anthropological place of home in which are to be found the overlooked but undervalued pleasures of the infra-ordinary.

Infra-Ordinary (In)action

The above quotation highlights a further important strand of the infra-ordinary – that of actions and events – or more frequently, of inaction and non-events. (The formal implications of this are discussed in Chapter 4.) The avoidance of the spectacular and attention to the near at hand, as with objects and places, extends to narrative events in these texts.

Perec questioned the notion that the spectacular is always significant: 'Il faut qu'il y ait derrière l'événement un scandale, une fissure, un danger, comme si la vie ne devait se révéler qu'à travers le spectaculaire, comme si le parlant, le significatif était toujours

⁴³⁷ *Monsieur*, p. 12. See also *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 42-43, for similar evasions in meetings.

anormal'.⁴³⁸ Toussaint's and Baker's novels conspicuously avoid the novelistic event traditionally expected to drive the narrative forward. Instead, they are composed of the kind of incidental events which one would normally expect to be subordinate to the central narrative thread - shaving, walking, washing, shopping, and so on. This is often signalled at the outset of Toussaint's novels, as at the beginning of *La Salle de bain*, *L'Appareil-photo* and *La Télévision*, with the announcement of what is no more than a change in the routine of the narrator. *La Télévision* begins: 'J'ai arrêté de regarder la télévision',⁴³⁹ and *La Salle de bain*: 'Lorsque j'ai commencé à passer mes après-midi dans la salle de bain, je ne comptais pas m'y installer'.⁴⁴⁰ The narratives proceed by the accumulation of such non-events. In *La Salle de bain*, for example, we find: 'depuis quelques instants déjà je savais que j'allais quitter la cuisine (j'avais un peu froid)'.⁴⁴¹ Or later, in Venice: 'le lendemain je me réveillai de bonne heure, passai une journée calme'.⁴⁴² In *Monsieur* the details of a game of scrabble are carefully recorded: 'le soir, parfois, après le dîner, Monsieur faisait un scrabble dans la cuisine avec les parents de sa fiancée; il notait lui-même les points sur une feuille divisée en trois colonnes'.⁴⁴³ The whole of *Monsieur* is composed of little pieces of activity with no greater importance than this. The reader cannot help but wonder where the main narrative is, to which these episodes are surely subordinate and incidental. Perhaps the central narrative concerns the breakup of Monsieur's relationship with his girlfriend? Or perhaps something important will occur on his trip to Cannes? In both cases, however, these potential narrative candidates are reduced to one and two paragraphs respectively, after which they are not referred to again.⁴⁴⁴

As with Baker's memories of a previous job, the hierarchy of events has thus been reversed, and this reversal of conventional values is a key component of the infra-ordinary.

⁴³⁸ *L'Infra-ordinaire*, p. 9.

⁴³⁹ *La Télévision*, p. 7.

⁴⁴⁰ *La Salle de bain*, p. 11.

⁴⁴¹ *La Salle de bain*, p. 35.

⁴⁴² *La Salle de bain*, p. 58.

⁴⁴³ *Monsieur*, p. 29.

⁴⁴⁴ See *Monsieur*, p. 29 and pp. 25-26.

To the reduction of events is added the deliberate avoidance of physical activity wherever possible by the narrators: ‘Après la sieste, je ne me levais pas tout de suite. Non, je préférais attendre. L’impulsion venait tôt ou tard, qui me permettait de me mouvoir dans l’ignorance de mon corps, avec l’aisance des gestes que l’on ne délibère pas.’⁴⁴⁵ Or more explicitly: ‘Je ne faisais rien, je n’attendais rien de particulier’.⁴⁴⁶ Indeed, doing nothing at times becomes less an absence of action than a goal to be methodically pursued, as in *La Télévision*:

Je ne faisais rien, par ailleurs. Par ne rien faire, j’entends ne rien faire d’irréfléchi ou de contraint, ne rien faire de guidé par l’habitude ou la paresse. Par ne rien faire, j’entends ne faire que l’essentiel, penser, lire, écouter de la musique, faire l’amour, me promener, aller à la piscine, cueillir des champignons. Ne rien faire, contrairement à ce que l’on pourrait imaginer un peu vite, exige méthode et discipline, ouverture d’esprit et concentration.⁴⁴⁷

What the narrator makes explicit here is the extent to which ‘doing nothing’ is actually conceived as full of activity. These activities are ‘l’essentiel’, which is to say they are both ordinary and fundamental to what one might call ‘quality of life’. The infra-ordinary is expressed here then as a rejection of the exotic or spectacular, replaced by an appreciation of the merely ordinary as the truly fulfilling. ‘L’essentiel’ also means the bare minimum, both in life and in text. This passage further alludes to the text’s own narrative structure, where what is ‘incidental’ turn out to be ‘l’essentiel’, and where the writing itself (as we shall see in the next chapter) displays its ‘méthode et discipline’.

The paradoxical richness of ‘doing nothing’ is something which *The Fermata’s Arno* can also appreciate:

I extended myself stomach-down on the towel (a blue-and-white-striped towel; the blue stripes were detectably warmer than the white ones) and let the weight on my ribcage produce a moan of utter contentment. No thoughts of unclothed women disturbed my awareness; [...] I felt only how lucky I was that after a little rooting around, a little trial and error, the groundward side of my face was able to find, within immediate neck-flex range, as it always eventually did find, a conjunction of

⁴⁴⁵ *La Salle de bain*, p. 87.

⁴⁴⁶ *La Réticence*, pp. 14-15.

⁴⁴⁷ *La Télévision*, p. 11.

several sod-humps or dolmens that cradled my cheekbone fairly comfortably through the insulation of the sun-warmed towel.⁴⁴⁸

Again, although at first glance it might seem possible to summarise the above paragraph as simply ‘lying on a towel’, Baker’s detailed description uncovers the richness of activity contained within, as indicated by the many discrete types of action: ‘extended myself’, ‘produce a moan’, ‘rooting around’, ‘trial and error’, ‘able to find’, and so on.

Inaction in Toussaint’s texts also often takes the form of procrastination. In *L’Appareil-photo*, the narrator continually postpones the acquisition of passport photographs necessary to complete his driving licence application. This neglected action reappears periodically in the text: ‘je me présentai dès l’ouverture à mon école de conduite (je n’avais toujours pas les photos, non, ce n’était même pas la peine de m’en parler)’,⁴⁴⁹ and ‘nous [...] tâchâmes de régler les dernières questions qui demeuraient en suspens (les photos d’identité, par exemple, dont je me laissai dire qu’il en fallait aussi)’.⁴⁵⁰ While in this state of procrastination, the narrator engages in alternative activities, such as attending Pascale’s son’s parent evening, or attempting to replace the gas canister for the driving school heater.

In *La Réticence*, the narrator repeatedly defers his visit to the absent Biaggi, until he begins instead to fear the possibility of meeting him at all. *La Télévision* is entirely preoccupied with the displacement activities of an academic who should be writing a paper on Titian, but who never manages to write more than the two words ‘quand Musset...’. The narrator defends his procrastination in terms familiar to academics, freelancers, and the self-employed the world over. On the point of starting to write, he confesses that:

Si, à ce moment-là, un bruit ne s’était pas produit dans la rue [...] qui m’avait fait tourner la tête vers la fenêtre et m’avait fait remarquer alors que les vitres étaient très sales dans le salon, [...] je n’aurais sans doute jamais eu l’idée de laver les vitres à ce moment-là.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁸ *The Fermata*, p. 100.

⁴⁴⁹ *L’Appareil-photo*, p. 11.

⁴⁵⁰ *L’Appareil-photo*, p. 48.

⁴⁵¹ *La Télévision*, pp. 115-16.

Cleaning windows is an infra-ordinary activity, precipitated by the narrator avoiding what he is supposed to be doing. Since ultimately it is the infra-ordinary which takes precedence in *La Télévision*, then it can be argued that if the narrator were to motivate himself to write his paper, there would be no novel, and therefore it is the task at hand which is a distraction to the infra-ordinary, and not the other way around.

The infra-ordinary is present throughout Toussaint's and Baker's texts; in the form of objects, places, and (in)activity, as the under-appreciated and the overly familiar, as the near at hand, the small, the barely noticed, and the incidental. Its contemporary character is evident in the rejection of the exotic, the search for a real as yet unwritten or overwritten by the saturating effects of postmodernity. Together with the predicaments of the contemporary subject, the infra-ordinary forms the central subject matter of their writing. In the next chapter, I will examine some formal aspects of Toussaint's and Baker's texts, which further demonstrate the contemporary nature of their writing.

CHAPTER 4: TOUSSAINT AND BAKER - FORM

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the formal features of Toussaint's and Baker's work. I will argue that the contemporary forms identified in Chapter 2 – 'neo-realism', 'post-postmodernism' and 'l'écriture blanche' – are those which best characterise their writing. In their texts these forms are marked by tension and ambivalence, in that they represent both the continuation of modern and postmodern experiment, and a departure from it, in the form of a return to the real and to narrative. I want first to look at how Toussaint and Baker manifest this return, and will then go on to examine the ways in which it is combined with a continued interest in experimentation. Finally I will address the question of writing the self, which, as discussed in Chapter 2, is a dominant mode for the contemporary novel.

4.1 Minimalism and the Return of the Real

Donné pour inaccessible au verbe par la décennie structurale et cantonné au statut de 'réfèrent', le réel est donc à nouveau considéré, d'autant plus que les systèmes de pensée qui ont cru pouvoir en rendre compte ont montré leurs limites.⁴⁵²

Toussaint

In terms of content, or thematic subject-matter, the return to the real is evident in terms of these texts' interest in the infra-ordinary, discussed in Chapter 3. In purely formal terms, however, a return to the real and to narrative is also visible. In Toussaint this can be seen in two ways; firstly, in each text, a narrative can be reconstituted, despite the frustration of reader expectations by means of experimentation, and/or persistent recourse to the 'incidental'. Secondly, the neutral, would-be denotative style of 'l'écriture blanche' is more suited to realist description than to fantasy, surrealism, or abstraction. As with other forms of minimalism, 'l'écriture blanche' is associated with the 'realistic or hyperrealistic' mode.⁴⁵³ Warren Motte makes this same point in relation to Toussaint in his article 'Toussaint's

⁴⁵² "Écrire avec le soupçon", p. 152.

⁴⁵³ John Barth, 'A Few Words About Minimalism', *New York Times*, 28 December 1986, Section 7, p. 1.

Small World', where he summarises Kim Herzinger's definition: 'minimalist fiction is formally sparse, tonally detached, elliptical, relatively plotless, and concerned with surface phenomena; its characteristic mode is representational (even hyperrealist) and not fabulist; its characteristic subject matter is domestic, quotidian and banal'.⁴⁵⁴ Even the titles of Toussaint's texts, in their simplicity and banality, mimic the form of his prose. Minimalist precision is perhaps most in evidence in the extremely terse *La Salle de bain*, where we find the following description of the narrator's arrival in an as yet unnamed city: 'Je trouvai une banque où changer de l'argent. Je fis l'acquisition d'un transistor bon marché.' He continues: 'Dans un grand magasin Standa, j'achetai un pyjama, deux paires de chaussettes, un caleçon.'⁴⁵⁵ There are several things to note about this quotation. First, there is concision, a significant feature of Toussaint's texts. His short sentences are sparse and denotative, with no metaphors and few adjectives. This is particularly the case in his earlier works. What is also striking is the unadorned functionality of these sentences. This reduction to the barest facts, expressed in the most commonplace of terms, is reminiscent of insurance declarations or witness statements. It can also be noted that, although we later discover the city to be Venice, the minimalist impulse here extends to even the most basic narrative information. Minimalism in general, and Toussaint's version of it in particular, can thus be best characterised by reticence, by exclusion. This exclusion can extend to a wide variety of elements: adornment, narrative detail, depth, complexity and, as already discussed in regard to the infra-ordinary, the very presence of narrative 'events'. The journal-style entries of *La Salle de bain* record this absence: 'J'avais passé une journée calme',⁴⁵⁶ 'les après-midi s'écoulaient paisiblement',⁴⁵⁷ and 'le lendemain, je ne sortis pour

⁴⁵⁴ 'Toussaint's Small World', p. 747.

⁴⁵⁵ *La Salle de bain*, p. 52.

⁴⁵⁶ *La Salle de bain*, p. 16.

⁴⁵⁷ *La Salle de bain*, p. 60.

ainsi dire pas'.⁴⁵⁸ One is reminded of the even terser journal entry of *La Nausée*: 'Rien. Existé.'⁴⁵⁹

In *L'Appareil-photo*, the barest minimum of dialogue between the narrator and Pascale is sufficient to bring about their romantic involvement: 'nous échangeâmes quelques généralités pendant que je prenais connaissance de l'actualité',⁴⁶⁰ 'nous parlions de tout et de rien, tranquillement',⁴⁶¹ and 'nous bavardâmes de choses et d'autres, entreprîmes de lier davantage connaissance'⁴⁶² are typical examples. In *La Salle de bain*, the conversations between the narrator and Edmondsson are similarly laconic. This is all the more noticeable when crucial information is concealed from the reader, as in the case of the conversations subsequent to the narrator's abrupt departure from Paris.⁴⁶³ His reticence is further facilitated by being a foreigner in Venice, since it means he can do away with speech altogether by miming: 'Le pharmacien ne comprenait pas très bien où je voulais en venir. Je dus déposer mes paquets sur le comptoir pour lui mimer la brosse à dents, les rasoirs, le savon à barbe.'⁴⁶⁴ As we saw in Chapter 3, this reticence extends to conversation with the hotel barman, since lacking a common language, their dialogue is limited to listing off the names of cyclists.⁴⁶⁵

The narrator of *La Salle de bain* himself refers to the 'blank background' effect of reticence on what little *is* said, when he describes the silence in his conversations with Edmondsson: 'Tout près de l'écouteur, je faisais des efforts pour entendre son souffle, sa respiration. Quand elle rompait le silence, sa voix prenait de la valeur.'⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁵⁸ *La Salle de bain*, p. 82. This is also typical of Toussaint's writing – a simple phrase which on closer inspection seems meaningless or paradoxical. What can 'pour ainsi dire' mean in this context? Presumably either he did or he did not go out.

⁴⁵⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris: Gaillimard, 1938), p. 149.

⁴⁶⁰ *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 11.

⁴⁶¹ *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 13.

⁴⁶² *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 13.

⁴⁶³ *La Salle de bain*, p. 65.

⁴⁶⁴ *La Salle de bain*, p. 52.

⁴⁶⁵ *La Salle de bain*, p. 62.

⁴⁶⁶ *La Salle de bain*, p. 67.

Reticence on the narrative level functions to create suspense. Faced with lacunae, the reader tends to experience increasing curiosity and speculation. Reticence is also present thematically, as in the following justification of procrastination from *La Télévision*: 'je songeais que, finalement, dans la perspective même d'écrire, ne pas écrire est au moins aussi important qu'écrire. Mais qu'il ne fallait peut-être pas en abuser (tel serait en effet le seul petit danger qui pourrait me guetter ces temps-ci).'⁴⁶⁷ The second meaning of 'réticence', namely reluctance, is present in the novel of the same name, in its narrator's reluctance to contact Biaggi, as well as in other novels in the form of passivity, refusal, and doing nothing. A physical kind of reticence is, of course, present in the withdrawal into the bathroom of *La Salle de bain*'s narrator.

The tone of Toussaint's texts tends towards complete neutrality, especially in the earlier works, where there is almost no indication of the narrator's emotional state or judgments of value, with the exception of a certain ironic dryness. As Sophie Bertho remarks in her article 'Jean-Philippe Toussaint et la Métaphysique', 'désigner les romans de Toussaint comme des romans "impassibles", ce serait d'abord pointer une sorte de neutralité et de dépouillement dans la technique romanesque'.⁴⁶⁸ This neutrality is somewhat overdetermined, with various origins and effects.

The exclusion of emotion can suggest an absence of interiority, as identified in Chapter 3. However, it can also suggest a genuine indifference on the part of the narrator. We see this in *La Salle de bain*, whose narrator recalls the 'tu' of Perec's *Un Homme qui dort*. When Edmondsson wants to make love, he passively concedes: 'J'ôtai mon pantalon pour lui être agréable.'⁴⁶⁹ When later her friends come to dinner, he confesses a complete lack of interest in their conversation: 'on bavardait, Pierre-Etienne se demandait s'il y aurait une troisième guerre mondiale. J'en avais rien à cirer.'⁴⁷⁰ Neutrality is central to Toussaint's

⁴⁶⁷ *La Télévision*, p. 90.

⁴⁶⁸ 'Jean-Philippe Toussaint et la Métaphysique', p. 16.

⁴⁶⁹ *La Salle de bain*, p. 19.

⁴⁷⁰ *La Salle de bain*, p. 44.

minimalist realism, which concentrates on the surface of things, to the exclusion of interiority – what John Barth calls ‘extrospective’⁴⁷¹ writing. Here again, Toussaint is preceded by authors from Perec, back through Robbe-Grillet and Barthes to Sartre, who all resisted the realist desire to invest the non-human world with human significance. A passage from *Un Homme qui dort* (alluding to an earlier passage from *La Nausée*),⁴⁷² encapsulates this attitude:

L’arbre n’a pas de morale à te proposer, n’a pas de message à te délivrer. Sa force, sa majesté, sa vie – si tu espères encore tirer quelque sens, quelque courage, de ces anciennes métaphores – ce ne sont jamais que des images, des bons points, aussi vains que la paix des champs, que la trahison de l’eau qui dort.⁴⁷³

Toussaint’s fiction offers no such consoling metaphors to the reader. Instead, the indifferent neutrality of Toussaint’s ‘écriture blanche’ offers unadorned access to the infra-ordinary. It can be read as a continuation of Perec’s injunction to ‘s’obliger à voir plus platement’,⁴⁷⁴ in order to retrieve, remember and appreciate anew without privileging perception according to imposed hierarchies of significance.

However, Toussaint’s apparently neutral tone has an additional dimension, in that it is also responsible for much of the deadpan humour of his texts, which often include dry asides to the reader, as in the following example from *La Télévision*, where the narrator is asked to water the neighbours’ plants while they are on holiday, and given a rather complex schedule:

C’était une petite liste récapitulative des fréquences et des conditions d’arrosage qui résumait ma tâche, plante par plante. [...] Uwe me sourit d’un air satisfait, but une gorgée de café et m’invita à le suivre dans l’appartement pour aller voir les plantes.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷¹ ‘A Few Words About Minimalism’, p. 1.

⁴⁷² *La Nausée*, pp. 181-192.

⁴⁷³ *Un Homme qui dort*, p. 41.

⁴⁷⁴ *Espèces d’espaces*, p. 71.

⁴⁷⁵ *La Télévision*, p. 28.

As Uwe precedes him, the narrator notices ‘une main qui bougeait dans la poche de son pantalon en faisant tinter des pièces de monnaie (il allait peut-être me donner un petit quelque chose)’.⁴⁷⁶ Here neutrality yields an ironic tone. It seems clear, then, that Toussaint’s form shares much with ‘l’écriture blanche’ described in Chapter 2, although his writing has attracted many other labels. In ‘*Passer en douce à la douane*’, Fieke Schoots identifies a number of these: ‘on colle les étiquettes suivantes: le Nouveau Nouveau Roman; le renouveau romanesque inauguré par Minuit; la génération salle de bain; le roman minimal, auteurs ou romans minimalistes; romans impassibles.’⁴⁷⁷

Other formal aspects of Toussaint’s texts appear at first to adhere to realist conventions, but on further examination to destabilise them. The *passé simple*, as noted in Chapter 2, is the archetypal tense of ‘le récit’ and hence of classical realism. It is true that Toussaint’s texts, for the most part, consist of coherent narratives from which it can be broadly ascertained ‘what happened’. In this sense his work is a ‘retour du récit’; after some of the more extreme formal experiments of his predecessors, his use of the *passé simple* partly serves to signal such a return. However, when considered in the context of Toussaint’s experimentation (discussed in the following section), it becomes apparent that his use of this tense does not simply signify a return to realist mythology, whereby, according to Barthes:

Le passé simple est précisément ce signe opératoire par lequel le narrateur ramène l’éclatement de la réalité à un verbe mince et pur, sans densité, sans volume, sans déploiement, dont la seule fonction est d’unir le plus rapidement possible une cause et une fin.⁴⁷⁸

Rather, the lack of any discernable ‘cause et fin’ in Toussaint’s texts is in fact amplified by the *passé simple*, and draws attention to the tense as signifier of the literary, rather than of

⁴⁷⁶ *La Télévision*, p. 28.

⁴⁷⁷ ‘*Passer en douce à la douane*’, p. 16.

⁴⁷⁸ Roland Barthes, *L’Aventure sémiologique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985), p. 26.

the real.⁴⁷⁹ This contrast was also exploited by his nouveau romancier predecessors, but Toussaint's texts make use of a particular contrast, the combination of (with the exception of *Morsieur*) first-person narration with the traditionally third-person tense of the *passé simple*. As Barthes notes, 'dans le roman, d'ordinaire, le "je" est témoin, c'est le "il" qui est acteur. Pourquoi? Le "il" est une convention type du roman; à l'égal du temps narratif, il signale et accomplit le fait romanesque'.⁴⁸⁰ Toussaint thus employs the entirely 'romanesque' *passé simple*, which usually implies determinate past events and an omniscient 'il', but combines it with a narrating 'je' which implies confiding, confession, and knowledge only of the narrator's own inner world. This contrast is further heightened by a tendency of Toussaint's narrators to describe themselves in the third-person descriptive style of an omniscient narrator, as though they were on the outside, looking in. This happens repeatedly in *La Télévision*, as for example in the following description of the narrator's attempt to resist turning on the television:

Je lisais tranquillement le journal dans la douce pénombre de la pièce, isolé dans le petit îlot de clarté oblique de la lampe de lecture halogène que j'avais allumée à côté de moi (la chaude lumière dorée de la lampe tombait sur mon crâne avec exactitude et auréolait ma calvitie d'une sorte de duvet de caneton du meilleur effet). Ce n'était évidemment pas pour me mortifier inutilement que je m'étais assis juste en face du téléviseur éteint, mais je tenais à éprouver mes capacités de résistance en présence même de l'objet de la tentation [...] Quoiqu'il m'en coutât, je devais bien avouer qu'elle occupait à présent toutes mes pensées. Mais je faisais semblant de rien.⁴⁸¹

The reader cannot help but wonder, for whose benefit does the narrator 'faire semblant', since he is alone in the room? Moreover, since he is reading rather than looking in a mirror, how can he know what he looks like with the light shining on his head? The merging of author and narrator involved in describing himself from a non-subjective viewpoint questions both his status and reliability as narrator. 'Mais je faisais semblant de

⁴⁷⁹ The *passé simple* further signifies detachment in comparison to the *passé composé*.

⁴⁸⁰ *L'Aventure sémiologique*, p. 29.

⁴⁸¹ *La Télévision*, pp. 33-34. There is an intertextual link between the halo of light around the narrator's head and the halo of smoke around the taxi driver's head in *La Réticence*: '(...) qui avait fini par former autour de sa tête un halo immatériel qui nimbaît son occiput d'une auréole évanescence du meilleur effet.' – p.20, *La Réticence*.

rien' indicates a sense that the narrator is conscious of being observed, either in his own imagination, or even by the reader. Demarcations between subjective and objective viewpoints are disturbed, and further illustrate the extent to which the narrator is a textual construct, rather than a character residing *in* the world of the novel. Paradoxically, it is *Monsieur*, which is narrated in the third person singular, that confirms this sense in Toussaint's novels that his first person narrators seem more like third person narrators. A comparison of their objective, neutral styles demonstrates that there is nothing to distinguish the first person narratives from the third person narration of *Monsieur*:

Dans sa chambre, après le diner, Monsieur ne se coucha pas tout de suite. Non. Il éteignit la lumière, et se posta près de la fenêtre, pieds nus, regarda le jardin quelques instants, les allées régulières, les pelouses sombres s'échelonnant.⁴⁸²

The combination of the literary past historic tense with first-person narration is comically intensified in *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)* when the narrator/Toussaint suddenly adopts the even more archaic and formal imperfect subjunctive, here describing his purchase of a slice of terrine: 'elle était en droit de supposer que ja la voulusse très fine'.⁴⁸³ Toussaint's choice of tense thus signifies not merely a return to the realist mode, but also creates a heightened awareness in the reader of its status as literary, thus hindering the self-effacing transparency of realist writing. There are other implications of its use in relation to time, which I discuss in the following section. However it is worth noting at this point that the publication of *Autoportrait* drew greater attention to the reflexivity in Toussaint's preceding works. As is highlighted by the passage quoted above where the narrator apparently sees himself from an impossible viewpoint, the maker of a self-portrait is always looking at himself looking, and so on into infinite regress.

⁴⁸² *Monsieur*, p. 59.

⁴⁸³ *Autoportrait*, p. 22.

Baker

I turn now to Baker, whose highly emotive verbosity, replete with erudition, arcania, and neology, seems in stark contrast to Toussaint's minimalism. However, there is exclusion and reticence in Baker's works that parallel those in Toussaint's. What Richard Stengel has called Baker's 'miniaturism'⁴⁸⁴ limits itself to objects that are small in both stature and presumed significance – making the tiniest and most overlooked object, such as ear-plugs or shoelaces, or the inside of a record groove, the focus of the narrative. Moreover, Baker's narrators, for all their confessional volubility, are reticent about certain specifics – their age, appearance, geographic location and so on. This has been discussed earlier in relation to the attenuated subjectivity of the narrators.

Further exclusions and constraint in Baker's texts include the narrative event, whose absence is also partly explained by a preoccupation with the incidental nature of the infra-ordinary, both in real life and in the novel. As Baker explains, the incidental gains so much stature in his works that there is simply no room for major events:

The plot has to be very tiny for me to pay any attention to it for some reason. As soon as my narrators focus on something, they seem to lose track of the fact that they're supposed to be part of some momentous chain of events.⁴⁸⁵

The formal possibilities of absence and of blankness are identified by *The Mezzanine's* Howie:

I remembered that when I was little I used to be very interested in the fact that anything, no matter how rough, rusted, dirty, or otherwise discredited it was, looked good if you set it down on a stretch of white cloth, or any kind of clean background.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁴ Richard Stengel, "1-900-aural-sex". *Time*. 3 February 1992: n.pag. Online. Available: <http://j-walk.com/nbaker/voxtime.htm>. 20 January 2006.

⁴⁸⁵ Laurence, Alexander and David Strauss, interview with Nicholson Baker, 1994. Online. Available: <http://www.altx.com/int2/nicholson.baker.html>. 20 January 2006.

⁴⁸⁶ *The Mezzanine*, p. 38.

The 'clean background' effect partly derives from the absence of central narratives, as discussed in Chapter 3. While Baker's prose is elaborately detailed, the action (as with Toussaint) is generally stripped down to the barest of 'events', so as not to distract from the minor or subordinate foci maximalised by Baker's attention. The use of reticence is also essential to the redescription involved in rendering the infra-ordinary fascinating, as the following quotation suggests:

I (...) saw a plastic-packaged sandwich labeled 'Cream Cheese and Sliced Olive.' The idea of a cross-section of olive-encircled pimiento set like a cockatoo's eye in the white stretch of cream cheese hit me very hard as an illustration of the same principle I had rediscovered that morning: on their own, olives are old, pickled, briny, rusty - but set them off against a background of cream cheese and you have jewelry.⁴⁸⁷

Here the 'clean background' of cream cheese enhances the importance of the olives much as Baker's absence of major events do the same for his infra-ordinary discourses.

Yet despite certain exclusions and reticence, one could not describe Baker's richly metaphorical and emotive texts as minimalist 'écriture blanche'. *The Everlasting Story of Nory* is perhaps an exception, closer to the forms of minimalism, in that it operates under the constraint of narrating in the 'authentic' voice of a nine-year old girl, and this gives it a certain simplicity and absence of adornment in relation to the ornate and esoteric prose of the other Baker texts. Such metaphor and neologia as there are seem to derive from Nory's own inventions and mistakes, such as 'click-laughing is just when you laugh so heroriously that you only make little tiny sounds at the back of your throat'.⁴⁸⁸

In general, however, Baker's texts belong to a strand of the neo-real that manifests a return to certain traditions. As with Toussaint's texts, the narratives, while digressive, are reconstructable – even texts such as *Room Temperature*, where the narrative is little more than an interlocking series of thoughts, sensations, and memories. The texts neither stray into the fantastic nor obstruct a realist reading through their form. Baker's attachment to

⁴⁸⁷ *The Mezzanine*, p. 39.

⁴⁸⁸ *The Everlasting Story of Nory*, p. 100.

realism is also visible in his declaration of intent as a novelist, and in his views on the purpose of the novel in general. He identifies ‘one of the principal aims of the novel itself, which is to capture pieces of mental life as truly as possible, as they unfold’.⁴⁸⁹ This clearly articulates his desire to access the reality of experience rather than to renounce the possibility and retreat into ‘l’art pour l’art’ or the purely formal.

The latter quotation is from *U and I*, whose subject is not only Updike and Baker, but also the nature of the novel and its purpose. It becomes clear that the qualities that Baker admires and desires to emulate in Updike are the classically realist aims of capturing external reality and internal phenomenal experience, and of using the metaphorical power of language to pass from the particular to the universal. Baker singles out a number of his favourite Updike metaphors for praise, such as: ‘the description of the rain-wetted screen in *Of the Farm*, “like a sampler half-stitched”; and [...] shoes “lying beside her feet as if dislodged by a shift of momentum”’.⁴⁹⁰ It is clear that this is a tradition Baker wishes to perpetuate.

Other elements of Baker’s work signal an attachment to traditional narrative forms. He has a great fondness for nineteenth-century writers, and for old-fashioned scholarship, as his passionate espousal of footnotes and conservation in libraries demonstrates. One can detect a traditional morality in Baker’s works; even his two books about sex, *Vox* and *The Fermata*, do not owe their explicit descriptions to some counter-cultural intent to shock (a vain hope in any case, one could argue). Instead, the narrators are always at pains to persuade the reader of their decency and moral sense, however distorted, as I discussed in Chapter 3. Baker seems to reject the nihilism of say, Ellis’s disturbingly amoral characters, and to insist that within the morally relative, superficial and individualist postmodern world, human beings continue to be moved by empathy and moral obligation. In this, one can detect an alignment with de Certeau.

⁴⁸⁹ *U and I*, p. 14.

⁴⁹⁰ *U and I*, p. 72.

Baker and Toussaint are thus both in some ways aligned with realism and with a return to narrative. There is a tension here, however, in that even where capturing the real is the declared aim, as with Bon's *Autoroute*, the result of that declaration can sometimes work counter to the aim itself. The question of how best to represent the real is something that recurs in Toussaint's texts. In *La Télévision*, the narrator compares television with painting:

À moins de considérer que, pour être réelle, la réalité doit ressembler à sa représentation, il n'y a aucune raison de tenir un portrait de jeune homme peint par un maître de la Renaissance pour une image moins fidèle de la réalité que l'image vidéo apparemment incontestable d'un présentateur mondialement connu dans son pays en train de présenter le journal télévisé sur un petit écran.⁴⁹¹

Such questions may signal the author's commitment to accessing the real, but, as with the recurring use of 'en réalité' in *La Réticence*,⁴⁹² they also have the effect of underscoring the text's status as construct, as mode of representation, a point which will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

A similarly dual effect derives from the blurring of boundaries between the novel and the real world. We can see this in the inclusion of real historical figures, such as Paul Guth in *Monsieur*,⁴⁹³ or Cees Nootboom in *La Télévision*,⁴⁹⁴ not to mention George Bush and other American politicians in Baker's *Checkpoint*. On the one hand, this seems to lend a novel the currency and authenticity of the real world; on the other, one has the sense of 'what are these real people doing in a novel?'

Baker's most striking attempt to merge the real world with the world of his novel occurs at the end of *The Fermata*. Having completed his autobiography, Arno has plans for the next time he stops time:

⁴⁹¹ *La Télévision*, p. 14.

⁴⁹² *La Réticence*, pp. 87, 112, 128.

⁴⁹³ *Monsieur*, p. 30.

⁴⁹⁴ *La Télévision*, p. 70.

I'm trying to interest a publisher in my autobiography. But even if nobody wants to publish it, I could still have, say, a hundred copies made up. I'll typeset them myself. I'll get Copy Cop to bind them. I'll design a jacket that uses the logo of some flush, big-name publisher like Random House. Yes, I'll put that little stylized house on the bottom of the spine of my book. I'll use a color copier to make the cover. It will look like a real book! And then, assuming I get my Fold-powers back, I'll go to Waterstone's or the Avenue Victor Hugo and Drop and put this book in people's hands just as they think their fingers are closing on some other, real, book. They will read me. Word will spread. The Fermata, my Fermata, the keeper of all my secrets, will be a secret no longer.⁴⁹⁵

Thus, Baker's *The Fermata*, published in effect by Random House, becomes one with Arno's autobiography. This turning towards the real, and its inclusion into the text, has the additional effect of causing the reader to become aware of the text's status and of the ontological separation between the world it describes and the real world inhabited by the reader. It seems that in Toussaint's and Baker's case, realism returns in the form of the post-postmodern, or the neo-real, where this return goes hand in hand with continued experiments of modernism and postmodernism. It is to this aspect of experimentation that I now turn.

4.2 Experiment and Reflexivity

Toussaint

Experiment

This next section examines the extent to which Toussaint and Baker continue the formal experiments of modern and postmodern texts. To begin with Toussaint, the previous section explored how his variety of 'écriture blanche' was suited to a certain return to the real and to narrative that perhaps signalled a departure from more extreme and didactic formal experiments of his predecessors. However, since 'écriture blanche' originates with those very predecessors, it is to be expected that an adaptation of that form retains some experimental features.

⁴⁹⁵ *The Fermata*, p. 303.

The discussions that follow highlight an important feature of both Toussaint's and Baker's work, the presence of a particular trait at multiple textual levels. These levels might be identified as, for example: narrative, structural, thematic, graphic (the appearance of print on page), and rhetorical. This last level would include both connotation and the poetic, which is to say, relating to the materiality of the words, their sound, shape, and arrangement. This presence of a single trait at multiple levels is common in, but not exclusively confined to, experimental writing, and as such is frequently referred to in this chapter.

The denotative neutrality of Toussaint's texts may well lend itself to realism rather than fabulism, but it also, as I have discussed, produces exclusion, flatness, depthlessness, reticence, and impersonality. In doing so, it creates obstacles to interpretation according to realist convention. The reader can find it difficult to discern character psychology, to distinguish foreground from background, cause and effect. I wish to look now at the various means by which Toussaint's texts frustrate expectation in this way. However, it is worth noting at this point that the first of these, which seems the most innocent, is that of the simplicity of denotation itself.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Toussaint's texts are focused on the incidental, the subordinate, the infra-ordinary. For example, in *La Salle de bain*, the following description of a pullover is given a paragraph all to itself:

39) C'était un pull en grosse laine blanche, un pull à larges côtes, qui, ramassé sur lui-même, présentait l'allure d'un sac de pommes de terre à l'abandon. Sur la poitrine s'entrecroisaient des losanges blancs et beiges; des protège-coudes en cuir brisaient le cheminement des manches. Je ramassai le vêtement qui se trouvait en boule sur le sol du débarras, et le dépliai dans le vestibule pour le considérer. Il était petit: Edmondsson avait dû le porter lorsqu'elle était jeune fille. Je retirai ma veste et l'enfilai.⁴⁹⁶

The devotion of an entire numbered paragraph to the description suggests some significance to this pullover, yet, as with the majority of objects and events in Toussaint's

⁴⁹⁶ *La Salle de Bain*, pp. 44-45.

texts, it does not interlock with others to form a larger narrative or theme – it is simply there. While common enough in the physical world, this quality of simply ‘being there’ has certain consequences in a novel. As Barthes has observed, ‘dans l’ordre du discours, ce qui est noté est, par définition, notable’.⁴⁹⁷ There is thus a tendency on the part of the reader to expect or attempt to deduce the purpose of each segment of narration in terms of the larger narrative of the novel – only to conclude that there is no such overarching narrative, and the choice of subject matter is thus seemingly arbitrary.⁴⁹⁸ Furthermore, the description of the pullover culminates in the narrator putting it on, or rather squeezing into it – this tiny pullover which his girlfriend wore as a child. The reader can only wonder why, and dream over the possible reasons left absent by Toussaint.

By contrast, *La Salle de bain* exhibits its impatience with mere scene-setting or background realist description when the narrator abruptly leaves Paris: ‘Je marchais dans la rue: les arbres, le trottoir, quelques passants.’⁴⁹⁹ The implication being: ‘you know what a street looks like – do I really have to describe it for you?’. A confusing message since one also knows what a sweater looks like, and for that matter, a bathroom, but these are described in crisp, precise detail, leading the reader to wonder, why this item, why this surrounding?

Michèle Ammouche-Krémers has pointed out to Toussaint in interview this habit of arousing then confounding reader expectations, suggesting that ‘vous semblez vous plaire à guider votre lecteur sur des pistes que ne mènent nulle part.’⁵⁰⁰ I would argue that, although there are also more explicit and deliberate ‘red herrings’ in Toussaint’s work, the overall predominance of the incidental has a similar effect. In his paper ‘Introduction à l’analyse structurale des récits’, Barthes posits units of meaning called ‘fonctions’, which he further subdivides into ‘noyaux’ and ‘catalyses’. *Noyaux* are key elements of the narrative to

⁴⁹⁷ *L’Aventure sémiologique*, p. 176.

⁴⁹⁸ See also *Faire l’amour*, p. 15, for an entire page of description of hotel lighting.

⁴⁹⁹ *La Salle de bain*, p. 49.

⁵⁰⁰ Michèle Ammouche-Krémers, ‘Entretien avec Jean-Philippe Toussaint’, *Jeunes Auteurs de Minuit*, ed. by Michèle Ammouche-Krémers & Henk Hillenaar (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 27-36.

which we tend to reduce any narrative when we attempt to resume ‘what happens’. A *catalyse*, on the other hand, ‘accélère, retarde, relance le discours, elle résume, anticipe, parfois même déroute’.⁵⁰¹ These are the subordinate elements that surround the main events, providing tension or explanation, for example. Barthes says of these subordinate elements that ‘la catalyse réveille sans cesse la tension sémantique du discours, dit sans cesse: il y a eu, il va y avoir du sens’⁵⁰². It seems to me that this is precisely the effect of Toussaint’s incidental segments of narrative – the reader, until she is used to his style, constantly awaits the ‘main story’ and wonders ‘where this is all going?’. In the absence of this main story or set of ‘noyaux’, one is obliged to read the ‘catalyses’ as ‘noyaux’, and to invest these minor incidents and objects with additional significance. It is a process which Toussaint exploits and parodies to extreme levels in *La Réticence*, a reworking of the detective novel, but with no crime, no perpetrator, and, despite the best efforts of the narrator, no clues.

In this novel, the narrator has come to the rainy Italian port of Sasuelo, where he first searches for, then inexplicably tries to avoid, a mysterious absent character, Biaggi. The narrator interprets every detail of his uneventful stay as a clue to Biaggi’s activities and intentions. These supposed clues come to require ever more baroque and comic explanations, as the narrator turns detective. For example, on coming down for breakfast in his hotel, the narrator discovers the following:

Des restes de petit déjeuner se trouvaient encore sur les tables, petites portions de confiture et plaquettes de beurre entamées qui traînaient dans les assiettes, avec quelques miettes çà et là et des serviettes froissées abandonnées en boule sur les nappes. Quatre tables avaient ainsi été occupées, et cela m’intrigua car il me semblait que les autres jours il n’y en avait pas autant. Se pouvait-il que quelqu’un qui ne prenait pas de petit déjeuner d’habitude fût descendu le prendre ce matin la première fois? Se pouvait-il que Biaggi – car je songeai immédiatement à Biaggi – fût descendu prendre le petit déjeuner ce matin dans la salle à manger? Mais, si

⁵⁰¹ *L’Aventure sémiologique*, p. 181.

⁵⁰² *L’Aventure sémiologique*, p. 181.

c'était Biaggi, me disais-je, pourquoi serait-il descendu précisément ce matin pour la première fois?⁵⁰³

The frustrated expectations that the text arouses in the reader are thus mimicked here by the unfounded assumptions of a paranoid narrator. The self-conscious text signals that clues are made, not found. A few pages on from the above quotation, the narrator enters a hotel room he is convinced is Biaggi's:

Je m'attendis à trouver une petite chambre toute sombre sous les combles, avec juste une petite table en bois contre le mur et la machine à écrire de Biaggi posée dessus, [...] un cendrier et quelques feuilles de papier sur le bureau.⁵⁰⁴

However, he quickly discovers that 'il n'y avait rien de tout cela, c'était une chambre occupée par une dame apparemment, à en juger par le peignoir en rayonne qui pendait à un cintre à côté du lavabo.'⁵⁰⁵ Undeterred, he goes on to detail the contents of the room as if they *were* clues to the existence of Biaggi, rather than of a complete stranger. Both 'clues' and non-clues are given the same status, to underline the fact that there is ultimately nothing to distinguish them. Although deriving from paranoia, the description comes across as an impassive recording of the details of his surroundings, and as such it is both the essence of 'l'écriture blanche' and reminiscent of the matter-of-fact recordings one might find in a detective's notebook. Furthermore, the detective novel form is perfectly suited to a literature of red herrings, frustration of expectations, and guesswork by the reader. All of this is achieved through Toussaint's simple, denotative style. Guesswork in particular is provoked through the paring down of adjective and metaphor. Without these to direct or indeed misdirect, the reader must fill in the interpretive blanks and direct or misdirect himself.

The exclusions and blanks in Toussaint's texts are manifold. There is the simple exclusion of information, as, for example, in *La Salle de bain*, where the reader-detective

⁵⁰³ *La Réticence*, p. 73.

⁵⁰⁴ *La Réticence*, p. 78.

⁵⁰⁵ *La Réticence*, p. 78.

must deduce from the use of the verb ‘gondoler’⁵⁰⁶ that the narrator is in Venice, until a reference to St Mark’s Church subsequently appears.⁵⁰⁷ Equally significant is the exclusion of linking passages of text – this could be described as a cultivation of disjunction, and is particularly noticeable in Toussaint’s earlier works. As with the numbered paragraphs in *La Salle de bain*, the paragraphs in *Morsieur* and *L’Appareil-photo* are aphoristic, fragmentary, self-sufficient, jumping from one to the next without explanation or link. In *La Salle de bain*, paragraph 29 ends with Kabrowinski, the Polish painter, assuring the narrator that the squid will be prepared within fifteen minutes: ‘Tant mieux, tant mieux, pensais-je en me fouillant les poches à la recherche de mes cigarettes. Je les avais laissées dans ma chambre.’⁵⁰⁸ Paragraph 30 commences abruptly in the middle of the narrator’s reverie of the Austrian ambassador’s party: ‘Des débats ont été engagés, dirait l’ambassadeur, des suggestions émises, des conclusions tirées et des programmes adoptés.’⁵⁰⁹ The numbering of the paragraphs highlights their aphoristic separation from one another, while at the same time suggesting that they are organised in some kind of order.

In *L’Appareil-photo*, the narrator and his new girlfriend, Pascale, have just said goodbye to her father after a failed trip together in the outskirts of Paris to replace an empty gas canister. The paragraph ends with one of Pascale’s very few pieces of dialogue, about her father: ‘(il est sympa, hein, dit Pascale)’. After a sizeable gap on the page, the next paragraph begins ‘Le lendemain soir, Pascale et moi dînions en tête à tête dans un restaurant indien.’⁵¹⁰ The reader assumes this means an Indian restaurant in Paris. However, it transpires that they have travelled to London, without any explanation of the journey, or how this came about after such a short acquaintance.

L’Appareil-photo is a text that flaunts its lack of conjunction, declaring its intentions from the outset with the following opening sentence:

⁵⁰⁶ *La Salle de bain*, pp. 54 and 77.

⁵⁰⁷ *La Salle de bain*, p. 77.

⁵⁰⁸ *La Salle de bain*, p. 33.

⁵⁰⁹ *La Salle de bain*, p. 33.

⁵¹⁰ *L’Appareil-photo*, p. 70.

C'est à peu près à la même époque de ma vie, vie calme où d'ordinaire rien n'advenait, que dans mon horizon immédiat coïncidèrent deux événements qui, pris séparément, ne présentaient guère d'intérêt, et qui, considérés ensemble, n'avaient malheureusement aucun rapport entre eux.⁵¹¹

This opening sentence encapsulates the novel's *modus operandi*, as Nicolas Xanthos has also noted in 'Un récit sans queue ni tête (?): organisation narrative et signification dans *L'Appareil-photo* de Jean-Philippe Toussaint'. Firstly, the narrator confesses that the events in question – namely, the decision to learn to drive, and the receipt of a letter from a long lost friend announcing his marriage – 'ne présentaient guère d'intérêt'. Furthermore, they occur in a life where usually nothing happens. The narrator thus confesses the incidental or infra-ordinary nature of the kinds of events we are to expect in this novel. Secondly, they have no connection between them – we are not to expect conjunction. As Xanthos writes, 'sitôt pressenti par le lecteur, ce rapport à la narrativité est contrecarré par le texte'.⁵¹² Whereas learning to drive is pursued in the ensuing narrative, the letter from the long-lost friend is never mentioned again. Finally, this is 'malheureusement' the case – a nonsensical comment in relation to real life, where one does not expect random events to connect with one another, but one which makes sense in the context of the subversion of the realist narrative conventions of the novel which are to take place. The ironic apology of the narrator/author highlights an ambivalence deriving from this textual self-consciousness, serving to blur the boundaries between them. It should be noted also that the traditional realist device of beginning a narrative by situating it temporally (even if only with 'once upon a time') is mimicked but rendered futile by 'à peu près à la même époque de ma vie', since the question arises – at the same time as *which* period of his life? This highlights another key feature of Toussaint's texts: the heightening of a sense of

⁵¹¹ *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 7.

⁵¹² Nicolas Xanthos, "Un récit sans queue ni tête (?): organisation narrative et signification dans *L'Appareil-photo* de Jean-Philippe Toussaint". *Beginnings and Endings, Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Graduate Student Conference in French, Francophone, and Comparative Literature Columbia University*, 25 March 2000. Online. Columbia University. Available: http://www.columbia.edu/~asj20/beginningsAndEndings_main.pdf. 20 January 2006.

disjunction by seeming to conceal it with elements of conjunction. So the opening sentence apparently links with something else gone before – but of course this is missing, depositing the reader in the middle of the narrative of (non)-events.

Such accentuation via concealment occurs in other ways, as for example in the following sentence from *La Salle de bain*: ‘le sol semblait sombre, dont le linoléum se décollait par endroits.’⁵¹³ The ‘dont’ is a relative pronoun used as conjunction, linking the two clauses – yet by placing the ‘dont’ clause after ‘sombre’ and not after ‘sol’, the sentence reads strangely, as though the second clause, like the linoleum, were also ‘unsticking itself’ from the first. Here again we see textual reflexivity, as the writing simultaneously denotes and reflects on its own workings. There are many examples of this strange disjunction of grammatical elements that belong together, such as this, from *Monsieur*: ‘le jour, sur Paris, était tombé’,⁵¹⁴ and from *La Salle de bain*, ‘le lendemain, je ne sortis pour ainsi dire pas’.⁵¹⁵

A lack of connection and conjunction can also be read as a lack of causality. The occluded motivations for the narrators’ actions, discussed earlier, thus entail not only a sense that there are missing pieces of the narrative, but also an inability to see how those that remain are brought about. One example of this is the tendency of Toussaint’s narrators suddenly to depart for other locations without explanation. In *La Réticence* the purpose of the narrator’s visit to Sasuelo is never revealed; in *L’Appareil-photo* the narrator visits Milan, apparently on business, but accomplishes no more than a pedicure, and later takes an unexplained trip to an undisclosed location; in *La Salle de bain* there is the unexplained departure for Venice, and in *Monsieur* the narrator abruptly leaves for Cannes. In *Monsieur*, we learn that Monsieur has broken up with his fiancée– but why? The lack of explanation leaves this a mystery for the reader – but also, apparently, for Monsieur:

⁵¹³ *La Salle de bain*, p. 32.

⁵¹⁴ *Monsieur*, p. 93.

⁵¹⁵ *La Salle de bain*, p. 82.

Monsieur, à vrai dire, aurait été bien incapable de dire pourquoi sa fiancée et lui avaient rompu. Il avait assez mal suivi l'affaire, en fait, se souvenant seulement que le nombre de choses qui lui avaient été reprochées lui avait paru considérable.⁵¹⁶

Gaps in the text become missing reasons or causes – we are left only with effects, and with uncertainty: an uncertainty that is alluded to in scientific form by Schrödinger's Cat in *Monsieur*, reminding us of the difficulties of prediction. As with the lack of conjunction, a lack of causality is often both disguised and accentuated through the use of causal terms; in *La Réticence*, for example, there is repeated and frequent use of such terms as 'car',⁵¹⁷ 'de sorte que',⁵¹⁸ and 'ce qui faisait que',⁵¹⁹ but this is contradicted by the realisation that the supposed causes of events are false ones, present only in the mind of the narrator.

Stripped of conjunction and causation, the fragmentary paragraphs are separated by blanks, by absence. On the graphic level too, this absence is felt. The gaps between paragraphs vary in *L'Appareil-photo*, for example, with the episode at the Indian restaurant being preceded by a gap much larger than those between other paragraphs, paralleling the significant narrative absence. In the early texts in particular, the blocks of text take up little space on the white page – as Schoots notes, this is also a feature of some of Toussaint's contemporaries: 'les textes des jeunes auteurs de Minuit sont fragmentaires dans la mesure où le blanc de la page domine le noir de l'encre.'⁵²⁰

This physical manifestation of a blank or absence demonstrates a specific continuation of earlier forms of 'l'écriture blanche' in the nouveaux romans. In Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur*, for example, there is a blank page at the centre of the novel, signalling the blank or void at the centre of the character, the 'voy(ag)eur' who is both voyeur and travelling watch salesman. On his use of lacunae, Robbe-Grillet writes:

⁵¹⁶ *Monsieur*, p. 30.

⁵¹⁷ *La Réticence*, p. 37.

⁵¹⁸ *La Réticence*, p. 39.

⁵¹⁹ *La Réticence*, p. 63.

⁵²⁰ 'Passer en douce à la douane', p. 104.

Des trous se déplaçant dans sa texture, c'est grâce à cela que le texte vit, comme un territoire au jeu de go ne reste vivant que si l'on a pris soin d'y ménager au moins un espace libre, une case vacante, ce que les spécialistes appellent un œil ouvert, ou encore une liberté.⁵²¹

One could argue that the blanks in Toussaint's works operate similarly, since they demand an active reader-turned-detective, who must attempt to fill in the blanks herself. The texts are alive, or co-created by reader and author, because the meaning is not closed, and the lacunae contribute to this undecidability.

Absences thus provoke an imaginative response, as with the paradoxical richness of activity to be found in 'doing nothing', discussed in Chapter 3. In Toussaint's case, they represent both the expansion of the infra-ordinary (room is made for the incidental by excluding the central) but also gesture to the minimalist experiment of Toussaint's predecessors. The 'vie calme où d'ordinaire rien n'advenait' of *L'Appareil-photo* recalls both the indifferent inactivity of Perec's *Un Homme qui dort*, but also *La Nausée*'s 'il n'y a rien eu de ce qu'on appelle à l'ordinaire un événement.'⁵²² However, the good humour and self-possession of most of Toussaint's narrators indicates that this 'vie calme' is unproblematic, in comparison with the existential anxiety of his precursors' narrators.

Toussaint's texts also demonstrate constraint, in terms of restriction to a specific location. In the case of *La Salle de bain* this is Paris, Venice, and back to Paris, and within these, the enclosed spaces of the bathroom, hotel room, and hospital room the narrator retreats into. In *La Réticence*, the narrator retraces his steps to the same locations again and again. This leads us to two further experimental aspects of 'l'écriture blanche'— repetition and circularity. *La Salle de bain*, already very restricted with regard to metaphor and adjective, reprises the same words over and over. For example, the words 'immobile', 'immobilité' and 's'immobiliser' recur throughout the text, increasing the sense of

⁵²¹ *Le Miroir qui revient*, p. 214. This idea is also to be found in Pierre Lusson, Georges Perec and Jacques Roubaud, *Petit traité invitant à la découverte de l'art subtil du go* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1969), both a handbook on the game and a metaphorical reflection on writing.

⁵²² *La Nausée*, p. 14.

restriction and discipline inherent in minimalism, but also signalling the text's theme of stasis, and the slowing of time. This is further achieved by the frequent use of verbs such as 's'attarder' and 'ralentir' and adverbs such as 'lentement' and 'tranquillement', which contribute to a sensation of lethargy, of time passing slowly or not at all. In *L'Appareil-photo*, vocabulary repeatedly evokes the thematics of thinking, dreaming, or semi-somnolence, as incarnated in the sleepy character Pascale: 'songeusement', 'rêveusement' and 'pensif' recur frequently. Eventually these culminate in the adjective that encapsulates them all: 'pascablement'.⁵²³

Repetition is perhaps most striking in *La Réticence*. Certain terms are repeated again and again, usually underscoring the depressing, decaying reality the narrator perceives ('désert', 'abandonné', 'grisâtre', etc). One particular passage describing the night sky is reprised at least nine times. Its first appearance is as follows: 'je respirais l'air frais de la nuit en regardant le ciel très sombre qui s'étendait devant moi, avec quelques longs nuages noirs qui glissaient lentement dans le halo de la lune.'⁵²⁴ A subsequent appearance three pages later reads: 'La lune était presque pleine dans le ciel, que voilaient en partie de longues volutes de nuages noirs qui glissaient dans son halo comme des lambeaux d'étoffes déchirées.'⁵²⁵ The repetitions continue in slightly varying form, until the narrator himself becomes aware of their recurrence: 'le même clair de lune toutes les nuits identique, toujours le même exactement, avec les mêmes nuages noirs qui glissaient dans le ciel.'⁵²⁶ Again, the use of repetition by Toussaint's precursors comes to mind, such as Robbe-Grillet, Simon, and Perec.

When repetition is extended to larger portions of the text, it yields a sense of circularity, as with the structure of *La Salle de bain*. The narrator moves into his bathroom in the first section 'Paris', leaves for Venice in the second section 'L'Hypoténuse', and

⁵²³ *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 91.

⁵²⁴ *La Réticence*, p. 44.

⁵²⁵ *La Réticence*, p. 47. Note here a further example of disjunction, since the 'que' here refers to 'la lune' at the beginning of the sentence, rather than, confusingly, to 'le ciel' to which it is adjacent.

⁵²⁶ *La Réticence*, p. 98.

returns to his bathroom in the final section 'Paris'. The identical titles of the first and last sections already indicate a certain circularity, combined with the numbering of paragraphs, which begin each section again at number one. This effect is heightened by the almost exact reiteration of certain phrases in the final pages that appear in the first. In the first section we find the following:

10) Assis sur le rebord de la baignoire, j'expliquais à Edmondsson qu'il n'était peut-être pas très sain, à vingt-sept ans, bientôt vingt-neuf, de vivre plus ou moins reclus dans une baignoire. Je devais prendre un risque, disais-je les yeux baissés, en caressant l'émail de la baignoire, le risque de compromettre la quiétude de ma vie abstraite pour. Je ne terminai pas ma phrase.

11) Le lendemain, je sortis de la salle de bain.⁵²⁷

This excerpt is exactly repeated on the final page, except that the final sentence reads: 'Le lendemain, je *sortais* de la salle de bain'⁵²⁸ (my emphasis). The narrator thus appears to have returned to his initial situation, making the novel circular in structure. He goes into the bathroom, leaves it for Venice, returns to the bathroom, leaves it again and so on, indefinitely, tracing the sides of the triangle: Paris, L'Hypoténuse, Paris. However, this circularity is not perfect; the alteration of tense in the final 'je sortais' from the initial 'je sortis' indicates that the situation is not identical. Thus the novel does not have to be read in a circular way - the difference in tense is ambiguous, enabling the reader to re-configure the chronology, if she wishes, to read the novel as beginning in Venice, progressing to the bathroom, and then leaving it to go on to some undisclosed future. 'Je sortais', by virtue of its imperfect tense, can therefore be read as implying the narrator beginning to leave the bathroom (for good). However, it can also be read as indicating habitual recurrence (I was always leaving the bathroom), and therefore as only emphasising the circular chronology. As Gil Delannoï has pointed out: 'Ce jeu entre les structures possibles est l'une des plus

⁵²⁷ *La Salle de bain*, p. 15-16.

⁵²⁸ *La Salle de bain*, p. 123.

grandes richesses du livre'.⁵²⁹ It is also, perhaps, an indication that the use of such experimental circularity is not complete, it is imperfect, and thus it has moved on from the more hermetic and alienating experiments of Toussaint's predecessors, into a more playful use of experiment, where the reader can choose the more open structure if she wishes.

Again, the text demonstrates its own awareness of its circularity and repetition, as when the narrator reflects while walking down his hallway: 'combien de fois avais-je ainsi parcouru le vestibule, avais-je tourné à gauche et ensuite à droite, dans le couloir, pour regagner ma chambre de mon pas régulier? Et combien de fois avais-je fait le trajet inverse?'.⁵³⁰

Some circularity is also in evidence in *La Réticence*, since the narrator is forever returning to what he calls 'la situation initiale'⁵³¹ – he repeatedly revisits the same locations: Biaggi's house, the hotel, and the port. He removes letters from Biaggi's letter box only to replace them in an attempt to erase his actions. However, since one of these is lost in the port, he cannot replace them all, and therefore cannot in fact return to the 'situation initiale'. Here too, circularity is not quite perfect, although the pseudo-mystery that the narrator concocts, with its ominous portents that never materialise, also suggest that at the end of the novel nothing has really happened that was not in the mind of the narrator. If the reader wishes, she can read the ending as the narrator returning to the initial situation, where he arrived with the innocent intention of contacting Biaggi, with no sense yet of foreboding about meeting him.

As with the other experimental features of 'l'écriture blanche', circularity in Toussaint's novels represents a continuation of similar formal techniques in, for example, the nouveau roman. In Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommes*, the initial shooting of Daniel Dupont is reprised at the end, and the main chapters are bookended by epilogue and prologue, both

⁵²⁹ Gil Delannoï, 'Cruel Zénon', *Critique*, 463 (1985), 1198-1200, p. 1198.

⁵³⁰ *La Salle de bain*, p. 35.

⁵³¹ *La Réticence*, pp. 102 and 103.

of which begin: ‘Dans la pénombre de la salle de café le patron dispose les tables et les chaises, les cendriers, les siphons d’eau gazeuse; il est six heures du matin.’⁵³²

The effects of repetition and circularity are multiple. They operate to frustrate reader expectation of adherence to realist principles, where a linear trajectory is followed from past to future, with no return, as in the real world. The realist illusion (that the text somehow equates to the world, because it mimics some features) is thus fractured or completely destroyed, depending on how extreme the experiment. It also makes it difficult for a reader to come back to a text and find her place, if she is unsure if she has read a certain passage before, thus further destabilising the illusion of a secure chronology being reported by the narrator.

Narrative chronology is another area in which Toussaint’s texts form an experimental continuum with his modern and postmodern predecessors. A thematic preoccupation with time is evident in one form or another in most of the novels, usually in the context of time passing too fast and the desire to arrest time and thus escape the inevitability of mortality. I have discussed how this is in part effected by the texts’ seeming to exist in an eternal present. In addition, Toussaint uses time to trouble the illusion of a realist chronology. As Barthes explains, time cannot exist in the novel except as an illusion based on the order of the narrative – time only exists in the real world, not in the text, and therefore the notion of a ‘real’ narrative time is a realist illusion: ‘par sa structure même, le récit instituait une confusion entre la consécution et la conséquence, le temps et la syntaxe narrative.’⁵³³ Texts have always been able to play with chronology in a way that is impossible in reality. The illusion of time in the novel is thus achieved by the suspension of meaning throughout the text, making a narrative free, for instance, to widely separate in space two events that are close in time, to insert long descriptions or digressions, and to move forwards and backwards in time. Similarly, a single event can be stretched to as

⁵³² *Les Gommès*, pp. 11 and 257.

⁵³³ *L’Aventure sémiologique*, p. 184.

many pages as the author wishes, and if desired, the chronology can be rendered impossible to reconstruct.

Realism chooses not to advertise this capability; it has, as Barthes puts it, 'la répugnance à afficher ses codes'.⁵³⁴ Experiments of Toussaint's predecessors tended, on the other hand, to exploit this possibility, and it is in this area that Toussaint also continues that experimentation. It is often difficult to reconstruct the order of events in Toussaint's novels, which is partly achieved by a temporal vagueness. This is generated by the extensive use of temporal shifters, also known as deictics or indexicals, which organise the relations of space and time around the subject, such as here, this, now, tomorrow, yesterday, and so on. The first few pages of *La Salle de bain* offer a proliferation of these – and this is representative of the entire text – such as: 'parfois',⁵³⁵ 'un matin',⁵³⁶ 'deux fois par semaine',⁵³⁷ 'depuis quelques semaines'⁵³⁸ and 'le lendemain'.⁵³⁹ In *La Réticence*, the reader must also rely on such indicators as 'ce matin',⁵⁴⁰ 'la nuit dernière',⁵⁴¹ and 'il y a quelques jours'⁵⁴² in order to reconstitute the chronology of the seven days spent in Sasuelo by the narrator 'à la fin du mois d'octobre'.⁵⁴³

In the previous section, I noted how the use of the *passé simple* can signify a return to traditional narrative, and hence to the real world outside the text. But in Toussaint's texts, its contrast with first person narration leads to a tension between two types of narrative codes, and draws attention to the 'written' status of the text, rather than effacing it. Something similar occurs in its use with regards to chronology. In *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Émile Benveniste separates French verb tenses into two distinct systems, 'histoire' and 'discours'. The first system is reserved for written texts, and is concerned

⁵³⁴ *L'Aventure sémiologique*, p. 200.

⁵³⁵ *La Salle de bain*, p. 12.

⁵³⁶ *La Salle de bain*, p. 12.

⁵³⁷ *La Salle de bain*, p. 12.

⁵³⁸ *La Salle de bain*, p. 15.

⁵³⁹ *La Salle de bain*, p. 16.

⁵⁴⁰ *La Réticence*, p. 11.

⁵⁴¹ *La Réticence*, p. 37.

⁵⁴² *La Réticence*, p. 156.

⁵⁴³ *La Réticence*, p. 12.

with the relating of past events. The tenses that belong to this system are the aorist, or past historic, the imperfect and imperfect conditional tenses, and the pluperfect, and it is a system characterised by the use of the third person. The events thus recounted can be understood as fixed in the past and unaffected by the narrator. As Benveniste writes: ‘A vrai dire, il n’y a même plus alors de narrateur. Les événements sont posés comme ils se sont produits à mesure qu’ils apparaissent à l’horizon de l’histoire. Personne ne parle ici; les événements semblent se raconter eux-mêmes.’⁵⁴⁴

The system of ‘discours’, on the other hand, presupposes a speaker and a listener, writer and reader, ‘je’ and ‘tu’, and traditionally excludes the aorist, the principal tense of historic enunciation. ‘Discours’ is the system of subjectivity within language, or as Benveniste writes: ‘Le langage est ainsi organisé qu’il permet à chaque locuteur de *s’approprier* la langue entière en se désignant comme *je*.’⁵⁴⁵ The appropriation is evinced by the use of pronouns, and other ‘indicateurs de *deixis*’,⁵⁴⁶ whose extensive use in Toussaint’s texts I have identified. Although the third person may also be used in ‘discours’, it is not the historic ‘il’, set at a distance from the events recounted, but an ‘il’ that is present in addition to the ‘je’. Autobiographical texts, in the broad sense of those written in the first person, are thus archetypal of the system of ‘discours’.

In Toussaint’s texts, the system of ‘discours’, detectable both in the use of first-person narrators (with the exception of *Monsieur*) and of deictics of the kind referred to above, contrasts with the ‘temps historique’ of the past historic, introducing a tension between time expressed in terms of fixed, concrete events, and the relational time of the narrator. This tension is increased by the use of deictics in a context where they can no longer serve their purpose of referring to a specific date or time by virtue of their utterance by a subject in the present moment:

⁵⁴⁴ Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), I, p. 238.

⁵⁴⁵ *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, I, p. 262 (original emphasis).

⁵⁴⁶ *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, I, p. 262 (original emphasis).

Mais séparons ‘aujourd’hui’ du discours qui le contient, mettons-le dans un texte écrit; ‘aujourd’hui’ n’est plus alors le signe du présent linguistique puisqu’il n’est plus parlé et perçu, et il ne peut non plus renvoyer le lecteur à aucun jour du temps chronique puisqu’il ne s’identifie avec aucune date; il a pu être proféré n’importe quel jour du calendrier et s’appliquera indifféremment à tout jour.⁵⁴⁷

Separating these signs of the present from the spoken present tense and uniting them with the past historic tense renders them purposeless in Toussaint’s texts. Instead of anchoring events in calendar time, they yield a sense of vagueness and indeterminacy, and - because the order of events cannot be reconstructed - of a seemingly eternal present.

In addition to the circular structure of *La Salle de bain*, and the temporal instability promoted by Toussaint’s use of deictics, in *La Réticence* the narrator is unreliable with regard to chronology. The mystery of the dead cat’s disappearance is linked to a ‘reticence’ on the part of the narrator concerning a nocturnal excursion from the hotel which is not included in the account of events, but can be discovered by mapping the time of the narrator’s utterances onto the the events recounted, and comparing for omissions (no small task). This inconsistency has been identified by Marc Lemesle, in his article ‘Jean-Philippe Toussaint: le retour du récit?’.⁵⁴⁸

It is worth noting here that Toussaint’s destabilisation of traditional literary conventions does not simply serve to inhibit a transparent realist reading and to focus attention on the constructed nature of the text. Toussaint’s continuation of modern and postmodern experiment often serves less to alienate than to amuse, since the juxtaposition of traditional and experimental often leads to humour. One example of this is in his mixing of different registers in narration, or incongruous choice of vocabulary. For example, in *La Réticence*, the narrator refers to the dead cat’s demise somewhat melodramatically as ‘le chat avait été assassiné’.⁵⁴⁹ In *L’Appareil-photo*, the narrator is given to undermining apparently portentous philosophical musings with the use of vernacular idiom, such as: ‘La pensée, me

⁵⁴⁷ *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, II, p. 77.

⁵⁴⁸ Marc Lemesle, ‘Jean-Philippe Toussaint: le retour du récit?’, *Oeuvres & Critiques*, 32:1 (1998), 102-121.

⁵⁴⁹ *La Réticence*, p. 37.

semblait-il, est un flux auquel il est bon de foutre la paix pour qu'il puisse s'épanouir dans l'ignorance de son propre écoulement et continuer d'affleurer naturellement en d'innombrables et merveilleuses ramifications [...].⁵⁵⁰

It seems, then, that Toussaint's texts exemplify the formal features of the contemporary novel identified in Chapter 2. There is a balance between realism and experimentation that can in part be understood as a response to the inheritance of his predecessors, as Toussaint himself explains:

Quand j'ai commencé à écrire, la bataille avait eu lieu, et je dirais que le terrain avait été déblayé. Robbe-Grillet et les autres avaient fait tout le boulot, moi je n'avais pas besoin d'être rigide sur la question [...] Je n'avais pas besoin de *serrer les rangs* (original emphasis).⁵⁵¹

In other words, Toussaint's predecessors having already comprehensively subverted the hegemony of classical realism through experimentation, he feels there is no longer a need to rigidly pursue that subversion according to any kind of manifesto, but can playfully intertwine experimentation with a return to narrative and the real.

Reflexivity

I have tried to show how Toussaint effects in his texts both a departure from and continuation of the forms of his modern and postmodern predecessors. With regard to experimentation, a common feature emerges, namely a heightening of attention to the writing itself, so that it intrudes into the awareness of the reader. Although all experimentation, directly or indirectly, invokes questions of writing and representation, I want now to look specifically at the importance of reflexivity in this respect.

Reflexivity is visible firstly in the multiplicity of textual levels, where a unit of meaning serves not only its primary narrative function, but also connotes something about

⁵⁵⁰ *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 32.

⁵⁵¹ Laurent Hanson, *Interview de Jean-Philippe Toussaint*, 19 January 1998. Online. Institut franco-japonais de Tokyo. Available: <http://www.berlol.net/foire/fle98to.htm>. 20th January 2006.

the text itself. We have already seen something of this in Toussaint's texts; in *Monsieur* for example, we find that a description of Monsieur's behaviour in a hammock also describes his general passivity in life, as well as the form of the novel itself, apparently just swinging from non-event to non-event: 'Insensiblement, Monsieur se laissa couler dans le hamac, porté par des brises légères, les jambes croisées, les yeux ouverts, suivant en pensée le rythme des balancements, ne les précédant pas, ne les provoquant pas.'⁵⁵²

We see the same kind of plurality of reference again in *La Télévision*, when the narrator remarks to his partner Delon that he can't believe how fast his son is growing up: '(c'était incroyable, ça changeait tout le temps: il n'y a que quinze pages, il avait quatre ans et demi).'⁵⁵³ The 'quinze pages' cannot refer in fact to his own Titian study, although Delon replies to him as though this were the case. He has not even written a page of his own work. It suggests instead the narrator's awareness of the text of *La Télévision* itself (unless of course the narrator is lying to Delon about how much he has achieved in her absence).

A second form of reflexivity occurs in the blurring of boundaries between traditionally demarcated sections of narrative. In realist narration, description is usually distinguishable from direct speech (often signalled by punctuation). In Toussaint's novels, however, there are moments of slippage between narration and direct dialogue. In *La Télévision*, the narrator's description of his attempt to cross a busy road merges with his directions to a motorist. There is thus no demarcation between interiority and exteriority :

La deuxième fois, je parvins, au terme de trois petits bonds d'antilope placés au bon moment, à gagner le terre-plein de béton qui séparait les deux voies rapides de l'autoroute urbaine qui sillonne le nord de Berlin, dans un enchevêtrement autoroutier complexe, car c'est là que se rejoignent le périphérique intérieur, qui permet tout aussi bien de gagner l'aéroport de Tegel, vers le nord, que les quartiers de Steglitz, vers le sud, jusqu'à Zehlendorf, et les grandes autoroutes qui conduisent vers l'ouest du pays, vers Francfort ou Cologne, et vers l'est, dans l'autre sens, en direction de Tegel, vers Dresde, ou même vers la Pologne, me semblait-il, redemandez, quand même, expliquais-je, le bras tendu en direction des confins de la Funkturm, penché à la vitre d'une petite voiture blue ciel.⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁵² *Monsieur*, p. 28.

⁵⁵³ *La Télévision*, p. 254.

⁵⁵⁴ *La Télévision*, pp. 58-59.

This serves to expose, by their absence, the conventions usually expected in realist novels. The reader is suddenly aware that she has been accepting the illusion of a narrator whose thoughts are somehow miraculously in her hands (thus effacing the writer) – which is exploded when these words are seamlessly transformed with no demarcation into the direct speech of the narrator to another character. By beginning his sentence as an address to the reader, and concluding it by speaking to another character, the narrator is placed both within and without the text simultaneously.

The blurring of these different levels of text within text is to be found in Toussaint's other novels. In *Monsieur*, the crystallography study he has agreed to type for his neighbour, Kaltz, keeps intruding directly into the text without any framing device (such as, for example: 'then Monsieur began to type: "..."' and so on). The continued insertion of Kaltz's words into the main narrative suggests the extent to which this chore is encroaching on Monsieur's free time, so that ultimately he has to move apartments in order to be free of it. Sometimes the text is not the text typed by Monsieur, but the voice of Kaltz dictating; again this must be deduced by the reader, since it is not signalled:

L'or natif, que l'on trouve dans la nature à l'état de corps simple, est souvent finement disséminé dans la gange quartzeuse des filons aurifères et dans les sulfures, la pyrite par exemple, le mispickel, deux i, la pirrotite, deux r deux i, et la stibine – comme ça se prononce.⁵⁵⁵

This unsignalled insertion promotes confusion over who is speaking, since in the following quotation it is unclear whether Kaltz is addressing Monsieur, or Toussaint/Monsieur is addressing the reader: 'L'interprétation des termes grecs utilisés pour la reconnaissance des formes extérieures des cristaux – oho, tu m'écoutes – est aisée en effet [...]'.⁵⁵⁶

We see again a brusque insertion of unsignalled text in the history student's interview later recorded by Monsieur, as well as in passages concerning the ambassador's

⁵⁵⁵ *Monsieur*, p. 72.

⁵⁵⁶ *Monsieur*, p. 74.

party in *La Salle de bain*. The reader cannot maintain the illusion that the text is somehow narrating events outside itself; rather, all is text, there is no distinction between the narrative and the events it purports to narrate. In this way the text designates itself, as text.

Finally, reflexivity can take the form of direct references to literature and literary theory. These direct references confirm what the experimentation also suggests: a lack of theoretical innocence, given the texts' predecessors. In *L'Appareil-photo*, the narrator puns on the two meanings of 'logos' to indicate a sophisticated awareness of post-structuralist theory: 'Une montgolfière aux armes jaunes de la Shell, par exemple. Ou de la Total, je connais pas son logo. Moi, l'essence. Quant à la quiddité, peut-on se fier au logos?'.⁵⁵⁷

Baker

Experiment

I now turn to the formal features of Baker's texts, in an attempt to see how they compare with those of Toussaint's set out thus far. I hope to show that Baker's work also manifests a continuity with modern and postmodern predecessors. An initial difference to note, however, is the overall form of their texts. As we have seen, Toussaint's texts all adhere to the novel format – even the non-fiction *Autoportrait (à l'étranger)*. They are also – with a single exception – all first-person narratives. Baker, on the other hand, has written a combination of first-person novels and works of non-fiction.

To begin with the novels, both *Vox* and *Checkpoint* take the form of dramatic dialogues, with almost no external narration at all. Since *Vox* uses the format of a telephone conversation (rather than the face-to-face dialogue of *Checkpoint*), it resembles an updated epistolary novel. Even *The Mezzanine*, a first-person narration, is subject to structural experimentation. *The Mezzanine* manifests its split level structurally, as well as narratively via the office space of its title; the main body of the text is encroached upon by

⁵⁵⁷ *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 73. See, for example, the following sample sentence from Derrida's *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967): 'L'essence formelle du signifié est la présence, et le privilège de sa proximité au logos comme *phone* est le privilège de la présence' (original emphasis), p. 31.

extensive footnotes, to such an extent that they in some places take up more space on the page.⁵⁵⁸ This makes them impossible to ignore or sideline. The result is an alternative, non-linear reading experience. Whether the novel is read body text first, then footnotes, or interspersing the two simultaneously, it does not alter the meaning⁵⁵⁹ of the novel, such is its digressive nature: Baker subverts the hierarchy normally associated between these two levels, refusing to recognise that principal = body text, subordinate = footnote. One cannot ascertain any difference in importance between the content of material assigned to these different levels, and thus Baker destabilises the customary hierarchy between the two. If *La Salle de bain* can be read as circular, then *The Mezzanine* can be read vertically.

As with Toussaint's narrators, Baker's seem aware of the text that they inhabit. Howie, in *The Mezzanine*, expresses his admiration for footnotes, and the following quotation is itself placed in a footnote:

The outer surface of truth is not smooth, welling and gathering from paragraph to shapely paragraph, but is encrusted with a rough protective bark of citations, quotation marks, italics, and foreign languages, a whole variorum crust of 'ibid.'s' and 'compare's' and 'see's' that are the shield for the pure flow of argument as it lives for a moment in one mind. They knew the anticipatory pleasure of sensing with peripheral vision, as they turned the page, a gray silt of further example and qualification waiting in tiny type at the bottom.⁵⁶⁰

The extent to which footnotes start to dominate the main body of the text recalls a similar experiment in Flann O'Brien's increasingly pervasive De Selby footnotes in *The Third Policeman*.⁵⁶¹ Experiments with varieties of form extend into Baker's non-fiction, where we see in particular his interest not just in writing, but in composing text. One piece of prose in *The Size of Thoughts* consists of some morsels of text that have collected at the bottom of Baker's word-processing screen while writing *Room Temperature*. This he has entitled *Mlack*. He explains:

⁵⁵⁸ *The Mezzanine*, pp. 27-28, and pp. 65-68.

⁵⁵⁹ Although it alters the 'sens' or direction of the reading.

⁵⁶⁰ *The Mezzanine*, pp. 121-22.

⁵⁶¹ Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Flamingo, 1967; repr. 1993), pp. 120-122, and pp. 149-153.

Keyboard work creates a class of unwanted things - one-letter typos, failures of phrasing, bad punctuation. If you don't want to delete these entirely, you can use the Return key to push them to the bottom of the screen. What gathers, a few lines ahead of the growth bud of your final intention, is a concentrated, enantiomorphic residue; a backward parody of each session's prose-in-progress.⁵⁶²

The title of this 'residue' refers to the typographical error occurring in the last line of the following quotation:

for larice or sehalf r
k crichad changedexpectedhl
but I had the
Bugtact
my energies, colliding with my uncertainty about mlack of

An interest in this kind of writing as composition again suggests Perec as an influence. In *The Fermata*, Arno Strine describes his enjoyment of composing text in the form of audio-typing. In *The Mezzanine*, Howie offers a whimsical list of the frequency of his thoughts:

<i>Subject of Thought</i>	<i>Number of Times Thought Occurred per Year (in descending order)</i>
L.	580.0
Family	400.0
Brushing tongue	150.0
Earplugs	100.0
Bill-paying	52.0
Panasonic three-wheeled vacuum cleaner, greatness of	45.0
Sunlight makes you cheerful	40.0
Traffic frustration	38.0
Penguin books, all	35.0
Job, should I quit?	34.0

The list continues, finishing with:

Popcom	1.0
Birds regurgitate food and feed young with it	0.5
Kant, Immanuel	0.5

⁵⁶² *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 117.

There is, however, no explanation of how to measure ‘half-thoughts’, such as those generated by Kant and by regurgitating birds.

As with Toussaint, experimentation also derives from a preoccupation with the infra-ordinary, from a privileging of the incidental over the principal. Baker’s apparent digressions in fact form the entirety of his texts; there is no main story to which these digressions are subordinate. Baker discusses *The Mezzanine’s* lengthy digressions on minutiae, or ‘narrative cloggers’, in *U and I*:

I wanted my first novel to be a veritable infarct of narrative cloggers; the trick being to feel your way through each clog by blowing it up until its obstructiveness finally revealed not blank mass but unlooked-for seepage-points of passage.⁵⁶³

This use of digressive, associative segments of narrative, which are connected to one another not by virtue of their role in a plot-driven narrative, but by contiguous and contingent connections – ‘seepage-points of passage’ – is characteristic of Baker’s writing. In *Room Temperature*, the series of reflections that comprise the eighth chapter proceed as follows: while listening to his wife writing in bed next to him, the narrator attempts to visualise what she might be writing by listening to the sound of her pencil on paper. He imagines he detects a comma just before a pause in writing. This leads him to recall how his old horn professor once erased a comma, a breathing space, from a Chiarnovsky étude he was practising, forcing him to train himself to hold his breath for longer and longer.⁵⁶⁴ This in turn leads the narrator to recall breath-holding competitions in childhood, and then a party given by his parents at which a guest played the bagpipes, inspiring him to take them up himself. He recollects that his father advised him first to learn the French horn, which connects back to the comma on the horn étude, via a reflection on the physical exertions of ballet dancers, and finally on to the decision to quit music, transfer to another

⁵⁶³ *U and I*, p. 73.

⁵⁶⁴ Chiarnovsky being a composer invented by Baker, as with other of his scholarly references such as Z. Czaplicki’s paper on ‘Methods for evaluating the abrasion resistance and knot slippage strength of shoe laces’, *The Mezzanine*, p. 132.

college, 'and spend my time reading prose and writing papers, where commas could be stuck in and taken out without the risk of physical injury.'⁵⁶⁵

These segments of recollection are connected by their metonymic or horizontal relationship to one another, and do not surround or support the narrative; they *are* the narrative. The connection of such segments is by means of contiguity rather than causality, or at least, a contiguous, associative kind of causality. There is a similarity here with Toussaint, but the absence of cause and effect lies not so much in occluded narrator motivation, which is more commonly disclosed and indeed dwelled upon in Baker's works, as in the contingency of each narrative segment arising at the moment that it does; the associative nature of this kind of writing lends an aleatory feel to the narrative. So the 'retour du récit' in the sense of a reconstructable narrative and reliable narrator combines in Baker's neo-realism with a rejection of the significant 'histoire'. As Ross Chambers has noted, the continuity of Baker's narratives is not so much disrupted as *formed* by these very digressions: 'Baker is generally more concerned with the continuity digression also implies, a continuity-in-disjunction [...]'.⁵⁶⁶

There is some similarity here between Baker's digressive narrative chains, and a refusal of causality that characterises some of the nouveaux romanciers. Robbe-Grillet writes in *Le Miroir qui revient* of the rise of the nineteenth-century novel and the values it expressed: 'les nouvelles valeurs que [la bourgeoisie] vénère exigent (...) la fermeté absolue du sens, la plénitude sans faille de la réalité, les assurances chronologiques et causales, la non-contradiction sans le plus petit écart possible.'⁵⁶⁷ Despite Baker's love of nineteenth-century writers and objects, he reveals his contemporary scepticism about such causal assurances in literature when discussing changes of mind:

⁵⁶⁵ *Room Temperature*, p. 65.

⁵⁶⁶ Ross Chambers, 'Meditation and the Escalator Principle (on Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*)', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 40:4 (1994), 765-806, p. 771.

⁵⁶⁷ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Le Miroir qui revient* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984), p. 210.

We must not overlook sudden conversions and wrenching insights, but usually we fasten on to these only in hindsight, and exaggerate them for the sake of narrative - a tool perfected by the great nineteenth-century novelists, who sit their heroines down and have them deduce the intolerability of their situation in one unhappy night, as the fire burns itself into embers in the grate.⁵⁶⁸

At the structural and narrative levels, then, Baker can be seen to perpetuate certain experimental features of his modern and postmodern predecessors. At the level of individual words, too, this influence is felt. It is here, in the area of vocabulary, that he most differs from Toussaint. In contrast to the restrained simplicity of 'écriture blanche', as practised by Toussaint, Baker's prose is dense with archaic and technically obscure terms; flowery Latinate 'inkhomers', as he calls them; and quantities of neologisms. A very few examples from *U and I* and *The Size of Thoughts*: 'plenipotentiary',⁵⁶⁹ 'Pierian', 'marmoreal', 'fustian' and 'erythematous'.⁵⁷⁰ Such vocabulary, and Baker's discussions of the same, both indicate an interest in scholarship, and serve to draw attention to the materiality of the written word. This effect is increased with the use of neologisms, of which there are many. For example, in *U and I* an admirer of Shakespeare becomes a 'Bardolator',⁵⁷¹ and in *Double Fold* the removal and destruction of books in a library become 'bibliectomies'.⁵⁷² In *The Size of Thoughts*, we find the following, in reference to model airplane glue: the 'cooling poison would silently *ensphere itself* at the machined metal tip, looking, with its sharp gnomonic surface highlights and distilled, *wodka* interior purity, like a self-contained world of incorruptible mental concentration' (my emphasis).⁵⁷³ These coinages form part of Baker's allusive, alliterative style. His scholarly review of a poetry database in *The Size of Thoughts* is itself poetic in its language, with its expressions such as 'earned learnedness' and 'blandly blindingly observe'.⁵⁷⁴ When writing about the origins of

⁵⁶⁸ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 7.

⁵⁶⁹ *U and I*, p. 78.

⁵⁷⁰ *The Size of Thoughts*, pp. 228, 282, 309, and 176, respectively.

⁵⁷¹ *U and I*, p. 124.

⁵⁷² *Double Fold*, p. 238.

⁵⁷³ *The Size of Thoughts*, pp. 27-28.

⁵⁷⁴ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 230.

the word ‘lumber’, Baker speculates that ‘one is tempted to propose that Viking explorers left the Indians of North America with some lim-lumbery Icelandic wood-word’,⁵⁷⁵ and ponders the relationship between the term ‘lumber-room’ and the ‘burly and Father-knows-Bestial *Den*’ (original emphasis).⁵⁷⁶

Although less prolifically, Toussaint also invents neologisms, such as ‘les yeux mousses’⁵⁷⁷ that the narrator experiences after watching too much television in *La Télévision*, and the adverb ‘ouateusement’, later in the same novel.⁵⁷⁸ Sometimes Toussaint’s narrators use expressions doubtfully, as though the narrator is suddenly unsure of which word to use. For Margaret Gray, expressions in *La Salle de bain* such as ‘à peu de choses près (?)’ where he adds an ‘s’ to ‘chose’, or the description of Edmondsson’s underwear as ‘en poil de zebu, en poil de zèbre’, signal the author’s Belgian nationality, and gently mock the academic hegemony of French language and literature.⁵⁷⁹ Be that as it may, such linguistic hesitation on the part of the narrator also serves to focus attention on writing as construct, rather than as transparent and ‘natural’.

I have noted the practice of mixing different registers in Toussaint, and we find something similar in Baker’s texts. In the previous chapter I discussed how Baker’s focus on the infra-ordinary entailed a fascination with and elevation of the lowly, trivial, or man-made into objects of admiration. What this means in terms of form is that Baker’s subject matter seems often to contrast with the lofty or scholarly vocabulary used to describe it, as with the instructions printed on hot-air hand dryers in washrooms: ‘I disapprove of this text now, but when I was little it bespoke the awesome oracular intentionality of prophets whose courage and confidence allowed them to scrap the old ways and start fresh’.⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁵ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 242 (footnote).

⁵⁷⁶ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 275.

⁵⁷⁷ *La Télévision*, p. 11.

⁵⁷⁸ *La Télévision*, p. 212.

⁵⁷⁹ Margaret E. Gray, ‘Pascal in the bathtub: parodying the *Pensées*’, *Symposium*, 51/1 (1997), pp. 20-29.

⁵⁸⁰ *The Mezzanine*, pp. 88-89.

Baker acknowledges this pleasing contrast: ‘with a book like *The Mezzanine*, it was exciting to use nineteenth-century vocabulary with something like a hot air blower - to have things not quite match.’⁵⁸¹ A mismatch of register and subject matter is also to be found in Toussaint, and has a similar effect. It serves to question the designation of certain topics as literary or non-literary and demonstrates how the language chosen can be used to exalt or denigrate accordingly. ‘To have things not quite match’, in the hot air blower example, encourages the reader to consider this lowly object as worthy of literary attention, indeed, of attention at all.

Baker’s love of the nineteenth century is detectable in his admiration for such authors as Shelley, Emerson, Melville, as well as William and ‘King Henry James’ – all of whom are discussed with admiration in *U and I*. His characters share this attraction, such as Arno’s ex-girlfriend, Rhody: ‘Nineteenth-century novels were all-important to her. It wasn’t a question of her liking them; they were a neurological necessity, like sleep.’⁵⁸²

Strangely enough, there are links between Baker’s ornate prose and the seemingly polar opposite of ‘écriture blanche’. The constraint practised by Toussaint has Perecquian parallels with Baker’s work in his essay ‘Lumber’ in *The Size of Thoughts*, where he exhaustively traces the etymology of this word. Restricting himself to what he calls ‘a single perversely chosen unit of vocabulary’,⁵⁸³ Baker tracks the origins, associations and usage of the word ‘lumber’ through the last three centuries:

I’ve spent almost a year [...] riffling in the places that scholars and would-be scholars go when they want to riffle: in dictionaries, indexes, bibliographies, biographies, concordances, catalogs, anthologies, encyclopaedias, dissertations abstracts, library stacks, full-text CD-ROMs, electronic bulletin boards, and online electronic books.⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸¹ Eric Lorberer, *Nicholson Baker, Without Blushing*. Online. Random House. Available: www.randomhouse.com/atrandom/nicholsonbaker. 18 October 1999.

⁵⁸² *The Fermata*, p. 177.

⁵⁸³ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 355.

⁵⁸⁴ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 208.

In this one word he discovers a universe of meaning: '*Lumber-room* loans the short-sold world back to the reader, while storing all of poetry and prose within as a shrouded pledge' (original emphasis).⁵⁸⁵ The idea that constraint breeds creativity is confirmed by the seemingly ascetic project of writing an essay on a single, half-forgotten word, which leads to the creation of one hundred and fifty pages of lumber-related miscellanea.⁵⁸⁶

The Everlasting Story of Nory is somewhat experimental in its restriction to the vocabulary and thought-patterns of a nine-year old narrator, in contrast with the adult and scholarly vocabulary Baker favours elsewhere in his approach to the infra-ordinary; rather, the child-like innocence of observation, of seeing afresh, matches the infra-ordinary subject matter with which the text is concerned. There are nonetheless passages where the Baker/Nory line is a blurred one, given the sophistication of the metaphor:

When you give your parents a present and they are very appreciating of what you've done and say that it's the most beautiful things they've ever seen, it can give you an undescrivable feeling in your chest, a certain kind of opening feeling, as if your heart's a clock in a furniture museum with little doors that open up and a clockwork princess twirls out for a short time.⁵⁸⁷

Despite dedicating the book to his daughter, 'the informant', and Baker's astute observation of childish expression, he further troubles the 'authenticity' of his narrator by using the third person singular (Nory may be nine years old, but why does that make her narrator the same age?), and by idealising her psyche so as to exclude all ignoble thoughts, and excluding all but a few carefully selected spelling errors in the text.

Baker's writing also serves to destabilise traditional realist chronology in subtle ways. Part of this derives from the digressive structure of his texts; as has been discussed, segments of texts that follow one another in the space of the text do not necessarily do so

⁵⁸⁵ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 354.

⁵⁸⁶ An intertextual connection with lumber can even be found in Perec's *L'Infra-ordinaire*, where he mentions the 'rue des Lombards' (*L'Infra-ordinaire*, p. 74). As Baker reveals: '*Lumber* seems originally to have meant possessions pawned to a Lombard' (*The Size of Thoughts*, p. 239), and 'Lombard Street [is] so named because thirteenth-century Lombard pawnbrokers (cf., *Longobardi*, 'long-beards') collected there to do business, replacing persecuted Jews.' (*The Size of Thoughts*, pp. 237-238).

⁵⁸⁷ *The Everlasting Story of Nory*, p. 165.

in 'narrative time'. Generally, we rely on the combination of an event-driven narrative trajectory plus clear temporal markers to enable us to determine when a narrative moves backwards or forwards chronologically, or suspends time altogether in order to linger or insert a sub-narrative. As with Toussaint's deictic temporal indicators, Baker does not generally anchor his smaller 'histoires' in the larger extra-textual 'Histoire' (with the exception of *U and I* and *Checkpoint*).

Baker's Proustian digressions and recollections combine with an absence of narrative events to produce a chronology that in some ways is as difficult to reconstruct as that of some of Toussaint's texts; with *The Mezzanine*, for example, it is easy to lose one's place and forget whether one is reading a recollection of the narrator who has just stepped onto the up escalator at the end of his lunch hour (where the novel begins), or, a recollection of a recollection the narrator had earlier during that lunch hour. One has to retrace steps in order to discover that, in terms of narrative events, the narrative remains 'frozen' at the moment Howie steps onto the up escalator, as he thinks and recollects during the duration of the novel, and then fractionally rewinds at the end to his entering the lobby and heading once again for the up escalator.

Narrative digression can also produce a sense that time has slowed or stopped. In *The Mezzanine*, a self-contained act, such as washing hands after using the men's room, provides a finite locus within which an infinite number of associations can take place. This format characterises the majority of *The Mezzanine's* chapters. The effect of Baker's dense and microscopic observation is to slow down narrative time, as he lingers indefinitely over a particular series of thoughts before the narrative moves forward. Similarly, when the reader drops down to read a footnote, some of which are extremely long, the narrative of the body text is suspended, and this leads to a sense that time is in some way also suspended.

Baker's experiments with time are central to the narrative in *The Fermata*, where the narrator achieves a power over time similar to that of an author over time in his novel.

(Arno's central romantic interest, Joyce, recalls another writer famous for the stretching of time.) Arno visits Joyce's apartment during a 'Drop', and examines her mattress:

My fingers looked as if they were playing the piano as they passed over its repetitively dimpled surface. I pulled up a corner of the fitted sheet. The foam pad was a dark-yellow color; when I stared at it, the pattern of identical shadows tricked my eyes with false dimensionalities. I felt as if I were looking at a rough approximation, in foam, of time's true geometry. Everyone else stayed at the level of the sheet, and only I could drop below it.⁵⁸⁸

This metaphor can be read as describing the text of *The Fermata*, from which two separate narratives (time in, and time out of, the fermata) can be reconstructed. These two alternate narratives would thus correspond to the 'level of the sheet' and what could 'drop below it'. In addition, Baker's geometrical metaphor for time is particularly appropriate to the novel in general. Since time exists not in the novel, but only in the real world, it can only be simulated in the novel along the axis of space – by means of the physical arrangement of semantic units. Toussaint's *La Salle de bain* makes similar allusions in its connections of geometry with time.

Reflexivity

There is extensive reference to literary theory in Baker, whose *U and I* expends at least as much space exploring how to go about writing the work itself as it does on Baker's relationship with Updike. Some of these explorations concern Baker's chosen method of writing about Updike: he does not want to falsify his responses to the texts – which prompted him to write *U and I* in the first place – by re-reading them, and by reading those he has not read, in preparation for a long essay (the standard scholarly approach). Rather, he wants to write only about Updike's books (and in places, about Updike himself) from memory, with all the inaccuracies and gaps that this entails – the 'sodden crisscrossing

⁵⁸⁸ *The Fermata*, p. 54.

strips of rivalry and gratefulness over an armature of remembered misquotation.⁵⁸⁹ Baker wonders whether this method of criticism already exists, and if not, what it should be called: ‘in the unlikely event that it has not already been recognized and does not already have a name, [it] might be called something sexy like *memory criticism*, or *phrase filtration*, or *dosed book examination*.’⁵⁹⁰ Baker’s method intertwines author and critic, literature and literary criticism, with a Proustian insistence on the importance of memory as well as on the ‘narrative cloggers’ which for him form the texture of subjectivity.

The act of writing is important in both Toussaint’s and Baker’s novels, whether as central topic or minor theme. As already noted, Baker’s *U and I* is as much about the process of writing *U and I* as it is about anything else; from anxiety of influence and unintentional plagiarism to the choice of vocabulary, as in the following excerpt:

I know perfectly well that I should not be using inkhorners like ‘florilegia’ when I mean ‘collection’ and ‘plenipotentiary’ when I mean ‘stand-in’ at my age (b.1957) - and though the latinate conscripts were indeed the ones that first spring to mind as I was typing those sentences, I did look askance at them on the screen a minute after I used them, for two reasons. First, because their eager scholasticism made me wonder if others would wonder whether my choices had leaped from a thesaurus or one of those maddening block calendars that offer a new vocabulary word every day. (...) And, second, I looked askance at ‘florilegia’ and ‘plenipotentiary’ because I felt a needle jump in my déjà vu-meter that might indicate that I’d used them both before, and I didn’t like the idea of people (i.e., Updike) thinking, ‘Florilegia *again*? It wasn’t that great the first time! He’s pretending his vocabulary is a touch-me-anywhere-and-I’ll-secrete-a-mot-juste kind of thing, when it turns out to be this cribbed little circle of favored freaks that he uses over and over hoping nobody will notice!’⁵⁹¹

The text of *U and I* comes to seem almost alive, reflexively creating itself out of the record of its own creation, as when Baker writes that ‘everything I had still to say crowded tighter around this sudden hole in my essay, shouting advice and pointing urgently off in different directions’.⁵⁹² This is reminiscent of John Barth’s ‘Title’ in *Lost in the Funhouse*, a short story chiefly concerned with the writing of itself. In the same way, *The Fermata* is both Arno

⁵⁸⁹ *U and I*, p. 59.

⁵⁹⁰ *U and I*, p. 87.

⁵⁹¹ *U and I*, p. 77 – 80.

⁵⁹² *U and I*, p. 94.

Strine's autobiography and the story of his attempts to write the same, together with his forays into erotic writing, or 'rot' as he calls it.

Toussaint's *La Télévision* concerns the failure of the narrator to write more than a couple of words of his Titian study. The difficulties inherent in getting down to work, avoiding procrastination, and finding the time to write, are addressed in very different but complementary ways in *The Fermata* and in *La Télévision*. In the latter, the narrator tells of the infra-ordinary experience of a writing project that can never get off the ground while there are windows to clean and naked sunbathing as distractions; in *The Fermata* Arno solves the related problem of real life eroding writing time by stopping time and opting out of real life altogether. Where Toussaint's novel describes the reality of procrastination unflinchingly, Baker's takes refuge in fantasy and solves the writer's problem by simply adding in extra days:

I wake up at seven-thirty, and if it's going to be a Fold day I thick-fingeredly snap time off, shake my watch to unfreeze it, and spend the whole next twenty-four hours enclosed within the quiescent seven-thirtyness of my room, working on this book.⁵⁹³

Much of Baker's writing, then, is about writing. An entire chapter in *Room Temperature* is devoted to the comma, as the narrator listens to the sound of his wife writing in bed. A preoccupation with writing and literature is further manifested in *The Size of Thoughts*, in the essays 'Lumber' and 'Mlack' discussed earlier, and more indirectly in the subject of book destruction tackled in *Double Fold*. Arno in *The Fermata* is writing his autobiography, and the narrators of *A Box of Matches* and *Room Temperature* are both writers of sorts – an editor of medical textbooks and 'a technical writer for a medical imaging company' respectively.⁵⁹⁴ The reflexive move of writing about writing, and indeed, about other writers, leads on to the related issues of citation and influence. As Fieke Schoots has remarked: 'le jeu citationnel [...] est [...] le libre jeu avec les œuvres antérieures qui mène à une vision

⁵⁹³ *The Fermata*, p. 154.

⁵⁹⁴ *Room Temperature*, p. 5.

originale de la réalité, à la confusion entre réalité et fiction, à la représentation de la représentation et à la métaphorisation de l'écriture.⁵⁹⁵ Viewed in this way, citation draws together many of the key features of postmodernism, suggesting in its most explicit and extreme forms that everything has already been written, that creation has become quotation. Although this extreme conclusion is not reached by either Toussaint or Baker, their texts are still marked by influential predecessors. There are, for example, some strong resemblances between the stopping of time in *The Fermata* and H.G. Wells' short story on the same subject, entitled 'The New Accelerator'.⁵⁹⁶ In Wells's story, the scientist Gibberne invents a potion which speeds up the action of the human body many thousands of times, so that time seems to have slowed almost to a halt in the world around them. One of the first things Gibberne and the narrator attempt, having drunk the potion, is to go outside: 'there we made a minute examination of the statuesque passing traffic.'⁵⁹⁷ This is reminiscent of the episode in *The Fermata* where Arno stops driving at sixty miles an hour and describes the stationary moving traffic. The vision of frozen motion is described as follows by Wells: 'an immovable cyclist, head down and with a frozen puff of dust behind his driving-wheel, scorched to overtake a galloping charabanc that did not stir.'⁵⁹⁸ For Baker's Arno: 'the road surface around my car presented a strange sight: though motionless, it looked slightly foggy and indeterminate, as if photographed through a Vaseline lens; you couldn't focus on it properly.'⁵⁹⁹

Both authors consider the effect of sound waves in this apparently stationary world.

Wells's characters enter a park, where

The band was playing in the upper stand, though all the sound it made for us was a

⁵⁹⁵ 'Passer en douce à la douane', p. 99.

⁵⁹⁶ H.G. Wells, 'The New Accelerator', in *The Complete Short Stories of H.G. Wells* (London: St Martin's Press, 1927; repr. 1970).

⁵⁹⁷ 'The New Accelerator', p. 935.

⁵⁹⁸ 'The New Accelerator', pp. 934-35.

⁵⁹⁹ *The Fermata*, p. 191.

low-pitched, wheezy rattle, a sort of prolonged last sigh that passed at times into a sound like the slow muffled ticking of some monstrous clock.⁶⁰⁰

On the freeway, Arno recounts that

The other oddity was that I heard hooting and roaring noises in my ears when I walked into or away from the direction that I had been driving: I supposed it was something to do with vectors and frozen sound waves and the Doppler effect, but I didn't trouble myself over it.⁶⁰¹

There is a striking similarity here between Baker's description of sound when time is stopped, and Wells's description of sound when time subjectively appears to have slowed almost completely to a stop, given the characters' own dramatically increased speed.

Baker's comically reverent treatment of minutiae also recalls some of Borges's writing, such as this, from the English translation of 'Toenails':

Gentle socks pamper them by day, and shoes cobbled of leather fortify them, but my toes hardly notice. All they're interested in is turning out toenails – semitransparent, flexible sheets of a homlike material, as defense against – whom? Brutish, distrustful as only they can be, my toes labour ceaselessly at manufacturing that frail armament.⁶⁰²

Baker's fondness of exaggeration and absurdity (e.g. 'each thought has a size, and most are about three feet tall, with the level of complexity of a lawnmower')⁶⁰³ also suggests the writing of Flann O'Brien, as in this quotation, from *The Third Policeman*, on getting into bed:

I felt as if all my weariness and perplexities of the day had descended on me pleurably like a great heavy quilt which would keep me warm and sleepy. My knees opened up like rosebuds in rich sunlight, pushing my shins two inches further to the bottom of the bed. Every joint became loose and foolish and devoid of true utility. Every inch of my person gained weight with every second until the total burden on the bed was approximately five hundred thousand tons.⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰⁰ 'The New Accelerator', p. 936.

⁶⁰¹ *The Fermata*, p. 101.

⁶⁰² Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Maker', *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), p. 296.

⁶⁰³ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 10.

⁶⁰⁴ *The Third Policeman*, pp. 119-20.

The traces of influence in Toussaint tend to be much more implicit, since, unlike Baker (who cites both Borges and O'Brien as influences others have put forward for him), Toussaint's discussion of it remains outside the texts, as in the following interview excerpt, where he says of *La Salle de bain*: 'je sens et je domine les influences: il y a Nabokov qui plane sur toute la dernière partie, Gombrowicz sur les Polonais, Perec sur des petites choses, des petits mots'.⁶⁰⁵ There are, of course, references to other artists and writers: Titian, Mondrian, Musset, Nooteboom, Guth, are some that have already been noted.

In Baker's case, direct citation and reference to other authors and texts is prolific, particularly in *The Size of Thoughts*. Where Baker differs from Toussaint is not only in quantity of citation but also in his discussion within his texts of questions of influence and citation. *U and I* is in some sense entirely concerned with this question. Baker considers the collection of antecedents ascribed to him by various reviewers:

I was reminiscent of, owed much to, or failed to measure up to Abish, Barth, Borges, Bove, Calvino, Friedman, Joyce, Lem, O'Brien (Flann, not Tim or Edna), Perec, Ponge, Proust, Robbe-Grillet, Sterne, Tati, and Trow – never Updike. What can this mean? That I think I'm influenced when I'm not? Or that there are differences between a role-model sort of influence and a purely stylistic one?⁶⁰⁶

U and I is concerned with questions of originality, of how to be inspired by other authors without allowing them to suffocate your own creativity, and with the fear that other authors may steal something from you.⁶⁰⁷ Baker's alternating admiration for and jealousy of Updike yields much comedy, as when describing a documentary on Updike he has watched:

in which, in one scene, as the camera follows his climb up a ladder at his mother's house to put up or take down some storm windows, in the midst of this tricky physical act, he tosses down to us some startlingly lucid little felicity, something about 'These small yearly duties which blah blah blah,' and I was stunned to

⁶⁰⁵ *Jeunes Auteurs de Minuit*, p. 30.

⁶⁰⁶ *U and I*, p. 175.

⁶⁰⁷ See his anxiety about Updike 'stealing' from him, in *U and I*, p. 55.

recognize that in Updike we were dealing with a man so naturally verbal that he could write his fucking memoirs *on a ladder*.⁶⁰⁸

Baker knows that all his anxiety about influence is just begging for a discussion of *The Anxiety of Influence*, but, as he explains: ‘I haven’t read any Harold Bloom, and all the way through writing this essay so far I have been experiencing bursts of anxiety about my ignorance of *The Anxiety of Influence*.’⁶⁰⁹ True to his method of ‘closed book examination’ however, this does not stop him discussing Bloom for a couple of pages, on the basis of what he has heard and read in book reviews. This rather interestingly reverses Bloom’s idea that the poet cannot escape what he has read: here, Baker cannot escape what he has not read. The intertextuality which *U and I* both incarnates and inhabits is extended by Updike’s own responses to the book. In interview, Updike points out that ‘it’s not exactly about me. He talks about all the books of mine he hasn’t read, and explains why. It’s a good long essay on how younger writers use older ones.’⁶¹⁰

While Baker obviously embraces broad stylistic influence from his peers and predecessors, he is anxious about plagiarism, which connects with his insistence on originality – a distinctly non-postmodern view. For Baker, postmodern ‘collage’ is no more than theft; Perec may be a precursor for his fascination with the infra-ordinary,⁶¹¹ but Baker rejects other aspects of his work:

And it *is* contemptible and wrong of Montaigne to have melted whole stolen crayons from Seneca into his paragraphs without announcing it, or for that matter for Georges Perec to work entire Frenched-over sentences from Joyce’s *Ulysses* into his *Life: A User’s Manual* without so much as a peep to his readers about it [...] – it isn’t cute, it isn’t postmodern, it’s cheating, and always has been – and once we learn that a prose writer is capable of such silent filchery, we dismiss him, rightly, as

⁶⁰⁸ *U and I*, p. 44.

⁶⁰⁹ *U and I*, p. 64. See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁶¹⁰ John Updike, in interview. Online. Available: <http://www.salon.com/08/features/updike2.html>. 20 January 2006.

⁶¹¹ There is a further, extra-textual point of convergence between Perec and Baker. In 1965, Perec invented a new kind of card catalogue system, and Baker has written and campaigned against the destruction of card catalogues and their replacement by microfiche and electronic databases. See David Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words* (London: Harvill, 1993), pp. 250-267.

a liar and a con-man, and no matter how good he is, we no longer completely trust anything he gives us.⁶¹²

In taking this stance, Baker rejects postmodern notions of the end of authorship and originality, and the use of collage and citation. It is a stance that explains both his desire to find uncharted areas for realism to seize upon and describe, as well as his scholarly insistence on declaring his sources (which does not, however, address the problem of those sources of which he is unaware – or those that he makes up, as with the bogus erudition in *The Mezzanine*).

Reflexivity, in the form of writing about writing, and of citation of other texts and authors, is thus partly responsible for drawing the reader's attention to the text as artefact, highlighting the labour and construction involved, as well as the debt to predecessors. The remaining responsibility for this effect is shared by the various kinds of experimentation already discussed, whose tradition Toussaint and Baker perpetuate: structural ambiguities, unusual novelistic form, the use of absence, lack of conjunction, disturbing chronology, mixing registers, as well as the effect on narrative of a preoccupation with the incidental and the infra-ordinary.

By focusing attention on form, a central tenet of classical realism is subverted – namely, that the text should be a transparent window, aiming at representation of the world but effacing the techniques which achieve this. The manner and purpose of this subversion, of this confounding of expectations of realist conventions, has varied historically, and according to its use by modernists or by postmodernists. Robert Looby cites Brian McHale's distinction between different types of experimentation as follows:

The essential difference between modernism and postmodernism is that the former is concerned with epistemological questions (e.g. 'how can I interpret this world?')

⁶¹² *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 292. Baker is wrong that it 'always has been' – throughout the whole of the medieval period and into the Renaissance, the notion of plagiarism would have been incomprehensible, deriving as it does from the more recent notion of 'the individual' and thus of authorship.

while the latter is concerned with ontology (e.g. ‘which world is this?’ ‘what is the mode of existence of a text?’).⁶¹³

On this view, it would seem that the nouveaux romanciers can be more plausibly aligned with modernism, since the seriousness of their endeavour, while it may have looked like a sterile commitment to ‘l’art pour l’art’, can also be read as attempts to strip away clichéd forms of representation in order to get closer to the reality of experience, with greater honesty and immediacy. Viart certainly holds this view in relation to writers such as Sarraute, Simon, Pinget, Duras, and Butor: ‘parce qu’ils ont voulu débarrasser le roman des codes et des conventions qui n’étaient jusqu’alors parvenus qu’à scléroser expression et représentation, ils se sont trouvés hâtivement associés à une théorie solipsiste’.⁶¹⁴

The playful and giddily reflexive work of John Barth and Donald Barthelme, discussed in Chapter 2, is more obviously postmodern in its concern with the ontological questions noted above. The reality of experience seems beside the point. An even more succinct distinction between modernism and postmodernism can be found in John Lanchester’s apophthegm in *The Debt to Pleasure*: ‘Modernism is about finding out how much you could get away with leaving out. Postmodernism is about how much you can get away with putting in.’⁶¹⁵

Attempts to classify modernism and postmodernism, whether usefully or glibly, provoke the question: what then, is contemporary neo-realism ‘about’? How is one to understand its continued use of experimentation in the context of its concomitant return to narrative and to the real? A sign that these contemporary novels have moved on from postmodernism is hinted at by Toussaint in his interview with Michèle Ammouche-Krémers. In response to her question about leading his readers down paths that go

⁶¹³ Robert Looby, *Flann O’Brien: A Postmodernist When it Was Neither Profitable Nor Popular*, 28 July 2004. Online. The Modern Word. Available: <http://www.themodernword.com/scriptorium/obrien.html>. 20 January 2006.

⁶¹⁴ “Écrire avec le soupçon”, p. 139.

⁶¹⁵ *The Debt to Pleasure* (London: Picador, 1996), p. 159.

nowhere, he concedes this occurs in his writing, but adds: 'ce n'est non plus un jeu à décoder'.⁶¹⁶

What we find in Toussaint's and Baker's work is a recognition of two things: firstly, that the contemporary world is one where the production of meaning is inevitably complex, that cultural practice, in Baudrillard's words, 'est une pratique manipulatoire, aléatoire, labyrinthique de signes'.⁶¹⁷ Secondly, that they cannot write without acknowledging what has come before. As Yvan Leclerc has remarked in regard to Toussaint and his peers:

Ils n'en sont pas de simples héritiers, même s'ils sont publiés aux Editions de Minuit, mais des gens qui ont lu et qui ont l'intelligence de ne pas faire comme si on n'avait rien écrit avant eux.⁶¹⁸

However, this recognition is combined with a relaxation of the rules of experimentation as philosophy and method. Toussaint's inclusion of some of the motifs of Perec's *Un Homme qui dort* is humorous, not bleak. His attitude is perhaps paralleled by the narrator of *La Télévision*, when the latter stresses the importance of exceptions to his rule of not watching television: 'façon, toute mienne, d'ailleurs, de tempérer quelque peu le jansénisme des règles que je me fixais par un certain coulant dans leur application'.⁶¹⁹

4.3 Writing the Self

In Chapter 2, I discussed under this heading the tendency of the contemporary novel towards autobiography and inward-looking explorations of the self. Toussaint and Baker share this tendency. Both authors' narrators use the first person singular to write not only about the world around them, but about themselves. In Toussaint's texts, the narrators are often gazing into mirrors at their own reflections, or their reflections are

⁶¹⁶ Michèle Ammouche-Krémers, 'Entretien avec Jean-Philippe Toussaint', *Jeunes Auteurs de Minuit*, ed. by Michèle Ammouche-Krémers & Henk Hillenaar (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 27-36.

⁶¹⁷ *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 99.

⁶¹⁸ Yvan Leclerc, 'Autour de Minuit', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 17, (1989), 63-74, p. 64.

⁶¹⁹ *La Télévision*, p. 156.

somehow invisible, as in *La Réticence*, posing questions over the solidity of their existence. Signs of autobiography are discernable in other ways. Both Baker (*U and I*) and Toussaint (*Autoportrait*) have written non-fiction whose titles explicitly indicate their subject. In addition, both have played with blurring or collapsing the distinction between author and narrator. The opening lines of *The Fermata* begin: ‘I am going to call my autobiography *The Fermata* (...)’.⁶²⁰ The conclusion suggests that we are reading a book not by Baker, but by Arno Strine, thus hinting at the identification to be made between the two. Toussaint also, in his asides to the reader, in the deliberate closeness between authorial and narrative voices, and in witty intertextual references, aligns himself with his narrators. Thus the narcissistic yet self-mocking narrator with whom we are familiar is as much present in *Autoportrait* as in Toussaint’s other texts, as the following description of himself at a *boules* contest indicates: ‘Moi, longiligne, aristocratique (très Prince de Savoie, m’étais-je laissé dire)’.⁶²¹ Toussaint seems to anticipate that his readers will associate him with perhaps his most narcissistic creation, the narrator of *Monsieur*, adding: ‘(vous voyez un peu la touche que j’avais, on m’appelait Monsieur)’.⁶²² *Autoportrait* opens with a challenge to the reader, an insistence on the centrality of the autobiographical: ‘on arrive à Tokyo comme à Bastia, par le ciel’.⁶²³ To readers unaware of his life in Corsica, this comes across as classic Toussaint humour – the incongruous twinning of capital city and small island town. Alternatively it can be read as an indication of the importance in this text of Toussaint’s real life, despite the similarities of this non-fiction work to his novels.

Both authors have discussed their interest in autobiography, and in the intertwining of real and fictional selves. Toussaint has said in interview:

Jusqu’à présent, dans tous mes livres, j’étais toujours parti de la fiction pour aller vers la réalité. Or, dans *Autoportrait (à l’étranger)*, pour une fois, je fais le contraire, je

⁶²⁰ *The Fermata*, p. 3.

⁶²¹ *Autoportrait*, p. 39.

⁶²² *Autoportrait*, p. 40.

⁶²³ *Autoportrait*, p. 9.

pars de la réalité, je pars d'expériences concrètes qui me sont réellement arrivées et je vais vers la fiction [...].⁶²⁴

Baker seems to propose a more direct equivalence between his author and narrator, as in *U and I*, when he writes of 'Updike's mother, or rather her fictional equivalent'⁶²⁵ and of Updike's own 'fictional equivalent'.⁶²⁶ Elsewhere, he has described the relationship between author and narrator as unproblematic, one that can be expressed in terms of percentages: '*The Mezzanine* is about 87% myself. *Room Temperature* is a little bit more. But *The Fermata* is purely fictional and not like me at all.'⁶²⁷ Baker is espousing here what seems to be a traditional and anti-postmodern stance, although for him it is more a rejection of New Criticism: 'There was this whole tradition of new criticism that swept across the 20th century. The poem was kept utterly distinct from the writer's life. Biographical considerations were kept out completely. That's complete crap.'⁶²⁸

There are problems with this sort of stance, however. Theoretical attacks on any kind of identification between author and narrator (of which Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' is one of the best known) have been extremely influential. For Barthes, to posit an equivalence between narrator and author, is to posit a unified sign-creating subject and the expression of this subject which is the text. This could never be accepted by structuralism, since, in structuralist thinking, people are not unified subjects, and do not singlehandedly emanate signs. Hence: 'qui parle (dans le récit) n'est pas qui écrit (dans la vie) et qui écrit n'est pas qui est.'⁶²⁹

For some, the idea that the author disappears at the moment of narration seems perversely counter-intuitive. If I survive a plane-crash and proceed to write a novel concerning a character who survives a plane-crash, how can we possibly argue that there is

⁶²⁴ Jean-Philippe Toussaint, in interview with Ingrid Aldenhoff. Online. Éditions de Minuit. Available: <http://www.leseditionsdeminuit.fr/titres/2000/autoportrait-etranger.htm>. 20th January 2006.

⁶²⁵ *U and I*, pp. 141-2.

⁶²⁶ *U and I*, p. 71.

⁶²⁷ Alexander Laurence and David Strauss, interview with Nicholson Baker, 1994. Online. Available: <http://www.altx.com/int2/nicholson.baker.html>. 20 January 2006.

⁶²⁸ Alexander Laurence and David Strauss, interview with Nicholson Baker.

⁶²⁹ *L'Aventure sémiologique*, p. 195-6.

no link between author and character, that my experience is irrelevant to the text? But this is to misunderstand Barthes, who is making a distinction between ontologically different types of being, between the 'êtres de papier' in a novel, and the physical entity of the author. The link between authorial experience and text does not have to be counter-intuitively severed; Barthes does not think texts are created *ex nihilo*, however:

Dès qu'un fait est *raconté*, à des fins intransitives, et non plus pour agir directement sur le réel, c'est-à-dire finalement hors de toute fonction autre que l'exercice même du symbole, ce décrochage se produit, la voix perd son origine, l'auteur entre dans sa propre mort, l'écriture commence (original emphasis).⁶³⁰

In other words, texts may originate with their authors, but they become ontologically disconnected from them at the moment of narration. In this way it is possible to retain both Barthes's view and the intuition that authors are linked to their texts.

This is not the only problem for the straightforward connection Baker makes between fiction and autobiography. As discussed in Chapter 2, the postmodern condition is seen as a crisis of subjectivity, entailing perhaps the death of the subject as unified and private self. This is something of a problem for the self that is claiming originality and authenticity in its writings. The confessional mode of Baker and his narrators certainly aspires to rigorous honesty and authenticity, as when he agonises over whether he should have included a compliment from Updike to himself in the text of *U and I*:

Should I not be including this pronouncement here? Is it self-serving? No, because mainly it shows Updike to be civil and generous in person [...] and because my patently self-serving inclusion of it shows me to be even less likable than I might possibly otherwise have seemed. (Who will sort out the self-servingness of self-effacement?).⁶³¹

However, even if Baker convinces his readers that he is in fact a unified self, not a fragmentary, schizophrenic compilation of pre-existing simulacra of personhood – there is still Lasch to contend with, and his condemnation of false confession by empty narcissists:

⁶³⁰ *Le Bruissement de la langue*, p. 61.

⁶³¹ *U and I*, pp. 164-165.

By fogging over the distinction between truth and illusion, he asks the reader to believe his story not because it rings true or even because he claims it is true, but simply because he claims it conceivably might be true – at least in part – if the reader chose to believe him.⁶³²

Baker seems to confirm all of Lasch's worst suspicions when he writes:

Before you can accept it as true, you need to have the sensation, the illusion, that something is said directly *to you* [...]. And what a writer of an essay like this is trying to do, it now seems to me, is to cheat in a sense on this process: I'm trying to convince the reader that I'm such a stone-washed article that even lacking [...] any known self outside of the one chunk of me here offered, I am somebody you know: we've been through the wars together, eaten at McDonald's, submitted to base motives, sweated through social gatherings, and so when I propose to tell you that John Updike is a genius, for example, my contention will have some trustworthy impulse of convincingsness behind it.⁶³³

This passage seems to acknowledge the falseness of intimate confession as literary or essayistic mode. Its purpose, however, as with the self-serving/self-effacing question of Updike's compliment, is in fact to inspire even greater trust in the reader that she is reading an account unflinching in its self-deprecating authenticity. What could be more honest than confessing to the essential dishonesty of the claim to honesty? Yet the recognition that even in non-fiction, there is a fictionalisation of the self, or 'cheating', seems to indicate in Baker an ambiguity or tension on this question.

Toussaint's autobiographical writing is conceived less on the model of author as authentic source that can be faithfully depicted, and more as a mutual relationship, whereby in writing about the self, one also writes or invents the self, and is always also writing about writing:

Consciemment, je suis très intéressé par l'autoportrait. [...] L'autoportrait aussi tel qu'il est considéré en peinture. Par exemple, quand Rembrandt fait des autoportraits, il parle de la peinture bien davantage que de lui-même. Certes, il se prend lui-même comme sujet d'étude, mais c'est toujours la peinture qu'il interroge,

⁶³² *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 20.

⁶³³ *U and I*, p. 63.

à la peinture qu'il s'ouvre. C'est comme ça que je conçois les choses: c'est à travers l'autoportrait que j'interroge la littérature.⁶³⁴

Autoportrait contains indications of this awareness that a self-portrait is as much about the writing of the same. Early on, he makes the somewhat dizzying remark that 'j'appellerai Madeleine Madeleine dans ces pages, pour m'y retrouver.'⁶³⁵ This remark could only make sense if *Autoportrait* were a novel, in which he might conceivably forget which character is based on Madeleine. Thus Toussaint once again reminds the reader that he is fully aware of the ambiguities inherent in his project. For Toussaint and Baker, the false confession is only false because that is its inevitable condition; the desire to speak of the self is genuine enough.

Is it possible to speculate as to a single purpose beneath the multiple variations of the neo-real, of which Toussaint and Baker represent two examples? The tension between experimentation and a real that somehow will not disappear, despite the postmodernists' best efforts, seems to be central here. This is mirrored by a tension between the death of the author/death of the subject and the autobiographical mode to which both authors are drawn. Perhaps we can detect the conviction that while the real is once again a subject of fascination, it is not conceived of as a non-human referent – there is an implicit understanding that reality is created by us, firstly as we live through it (perception and memory, introjection and projection) and secondly in the art that we make. Since we now know that as much as the world *is*, we also make it and remake it through literature – then the appropriate realism, or neo-realism, is one that knows that it cannot simply describe – it always also creates.

⁶³⁴ Ingrid Aldenhoff, interview with Jean-Philippe Toussaint.

⁶³⁵ *Autoportrait*, p. 9.

CHAPTER 5: BANALITY AND THE SUBJECT

Introduction

Chapters 3 and 4 argued that the works of Toussaint and Baker, despite apparent differences, share some distinctively contemporary characteristics: their exploration of certain of the subject predicaments outlined at the outset of this thesis; their combining of experimentation and realism in the post-postmodern form of ‘neo-realism’; and a preoccupation with the infra-ordinary. I suggested that the term ‘infra-ordinary’ could usefully be thought of as a subset of the merely ordinary or everyday. This distinction mobilises a number of factors; from the subject matter itself (where objects are literally small in size, or otherwise hitherto completely overlooked, deemed beneath notice), to the formal qualities of the texts themselves (an ecstatic or neutrally attentive tone, the exclusion of significant narrative events, and so on). However, the proximity of the infra-ordinary to the everyday provokes questions about the former’s relationship to the commonplace and to the banal. For example: should the infra-ordinary in these texts be understood as transformation, representation, or mere instances of the banal? How, if at all, is the infra-ordinary distinct from the banal? If it is not, and if the banal is present in these texts, untransformed, does this diminish or negate their aesthetic value? Furthermore, can the act of infra-ordinary transformation itself – whereby the overlooked and unnoticed is celebrated – effect a reversion back to the banal as a result of entering the public domain? Put briefly, is it possible to talk of a banal aesthetic?

In order to approach this question – with particular reference to our two authors – it will first be necessary to circumscribe more narrowly the meaning of the term ‘banal’. That is the purpose of the next section.

5.1 The Banal Subject – a Psychoanalytic Approach

I began this thesis by suggesting that one might theorise the contemporary from the perspective of the subject. The analysis of the banal that follows takes the same perspective, and thus is explored here as a problem of subjectivity, using a particular psychoanalytic theory. The approach comes from Mahmoud Sami-Ali, Director of the *Centre International de Psychosomatique* in Paris, who has written extensively on the relationship between organic pathology and psychopathology. More importantly, for our present purposes, he has also written on the banal in the realm of artistic creativity. In studies of artists and writers ‘in the lineage of surrealism’ (Roussel, Rigaut, Duchamp and Warhol) he has explored the notion of creation as a ‘subjectivity without subject’. His work proves so useful because it combines three aspects that are at the core of this thesis: the predicament of the subject, the sociological banal (as in the work of Marcuse), and the presence of the banal in works of art.

Before arriving at banal aesthetics, however, it is necessary to understand the theoretical and clinical underpinning of Sami-Ali’s notion of the banal. Sami-Ali defines the banal as an absence of subjectivity. In order to understand this, we must look at what he considers to be the fundamental function of the psyche, synonymous with subjectivity: *projection*. Sami-Ali’s theory of somatisation, or the psychosomatic, has a Freudian basis, and relies on two central concepts: the imaginary and the repression of the imaginary. The imaginary function is defined as dreaming, and its equivalents in waking life (reverie, hallucination, illusion, belief, game, fantasy,⁶³⁶ delusion, and so on). The imaginary function is synonymous with projection, which is ‘un mode de pensée caractéristique du rêve et transformant le sujet en objets aussi bien qu’en l’espace et le temps des objets: l’absolument

⁶³⁶ I use ‘fantasy’ in lieu of ‘phantasy’ in this thesis in order to broaden the connotations beyond purely clinical usage.

subjectif devenu l'absolument objectif.⁶³⁷ Projection is the means by which the inner world appears as an outer world – it is the subjective perceived as objective, permitting the subject to be 'soi hors de soi, absorbé par un réel qui est soi'.⁶³⁸ This function is most evident when considered in relation to dreams, where one is simultaneously entirely within the self and yet seemingly participating in an objective reality that is outside of the self.⁶³⁹

The dream is a case of pure projection, or the purely imaginary, whereas, when we are awake, what is perceived to be outside the self mingles with what is projected from inside the self. Projection and perception are inextricably linked, forming a continuous and simultaneous loop. The objective is internalised as subjective and the subjective, in the form of unconscious investment, is projected onto the objective:

Tourné vers le dedans et le dehors et faisant circuler une énergie polarisée par le conscient et l'inconscient, l'appareil psychique est simultanément appelé à percevoir et à se souvenir. Percevoir le dedans et le dehors, se souvenir du dedans et du dehors.⁶⁴⁰

To avoid terminological confusion, it is worth pointing out that this conception of the imaginary differs from the more circumscribed Lacanian imaginary, in that for Sami-Ali, the imaginary is synonymous with subjectivity as a whole (including language), whereas for Lacan, language belongs to the symbolic order, and the imaginary is more specifically related to images and the development of the ego via the mirror stage.

Sami-Ali also radicalises and extends the Freudian concept of repression. Freudian psychopathology is based on the repression of unconscious material, the failure of this repression, and the return of the repressed in the form of dreams or symptoms. The return of the repressed is thus still evidence of the imaginary function at work. Sami-Ali departs

⁶³⁷ [Mahmoud] Sami-Ali, *Le Corps, l'espace et le temps*, 2nd edn (Paris: Dunod, 1998), p. 2.

⁶³⁸ *Le Corps, l'espace et le temps*, p. 69.

⁶³⁹ Freud theorises the origin of projection as follows: 'a particular way is adopted of dealing with any internal excitations which produce too great an increase of unpleasure: there is a tendency to treat them as though they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside, so that it may be possible to bring the shield against stimuli into operation as a means of defence against them. This is the origin of *projection*'. (Original emphasis). Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', *On Metapsychology*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 300-01.

⁶⁴⁰ *Le Corps, l'espace et le temps*, p. 66.

from Freud in that he posits another possibility: successful repression of the imaginary function as such: 'Ici [i.e. in the banal], tout est refoulement, sans retour du refoulé.'⁶⁴¹

In the event of the repression of the imaginary, a subject is emptied of his or her subjectivity, and the resulting void is filled by what he calls 'une pathologie de l'adaptation'.⁶⁴² The subject adapts to rules derived from society, from the collective imaginary, which pre-exists the subject: 'l'imaginaire subjectif cède à un imaginaire collectif qui a nom le banal'.⁶⁴³

The pathology of the banal is therefore ultimately *social* and not individual. In this assertion Sami-Ali departs from the Freudian psychology of intra-psychic conflict, insisting that the latter had taken too little account of inter-psychic relations, and of the extent to which socialisation precedes and prepares the individual. For Sami-Ali the banal is construed as de-personalised signification belonging to everyone and to no-one. In this it is the antithesis of the unconscious, whose function the banal succeeds in repressing altogether: 'La théorie freudienne de l'inconscient constitue de la sorte comme la preuve ontologique de la non-existence du banal, au sens où une chose serait simplement ce qu'elle est.'⁶⁴⁴ To enlarge upon this last point, if the formula for the imaginary function can be written $a \neq a$ (as in dreams, where what is, is not), then the formula for the banal is $a = a$, since it is deprived of the imaginary function's transformative power. The banal is therefore identical to itself, neutral, literal. It is in many respects analagous to the Sartrean 'en-soi' about which it is possible to say only that it is what it is.

The function of projection entails an oscillation between real and imaginary, perception and unconscious investment. In the banal, however 'cette relation dialectique s'interrompt'⁶⁴⁵ so that the real of the banal is neutral, literal, depthless – desire and projection are eliminated. In the absence of subjectivity, the banal henceforth determines

⁶⁴¹ *Le Corps, l'espace et le temps*, p. 4.

⁶⁴² *Le Corps, l'espace et le temps*, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁴³ *Le Corps, l'espace et le temps*, p. 70.

⁶⁴⁴ *Le Banal*, pp. 10-11.

⁶⁴⁵ *Le Banal*, p. 45.

the relations between ‘self’ and other, inasmuch as it is still possible to talk of the ‘self’ except in its coincidence with the other. The very etymology of the word banal reveals this collective dimension: the word originally meant ‘belonging to compulsory feudal service’, which later evolved to mean ‘of or belonging to the common people’, or that which is common-place. In contrast with those, such as Heinz Hartman, who judge adaptation to social rules as an index of sanity,⁶⁴⁶ Sami-Ali views conformity to social rules as pathological. The case studies in *Le Banal* trace conformity to the collective to an initial subjugation to parental authority, which evolves into subjugation to social authority. This subjugation is expressed by conformity to the real, a pathology which ‘privilégie le réel et fait de l’adaptation au réel une exigence absolue, très générale.’⁶⁴⁷

In Freudian terms, then, the banal consists only of manifest content, which conceals no other, latent content. It is depthless, existing only as surface. The absence of subjectivity results in an absence of emotion: ‘le banal a ainsi partie liée avec l’épuisement du contenu émotionnel et cognitif de l’objet, moyennant une répétition qui ne manque pas d’engendrer un équivoque sentiment de monotonie’.⁶⁴⁸ Repetition contributes to the absence of affect in the banal, tending as it does to promote indifference – as when continual repetition of distressing images or ideas leads to a loss of their effect. Monotonous repetition is also evidence of the banal’s lack of ‘becoming’: the banal is not produced by the subject but by the collective; additionally, according to Sami-Ali, it obscures those collective historical processes that have brought it into existence. Since the banal pre-exists the subject, it can be indefinitely reproduced, unaltered by those that adopt it. This is the sense of banal as ‘cliché’, connoting the idea that something has been, and continues to be, endlessly reproduced without the intervention of subjectivity: ‘Soustrait au devenir, le banal jouit d’une éternité qui est négation de la vie et éternité du factice’.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁶ *Le Banal*, p. 78.

⁶⁴⁷ *Le Banal*, p. 131.

⁶⁴⁸ *Le Banal*, pp. 23-24.

⁶⁴⁹ *Le Banal*, p. 24.

Sami-Ali summarises the various dimensions of the banal in his conclusion to *Le Banal*. In terms of content, it is the literal. In terms of form, it is the singular made general. In terms of affect, it is neutral. In terms of function it is ‘une règle adaptive qu’on applique à la lettre pour aboutir au typique.’⁶⁵⁰ He summarises his findings as follows:

L’analyse du banal montre que le banal est la limite de la projection et que la projection est d’abord projection de l’espace et du temps à travers le corps propre conçu comme le schéma le plus élémentaire de toute représentation.⁶⁵¹

Sami-Ali’s analysis in *Le Banal* focuses on the subject in a relationship of pathological conformity with society. If this conformity is widespread, however, it becomes something that further characterises society itself, and in his preface to *Le Banal* Sami-Ali emphasises ‘les forces organisées et organisatrices qui, dans une société donnée, poussent à l’uniformité. Uniformité de penser, de sentir et d’être dont le banal est l’expression par excellence.’⁶⁵² As I said at the start of this chapter, the interest of what Sami-Ali is attempting to do in *Le Banal* lies in the way that a single notion – deriving from clinical practice – can be mobilised in order to allow the commentator/critic to move between different domains: the psychopathology of the individual, sociology and aesthetics. I would like to repeat that gesture, using the banal – thus understood – as a ‘fil conducteur’, in order to illuminate first the contemporary subject in society, and then the contemporary nature of Toussaint’s and Baker’s works. The creation of art, of literature, particularly if understood as the unique expression of the artist’s subjectivity, would seem on this analysis

⁶⁵⁰ *Le Banal*, p. 195.

⁶⁵¹ *Le Banal*, p. 197. There are similarities here with Hannah Arendt’s concept of the banality of evil. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she writes that: ‘officialese became [Eichmann’s] language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché. [...] Eichmann, despite his rather bad memory, repeated word for word the same stock phrases and self-invented clichés (when he did succeed in constructing a sentence of his own, he repeated it until it became a cliché) each time he referred to an incident or event or importance to him’. Furthermore: ‘The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else.’ – *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 49. As with Sami-Ali’s banal, the failure of the imaginary and the absence of subjectivity means the inability to think, and the uncritical adoption of what publicly precedes the individual.

⁶⁵² *Le Banal*, p. 9.

to exist in direct opposition to the banal. This tension between the social banal, on the one hand, and artistic creation, on the other, will be important for the next section; it will also be the main focus of my final chapter.

5.2 The Banal as Repression of the Imaginary – the Contemporary Subject's Predicament

Simulation, Homogeneity, Non-Lieux

The contemporary suggestiveness of Sami-Ali's theory becomes apparent when we revisit the subject predicaments set out in Chapter 1. Given that both Sami-Ali and Baudrillard share common points of reference in Marcuse and McLuhan, it is unsurprising that the banal is in many ways analagous to Baudrillard's simulacrum: it is neutral, transparent, unambiguous and self-coinciding. Baudrillard claims that the disappearance of a distinction between real and fake has led to the substitution of simulation for representation. The real has become the hyperreal: 'Il ne s'agit plus d'imitation, ni de redoublement, ni même de parodie. Il s'agit d'une substitution au réel des signes du réel.'⁶⁵³ Similarly, Sami-Ali's banal circumvents representation, and defies situation on the real/fake or reality/representation axis. As with simulation, the gap between referent and image has closed.

The banal also fits Marcuse's description of public language:

Words and concepts tend to coincide, or rather the concept tends to be absorbed by the word. The former has no other content than that designated by the word in the publicized and standardized usage, and the word is expected to have no other responses than the publicized and standardized behaviour (reaction). The word becomes *didé* and, as cliché, governs the speech or the writing; the communication thus precludes genuine development of meaning (original emphasis).⁶⁵⁴

It is hard not to think of the contemporary use of words such as 'freedom' and 'democracy' as fitting this model.

⁶⁵³ *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 11.

⁶⁵⁴ *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 90.

Mutual manipulation, whereby the subject is apparently solicited without recourse to subjectivity, can also be theorised as a function of the banal, in that the collective imaginary instead determines the subject's responses. The pre-selected consumer 'choices' from which to construct an identity that is necessarily homogenous, can be thought of as the adoption of the collective imaginary, where subjectivity is displaced in favour of an illusion of the same.

I want further to suggest that the contemporary phenomenon of 'non-lieux', discussed in previous chapters, is a manifestation of the banal in spatial form. The banal as collective imaginary, derived from rules that pre-exist us, is discernable in the rules governing behaviour in Augé's non-places, all of which produce unreflective, almost automated behaviour patterns. Anyone transgressing the rules of non-place will soon find themselves corrected, if not by the governing authority then by their fellow passengers or customers (think of the reaction to the uninitiated tube traveler who stands on the left and walks on the right). Non-places tend towards the exclusion or minimisation of subjectivity. Instead, 'c'est le non-lieu qui crée l'identité partagée des passagers, de la clientèle ou des conducteurs du dimanche.'⁶⁵⁵ I would argue that this shared identity militates against the individual as subject and can thus be seen as inhibiting the imaginary.

De Certeau's 'ruses' and 'pratiques' may well indicate that the contemporary subject is successfully resisting dissolution under uniformity but, by the same token, they indicate the insistent nature of that very threat. Sami-Ali's definition of the imaginary as the function of projection, whereby the subjective is made objective (inner space forms outer space), correlates to Augé's definition of the means by which anthropological place is formed, that is to say: 'à travers les connivences du langage, les repères du paysage, les règles non formulées du savoir-vivre'.⁶⁵⁶ If subjectivity does not intervene in non-place, nor in the banal, then non-places are banal spaces. Non-places are also banal by virtue of their

⁶⁵⁵ *Non-Lieux*, p. 127.

⁶⁵⁶ *Non-Lieux*, p. 127.

formal attributes. Like the banal, which is repeated without alteration, and defined by repetition, uniformity and monotony, non-places are the same wherever we go. As Augé says: 'l'étranger égaré dans un pays qu'il ne connaît pas [...] ne s'y retrouve que dans l'anonymat des autoroutes, des stations-service, des grandes surfaces ou des chaînes d'hôtels'.⁶⁵⁷

The position of the contemporary subject in relation to time is also encapsulated in the a-historical banal – produced and reproduced without any sign of how or by whose hand it came into existence, the banal describes not only the eternal present of non-places, but also the subject's exclusion from the past except in the form of the glossy simulacra of pop culture.

Narcissism and the Banal

*Oedipe semble bien souvent céder la place à Narcisse sur nos divans, comme dans l'espace social et culturel*⁶⁵⁸

As I suggested in Chapter 1, the disappearance of individuality and of self-creation can be thought of either in terms of the death of the subject, or in terms of pathological transformation; on Lasch's analysis, the contemporary subject and society are both defined by narcissism. There are similarities between Lasch's theory of the narcissistic subject and Sami-Ali's theory of repressed subjectivity. The conformity to social order concealing narcissistic rage that Lasch identifies is echoed in Sami-Ali's theory of a pathology of adaptation, of conformity to social rules. Where the unconscious (the imaginary) is successfully repressed, the shared social superego takes full control, and this is visible in the homogeneity of society already discussed. The idea of every person possessing unique and individual psychological 'demons' is ebbing away in the contemporary world.

⁶⁵⁷ *Non-Lieux*, pp. 133-134.

⁶⁵⁸ Jean-José Baranes, 'Double narcissique et clivage du moi', in *Le Double: Monographies de la Revue Française de Psychanalyse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), p. 39.

The question of narcissism is explored in depth by André Green and Guy Rosolato, in the ‘Narcisses’ edition of *La Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*.⁶⁵⁹ Their analysis confirms the proximity between Lasch’s analysis of narcissism and the contemporary subject’s predicament.

For Rosolato, narcissism consists of five ‘courants’, which are present in greater or lesser degrees in each case: *‘le retrait libidinal, l’idéalisation, le dédoublement, la double entraxe et l’oscillation métaphoro-métonymique’* (original emphasis).⁶⁶⁰ Quite different symptoms and states of mind can arise which nonetheless share the same basis – a turning away from the world, the Other, and a falling back onto the Self. This return to the Self is perhaps most commonly thought of as the ‘retrait libidinal’⁶⁶¹ or retraction of desire. It can be manifested as a complete absence of desire or of interest in the outside world, as isolation, self-sufficiency, all along the spectrum to autism and psychosis. However, there are other less well known ‘currents’.

At the other end of the spectrum lies ‘l’idéalisation’, which is desire for possession and mastery of the outside world. Idealisation can result in the idea of an all-powerful ‘Moi Idéal’,⁶⁶² or the projected idealisation of another, for example a powerful leader. Then there is the current of ‘dédoublement’, whose importance is visible in the mythical origins of narcissism. Rosolato links this to the mirror stage, and explains that when this stage is disrupted, narcissistic doubling can respond by projecting a supplementary ideal ego onto the mother, so that her image as perfectly responding mother is not threatened by her contrasting power as destructive and dangerous. The mirror stage involves the mirroring of one’s own movements and sounds on that of the object. Rosolato makes a link between this copying and the auto-eroticism of sucking the thumb, and hence the ability to give

⁶⁵⁹ André Green, ‘Un, autre, neutre: valeurs narcissiques du même’, in *La Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, 13 (Spring 1976), pp. 37-80, and Guy Rosolato, ‘Le Narcissisme’, in *La Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, 13 (Spring 1976), pp. 7-36.

⁶⁶⁰ ‘Le Narcissisme’, p. 8.

⁶⁶¹ ‘Le Narcissisme’, p. 9.

⁶⁶² ‘Le Narcissisme’, p. 15.

pleasure to oneself.⁶⁶³ A further current, ‘la double entrave’ or double-bind is important as it can prompt the narcissistic response, as a means of escape:

La double entrave imposée est le pouvoir, la décision de placer autrui dans un choix indécidable, donc de lui ravir le pouvoir de décision. C’est en cela que se manifeste l’idéale toute-puissance du narcissisme: de n’y être pas soi-même par ce moyen soumis (original emphasis).⁶⁶⁴

Rosolato gives the example of the Oedipal double-bind: be like your father/don’t be like your father. Narcissism can resolve this by identifying with the mother instead, leading to a preference for her own (male) love object – and thus to homosexuality.

Green maps roughly the same territory as Rosolato. He notes that narcissism is at times structured as desire for and investment in the self, and at others simply as zero investment in the world. However, these two are analagous, inasmuch as ‘c’est le zéro qui devient objet d’investissement’.⁶⁶⁵ But as with Rosolato, at root is the return to the self: ‘le Moi trouve en lui-même sa propre satisfaction, se donne l’illusion d’autosuffisance, se délivre des vicissitudes et de la dépendance à un objet éminemment variable dans ce qu’il donne ou refuse à son gré.’⁶⁶⁶ As to Green’s title, ‘Un, Autre, Neutre’: the infant begins with the One, the awareness only of the self and of the belief that the world is part of that self.⁶⁶⁷ Then we become aware of, and ultimately dominated by our desire for, the Other.⁶⁶⁸ Green writes that ‘je propose de compléter cette série par la catégorie du Neutre (*neuter*, ni l’Un, ni l’Autre).’⁶⁶⁹ It is this neutral/neuter that Green associates with what he calls ‘negative’ narcissism, as opposed to the grandiose, megalomaniacal, positive narcissism: ‘le narcissisme négatif va vers l’inexistence, l’anesthésie, le vide, le *blanc* (de l’anglais *blank* qui

⁶⁶³ ‘Le Narcissisme’, p. 19.

⁶⁶⁴ ‘Le Narcissisme’, pp. 26-27.

⁶⁶⁵ ‘Un, Autre, Neutre’, pp. 41-42.

⁶⁶⁶ ‘Un, Autre, Neutre’, p. 41.

⁶⁶⁷ ‘Freud est parti du regard et il découvre l’Un.’, ‘Un, Autre, Neutre’, p. 44.

⁶⁶⁸ ‘Après lui, les analystes installent l’Autre en position maîtresse’, ‘Un, Autre, Neutre’, p. 44.

⁶⁶⁹ ‘Un, Autre, Neutre’, p. 44.

se traduit par la catégorie du neutre), que ce blanc investisse l'affect (l'indifférence), la représentation (l'hallucination négative), la pensée (psychose blanc).⁶⁷⁰

Green makes more of the role of fantasy than Rosolato, and of narcissism as rejection of reality, partly because reality threatens to contradict idealisation, but also because the self can supply all the self needs: 'En principe, réalité et narcissisme s'opposent s'ils ne s'excluent pas.' Instead, we have 'la toute-puissance de la pensée'.⁶⁷¹ Furthermore, he identifies a narcissistic asceticism that can be linked to idealisation – what he calls 'moral narcissism', whereby sacrifice can lead to self-exaltation: 'cette situation contradictoire – exaltation et sacrifice – témoigne du double mouvement *d'expansion et de retrait narcissiques*' (original emphasis).⁶⁷² This expansion and retreat is one way of characterising what Green sees as the dialectical oscillation (like Rosolato's) at the heart of narcissism. They are the twin impulses of Eros and Thanatos, of 'la liaison et la déliaison', 'la conjonction et la disjonction', or 'Même et Autre'.⁶⁷³ Narcissism is the 'Désir de l'Un', which paradoxically leads to doubling.

Rosolato and Green's analyses identify what seem to be opposing traits in narcissism, some of which correspond to the banal, and others which do not. The neutral indifference and absence of desire characterised as negative narcissism, and the retreat into the self and isolation from the world, correspond to certain predicaments of the subject which I outlined in Chapter 1, and which I have recast in terms of the banal. The retreat into the self resulting in fantasy and rejection of reality, however, is an act of projection: 'la psyché ne peut représenter sans se représenter'.⁶⁷⁴ In narcissism this becomes so extreme that the entire world is remade according to the self's projection – and as we have seen, projection is the antithesis of the banal. This is a paradox I shall return to below, in relation to Baker and the banality of sexual fantasy.

⁶⁷⁰ 'Un, Autre, Neutre', p. 44.

⁶⁷¹ 'Un, Autre, Neutre', p. 45.

⁶⁷² 'Un, Autre, Neutre', p. 49.

⁶⁷³ 'Un, Autre, Neutre', p. 56.

⁶⁷⁴ 'Un, Autre, Neutre', p. 72.

I hope to have shown that Sami-Ali's banal describes with great accuracy the affluent, contemporary societies of the first world, with reference to the three domains of subject, society, and art.⁶⁷⁵ In terms of the subject, the banal is the repression of the imaginary function, which creates a void. The resultant attenuated subject can be identified with the homogenous or narcissistic individual. In terms of society, the void is filled by a pathological conformity to the rules and contents of society that pre-exist the subject, of which non-lieux are an example. In terms of the contents of society, the artworks and cultural products, the banal is the self-identical, the transparent, the manifest, the typical. Simulation is an example of the banal in this domain.

This raises a series of questions: if art is by definition the anti-banal (projection), but also in and of the contemporary world, then what are the dangers inherent to the work of art (e.g. the novel) that attempts to represent or reproduce that banality? In the remainder of this chapter I want to examine the extent to which these dangers are visible in the works of Toussaint and Baker. In Chapter 6, I examine how their writing succeeds in escaping banality, thereby redeeming the banal world.

5.3 Banality, Toussaint, and Baker

The Infra-ordinary and the Banal

*Le quotidien [...] s'approche du banal sans pour autant s'y réduire.*⁶⁷⁶

I now turn to Toussaint's and Baker's texts, and to their relationship with the banal. It might seem obvious from preceding discussions that their central preoccupation with the infra-ordinary must, like the everyday mentioned in Sami-Ali's quotation above, draw close

⁶⁷⁵ In contrast, as Sami-Ali observes from his own clinical practice in Egypt, are the so-called 'archaic' societies, where dreaming still occupies a privileged place as a means of communication with self, other, and the Beyond, and where the imaginary function still has a role to play. *Le Banal*, p. 80.

⁶⁷⁶ *Le Banal*, p. 23.

to the banal. Turning again to Perec's definition: 'ce qui se passe chaque jour et qui revient chaque jour, le banal, le quotidien, l'évident, le commun, l'ordinaire, l'infra-ordinaire, le bruit de fond, l'habituel [...]',⁶⁷⁷ we can see that for Perec the infra-ordinary is listed alongside, perhaps is on a continuum with, the banal. The question of whether the infra-ordinary is indeed equivalent to the banal, or whether it is a transformation of the banal, is reserved for Chapter 6. It will become apparent in the next chapter that despite their close association, I in no way believe either the infra-ordinary or Toussaint's and Baker's work to be reducible to the banal. In this chapter, however, I will first explore the areas of proximity between the banal and Toussaint and Baker that make it possible to raise the question of that equivalence.

The point of closest contact between the infra-ordinary and the banal would seem to be that of the commonplace. If the banal is the sign of a repressed subjectivity replaced by the collective imaginary, then the infra-ordinary would certainly seem to share this collective dimension. Toussaint's and Baker's infra-ordinary, whether discussing staplers or television-watching habits, relies on its typical nature, its generalised singularity, in order to function *as* the infra-ordinary – in order to be recognised by the reader. Without this, it would be the utterly singular record of a set of private and unrecognisable experiences. In this, the infra-ordinary is but the culmination of a long-standing aspiration of the novel, where the singular is made general, and access to universal truth is provided by means of a specific fiction.

For Toussaint and Baker, the presence of the infra-ordinary as a focus on objects and exteriors, also suggests a preoccupation with the outside, with the common world outside the self, that characterises the banal: 'relativement à la polarité dedans-dehors, le banal appartient donc exclusivement au dehors. Au dehors que le langage et les habitudes perceptives convertissent en un lieu de rencontre ouvert à tous et à personne, c'est-à-dire

⁶⁷⁷ *L'Infra-ordinaire*, p. 11.

en un lieu commun.⁶⁷⁸ There are other instances of the banal in Toussaint's and Baker's texts. Chapter 3 examined the presence of 'non-lieux' in Toussaint's and Baker's novels, which I argued are examples of banal space. Furthermore, the inclusion of 'non-lieux', as with the presence of brand names in Baker, and as with the other contemporary novelists discussed in Chapter 2, results in a superficially realist atmosphere, much like a Barthesian 'effet de réel'. As with Baudrillard, signs of the real as category replace representation of the real itself. The effect is illusory because these details are ultimately depthless, banal. For Fieke Schoots, what results in Toussaint's texts is 'une réalité trop réelle pour être vraie ou même vraisemblable.'⁶⁷⁹ So the real in Toussaint tends to the banal, to simulation. If the banal can be characterised as 'cliché', it can be tempting to see *L'Appareil-photo*, for example, as 'a string of clichés', both in the immediate sense and also in the sense of 'cliché' meaning snapshot. Indeed, the only photographs to successfully develop from the film in the narrator's stolen camera, are two utterly banal holiday snapshots.

La Télévision concerns the narrator's relationship with the medium of television, repeatedly returning to ideas about its influence and effects. The narrator decides to stop watching television partly as a result of its numbing effect: 'ainsi notre esprit, comme anesthésié d'être aussi peu stimulé en même temps qu'autant sollicité, demeure-t-il essentiellement passif en face de la télévision.'⁶⁸⁰ In the passivity of the spectator, and the stifling of subjectivity, it would seem that television belongs to the realm of the banal.

A preoccupation with the banal as theme is also significant in Baker's texts. Two of these, *Vax* and *The Fermata*, are concerned in large part with pornography, a mode whose form adheres strictly to the banal. While most theoretical writing on pornography tends to claim it either as harmful or as subversively avant-garde, Chris Nagel, in his paper

⁶⁷⁸ *Le Banal*, p. 27. Henceforth, the term 'banal' will be taken to refer to the banal as we have seen it defined by Sami-Ali.

⁶⁷⁹ *Passer en douce à la douane*, p. 170.

⁶⁸⁰ *La Télévision*, p. 26.

‘Pornographic Experiences’, sets out simply to identify the phenomenal qualities of the arena of (as is relevant here to Baker), so-called ‘straight porn’:

Regardless of the sub-genre (feature, short, or lacking any plot), the sex scenes in straight porn vary remarkably little. With few exceptions, an apparently industry-standard schedule is followed in scenes with one female performer and one male performer. What is striking about this formula, and which I unfortunately cannot represent well enough in its tedious redundancy here, is that it appears with little or no variation in nearly every straight porn one-man, one-woman scene.⁶⁸¹

This is banality par excellence, with its lack of variation, and the tedium of an ‘industry-standard schedule’ paradoxically geared to ‘produce’ excitement.

Video after video after video, almost exactly similar movements, shifts, and actions are depicted. The question this raises is how to interpret the regimentation of the scenes. *Pornography presents these performers as nothing but types who follow recipes* (my emphasis).⁶⁸²

Nagel goes on to question why these recipes are in fact followed in pornography. His suggestion is that pornography operates in a similar way to other ‘recipes’ in daily life, such as the conventionalised greetings we exchange without thinking. The question remains, why should such conventions be necessary in the essentially private realm of pornographic consumption? For Nagel, consumption is indeed the question at issue:

The conventions of an audience watching and the conventions of production are part of the same phenomenon. [...] They form a recipe for pornographic experience that can be relied upon by users of porn who ‘know’ what to expect as a result. This reliance, this routine, allows pornography to function as a consumer product – a taken-for-granted, ready-made object with a specific purpose. Consumption is an unreflective, non-working relation to a product. Consumers are ‘passive’, not in the sense of being unengaged or unenthused, but in the sense of *not appropriating, changing, or working on the product to make it one’s own creation* (my emphasis).⁶⁸³

⁶⁸¹ Chris Nagel, *Pornographic Experience*. Online. California State University. Available: <http://www.mundanebehavior.org/issues/v3n1/nagel3-1.htm>. 20 January 2006.

⁶⁸² *Pornographic Experience*.

⁶⁸³ *Pornographic Experience*.

The monotonous recipe of pornography that Nagel describes is thus provided by the collective imaginary, since the subjectivity of the viewer is excluded; he/she cannot participate (by means of interpretation) in creating what is on display. The banality of straight pornography precludes and closes off such interpretations, leaving the viewer with a 'ready-made' article for consumption.

Baker's *The Fermata* and *Vox* engage with this question in a similarly dual way to their engagement with the contemporary in general; that is to say, they are both 'about' pornography, and arguably examples of it. The pornographic elements in Baker's texts are not limited to the video format Nagel describes; however, video does feature. In *Vox*, Jim relates his seduction of a work colleague; but this is no ordinary seduction, since it culminates in no more intimate physical contact than the stroking of a forearm. The couple enact Jim's fantasy of mutual masturbation while watching a pornographic video, with its 'dimensionless electronic Europop music'.⁶⁸⁴ This quotation suggests an awareness of the depthlessness and banality of the genre, as exhibited by the accompanying music. The central male characters of both *Vox* and *The Fermata* consume pornography in video and magazine form, and *Vox* is the record of a conversation on a sex chat line.

Although Baker's texts include references to straightforwardly banal pornography, *The Fermata* and *Vox* also offer themselves as *examples* of pornography. *Vox* begins with that cliché of the sexual telephone conversation: 'What are you wearing?'.⁶⁸⁵ In *The Fermata*, while in a public library, Arno conducts a visual experiment on an unsuspecting woman at an adjacent table:

She was looking through several piles of microfilm copies, sorting them and circling paragraphs every so often. She spun her pen gently, silently, on the table as she read, as if it were a spinner in a child's game. Her eyes moved with impressive speed over the chemical-smelling legal-sized pages, but she looked tired from spending hours gazing at the gray light of one of the library's horrible microfilm

⁶⁸⁴ *Vox*, p. 119.

⁶⁸⁵ *Vox*, p. 7.

readers. [...]She needed, it seemed to me, to see, or sense, my Moving Psi Squares.⁶⁸⁶

These turn out to be one-inch-square stills, cut from a flyer advertising pornographic films ‘with titles such as *Double Hand-Job Reue*, *Brunette Lactating Hermaphrodite Blowjob Reue*, and *Big Uncut Dick Facial cumshot Reue*’.⁶⁸⁷ Arno stops time, positions these squares around the woman’s reading material, and then switches time on very briefly and then off again: ‘I did this repeatedly, dozens and dozens of times, wanting to offer her a pulsing marquee of images on the periphery of her vision as she read her forties *Harper’s Bazaars*’.⁶⁸⁸

To comic effect, Baker exaggerates with these titles (although not by much) the tendency of pornographic magazines to offer content apparently tailored to the utmost specificity of ‘taste’; but their banality is discernable in their ‘recipe’ format, rigidly and repetitively adhered to. Furthermore, Baker’s narrators themselves follow a strict formula without deviation, whether in act or in fantasy. They are largely uninterested in penetrative intercourse; both Jim and Arno seem to share Jim’s dismissal of the most basic sexual act:

I don’t know, you slip inside, and that first moment is paradise, incomparable, but then you’re there, working away [...] you’re distracted, [...]. When I come inside it feels mystical but muffled [...].⁶⁸⁹

Both Jim and Arno nonetheless protest that they do ‘normal stuff here and there’,⁶⁹⁰ and that ‘Rhody and I had good, friendly sex’,⁶⁹¹ but the content of their fantasies suggests that this is not their primary interest. With the exception of the climactic scenario of *Vox*, all sexual encounters in both *Vox* and *The Fermata*, whether actual or imagined, centre around the man masturbating while watching a woman (ideally a stranger) masturbate. If the narrator can have some kind of control over what the woman watches or is aroused by,

⁶⁸⁶ *The Fermata*, pp. 61-62.

⁶⁸⁷ *The Fermata*, pp. 61-62.

⁶⁸⁸ *The Fermata*, pp. 61-62.

⁶⁸⁹ *Vox*, p. 126.

⁶⁹⁰ *Vox*, p. 126.

⁶⁹¹ *The Fermata*, p. 75.

so much the better. We see this in the Moving Psi Squares, in Arno burying his erotica in the sand for a woman to discover (*The Fermata*)⁶⁹² and in Jim watching a pornographic film with, and giving a penis tracing to, a work colleague (*Vox*).⁶⁹³ Even in *Vox*, where the mutual exchange of the telephone call gives greater importance to the woman's role and to her desires, Jim is still drawn to the fantasy of secretly observing women in states of arousal, and to this end invents his imaginary 'Bionic Mmmm-Detector',⁶⁹⁴ which 'senses the presence nearby of any intelligent strumming woman.'⁶⁹⁵ It would seem, then, that the banality that characterises pornography is still present here in the repetitive nature of the fantasies of Baker's characters.

This uncovers something of a paradox in Sami-Ali's theory. Fantasy equals projection, which is itself the antithesis of the banal. On the other hand, there is nothing more formulaic, repetitive, and therefore deathlike, than an individual's sexual fantasies.⁶⁹⁶ The repetitiveness of sexual fantasies can be understood as the colonisation of the creative unconscious by the social banal. This paradox can be resolved if one accepts that repetition is a necessary but not sufficient condition of the banal; this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 in relation to the use of repetition in the banal aesthetic. However, it suffices to note here that writing itself (as a creative, projective act) is also repetition in the sense of building on and citing the forms of the past. The banal may always be repetitive; but repetition is not always banal.

Character Psychology – Absent Narcissists

Finally, in looking at the presence of the banal in Toussaint and Baker, there is the question of absent character psychology or interiority. I discussed the apparent absence at the heart

⁶⁹² *The Fermata*, p. 126.

⁶⁹³ *Vox*, pp. 101-117 and pp. 93-96, respectively.

⁶⁹⁴ *Vox*, p. 150.

⁶⁹⁵ *Vox*, p. 151.

⁶⁹⁶ See Freud's discussion of repetition as manifestation of the death instinct, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', pp. 307 – 312.

of central characters in Chapters 3 and 4. An absence of subjectivity, and thus of the imaginary, suggests banal pathology.

La Réticence is perhaps the most exemplary text in this respect. The externality of the prose is relentless, as the narrator endlessly traces the same pathways in the town of Sasuelo. The seemingly arbitrary attention to descriptive detail of banal surroundings can be demonstrated from one or two examples among literally hundreds:

J'allais déjeuner *Chez Georges* à midi, un des rares restaurants du port qui restait ouvert toute l'année. Les murs étaient décorés de cartes de géographie anciennes joliment encadrées, et les nappes à carreaux rouges et blancs étaient assorties au tissu des serviettes et des rideaux [...].⁶⁹⁷

Later on, in a taxi:

Le ciel était très sombre sur la route quand nous quittâmes le village. Il n'était qu'un peu moins de quatre heures de l'après-midi, mais la lumière était si grise que le jour semblait déjà être tombé.⁶⁹⁸

Even when the narrator describes an event which should be highly charged with emotion, such as the anxiety he must surely feel as he breaks into Biaggi's house, expecting at any moment to be found out, there is a complete absence of any interiority in the description:

Y avait-il donc quelqu'un dans la maison en ce moment qui savait que j'étais là? Je ressortis de la pièce aussitôt, et, au moment où je repassais devant le grand miroir en bois du vestibule, je vis fugitivement passer devant moi dans le noir une silhouette en manteau sombre et en cravate.⁶⁹⁹

One can further note in the above quotation the reference to the narrator himself as a third party, as a stranger seen from an outside perspective, 'une silhouette en manteau sombre et en cravate.' The apparent absence or repression of subjectivity on the part of these characters gestures towards the banal. Unlike the other texts, however, *La Réticence* poses somewhat of a paradox, in that it is the account of the narrator's paranoia, where *nothing is*

⁶⁹⁷ *La Réticence*, p. 26.

⁶⁹⁸ *La Réticence*, p. 31.

⁶⁹⁹ *La Réticence*, p. 118.

ever as it seems; every banal detail recorded is evidence for the narrator's conviction that Biaggi is hiding from him and following him. On the one hand, his inability to accept the surface of things, but instead to believe that everything in fact refers to something else, seems to contradict the definition of banality; on the other, the extreme repetition involved in *La Réticence* (of which more in Chapter 6) combines with a reduction of every observation to the same unvarying schema, and it is the sheer monotony of this paranoia that in fact aligns it with the banal.

Lasch's theory of narcissism, that I correlated earlier with Sami-Ali's banal pathology, is also often suggested by the central characters of Toussaint and Baker. A central aspect of this narcissism is a heightened concern with one's image in others' eyes, a desire to please and to be admired. This attitude is abundantly exhibited by *The Mezzanine's* Howie, who is greatly concerned with what one might call 'successful' social interactions, those that glide past effortlessly, with no clumsiness or embarrassment on either side: appropriate male washroom behaviour, how to take leave of a co-worker, how to perfect a transaction with a cashier, and so on. Arno exhibits a similar desire to please in *The Fermata*. Wishing to give better street directions to passers-by, his concern with others' perception of him leads to behaviour far in excess of that required by simple courtesy:

I am poor at retaining street names, however [...]. For a while I deliberately studied maps of the business district in the evening, counting traffic lights and memorizing cross streets and helpful landmarks, so that I would live up to the expectations of unintimidating guidance that my face and features seem to create.⁷⁰⁰

U and I also acknowledges its narcissistic project in Cyril Connolly's epigram that prefaces the text: 'It may be *us* they wish to meet but it's themselves they want to talk about' (original emphasis).

Although Toussaint's characters are far less concerned with pleasing others – tending to the converse more often than not – they are not immune from the heightened

⁷⁰⁰ *The Fermata*, p. 45.

sense of observation by others, and from concern with how they appear. The tendency to describe a third person perspective in the first person, discussed in Chapter 4, contributes to this effect: ‘Je me revois très bien dans le hall de l’aéroport me diriger vers le panneau qui annonce les départs, la tête levée et les billets à la main, comparant un instant les deux d’un air perplexe.’⁷⁰¹

Furthermore, there are occasional but startling eruptions of narcissistic rage in Toussaint’s characters. Narcissism involves a repression of desire; it seeks only to excite the desire of others. For Lasch, it is these defences against desire which transmute into rage, disguised by an apparently calm exterior: ‘outwardly bland, submissive, and sociable, they seethe with an inner anger for which a dense, overpopulated, bureaucratic society can devise few legitimate outlets.’⁷⁰² This connects with the eruptions of rage in Toussaint’s characters. In a ‘dense, overpopulated’ world, they attempt to find and gain mastery over certain spaces of retreat, adopting and controlling them as if they were their own, from the driving school in *L’Appareil-photo*, to the hotel room and hospital room in *La Salle de bain*, to his neighbour’s apartment in *La Télévision*. The desire to control these spaces can be seen in the way the narrator turns away a prospective student from the driving school, as well as sending out Pascale to obtain coffee and croissants on his first visit; the way he adopts his neighbours’ apartment as his own, watching their television and wearing Uwe’s dressing-gown; and the insistence on a room of his own in hospital, in which he insists on smoking despite its prohibition, and where he orders in café food rather than eat hospital food. In this way the narcissistic self expands to include immediate surroundings – evidence, on a small scale, of ‘positive’ or megalomaniacal narcissism.

The sparks of rage in Toussaint’s characters nearly always relate to their mastery of these places of retreat being in some way disturbed. The Venetian hotel in *La Salle de bain* has become just such a retreat, where he can play solo darts tournaments in peace. Even

⁷⁰¹ *La Télévision*, pp. 17-18. See also p. 7 for a further example.

⁷⁰² *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 11.

beyond the room itself, the narrator starts to extend his practice of ‘making himself at home’ to the rest of the hotel, when he creeps into the kitchen at night, ‘à la recherche d’une cuisse de poulet’.⁷⁰³

But when this mastery of the immediate world as extension of self is disrupted, then, as Green writes: ‘l’impossibilité d’assouvir le besoin de maîtrise entraîne la rage narcissique.’⁷⁰⁴ We see this clearly in *La Salle de bain*. When Edmondsson comes to visit, the narrator’s control over the space of the hotel room and thus over his whole day-to-day existence is compromised by her presence. She wants to take him sightseeing when he would rather play tennis; a friction develops and they spend less time together. When they are together, the fact of being looked at by her unnerves him more and more. When he suddenly cracks and throws a dart in her forehead, the effect is one of repressed rage suddenly finding an outlet. Edmondsson was preventing his concentration and ability to throw his darts, suggesting a further explanation akin to Rosolato’s:

La ‘rage’ narcissique [...] s’explique donc soit par l’intolérance à l’égard de tout obstacle et de toute attente qui gêne un projet, soit plus exactement par la décharge agressive provoquée dans l’affrontement au double qui menace l’identité et partant l’intégrité du sujet.⁷⁰⁵

Under positive narcissism, where the psyche begins to extend and dominate over the world outside, any attempt at disruption over that world will threaten a narcissist’s sense of control not only over that space, but over *himself*, hence Rosolato’s point about the threat to identity and integrity of the subject.

The narrator of *La Salle de bain* is also in many ways the most solitary of Toussaint’s characters, and in this he and the others exhibit the narcissistic trait of isolation and self-sufficiency. Rosolato identifies ‘le plaisir narcissique’, which

⁷⁰³ *La Salle de bain*, p.63.

⁷⁰⁴ ‘Un, Autre, Neutre’, p. 47.

⁷⁰⁵ ‘Le Narcissisme’, p. 23.

comporte donc trois courants: le souhait de faire converger sur soi les satisfactions en ne tenant pas compte du monde et des intérêts extérieurs, ce qui est proprement l'égoïsme; l'autonomie d'un être qui trouve sa toute-puissance dans une autosuffisance, bien souvent synonyme de pouvoir, soit en ne dépendant pas des autres, soit, dans une forme active, en soumettant les autres à ses volontés; enfin l'exercice lui-même du fantasme et de la pensée, toute-puissance qui modèle par anticipation non seulement les satisfactions mais le monde extérieur à sa guise et jusque dans la réalité.⁷⁰⁶

We can see from this that narcissistic traits can be detected in both Tousaint's and Baker's characters, from the misanthropy and self-sufficiency of Toussaint's characters, to the power of Baker's Arno in *The Fermata* to make the world submit to his will. Even *La Réticence*, with its elaborate paranoid fantasy, can be read as 'toute-puissance qui modèle par anticipation non seulement les satisfactions mais le monde extérieur à sa guise et jusque dans la réalité.'⁷⁰⁷ As noted earlier, the projective nature of paranoid fantasy can nonetheless be banal in its unchanging schema and in its tendency to be hermetically sealed against influence from reality itself.

The indifferent tone of Toussaint's texts has been discussed in Chapter 4, and will be discussed further in relation to the banality of minimalism, in the following section. The indifference of Toussaint's narrators themselves, however, is also relevant here. Examples of this have already been cited in Chapter 4; some further examples include, in *La Salle de bain*: 'Edmondsson n'écoutait pas. Bon.'⁷⁰⁸ and in *Monsieur*, Monsieur's response to his fiancée's mother's excessive interest in the perks of his job with Fiat-France:

Et vous avez des prix? demanda Mme Parrain. Pardon? dit Monsieur. Vous avez des prix sur les voitures? Je ne sais pas, dit Monsieur en tapotant sur la table. Vous devriez vous renseigner, dit-elle. Oui, si vous voulez, dit Monsieur, je me renseignerai. Bien, bien. D'autres questions?⁷⁰⁹

Narcissistic traits in the texts extend beyond the signs of narcissism in character psychology. Maryse Fauvel has discussed the narcissistic thematics of Toussaint's texts in

⁷⁰⁶ 'Le Narcissisme', pp. 10-11.

⁷⁰⁷ 'Le Narcissisme', pp. 10-11.

⁷⁰⁸ *La Salle de bain*, p. 76.

⁷⁰⁹ *Monsieur*, p. 22.

'Narcissisme et esthétique de la disparition chez Jean-Philippe Toussaint',⁷¹⁰ highlighting the flat surface of the writing. That surface is realism as simulacra, a virtual, schematic reality, 'une image, non pas l'objet d'une investigation, d'une réflexion rationnelle, d'un questionnement.'⁷¹¹ There are also textual motifs, such as the self reflections in water and in mirrors, in *La Réticence* and in *La Salle de Bain*. In the search by the narrator of *L'Appareil-photo* for adequate photographs of himself we can also detect the narcissistic trait of self-surveillance (in order to assess others' perception of the self), together with the idea that the narcissistic self is in some way unreal, requiring a photographic record in order to give it substance:

The proliferation of recorded images undermines our sense of reality. [...] We distrust our perceptions until the camera verifies them. Photographic images provide us with the proof of our existence.⁷¹²

Fauvel identifies this same self-observation in Toussaint's texts: 'il objectivise son expérience habituellement vécue en privé, se voit rêver, faire l'amour, se regarde sans cesse agir.'⁷¹³

Other examples of narcissism in Toussaint's texts have already been explored in Chapter 3. However, I will argue in Chapter 6 that the apparently flat surface of Toussaint's characters is ultimately undermined by the writing itself, and that it serves to introduce depth and projection which counters the texts' initial appearance. In this I concur with Fauvel that Toussaint dismantles or subverts the narcissism present in his texts: 'le monde fictionnel de Toussaint relève d'une réalité de surface, réalité de l'image virtuelle et démonte la culture du narcissisme de la fin du XXe siècle.'⁷¹⁴

⁷¹⁰ Maryse Fauvel, 'Narcissisme et esthétique de la disparition chez Jean-Philippe Toussaint', *Romanic Review*, 89:4 (1998), 609-20.

⁷¹¹ 'Narcissisme et esthétique de la disparition chez Jean-Philippe Toussaint', p. 612.

⁷¹² *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 48.

⁷¹³ 'Narcissisme et esthétique de la disparition chez Jean-Philippe Toussaint', p. 616.

⁷¹⁴ 'Narcissisme et esthétique de la disparition chez Jean-Philippe Toussaint', p. 610.

Baker's characters in *The Fermata* and *Vox* demonstrate, as I have noted, a narcissistic preoccupation with the desire they can arouse in others, and prefer to keep themselves distant from the women in question – whether by interacting over the telephone, or by freezing them in time, so that they remain unaware of his presence, an apparent attempt to 'atteindre la jouissance dans le retrait le plus radical à l'égard de l'objet et du monde'.⁷¹⁵ There is also the desire to control others in social interactions, in the control of sexual arousal or other manipulations as a result of stopping time.

The Form of the Banal

In terms of *thematic* content then – the infra-ordinary, non-places, television, pornography, as well as the characterology of the texts – I would argue that the banal plays a very important role in Toussaint's and Baker's texts. I want now to examine how this is mirrored in the *form* of these texts.

Toussaint's writing is, as I have said, characterised by a neutral, indifferent tone. In the following quotation, Monsieur has just moved into a new office:

La pièce était spacieuse, assez haute de plafond. Une grande baie vitrée, en verre bleuté, dominait la ville. La table de travail, située à portée de main de deux armoires métalliques, identiques, comptait six tiroirs, de part et d'autre, et était recouverte d'une plaque épaisse, en verre fumé.⁷¹⁶

On a first, cursory reading, the description seems flat, neutral, two-dimensional. The narrator's gaze remains entirely at the surface of the objects. It is a supremely literal description; like the banal, it is exactly as it appears – 'le réel n'est plus que ce qu'il est'.⁷¹⁷ Subjectivity does not intervene; the description of Monsieur's office is without emotional charge, devoid of metaphor. As Monsieur settles in, the reader encounters further

⁷¹⁵ 'Le Narcissisme', pp. 15-16.

⁷¹⁶ *Monsieur*, p. 7.

⁷¹⁷ *Le Banal*, p. 10.

meticulous descriptions, as in the following quotation, given its own paragraph and therefore prominence:

Peu à peu, il s'installait. Dès le lendemain, il apporta une cafetière électrique, qu'il brancha à l'unique prise de terre de la pièce, sise dans un angle du mur, derrière le porte-manteau, et que, provisoirement, il laissa sur une caisse de vieux livres. Elle faisait du très bon café, sa cafetière, le gardait chaud en permanence. Il en buvait tous les matins une ou deux tasses, ne manquait pas d'en offrir à ses visiteurs.⁷¹⁸

Here we have, apparently, the real that is no more than it appears to be. It is the literal; the figurative is excluded. In Chapter 6 I will return to the first of these quotations in order to demonstrate how its apparent banality is subverted by connotation, but for the moment I wish to draw out the banality which is exhibited on an initial reading. For Sami-Ali the opposition between literal and figurative equates exactly to the absence and presence of projection: 'L'opposition du littéral et du figural renvoie, dès lors, à l'absence et à la présence de la projection dans l'élaboration de l'expérience du monde.'⁷¹⁹ It must be noted, however, that metaphor is only evidence of projection when it operates *as* metaphor, that is to say, by signifying that which is not itself. A 'dead' metaphor, a cliché, is banal and literal despite appearances to the contrary. As Sami-Ali explains, such clichés were once the product of projection, but no longer – their effect now derives from the collective, not the individual, imaginary. These are 'des poncifs qui sont des métaphores dues à une projection qu'elles-mêmes n'effectuent pas.'⁷²⁰

The Perecquian desire to 'voir plus platement'⁷²¹ may be central to the infra-ordinary and to minimalism or 'l'écriture blanche', but it also *mimics* the neutrality and repressed subjectivity of the banal. Sami-Ali notes that in apparently objective or denotative art subjectivity seems to recede: 'en se confondant avec l'anonymat de l'objet, la

⁷¹⁸ *Monsieur*, p. 8.

⁷¹⁹ *Le Banal*, p. 13.

⁷²⁰ *Le Banal*, pp. 48-49.

⁷²¹ *Espèces d'espaces*, p. 71.

subjectivité crée l'illusion de son absence: subjectivité par négation d'elle-même.⁷²² This quotation could be used to describe the Toussaintian illusion of absent subjectivity (where the narrator says 'I' but the I seems to be absent), and doubly so in *Monsieur*, where we are faced with this absence on the part of both narrator and character.

The reflexivity of Toussaint's texts, discussed in Chapter 4, sometimes suggests an awareness of their own flattened two-dimensionality. In *La Télévision*, where the narrator looks down on Berlin from an airplane, the view seems to allude to the 'flattened' aspect of the text itself:

Vu d'en haut, à trois ou quatre cents pieds d'altitude, la ville, immense, que le regard ne pouvait embrasser d'un seul coup tant elle s'étendait de toutes parts, semblait être une surface étonnamment plate et régulière, comme écrasée par la hauteur, uniformisée, simple agglomérat de blocs réguliers [...] (my emphasis).⁷²³

This quotation not only denotes the space of Berlin as seen from above, but also hints at the uniform and regular surface of the writing – a surface where the calm neutrality of narrative voice is never broken. Moreover, the 'simple agglomérat de blocs réguliers' could equally well describe the spatial arrangement of blocks of text on the page – isolated paragraphs surrounded by white space. Toussaint makes a similar reference to the flattening or uniformising effect of aerial views in the opening of *Autoportrait*: 'Vu de haut, à quatre mille pieds d'altitude, il n'y a pas beaucoup de différence entre le Pacifique et la Méditerranée.'⁷²⁴ I would argue that there is an intertextual link between these two quotations, both demonstrating an awareness of the flattened quality of the writing, whose neutrality apparently smooths out differences as do aerial views of the geography below. This self-awareness is something to which I will return in Chapter 6, as it functions paradoxically to provide depth at the moment of displaying surface.

⁷²² *Le Banal*, p. 15.

⁷²³ *La Télévision*, p. 215.

⁷²⁴ *Autoportrait*, p. 9.

The banal as surface, as two-dimensionality, is also explicitly evoked in Toussaint's thematics of geometry. This is perhaps most marked in *La Salle de bain*. Prefaced by Pythagoras' theorem, and with 'triangular' chapters entitled 'Paris', 'L'Hypoténuse' and 'Paris', geometric patterns recur throughout, in the form of bathroom tiles and Mondrian paintings. Geometric figures are sometimes subtly embedded in descriptions, as for example when the narrator is shaving: 'Déplaçant lentement le rasoir, je retirais des rectangles de mousse, et la peau réapparaissait dans le miroir, tendue, légèrement rougie.'⁷²⁵ Elsewhere the references are more explicit: 'mes cauchemars étaient rigides, géométriques.'⁷²⁶ Geometric metaphor is extremely pervasive in *La Salle de bain*, and features sporadically in other Toussaint novels.⁷²⁷ By definition, the two-dimensional plane cannot possess depth, and it is in this respect that Toussaint's works further suggest the theme of the banal as surface.

Linked to the geometric is the theme of immobility in Toussaint and Baker, which expresses the narrators' desire to fix the present moment and resist the passing of time, and hence mortality. It is a theme that occurs particularly throughout *La Salle de bain*, in the narrator's interest in stalemate chess problems and the immobility of Mondrian paintings. We see it also on the narrator's train journey to Venice:

J'avais passé la nuit dans un compartiment de train, seul, la lumière éteinte. Immobile. Sensible au mouvement, uniquement au mouvement, au mouvement extérieur, manifeste, qui me déplaçait malgré mon immobilité, mais aussi au mouvement intérieur de mon corps qui se détruisait, mouvement imperceptible auquel je commençais à vouer une attention exclusive, qu'à toutes forces je voulais fixer.⁷²⁸

In *Fuir*, Toussaint's most recent novel, the immobile is again linked to the geometric. Themes of geometry not only point toward the two-dimensionality of the

⁷²⁵ *La Salle de bain*, p. 25.

⁷²⁶ *La Salle de bain*, p. 84.

⁷²⁷ See *La Salle de bain*, pp. 35, 45, 55, 72, 84, 97, 109; *Monsieur*, pp. 90, 92, *La Réticence*, pp. 47, 60.

⁷²⁸ *La Salle de bain*, p. 51.

banal, but also to the world of forms, or pure ideas. Fixed geometric forms (especially triangles) refuse transformation into anything else. They are endlessly self-defining ($a = a$) and appear to leave no gap for their transformation or degradation ($a \neq a$). This is the a-priori, where there is no human (unconscious) investment, no projection, and no suffering. Toussaint draws these connections out as the narrator of *Fuir* gazes at the geometrical shapes formed by a bowling alley and its skittles:

Depuis que je jouais, j'étais transporté dans un autre monde, un monde abstrait, intérieur et mental, où les arêtes du monde extérieur semblaient émoussées, les souffrances évanouies. Peu à peu s'était tu autour de moi le turbulent vacarme de la salle, le tumulte de la musique et la vaine agitation des joueurs. J'étais seul sur la piste, ma boule à la main, le regard fixé sur l'unique objectif du moment, ce seul endroit du monde et ce seul instant du temps qui comptaient pour moi désormais, à l'exclusion de toute autre, passé ou à venir, cette cible stylisée que j'avais sous les yeux, géométrique, et par là même indolore – car la géométrie est indolore, sans chair et sans idée de mort –, pure construction mentale, rassurante abstraction, un triangle et un rectangle, le triangle des dix quilles blanches et rouges bombées que j'avais sous les yeux et le rectangle de la longue allée de bois naturel presque blanc de la piste qui s'étendait devant moi [...].⁷²⁹

The idea of pure mathematical abstraction as a non-human domain devoid of suffering has its antecedents in Roquentin's attraction to the circle as mathematical figure in *La Nausée*.⁷³⁰ Such a privileged moment still suggests the banal in virtue of the exclusion of depth, projection, emotion – all of which are reduced to calm, geometric abstraction. The paragraph also connects to the dart-throwing in *La Salle de bain*:

J'étais très concentré lorsque je jouais aux fléchettes. Immobile contre le mur, j'en serrais une entre mes doigts. Tout mon corps était tendu, mes yeux étaient intenses. Je fixais le centre de la cible avec une détermination absolue, faisais le vide dans ma tête - et lançais.⁷³¹

⁷²⁹ *Fuir*, pp. 99-100.

⁷³⁰ 'Dans un autre monde, les cercles, les airs de musique gardent leurs lignes pures et rigides.' *La Nausée*, p. 182.

⁷³¹ *La Salle de bain*, p. 60.

L'Appareil-photo and *Autoportrait* are also preoccupied with the theme of immobility and of resisting the passing of time and the suffering it brings with it. In the latter text, Toussaint comes to see the act of writing as central to this resistance:

Cette sensation d'être emporté par le temps avait toujours été atténuée par le fait que j'écrivais, écrire était en quelque sorte une façon de résister au courant qui m'emportait, une manière de m'inscrire dans le temps, de marquer des repères dans l'immatérialité de son cours, des incisions, des égratignures.⁷³²

What is interesting here is that writing is in a sense both the liberation from immobility, and yet also conditioned by it. As Dominique Fisher has noted, Toussaint's writing, 'hantée par le motif de l'immobilité, se heurte avec ténacité à l'idée de créer du nouveau, dans une fin de siècle où la possibilité même du nouveau semble avoir été épuisée ou dépassée comme l'affirment Lyotard et Baudrillard.'⁷³³ The end of the new, the repetition of forms in the postmodern, overwritten world, are all thus expressions of a banal discernably present in Toussaint's and Baker's texts, whether by inclusion or, as we shall see in Chapter 6, by resistance.

One of the most noticeable features of the banal is that of repetition, and this is present within as well as among Toussaint's texts. In Chapter 4, I explored in detail his use of repetition and circularity, suggesting that the repetition of identical or near-identical passages seems to fulfil the condition of infinite reproducibility that defines the banal. Infinite reproducibility without the intervention of subjectivity also results in the a-historical dimension of the banal, which is 'soustrait au devenir',⁷³⁴ thereby occluding the history of how it came to be. We can see this dimension at work here in both Toussaint and in Baker, in the preoccupation with the present moment and exclusion of history explored in Chapter 3.

⁷³² *Autoportrait*, pp. 119-120.

⁷³³ 'Les non-lieux de Jean-Philippe Toussaint: bricolage textuel et rhétorique du neutre', p. 628.

⁷³⁴ *Le Banal*, p. 24.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, using Sami-Ali's bold opposition between the literal and the figurative, I have, as it were, played 'devil's advocate' and explored aspects of Toussaint's and Baker's work that could lead some readers to conclude that a preoccupation or flirtation with the banal – evident at both the thematic and formal levels – has led these writers to fall into the trap of being seduced by it. In other words, the proximity to the banal of the infra-ordinary, together with banal images and thematics, and the mimicking of its form, inevitably raises the uneasy question as to whether these works are *themselves* banal.

That I do *not* believe this to be the case should come as no surprise: after all, the very choice to study and compare these two writers implies that I believe there is more to say about them than 'they are what they are and nothing else' – a judgement that could be levelled at ninety-nine percent of the pulp fiction that fills the shelves of W.H. Smith at Heathrow. Nevertheless, the insistence of the banal – as I have defined it – in their works does pose a problem, namely: how to escape from it, or, perhaps, redeem it? It is to this question of a redemptive 'banal aesthetic' that I turn in my final chapter.

CHAPTER 6: TRANSFORMING THE BANAL

*Une esthétique du banal est-elle possible? Comment l'œuvre d'art qui est pure projection s'accommode-t-elle du banal qui est absence de projection?*⁷³⁵

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I looked at how the banal, theorised in psychoanalytic terms, provides a basis for thinking about a number of ideas and modes that I have claimed throughout the thesis as uniquely contemporary. I also explored the presence of the banal in the work of Toussaint and Baker, in terms of both theme and form. The idea of an artwork that apparently exhibits all the features of the banal is a problem that needs resolving, since the act of artistic creation would seem utterly incompatible with the banal, in that an artwork of any kind is universally construed as evidence of the imaginary function at work.

Sami-Ali equates the revolt of the unconscious against the superego with the revolt of the creative impulse against social adaptation. The banal, on the other hand, is 'pathologie de l'adaptation réussie au monde social au premier chef, dans laquelle est absente cette négativité particulière inhérente à l'acte créateur, qu'il soit œuvre, délire ou rêve, et que porte en soi l'activité projective' (original emphasis).⁷³⁶ The negative impulse of an artwork resisting its social context, or the unconscious in conflict with the superego, are for Sami-Ali evidence of the same activity of projection.⁷³⁷

Sami-Ali is thus interested in the question of artworks which seem to exhibit banal properties, and yet somehow embody 'la possibilité de la projection dans une organisation sociale favorisant un réel qui est le littéral.'⁷³⁸ If art is projection, how are we to understand

⁷³⁵ *Le Banal*, p. 31.

⁷³⁶ *Le Banal*, p. 77.

⁷³⁷ Jameson identifies a similar negativity in the 'semi-autonomy' of art, in *Postmodernism*, p. 48, as does Marcuse: 'The "estrangement-effect" [...] is rather literature's own answer to the threat of total behaviorism – the attempt to rescue the rationality of the negative.' - *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 70.

⁷³⁸ *Le Banal*, p. 15.

apparently banal artworks? One possibility is simply to deny their status as artworks. I shall argue that for some texts this may indeed be appropriate, perhaps re-classifying them as products instead. For other texts, however, the question of the banal artwork is a paradox which yields more from exploration than from erasure of one of its terms. Sami-Ali evolves an idea of a banal aesthetic in response to this question. In this final chapter, I want to look at how his analysis of a banal aesthetic, which he develops in relation to Warhol and Duchamp, amongst others, can be expanded and adapted to clarify the same problem in regard to Toussaint and Baker.

The first section of this chapter will examine the question of an apparently paradoxical banal aesthetic. The second section explores its use by Toussaint and Baker. Sections 3 and 4 go on to show that in addition to the adoption of a banal aesthetic, their texts also exhibit other forms of projection that resist and counteract the banal. It is these elements of resistance which further demonstrate that Toussaint's and Baker's work cannot ultimately be thought of as banal, despite the mimicry of its form in many respects: the banal aesthetic enables Toussaint's and Baker's texts to be about the banal, and even to formally mimic banal traits, and yet not to function as such. In order to understand how this can be, it will be useful to contrast with their texts those works, or perhaps one might better say products, which *do* fall into the category of the banal.

6.1 The Banal Aesthetic: Paradoxical Projection

Truly Banal Works

In this category are works which neither evince nor solicit projection, the activity which Sami-Ali insists is necessary for artworks, and thus to distinguish them, we may prefer instead to call them cultural products. Their banality resides in their mass produced,

infinite reproducibility, where formula and cliché render them impervious to interpretation.⁷³⁹

Some examples of the unambiguous and uninterpretable banal may be useful here. I have chosen a recent text by Michael Crichton (author of *Jurassic Park* and *The Andromeda Strain*), but, as will become apparent, any one of the numerous chunky, highly embossed bestsellers, sometimes called ‘airport novels’ because of their ubiquity in such places (appropriately enough, given the Augéan banality of airports), would do. This one is called *State of Fear*,⁷⁴⁰ and is an environmental thriller concerning global warming conspiracies, suspicious deaths, and the like. (Towards the end, one character, punching his nemesis in some dangerous location, utters the memorable line: ‘*That’s for Antarctica*’.)⁷⁴¹

The novel’s clichés extend to every area. To scene-setting description: ‘Thunder rumbled ominously’, ‘The mood was somber’, and ‘the ground-floor conference room [was] bustling with activity’;⁷⁴² to dialogue attribution and gesture: ‘he whispered fiercely’, ‘Evans nodded sympathetically’, ‘The Head of Station greeted him warmly’.⁷⁴³ Some sentences cannot, one senses, exist outside this type of novel, so identified with that formula have they become. ‘She gave a derisive snort’ is one such example.⁷⁴⁴

The action is described in words that seem instantly familiar. They are devoid of interpretative potential: ‘With a *clang*, the door behind them slammed shut’ (original emphasis).⁷⁴⁵ In other words, banal writing lacks depth; the reader skims over the surface because the writing is designed only as surface, the language functioning almost as cinematic image. Non-banal writing, in contrast, encourages the reader to stop at the level of the writing, and ‘dream’ over the words and their potential.

⁷³⁹ ‘En tant que véhicule de sens, le banal se présente comme un contenu manifeste que ne double aucun contenu latent: il réclame d’être pris tel quel, au pied de la lettre, en dehors de toute exégèse.’ *Le Banal*, p. 24.

⁷⁴⁰ Michael Crichton, *State of Fear* (London: Harper Collins, 2005).

⁷⁴¹ *State of Fear*, p. 653.

⁷⁴² *State of Fear*, p. 127, 166, and 347 respectively.

⁷⁴³ *State of Fear*, p. 155, 111, and 236 respectively.

⁷⁴⁴ *State of Fear*, p. 5.

⁷⁴⁵ *State of Fear*, p. 333.

The repetition inherent to the text's banality occurs not just in the form of clichés that pre-exist the text, but within the text itself. Thus we have the repeated use of 'squealing' in relation to vehicles: 'the Land Cruiser careered around the corners, tires squealing',⁷⁴⁶ 'he accelerated, roaring out of the parking lot as Evans jumped back. The Ferrari squealed around the corner'⁷⁴⁷ and 'she raced off, squealed around the corner'.⁷⁴⁸ In accordance with the rule that 'le banal dit seulement qu'il est ce qu'il paraît',⁷⁴⁹ the characters in *State of Fear* are not distinguished from one another by much more than name and function in the plot. Their attributes, when described, are so general as to yield only the typical, not the singular individual: 'Beckman had an incredibly agile mind, a charming manner, a quick sense of humor, and a photographic memory.'⁷⁵⁰

The examples drawn from *State of Fear* could apply to many thousands of similar texts; they are utterly commonplace. Their banality lies in the immediate recognisability of both content and form, but most particularly of form, understood here as 'style'.⁷⁵¹ Each new banal bestseller is at once familiar, even if the author is new. This familiarity is central to the banal. Unlike the Freudian Uncanny, where the familiar is bound up with the strange, for Sami-Ali the banal is pure familiarity. However, although such familiarity may be necessary to render an artwork banal, it is not a sufficient condition: 'qu'une oeuvre de sensibilité ou de pensée devienne parfaitement connue ne la transforme pas forcément en oeuvre de banalité.'⁷⁵² Thus the classics of the canon, taught in every school, and filtering through society, are safe from redescription as banal.

Truly banal products are thus works where there is no question of an aesthetic of the banal – they are unintentionally banal, so to speak. In fact, artistic intention may

⁷⁴⁶ *State of Fear*, p. 19.

⁷⁴⁷ *State of Fear*, p. 158.

⁷⁴⁸ *State of Fear*, p. 75.

⁷⁴⁹ *Le Banal*, p. 77.

⁷⁵⁰ *State of Fear*, p. 110.

⁷⁵¹ The formulaic titles of Robert Ludlum are good examples of this recognisability, following as they do the template of [Proper Noun functioning as adjective] [Noun], e.g. *The Bourne Identity*, *The Apocalypse Watch*, *The Icarus Agenda*, and so on.

⁷⁵² *Le Banal*, p. 23.

sometimes be all there is to distinguish between the deliberate repetition and cliché of an avant-garde pseudo-pulp novel by, for example, Stewart Home, and the banal writing it satirises. I will offer examples of this in due course, but first I wish to explain further the claim that mere artistic intention can distinguish an apparently banal text from a truly banal text.

The Ontological Distinction

This claim is derived from Arthur C. Danto's contextual theory of art, set out in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. In it he argues that the quality that distinguishes a work of art from a mere thing in the world is not to be found in its aesthetic appearance; that is to say, the property that makes a work of art a work of art is not a perceptual one. Rather, it is an ontological property, effecting something along the lines of a metaphorical, mythical, or religious transformation, from mere thing, to work of art. It is this that enables us to understand the difference between, for example, a bed or a fire extinguisher and their exact artwork counterparts – what Danto calls the 'boundary that our examples cross without erasing.'⁷⁵³

One aspect of this non-perceptual transformation is that of context, and of artistic intention in relation to that context. Danto claims that 'to see something as art at all demands [...] an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art'.⁷⁵⁴ This extends also to literature, whose 'works are in part constituted by their location in the history of literature as well as by their relationships to their authors'.⁷⁵⁵ Locating the property that defines an artwork beyond its appearance or aesthetic properties in this way enables us to make an important distinction between a perfect forgery and the original, and between identical finished works with different origins.

⁷⁵³ *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 8.

⁷⁵⁴ *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 135.

⁷⁵⁵ *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, pp. 35-36.

To illustrate his claim, Danto asks us to imagine a work of art that Picasso might have painted, called *Le Cravat*. This is a necktie covered meticulously with paint, and painted so smoothly that one cannot discern the brush strokes used. He imagines this object being created in the context of the 1950s ‘apotheosis of paint-and-brushstroke (or drip)’.⁷⁵⁶ The smoothness implies a commentary on this context, the deliberate disguising of the brushstroke as a breaking free from, and commentary on the style of the Abstract Expressionists. Danto then asks us to imagine two other objects identical in appearance: one is a perfect forgery, and the other is a tie that has been covered with paint by a child. The child’s version is by sheer coincidence physically identical, no visible differences can be discerned. But differences there are, and these lie in both the context of the art world into which the object is inserted, and in the respective intentions of each creator: ‘the child could not be expected to have internalized the recent history of the artworld, or to appreciate the mad polemics of the brushwork.’⁷⁵⁷ Notwithstanding the traditional response of the ‘philistine’, along the lines of ‘my five year old could do that’, most of us would admit of a difference between the Picasso tie and the child’s. Danto articulates this important intuition, that these are different objects, with different powers. Yet the difference cannot be a perceptual one, since the works are visually identical.

For Danto, the properties that make artworks what they are, are extra-perceptual, or ontological. It is their ontological nature that allows us to distinguish between apparently identical artworks with different origins, as above. It also allows us to distinguish between artworks and mere things. Artworks are the only items in the world of which it is possible at least to ask the question what are they ‘of’ or ‘about’, even if the response is ‘nothing’. This question simply cannot be asked of objects to which one may have an aesthetic response, but are not artworks (sunsets, for example). It also cannot be asked of objects such as beds, although it may of Tracey Emin’s *My Bed* (1998/99). ‘There

⁷⁵⁶ *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 40.

⁷⁵⁷ *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 51.

are two orders of aesthetic responses, depending on whether the response is to an artwork or to a mere real thing that cannot be told apart from it.⁷⁵⁸ This notion of an extra-perceptual distinction is one that I wish to use with regard to the banal – the distinction of intentionality, and context, both within and beyond the work.

Danto explains that although this ontological distinction obtains from the earliest art forms, it is particularly important when we are looking at modern artworks that are otherwise indistinguishable from mere things, or at artworks that seem devoid of aesthetic merit. He argues that one can, just about, make the case for Duchamp's *Fountain* meriting designation as an artwork in light of its hitherto unnoticed aesthetic properties of gleaming white porcelain (arguing from the infra-ordinary, one might say). But these properties also belong to ordinary urinals in the world, and therefore cannot on their own explain the difference between Duchamp's artwork and a mere thing that is otherwise identical to it. What do belong to *Fountain* but not to urinals in general, are certain non-aesthetic, cognitive properties, such as being 'irreverent, witty, and clever.'⁷⁵⁹ It is thus the intention of the artist, and the context into which that artwork is inserted, that determines its status *as* artwork – and that intention is in some sense beyond or outside the artwork, in that it is not a visible or aesthetic property. Furthermore, once one arrives at Warhol's work, the option of resorting to aesthetic properties to explain their status as artworks is closed. Danto cites Warhol's 1964 Brillo Boxes exhibition, 'in which the transfigured objects were so sunk in banality that their potentiality for aesthetic contemplation remained beneath scrutiny even after metamorphosis.'⁷⁶⁰

Projection as Intention

I want to argue that Danto's non-perceptual properties of intention and context, combined with Sami-Ali's own ideas about the banal aesthetic, may offer the solution to Sami-Ali's

⁷⁵⁸ *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 94.

⁷⁵⁹ *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 94.

⁷⁶⁰ *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. vi.

question which prefaces this chapter, namely: ‘comment l’œuvre d’art qui est pure projection s’accommode-t-elle du banal qui est absence de projection?’.⁷⁶¹ The solution is two-fold: firstly, it explains how we can distinguish between a genuinely banal work and a work which appears to exhibit the same features. Secondly, the question of artistic intention is the evidence of the imaginary function required, in Sami-Ali’s theory, for an artwork to merit the name. A banal aesthetic would thus consist of mimicking features of the banal and yet avoiding categorisation as such by virtue of the intention, or projection of the artist, and by virtue of the context in which it is created.

It should be noted that the art-historical context into which a work or text is inserted cannot on its own be taken as evidence of projection in the work in question (since the truly banal also shares that same historical context). However, artistic intention that negotiates and incorporates awareness of that context into the work, can, I would argue, be identified with Sami-Ali’s imaginary function.

When projection is absent, however, the banal is the result. In this case an artist’s intention is no more than to adopt and perpetuate the pre-existing collective forms of cliché and formula, as we have seen with the example of Michael Crichton’s novel. In the absence of projection, flatness ensues; the banal lacks emotion, surprise, and the ambiguity of meaning which requires participation by the reader.

Sami Ali’s Banal Aesthetic: Warhol and Duchamp

Sami-Ali’s banal aesthetic can be combined with Danto’s theory to yield a theory of the banal aesthetic which will account for the work of Toussaint and Baker. Sami-Ali examines the paradox by looking at the surrealists, but also more closely at Warhol, Duchamp and Roussel.

Duchamp’s art demonstrates, for Sami-Ali, ‘une activité créatrice qui, grâce à l’utilisation systématique du banal, n’a plus rien à voir avec les critères habituels de la

⁷⁶¹ *Le Banal*, p. 31.

“créativité”.⁷⁶² Duchamp’s banal aesthetic becomes intensified in Pop Art with its use of mass media and mass reproduction. With Andy Warhol we reach the incarnation of the banal – his art is the banal of pure surface, it is as it appears, and nothing else: “Si vous voulez tout savoir d’Andy Warhol, ne regardez que la surface [...] Il n’y a rien derrière.”⁷⁶³

Both reflecting and promoting the tendency towards homogeneity, Warhol’s art, often mechanised and mass produced, involves a loss of all the attributes that used to guarantee the presence of projection: aesthetics, craft, subjectivity, interpretation, originality – the artist submits to and promotes the forces of reproduction and banalisation which prevail in the rest of the world.

L’oeuvre n’a même plus besoin d’être créée puisqu’elle existe déjà toute faite dans les images que véhiculent sans arrêt la presse, la télévision, la publicité, les bandes dessinées, etc. Les reproduire aussi fidèlement que possible, à l’aide d’un procédé technique comme la sérigraphie, c’est en cela uniquement que consiste à présent l’acte de peindre.⁷⁶⁴

Warhol’s indifference towards and boredom with the world and his art is symptomatic of an implosion of subject and object, as described by Baudrillard, since the artist subject cannot be seen as expressing him or herself through the art object – rather, his subjectivity is identical with the object derived ready-made from the world. As Sami-Ali concludes of Warhol’s, Duchamp’s, and Roussel’s banal aesthetic: ‘L’esthétique du banal, c’est l’esthétique de l’absolue subjectivité, d’une subjectivité sans sujet qui est aussi une objectivité sans objet.’⁷⁶⁵

This may be the case, but it fails to explain *how*, exactly, a banal aesthetic is distinguishable, if at all, from the simply banal. Sometimes it seems that Sami-Ali wants to suggest that they are not distinguishable. There is an indication, however, in his conclusion to his discussion of Warhol, that his views have some common ground with Danto, when

⁷⁶² *Le Banal*, p. 15.

⁷⁶³ *Le Banal*, p. 61.

⁷⁶⁴ *Le Banal*, p. 62.

⁷⁶⁵ *Le Banal*, p. 74.

he writes: 'La création s'achemine lentement vers une totale mécanisation, cependant que l'humour et la répétition font sentir la présence du sujet.'⁷⁶⁶ It is this humour, as with Duchamp, that is posited as a property of the artwork. It is, of course, non-perceptual – the property of artistic intention. I would argue that this same property of intention is at stake when Sami-Ali suggests that Warhol's work cannot be understood without understanding the thematics of absence of the self,⁷⁶⁷ since, as with Danto's definition of a work of art, thematics implies 'about-ness', it implies that a work is not only banal, but in some way *about* banality.

Although Sami-Ali does not spell it out, it seems to me that the distinguishing property of intention must be evidence of projection. It is not projection that is visible in its perceptual properties, since the banal aesthetic 'looks' banal – and the banal is by definition the exclusion of projection. But, as with Danto's ontological property of artistic intention, projection can in some sense exist simultaneously beyond the artwork, and yet be part of it. To make sense of this apparently paradoxical idea of something which both is, and is not, a property of an object, we can appeal to the ontological concept of reciprocal dispositionality. This philosophical concept accounts for the property of colour, for example. On this theory, the colour red is *intrinsic* to an object, and yet conditional on a perceiver in order to manifest itself.⁷⁶⁸ It therefore somehow resides both within and without the object. In the case of artworks, Danto posits both the intention of the artist *and* the art-historical context in which a work is situated, as accounting for its non-perceptual properties. Similarly, I contend that the banal aesthetic in literature may function as a result of the relationship between the physical text, the author's intention, and the literary history which contextualises it. This, then, is the solution to the paradox of the

⁷⁶⁶ *Le Banal*, p. 74.

⁷⁶⁷ See *Le Banal*, pp. 70-72.

⁷⁶⁸ See John Heil, *From an Ontological Point of View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), pp. 81-84. Heil emphasises that reciprocal dispositionality is *not* the same as relationality. To be red involves certain properties intrinsic to the object, in the way that pure relationality does not; being red is different to being to the left or right of something, for example.

banal aesthetic – combining Sami-Ali's theory of projection and Danto's theory of extra-perceptual properties shows how a banal aesthetic both is, and is not, banal.

It will be useful to see how this functions in a text. In some cases, as I stated earlier, the artistic intention may be all that can distinguish the clichés of the truly banal text from, for example, the postmodern text adopting a banal aesthetic. Stewart Home's *69 Things to Do with a Dead Princess*⁷⁶⁹ adopts a number of different banal styles, such as the style of a tourist guide: 'The stone was positioned just below the summit of a gentle slope and Bennachie was displayed to magnificent effect in the background.'⁷⁷⁰ The novel is composed of various styles, including the explicit sexual banality of pornography (these passages are marked by continual repetition of characters 'adjusting their clothing'), linked by flat, indifferent narration, and long theoretical discussions of literary texts and theory. It is in part these discussions which alter the context of the perfectly banal sections of text, alerting the reader as they do to the highly ironic and postmodern intentions of the author. In this text, then, the banal aesthetic functions rather as it does in Warhol's work. In Home's case, however, the artist's intention is deduced from evidence of projection within the artwork, but it is still outside of those sections which seem identical with the banal.

This is one way in which the banal aesthetic can function – one could equally transplant passages of a Michael Crichton-style blockbuster into a postmodern novel, and link them in such a way as to make clear to the reader that these sentences were not so much banal, as *about* the banal in their highlighting of its existence, and thus part of a banal aesthetic. While Toussaint and Baker do not use the banal aesthetic in exactly this way, the principles of its function are the same. I will argue that they accomplish a great deal more, that they are doing something rather more complex than Home's rather limited conceptual exercise in reflexivity. However, what defines the banal aesthetic across its various modes is the projection of artistic intention.

⁷⁶⁹ Stewart Home, *69 Things to Do with a Dead Princess* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2002).

⁷⁷⁰ *69 Things to Do with a Dead Princess*, p. 135.

This invocation of authorial intention seems to fly in the face of the postmodern anti-authorial trend typified by Barthes's stance in 'La mort de l'auteur'. But intention is invoked here as a guide to interpretation in a weaker sense than that which Barthes attacks. In other words, Barthes attacked the recourse of readers to a notion of authorial intention in order to block the 'play' of text and to impose a final meaning: 'Donner un Auteur à un texte, c'est imposer à ce texte un cran d'arrêt, c'est le pouvoir d'un signifié dernier, c'est fermer l'écriture'.⁷⁷¹ I am simply advocating the common sense recourse to authorial intention as one mode amongst others of making sense of a text or artwork – and when the other, perceptual modes of interpretation become redundant (as in the case of Warhol's Brillo boxes, for example), and are incapable of answering the question for us 'is this art?', then authorial intention is all we are left with. Sometimes this intention will be inscribed within the artwork, and sometimes must be deduced from its context. Sometimes, as with the banal aesthetic, it must be deduced from its reciprocal relationship between work, author, and context.

6.2 The Banal Aesthetic in Toussaint

This section explores the use of a banal aesthetic in Toussaint's texts. I do not discuss Baker here, since it is my contention that while his texts may often take the banal as their subject matter, their form cannot be described as a banal aesthetic; rather, they resist and transform the banal in ways which I will discuss in the last two sections. In Chapter 5, I looked at the various ways in which the banal appeared to have a worrying grip on Toussaint's texts. I now want to show how this apparent banality is more interestingly understood as a banal aesthetic, and that there is a profound, if subtle, distinction between the two.

I will deal first with the passages in Toussaint's texts that seem to exhibit the qualities of the banal. These passages are not characterised by the stylised cliché of the

⁷⁷¹ *Le Bruissement de la langue*, p. 65.

Michael Crichton novel. Rather, they tend to be strictly denotative and literal, using the most common and everyday vocabulary. This is something different from the use of such genre-specific clichés as ‘he had an infectious grin’, or, ‘the place was crawling with cops’, neither of which have much currency outside of pulp fiction. However, there are examples in pulp fiction of precisely the sparse, denotative banality for which Toussaint’s texts are remarkable, such as this, from *State of Fear*: ‘He went back down to his car and drove to the nearest drive-in, a hamburger joint on Pico. They knew him there. He had a double cheeseburger and a strawberry shake.’⁷⁷² Returning to a Toussaint passage quoted above in Chapter 4, there appear to be similarities:

Je trouvai une banque où changer de l’argent. Je fis l’acquisition d’un transistor bon marché. [...] Dans un grand magasin Standa, j’achetai un pyjama, deux paires de chaussettes, un caleçon.⁷⁷³

The above quotation may seem to be a perfect example of the banal as ‘l’énumération d’événements quotidiens où le réel est réel et rien de plus’⁷⁷⁴ – literal, denotative, using the most commonplace vocabulary. However, between the two sentences quoted above, occurs the following sentence: ‘Je bus un café succinct, demandai des cigarettes.’ This sentence gives a difference twist to the passage taken as a whole, differentiating it from the Crichton milkshake passage. The adjective ‘succinct’, as applied to the coffee, functions narratively to describe not only the coffee as small and espresso-style, but also the speed at which it is drunk, but furthermore the qualities of the sentence in which it is found – odd, humorous, and signalling a thematic concern with minimalism. At the rhetorical level, ‘succinct’ operates in combination with the short vowel sounds and hard consonants in the rest of the paragraph, whose staccato rhythm conveys an impression of the narrator’s speed and brusque tone.

⁷⁷² *State of Fear*, p. 78.

⁷⁷³ *La Salle de bain*, p. 52.

⁷⁷⁴ *Le Banal*, p. 111.

A further example from *Monsieur* serves to illustrate how a single sentence can alter the effect of a seemingly banal passage. In Chapter 5, I quoted Monsieur's description of his new office:

La pièce était spacieuse, assez haute de plafond. Une grande baie vitrée, en verre bleuté, dominait la ville. La table de travail, située à portée de main de deux armoires métalliques, identiques, comptait six tiroirs, de part et d'autre, et était recouverte d'une plaque épaisse, en verre fumé.⁷⁷⁵

So far, so banal. But the passage continues: 'Le fauteuil, Monsieur s'en assura négligemment, pivotait.' This sentence serves to recontextualise the description preceding it as satirical description of the executive office as status symbol, with its smoked glass desk, view of the city, and, most importantly, executive chair which, reassuringly, swivels. The connotations are those of success and power, the status conferred by superior office equipment, and these too are banal clichés. Indeed, you would find these connotations in truly banal writing, but here, by the ironic aside, they are *exposed* as clichés, and this is where the surface of the writing attains a certain depth.

What also alters the character of these kinds of paragraphs in Toussaint are elements in the text that surround them. *La Salle de bain*, from which the following quotation is drawn, is replete with self-undermining mockery, red herrings, and reflexivity, of the kind discussed in Chapter 4. When passages such as the one quoted above share textual space with others such as: 'Je marchais dans la rue: les arbres, le trottoir, quelques passants',⁷⁷⁶ the effect is that of a text that is demonstrably aware of its apparent banality.

In addition, the incidentality of these passages is heightened by the absence of a purposive central narrative. This distorts them – that is to say, what surrounds, or fails to surround them, distorts the passages themselves. This transformation of the banal into banal aesthetic is thus similar to the process Sami-Ali identifies in relation to Roussel's *La Vue*. Descriptions of scenes may be banal, but by shrinking them to an impossibly invisible

⁷⁷⁵ *Monsieur*, p. 7.

⁷⁷⁶ *La Salle de bain*, p. 49.

scale, Roussel ‘ne transforme pas le banal mais transforme l’espace dans lequel le banal se manifeste.’⁷⁷⁷ Thus the reader’s awareness of the scale of description alters the character of the apparently banal scenes. Furthermore, Sami-Ali writes of *La Vue* what can equally be said of Toussaint’s and Baker’s texts: ‘rien, ici, n’est accessoire et tout est essentiel.’⁷⁷⁸ This is another way of saying that there is only the incidental, and as such, it is all that matters.⁷⁷⁹

In Toussaint’s texts, other textual elements (or lack thereof) contextualise the passages that resemble banal denotation of the most commonplace of events, and function to demonstrate an awareness of their own condition as such. This is evidence of projection encircling the banal, transforming it instead into a banal aesthetic, and thus rendering the text as a whole immune to the charge of banality, since it manifests evidence of the artist’s subjectivity, the artist’s intention, in the form of textual self-awareness.

Something similar occurs with repetition, which should be one of the clearest indicators of banality, as with the ‘squealing’ vehicles discussed earlier, repetition that is common both within and between texts of genre fiction. I discussed the presence of repetition in Toussaint in Chapter 4, as for example with the night sky description of *La Réticence*. Yet here again the difference lies in the self-awareness of the text concerning its own act of repetition: ‘le même clair de lune toutes les nuits identique, toujours le même exactement, avec les mêmes nuages noirs qui glissaient dans le ciel’.⁷⁸⁰ It is as though we were to read ‘the same tires, endlessly squealing around the same corner...’, which would have a markedly different effect from the lazy and unthinking repetition in truly banal texts. The difference also lies in the choice of segment for repetition – again, it is a description of a night sky, but not in initially clichéd terms. The repetition is thus more noticeable, and one wonders why, since laziness cannot be the reason. Truly banal repetition is less

⁷⁷⁷ *Le Banal*, p. 42

⁷⁷⁸ *Le Banal*, p. 44.

⁷⁷⁹ It is true that one also wants to ask of the *State of Fear* hamburger quotation ‘Why? Who cares? Why strawberry?’ One answer is that it gives the reader the sense of a brief respite in tension before the next onslaught of action.

⁷⁸⁰ *La Réticence*, p. 98.

noticeable since one is never sure if that word or phrase has been repeated many times within the same text, or owes its familiarity to its endless repetition in all the texts that have been read before the one in hand. One could say that truly banal repetition conceals itself, and conceals the fact that it is ‘soustrait au devenir.’⁷⁸¹

One aspect of the banal aesthetic, then, can be understood as the presence of projection surrounding banal elements in such a way as to change them through contextualisation. This projection is similar to Danto’s non-perceptual or ontological property. The second area of the banal aesthetic operates in a similar way, but is somewhat more complex. This concerns aspects of the text which in some sense exhibit banal traits – and yet do not function as the truly banal.⁷⁸² This occurs, for example, when the banal is thematic (to be discussed in the next section). But it also occurs when the characteristics of the banal are enacted in such a way as to fail to function as such. The aesthetic of ‘l’écriture blanche’ as a whole is an example of this. Prose that is flat, neutral, literal, minimalist, two-dimensional, and *permits no interpretations of depth*, is prose that ought, in light of that list of adjectives, to be designated as banal. Yet, as we have seen, it simultaneously and paradoxically *solicits* interpretation. Why? Because the apparently banal characteristics of ‘l’écriture blanche’, when combined with the content of Toussaint’s texts, undermine the very uninterpretability they flaunt. We can see this in the use of ‘l’écriture blanche’ in passages where the reader of an ordinary realist novel, or indeed of a pulp novel, would expect descriptions of high emotion, and vocabulary to match. Thus the ‘dart in forehead’ episode of *La Salle de bain* brings sharply into focus the techniques of reticence and the stripping down of the language employed by the author. The paragraph immediately succeeding this event runs as follows:

⁷⁸¹ *Le Banal*, p. 24.

⁷⁸² This is somewhat similar to the ‘dead metaphor’ which retains its appearance of metaphor, but as cliché, no longer functions as such.

76) Edmondsson perdait du sang, je l'entraînai hors de la chambre. Nous descendîmes à la réception. Nous courions dans les couloirs, cherchions un médecin. Je l'installai sur une chaise dans le hall de l'hôtel, sortis en courant.⁷⁸³

The same neutrality, the same absence of interiority, the same restriction to the most common vocabulary – except that the narrator is not just getting a cheeseburger. The fact that this is a first-person narration of such an extreme event (arguably one of very few ‘events’ in the novel) only heightens these properties, and this is therefore interlinked to the question of absent subjectivity.

The question of absent subjectivity arising from Toussaint’s blank characters follows the same complex process in his banal aesthetic; an apparently banal characteristic, familiar from the depthless ciphers of action novels, yet functioning instead to draw attention to its existence, to the writing, and thus both demonstrating the author’s subjectivity and soliciting subjectivity in the reader. This occurs partly by virtue of the effect of its absence in such circumstances as noted above, but also by virtue of the thematics of character absence discussed in Chapter 4. The recurrence and problematisation of the theme (as in the absence of reflections in *La Réticence*, for example) draws attention back to the writing itself and its self-awareness.

I noted in Chapter 5 the idea that in apparently objective or denotative art subjectivity seems to recede: ‘en se confondant avec l’anonymat de l’objet, la subjectivité crée l’illusion de son absence: subjectivité par négation d’elle-même.’⁷⁸⁴ This seems to me an apt description of Toussaint’s neutral, indifferent, and apparently absent narrators and characters, since it is indeed an illusion, in two senses: firstly, the evidence of subjectivity is there, but located beyond the descriptions of character psychology, in the apparently objective descriptions of the world – in acts of projection onto the outside world. Secondly, the subjectivity of the author, for the reasons discussed, haunts the apparently objective writing of ‘l’écriture blanche’.

⁷⁸³ *La Salle de bain*, p. 88.

⁷⁸⁴ *Le Banal*, p. 15.

Once attention is being paid to the writing, as for example in the flattened aerial view of Berlin from *La Télévision* quoted in Chapter 5, 'écriture blanche' can fulfil its other function as comment on and response to previous forms of writing. Like Danto's 'atmosphere of artistic theory',⁷⁸⁵ 'écriture blanche' thus operates in an atmosphere of literary theory which alters its banal appearance into banal aesthetic.

The rest of Toussaint's formal experimentation has the same effect. One can thus deduce that central to the banal aesthetic is its reflexivity; the sense in which the writing draws attention to itself as such. This, as I have said, is a matter of dual projection which transforms the banal into the banal aesthetic: firstly, this self-aware writing means the reader is unable to adopt a ready-made banal that precedes her and thus she cannot help but project interpretations onto the text – her subjectivity is solicited; secondly, the reflexivity is evidence of authorial intention, which as Taylor noted was true of all experimentation: 'there is a new reflexive turn, and poetry or literature tends to focus on the poet, the writer, or on what it is to transfigure through writing.'⁷⁸⁶

6.3 Against the banal – Projection and the Infra-Ordinary

The Infra-Ordinary – De Certeau's Subjectivity

In the previous section I argued that apparent similarities to the form of the banal in Toussaint's texts should in fact be understood as a banal aesthetic which *opposes* the banal in function, since they manifest projection. In what follows, I expand on this idea of opposition, with an analysis of the other ways in which both Toussaint's and Baker's texts resist and transform the banal of both world and text. The previous section was exclusively concerned with Toussaint in his use of the banal aesthetic. I now concentrate more on Baker, and consider one of his chief modes of opposition to the banal – namely,

⁷⁸⁵ *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 135.

⁷⁸⁶ *Sources of the Self*, p. 481.

the infra-ordinary as subject matter. In the final section I will go on to explore the infra-ordinary as a formal technique which transforms banal content.

In the previous chapter, I identified a proximity between the infra-ordinary and the banal, by virtue of their familiar, everyday quality. This proximity, however, belies the ability of the infra-ordinary to oppose the banal, something that becomes clear when the infra-ordinary is examined more closely and compared with the characteristics of the banal Sami-Ali identifies. The distinction between banal and infra-ordinary can perhaps be usefully thought of as one between opposing subdivisions of the everyday. In some respects, the everyday as subject experience is banal. This is the subject experience described in the pessimistic theories of the contemporary world with which I began this thesis: non-places, the homogeneity of 'individual' experience, the culture of narcissism, depthless and seamless simulation in the spheres of commerce, culture, and information. It is the kind of everyday described by Houellebecq and Ellis. Yet, as I suggested in Chapter 1, this picture of the contemporary is not total. I introduced de Certeau's dissenting and more optimistic theory of 'l'entre-deux' - the 'ruses' and 'pratiques' of the everyday that in some way slip between the cracks of contemporary life and culture, usually by dint of their invisibility. It is these aspects of the everyday that oppose the banal in the contemporary world, and that I equate with the infra-ordinary.

I want now to claim that, inasmuch as it serves to counteract the banal, what Perec termed the infra-ordinary should be aligned with de Certeau's 'ruses' and 'pratiques' (as well as with Augé's anthropological places). The description of these 'pratiques' in Toussaint's and Baker's texts is the infra-ordinary in terms of content. As I noted in Chapter 1, de Certeau theorises that any subject is able to 'faire avec' that which is given to her.⁷⁸⁷ De Certeau claims this is achieved via 'l'opaque réalité de tactiques locales.'⁷⁸⁸ This opaque reality (invisible to culture as a whole) is the adaptation of a given law, habitat, culture,

⁷⁸⁷ *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. 58.

⁷⁸⁸ *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. 1.ii.

language, labour conditions and so on, to the inventiveness and creativity of the subject. It is this that de Certeau calls ‘un art de l’entre-deux’.⁷⁸⁹ Plural, transient customs develop that are in response and opposition to the ‘society of spectacle’.

It seems, then, that infra-ordinary ‘pratiques’ operate in contrast to the banal as we have defined it, even though, paradoxically, they are rooted in the commonplace or everyday. They are thus evidence of subjectivity, of projection, and not of subjugation. Although I said in Chapter 5 that Toussaint’s and Baker’s infra-ordinary relies on its typical nature in order to function *as* the infra-ordinary – in order to be recognised by the reader – this is only part of the story. Though the ‘pratiques’ are recognisable and shared, they have largely been arrived at privately, individually. As we will see from the examples that follow, it is not plausible that we have evolved them from observation of others. Individual subjectivity is thus central to the infra-ordinary despite its collective dimension.

Anthropological Places

Some of the infra-ordinary content of Baker’s texts resists the banal of the contemporary world simply because it is drawn from those areas which have greater immunity to the banal to begin with. *Room Temperature*, for example, is largely focused on domestic life with the narrator’s wife, new baby, and his memories of childhood. Within this domain, the text focuses on the classic Baker infra-ordinary: the overlooked and unnoticed in the form of tiny physical details of the world; subtleties of phenomenal experience, and, unusually for Baker, the microscopic shifts and patterns in intimate relations.

An example of a tiny physical detail can be seen in this observation of the narrator’s daughter: ‘I spotted her pulse beating in her lower lip – her *lip!* – something I had never seen before, or known was a thing people could ever see, or would want to see.’⁷⁹⁰ The

⁷⁸⁹ *L’Invention du quotidien*, p. 52.

⁷⁹⁰ *Room Temperature*, p. 105.

following rather longer quotation demonstrates an interest in the subliminal patterns of intimate relationships, in this case between the narrator and his wife:

And she too was at work on learning why the things that pleased me did please me, testing her progress against my reactions. This reciprocally crossed effort to master the other's interests meant a temporary subjugation of one's own, so that, for example, when Patty pointed out a beautiful book of photographs and engineering drawings of gears (sepia, gray, black) in a Rizzoli bookstore, not saying "Hey, here's something *you'll* like, Spank-victim," but rather "Oh, how beautiful those gears are!" as if an enthusiasm for mechanical engineering had been innate in her, I had to force myself back into my old technologically appreciative self and go, "Oh, Momma! Cycloids! Much better than old Edward's shots of the green pepper!" – when I myself had been intently scanning the same table of books to predict the one (*Blue and White China? Long Island Landscape?*) that she would have exclaimed about had she not been trying to second-guess my exclamation.⁷⁹¹

As Lasch acknowledges, the family is an environment relatively resistant to fashion and consumerism. 'Family [...] inherently tends to promote custom'⁷⁹² and custom resists imposed cultural strategies. Home and family create what Augé calls 'anthropological place', an arena naturally opposed to non-place and to appropriation by culture into the banal. Equally, when Baker describes experiences with soap in the shower, in *A Box of Matches*, he is drawing on the realm of the domestic:

You can make the soap revolve in your hand, like a police car's dome light, just by working your thumb and palm muscles a little: it looks as if the soap is turning of its own accord, and not as if you are turning the soap.⁷⁹³

This identifies a private, subjective experience of handling soap, an experience untouched by, for example, the commercial overlay of significance dictated by soap advertising, where all that matters is scent, texture, efficiency, and brand. What the soap provokes in Baker's hands (!) is instead playfulness and imagination.

⁷⁹¹ *Room Temperature*, p. 26 (original emphasis).

⁷⁹² *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 74.

⁷⁹³ *A Box of Matches*, p. 157.

Banal Objects

The infra-ordinary in Baker is by no means limited to the domestic arena, however. In fact it most frequently takes the form of responses to some feature of the banal world – responses that seem to fit de Certeau’s definition of ‘pratiques’. These are often in relation to commercial products and gadgetry, revealing shared but unacknowledged pleasures. We can see this in the description by *Room Temperature’s* narrator, Mike, of the satisfaction to be had from ‘the little kissy noise you could make by sucking the air from the blue cap of a Bic pen and letting it seal itself against your tongue.’⁷⁹⁴ This is instantly recognisable as a shared particle of behaviour, but not something that anyone can remember ever having been articulated before. It is something that (on anecdotal evidence) has evolved separately for everyone who has ever sucked thoughtfully on a Bic pen. Insignificant it may seem, which is precisely what protects this ‘pratique’ against assimilation into global culture – its invisibility, its unconscious deployment: ‘*Ce savoir n’est pas su*’ (original emphasis).⁷⁹⁵

The parallels between de Certeau’s theory and Baker’s practice are striking. De Certeau emphasises the unexpected ‘traverses’ which are evidence of human desires and interests that oppose and adapt commercial or systemic structures:

Bien qu’elles aient pour matériel les *vocabulaires* des langues reçues (celui de la télé, du journal, du supermarché ou des dispositions urbanistiques), bien qu’elles restent encadrées par des *syntaxes* prescrites (modes temporels des horaires, organisations paradigmatiques des lieux, etc.), ces ‘traverses’ demeurent hétérogènes aux systèmes où elles s’infiltrèrent et où elles dessinent les ruses d’intérêts et de désirs *différents* (original emphasis).⁷⁹⁶

Compare Baker’s footnote in *The Mezzanine* exploring the adaptations to the single portion sugar packet:

⁷⁹⁴ *Room Temperature*, p. 107.

⁷⁹⁵ *L’Invention du quotidien*, p. 110.

⁷⁹⁶ *L’Invention du quotidien*, p. 57.

What sugar packet manufacturer could have known that people would take to flapping the packet back and forth to centrifuge its contents to the bottom, so that they could handily tear off the top? The nakedness of a simple novelty in pre-portioned packaging has been surrounded and softened and made sense of by gesticulative adaptation (possibly inspired by the extinguishing oscillation of a match after the lighting of a cigarette); convenience has given rise to ballet [...] An unpretentious technical invention [...] has been ornamented by a mute folklore of behavioral inventions, unregistered, unpatented, adopted and fine-tuned without comment or thought.⁷⁹⁷

Until, that is, Baker wrote about it. There is no better elucidation of de Certeau's 'pratiques', the surrounding and softening of 'gesticulative adaptation', of 'mute folklore', which is 'unregistered, unpatented', than the above quotation from *The Mezzanine*. When Baker's texts discourse on apparently banal objects – the merits of hot air hand-dryers versus towels, or the evolution of plastic straws – they perform exactly what de Certeau had proposed:

analyser les pratiques microbiennes, singulières et plurielles, qu'un système urbanistique devait gérer ou supprimer et qui survivent à son dépérissement, suivre le pullulement de ces procédures qui, bien loin d'être contrôlées ou éliminées par l'administration panoptique, se sont renforcées dans une proliférante illégitimité, développées et insinuées, dans les réseaux de la surveillance.⁷⁹⁸

Banal Spaces and Beyond

In Chapter 3, I discussed the presence of Augé's non-places in Toussaint's and Baker's texts, and in Chapter 5, I went onto align non-places with the banal in spatial form. Many examples of the infra-ordinary in both authors' texts are concerned with responses and adaptations to non-places that defy their tendency to promote purely 'average' behaviour of the typical consumer or passenger – such as the descriptions of elevator and escalator behaviour in *The Mezzanine*. In Toussaint's case, this often takes the form of direct rebellion – deviation from the norms of behaviour expected when in non-places, as in his

⁷⁹⁷ *The Mezzanine*, p. 95 (footnote).

⁷⁹⁸ *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. 145.

manipulation of the Berlin shop-keeper in *Autoportrait*, or sending clients away from a driving school in *L'Appareil-photo*.

Again, what is noticeable is the lack of acceptance of the rules of banal space – instead there is either fascination with our unnoticed spontaneous responses (Baker) or an oblique approach (Toussaint), whereby banal space is subtly commented on, satirised, or in some way refused. But the subversive streak in Toussaint's characters is not limited to non-places: their acts of petty misanthropy are evidence of this. In *La Télévision*, the narrator looks down from his neighbour's balcony: 'la tête baissée, je jetais distraitement des gravillons sur les passants'.⁷⁹⁹ In *L'Appareil-photo*, while Pascale goes in search of croissants, he takes it upon himself to tell another driving school student that the centre is closed: 'C'est fermé, dis-je. Mais je suis déjà venu hier, ajouta-t-il, je voudrais juste déposer le dossier. Ne soyez pas buté, voyons, dis-je en baissant doucement les paupières. Je refermai la porte.'⁸⁰⁰

This mild maliciousness can equally be construed as a penchant for disturbing conventions, for example when Monsieur refuses to co-operate with his doctor's bedside manner:

Il lui demanda ce qu'il faisait dans la vie. Dans la vie? dit Monsieur. Nullement découragé par son esquive, le docteur Douvres, relevant la tête avec bienveillance, lui répéta la question, qu'il formula toutefois un peu différemment pour le contraindre à répondre. Monsieur répondit évasivement. Et c'est intéressant? demanda le docteur Douvres. Oui, je suis assez bien payé, dit Monsieur. Je pense que je gagne plus d'argent que vous, ajouta-t-il. Dès lors, le docteur Douvres ne dit plus rien (c'était peut-être par là que Monsieur aurait dû commencer).⁸⁰¹

The resistance to convention is an infra-ordinary adaptation – a ruse – enabling subjects to 'talk back' to the banal of the contemporary society and its expectations. The infra-ordinary content of Baker's and Toussaint's novels thus provide a means of evading or opposing the banal of the world, and of texts: they uncover as yet unwritten areas which

⁷⁹⁹ *La Télévision*, p. 29.

⁸⁰⁰ *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 12

⁸⁰¹ *Monsieur*, pp. 23-24.

escape the literary banal. The ‘ruses’ and ‘pratiques’ their narrators describe are evidence of Sami-Ali’s projection – the imposition of subjectivity on reality, or rather, the shaping of an imposed banal reality into singular and subjective forms.

The infra-ordinary counteracts the banal spectacle which narcissistic society craves, thereby resisting the boredom Lasch identifies: ‘People nowadays complain of an inability to feel. They cultivate more vivid experiences, seek to beat sluggish flesh to life, attempt to revive jaded appetites.’⁸⁰² The infra-ordinary as content is the opposite of this impulse – it seeks the vivid not in the exotic which has jaded us, but in the endotic, the simple reality of the hitherto unnoticed and close to home.

This is part of the return to the real discussed in Chapter 4. But a fascination with the minute detail of the real is qualitatively different to the banal and its literal attention to the real, its care to reproduce mechanically, objectively, without recourse to subjectivity: ‘Non pas que le réel maintienne un lien secret avec la projection que, à ce titre, il envoûte et fascine, mais qu’il est simplement ce qu’il est, c’est-à-dire le réel.’⁸⁰³ It is this sense of fascination with the real in Baker, and the insistence on the importance of the incidental everyday in Toussaint, that demonstrates the existence of projection in their works, intertwined with the return to the real.

The Infra-Ordinary and the Question of Rarity

Documenting the real of the infra-ordinary is thus a response to the excesses of the overwritten world, resisting the idea that all experience is already anticipated and absorbed by culture. However, this is not the end of the story. The possibility that the infra-ordinary may itself revert to banality is one that Baker himself considers, in the essay ‘Rarity’ in *The Size of Thoughts*. He begins with the following passage:

⁸⁰² *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 11.

⁸⁰³ *Le Banal*, p. 78.

Has anyone yet said publicly how nice it is to write on rubber with a ballpoint pen? [...] Right now dozens of Americans are making repetitive scroll designs on the soft white door-seals of their refrigerators, or they are directing their pens around the layered side-steps and toe-bulbs of their sneakers [...], or they are marking shiny initials on one of those gigantic, dumb, benevolent erasers [...], and then using the eraser to print these same initials several times, backward, on a knee or forearm, in a fading progression. These are rare pleasures.⁸⁰⁴

These rare pleasures are the ‘pratiques’ that we all engage in, in the interstices of the commercial world of fridges and sneakers. Baker goes on to consider the effect of publicly celebrating these ‘pratiques’, of shifting their shared yet private existence into the collective domain of the written word: ‘Regrettably, multiplying the idea of a thing’s rarity is nearly identical in effect to multiplying the thing itself: its rarity departs.’⁸⁰⁵ In other words, is there a danger that the infra-ordinary will transform into its close cousin, the banal?

The problem with seeking richness in the overlooked texture of life unassimilated by culture is that the act of doing so cannot help but overwrite those very areas which had been hitherto left untouched, making them part of the circulation of excess information. As Verne says in Bon’s *Autoroute*, his goal is: ‘se promener avec une caméra là où normalement on ne va pas pour filmer, photographier ou écrire, simplement parce que tel est notre monde, et que ce monde-là n’est pas encore dans les livres et les films.’⁸⁰⁶ But the act of doing so assimilates the overlooked and hence new material into the known, the recorded, the written about, and thus puts it in danger of becoming banal. It renders the portion of reality ‘pas encore dans les livres et les films’ ever smaller. The process is something akin to Barthes’s point about the danger inherent in literary innovation and subversion – that it will eventually solidify into no more than a style or mannerism.

Baker’s worry is, I think, a legitimate one, but one which can be dispelled. The infra-ordinary is a relative term – what counts as the unnoticed everyday is relative to the observer. This gives us the clue to the solution to the rarity objection: de Certeau’s ruses

⁸⁰⁴ *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber*, p. 18.

⁸⁰⁵ *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber*, p. 19.

⁸⁰⁶ *Autoroute*, p. 8.

and pratiques are ever-changing, always evolving. Why should there not be continuous renewal to counteract the banalisation risked by revealing or describing those ‘pratiques’? It may well be that the banal is increasing steadily in its assimilation of human activity and subjectivity. But there seems no reason to believe that this evolution is exhaustible – as soon as some ‘pratiques’ are consigned to banality, new ones emerge, and so on indefinitely.

The endless pursuit of novelty has been condemned as a capitalist device to create surplus value, or as a need to stave off narcissistic boredom – but it can be viewed another way. Novelty for its own sake may disguise endless reproduction of the same, and this is simply the banal by another name. But genuine invention and innovation, of the kind de Certeau describes, is the only appropriate reaction to the banal. Only the new can have the potential to express subjectivity, to count as an act of projection. The alternative – reproducing that which already exists – equates to adopting the collective pathology of the banal.

As content, then, the infra-ordinary in Toussaint’s and Baker’s texts functions to resist the banal. In the next and final section, I will explore other modes of resistance, including the notion of an infra-ordinary aesthetic - how the infra-ordinary as *form* can transform even banal content into its converse.

6.4 Against the Banal – Other Strategies

The Infra-ordinary Aesthetic

In the section above, I examined how the infra-ordinary content of Baker’s and Toussaint’s texts functioned in opposition to the banal, by identifying and describing the infra-ordinary ‘ruses’ and ‘pratiques’ by means of which individual subjects exercised the imaginary function of projection, in the interstices of the banal world.

I now want to examine an alternative reading of the term ‘infra-ordinary’ as formal device. My contention is that Baker and Toussaint are not limited to drawing on the infra-

ordinary that can be observed in the world beyond the text. What we also find in their texts is a transformation of objects and experiences that, in the real world, are irremediably banal, but *in the texts* are rendered infra-ordinary via literary projection.

In some ways the infra-ordinary aesthetic is the counterpart of the banal aesthetic. It is an alternative method of negotiating the fact of banality in the contemporary world. Whereas the banal aesthetic resembles yet opposes the banal, the infra-ordinary aesthetic transforms the banal until it loses those features Sami-Ali identified. What both of these approaches share is that they embody a refusal of the banal as such, as opposed to simply exhibiting and deploring it (as one could argue Ellis and Houellebecq do).

I have already discussed Baker's ecstatic and fascinated treatment of his subject matter. I want to look more closely now at what happens when that subject matter is drawn from the purely banal, as for example, from non-places. Where in the previous section I looked at descriptions of 'ruses' within non-places, I want now to look at some of the objects and activities in non-places which are not 'ruses', but are straightforwardly banal. One such example is the escalator in *The Mezzanine*. The following description occurs early on in the text:

On sunny days like this one, a temporary, steeper escalator of daylight, formed by intersections of the lobby's towering volumes of marble and glass, met with the real escalators just above their middle point, spreading into a needly area of shine where it fell against their brushed-steel side-panels, and adding long glossy highlights to each of the black rubber handrails which wavered slightly as the handrails slid on their tracks, like the radians of black luster that ride the undulating outer edge of an LP.⁸⁰⁷

In Baker's prose, the escalator as banal object is transformed into an object with intrinsic aesthetic properties to be appreciated, if only we knew how to look: the brushed steel with its 'needly area of shine', the 'long glossy highlights' of the handrails, which are compared to 'the radians of black luster' of an LP record. It seems to me that what Baker is doing

⁸⁰⁷ *The Mezzanine*, p. 3.

here parallels the way in which Danto claimed that Duchamp's *Fountain* could be (mis)understood: as a sensitisation to the gleaming aesthetic properties of urinals (although of course Danto rejects this as insufficient to explain *Fountain's* status as a work of art):

It is (just) possible to appreciate his acts as setting these unedifying objects at a certain aesthetic distance, rendering them as improbable candidates for aesthetic delectation: practical demonstrations that beauty of a sort can be found in the least likely places.⁸⁰⁸

In part, then, Baker perpetuates 'a theory as old at least as St Augustine, and itself perhaps the aesthetic transform of an essentially Christian teaching that the least of us – perhaps especially the least of us - is luminous in holy grace.'⁸⁰⁹ It is an attitude explicitly espoused by *The Mezzanine's* narrator, who requires only a blank background in order to make the leap:

I remembered that when I was little I used to be very interested in the fact that anything, no matter how rough, rusted, dirty, or otherwise discredited it was, looked good if you set it down on a stretch of white cloth, or any kind of clean background.⁸¹⁰

This recollection is prompted by Howie's observation of the aesthetic properties of a garbage truck. In the case of the escalator, Baker effects the modernist transformation of ugly into beautiful, except that now it is the banal that is redescribed as the beautiful.

The redescription of the banal as beautiful, fascinating, emotionally significant, permeates all of Baker's texts. In *A Box of Matches*, the banal object of a car rear window heater is redescribed in terms of its aesthetic properties: 'a stave of long wires elegantly arranged like the plectrum of a hardboiled-egg slicer, buried in the glass'.⁸¹¹ It is not only the aesthetic properties of the banal which are transformed, but also the phenomenal experience of our interaction with the banal. Instead of accepting the unthinking, numbing

⁸⁰⁸ *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. vi.

⁸⁰⁹ *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. vi.

⁸¹⁰ *The Mezzanine*, p. 38

⁸¹¹ *A Box of Matches*, p. 69.

There are certain infra-ordinary ‘ruses’ and ‘pratiques’ that we engage with in the banal space of non-places, and in anthropological places such as the home (discussed in the previous section). These can be revealed as infra-ordinary content. But we have not, as a rule, engaged in Baker’s redescription of escalators until he has done so for us. Until that moment, they have been part of the numbing, anti-subjective, banalising architecture of the contemporary world. Through the infra-ordinary aesthetic they are transformed. This aesthetic is largely dependent on the use of metaphor, a fundamental act of projection, where what is, is not, or rather is something else (of which more later).

To say that we had simply never noticed these qualities before, or ‘seen things in that light’, is, I feel, the same as saying that we had not projected these qualities onto these objects, we had not projected ourselves onto them but had succumbed to their banal influence. Realist writing purports to derive its value, its greatness, from descriptions of the world that are true, yet new. It seeks the most finely and originally crafted metaphors to vividly evoke what has been meticulously and sensitively observed. Despite the strategic division of form and content in the discussions of Toussaint’s and Baker’s texts, I think that the realist ideal of describing as truly as possible what is simply *there*, is an illusion, both in realist writing in general and in Baker’s writing in particular (notwithstanding his own declared aims in *U and I*, noted in Chapter 4).⁸¹⁵ A better analysis of what is occurring is perhaps that an author’s act of projection in the text in some sense simultaneously arouses and matches our own act of projection on the world, whereby we have that intense sensation of recognition.

The effect of all this projection/renewed perception is not only the beauty of the infra-ordinary. It is also a rediscovery of the functionality of the objects previously ‘sunk in banality’, to use Danto’s phrase. Where once they were invisible extensions of our technological selves, unnoticed, yet deadening, Baker focuses attention on their use value

⁸¹⁵ *U and I*, p. 14, where Baker identifies ‘one of the principal aims of the novel itself, which is to capture pieces of mental life as truly as possible, as they unfold’.

once again. There is a great deal of this in *The Mezzanine*, on the subject of staplers, straws, shoelaces, and so on. In *The Size of Thoughts*, too, there are essays on model airplanes, nail clippers, and film projectors. Elsewhere, I have noted the excitement generated by the phenomenon of perforation. Throughout Baker's work, we find a renewed focus on functionality, and this is part of the transformation of the infra-ordinary aesthetic.

A final aspect of the infra-ordinary aesthetic is its redescription not just in terms of beauty, or functionality, but in terms of the extra-ordinary and the exotic. We see this in *The Mezzanine's* comparison of the ice-skate groove and the record groove, where Baker shrinks us down to the size of a dust particle and describes what we might see:

If you made a negative image of my skate blade's gorge, you would arrive at the magnified record groove – a hushed black river valley of asphaltic ripples soft enough to be impressed with the treads of your Vibram soles [...] Cobblestone-sized particles of airborne dust, unlucky spores with rinds like coconuts, and big obsidian chunks of cigarette smoke are lodged here and there in the oddly echoless surface, and once in a while, a precious boulder of diamond, shorn somehow from the stylus by this softer surface, shines out from the slope, where it has been pounded deep into the material by later playings, sworn at by the listener as if it too were common dust. That was needle wear.⁸¹⁶

This transformation of the banal into the extra-ordinary is another method of rendering what was previously familiar suddenly exotic and fantastic. Sami-Ali identifies something similar in Raymond Roussel's *La Vue*, where a series of banal images are situated in a space that is transformed. The eye of the poem's narrator is able to descend into impossibly minute dimensions. In a pen-holder, a glass sphere is embedded, inside which there is a tiny photograph of a beach, in which more than ninety figures are visible. The perspective of point of view is not respected; the eye can move where it will, distant objects are no less distinct than near ones. As the eye moves, scale changes, tiny details seem to increase in

⁸¹⁶ *The Mezzanine*, p. 66.

size.⁸¹⁷ Thus, Roussel's poem 'ne transforme pas le banal mais transforme l'espace dans lequel le banal se manifeste.'⁸¹⁸

We see this again in *The Fermata*, where the potentially banal image of walking in the rain is transformed by the arrest of time, so that the raindrops are stationary: 'I showed her the negative black paths our bodies left behind in the constellations of hanging, glinting raindrops.'⁸¹⁹

Philip E Simmons has argued that, 'though the narrator of *The Mezzanine* is (also) absorbed by the phenomena of the surface, the existentialist fear of the void beneath has been replaced by the sunny confidence that there *is* no "beneath"' (original emphasis).⁸²⁰ I think this is too simplistic a reading of Baker's fascination with the banal. On the contrary, what was once only surface gains depth in his writing – the 'beneath' is the depth that results from projection, from subjective investment.

Thematics of the Banal

Thus far, I have discussed three facets of Baker's and Toussaint's resistance to the banal: the banal aesthetic, the infra-ordinary as content, and the infra-ordinary aesthetic. In the remainder of this chapter, I want to look at the other ways in which the banal is resisted by Toussaint and Baker. In some cases the banal is present in some form or other, but is negotiated or transformed. In others, there are elements that directly oppose or contradict the banal. In the former category belongs what might be called a thematics of the banal. This is the banal as problem to be considered, rather than the mimicking of its form by means of the banal aesthetic.

The thematics of the banal is visible in terms of much of the content already discussed; but it is also there in terms of explicit narration in the texts. *La Télévision's* title signals its thematic concern. The narrator, despite the self-delusion which enables him to

⁸¹⁷ *Le Banal*, p. 43.

⁸¹⁸ *Le Banal*, p. 42.

⁸¹⁹ *The Fermata*, p. 299.

⁸²⁰ 'Toward the Postmodern Historical Imagination', p. 608.

evade the strictures of his television ban, is only too aware of the effects of this medium, of the sameness it imparts to all its contents (in true McLuhan fashion). The narrator describes the experience of channel-hopping:

Partout c'était les mêmes images indifférenciées, sans marges et sans en-têtes, sans explications, brutes, incompréhensibles, bruyantes et colorées, laides, tristes, agressives et joviales, syncopées, équivalentes, c'était des séries américaines stéréotypées, c'était des clips, c'était des chansons en anglais, c'était des jeux télévisés, c'était des documentaires, c'était des scènes de film sorties de leur contexte, des extraits, c'était des extraits, c'était de la chansonnette, c'était vivant, le public battait des mains en rythme, c'était des hommes politiques autour d'une table, c'était un débat, c'était du cirque, c'était des acrobaties, c'était un jeu télévisé, c'était le bonheur.⁸²¹

This passage incarnates the essential equivalence of all the segments on the different channels. The repetition of 'c'était des...c'était des...' mimics the repetitive movement of channel-hopping as well as the essential sameness of all these apparently disparate pieces of content, simply by virtue of all being televised. They are utterly familiar visual segments, the experience of the banality of television we all share. One cannot avoid reflecting on the banal as theme – as such, this requires thought, a subjective response, participation: projection on the part of the reader. In including the banal thematically in this way, Toussaint also transforms it in the text from random banal segments into a piece of poetry, in a manner reminiscent of Perec's lists.

The banal is thematically present elsewhere. In Chapter 5, I identified themes of two-dimensionality, geometry, and immobility as indicative of the presence of the banal in Toussaint's work. However, despite the narrators' attraction to the world of mathematical forms, to non-invested two-dimensionality, it is a thematic that ultimately questions and resists the banal. In both *La Salle de bain* and *Fuir*, the narrators are attracted to immobility and to the a priori as an absence of investment, an absence of suffering. Yet when the

⁸²¹ *La Télévision*, pp. 22-23.

narrator of *La Salle de bain* contemplates a raindrop, we see the recognition that immobility is death:

Ainsi est-il possible de se représenter que le mouvement, aussi fulgurant soit-il en apparence, tend essentiellement vers l'immobilité, et qu'en conséquence, aussi lent peut-il parfois sembler, entraîne continûment les corps vers la mort, qui est immobilité.⁸²²

This immobility which is death can be read as the banal which is repetition, which is exhibited by the circular structure and formal repetition of *La Salle de bain*. On one reading, it never changes, but can be repeated indefinitely. There is an awareness in *La Salle de bain* that for all the narrator's desire for immobility and retreat from the world, such a desire is only a desire for death. Something similar is alluded to at the end of *L'Appareil-photo*, where the narrator is enclosed in a telephone box:

Je regardais le jour se lever et songeais simplement au présent, à l'instant présent, tâchant de fixer encore une fois sa fugitive grâce – comme on immobiliserait l'extrémité d'une aiguille dans le corps d'un papillon vivant. Vivant.⁸²³

This final paragraph of *L'Appareil-photo* is more difficult to interpret than it might at first appear. At first glance it can seem as though the butterfly is being immobilised with the needle, whereas in fact it is the needle itself which is being immobilised. On further thought, one realises that in any event, the image of a living butterfly pinned by a needle, as in a collector's case, is a nonsensical one: either the butterfly is already dead when being pinned to the case, or if not, one certainly does not catch it with a needle.⁸²⁴ Finally, the present moment, whose fleeting grace one would hastily assume to be identified with the living butterfly, is in fact identified with the point of the needle. Beware the obvious metaphor, Toussaint might be implying. My reading of this passage is as follows: the

⁸²² *La Salle de bain*, p. 36. There is intertext here with Baker's *A Box of Matches*, which contains the description of raindrops sliding down a window pane, see p. 61.

⁸²³ *L'Appareil-photo*, p. 127

⁸²⁴ Nabokov's career as lepidopterist is an obvious intertext here, given Toussaint's comments concerning his influences on *La Salle de bain*, cited above in Chapter 4, Section 2.

fleeting grace of the present moment, which is the point of the needle, can perhaps best be associated with Toussaint's writing itself. Elsewhere, as we have seen, he has connected images of sharpness with writing ('écrire était en quelque sorte une façon de résister au courant qui m'emportait, une manière de m'inscrire dans le temps, de marquer des repères dans l'immatérialité de son cours, des incisions, des égratignures').⁸²⁵ Sharp instruments such as darts and knives are points of focus for his narrators. So the writing is perhaps the present moment scored, scratched, or pinned in time. In any event, the repetition of the word 'vivant' indicates, I suggest, a rejection of the immobilising and deathly aspect of the banal.

There are other subtle suggestions of this rejection. In *Monsieur*, Monsieur sprains his wrist because he is pushed over on a bus by 'un monsieur' whom he has rudely ignored when being asked a question. In response to this, we learn that 'Monsieur n'aimait pas tellement tout ce qui, de près ou de loin, lui ressemblait.'⁸²⁶ In other words, Monsieur dislikes anything that is typical of him, and the typical is the banal. He thus rejects the man who is an image of himself. There are other indications in *Monsieur* that he rejects banality, as can be detected from his unconventional abdication from the behaviour required of him in his roles as employee, fiancé, or neighbour. His mocking stance towards the rest of humanity ('les gens, tout de même' is his refrain) indicates a rejection of much that is banal in the contemporary world. We can see this in his subtle mockery of the conventional chit-chat of party guests about their holiday:

Ils entreprirent de se raconter leurs vacances en Egypte, regrettant assez vite de ne pouvoir associer leurs diapositives aux descriptions qu'ils firent des paysages grandioses, parfois irréels (les gens, tout de même).⁸²⁷

⁸²⁵ *Autoportrait*, pp. 119-120.

⁸²⁶ *Monsieur*, p. 15.

⁸²⁷ *Monsieur*, p. 96. One is reminded here of Augé's remarks about the non-place of travel.

In Baker's work the banal as theme often takes the form of explicit discussion of the banal as problem, as can be seen from the discussion of Rarity in *The Size of Thoughts* – it is both reflexive writing on his own response to banality and also a 'thinking through' of the problem of 'a society so intent on institutionalizing its response to novelty. Our toes are curled right around the leading edge of the surfboard.'⁸²⁸

In various ways, the banal is thematically evoked in Toussaint's and Baker's texts by a resistance to it. I want now to look at how the banal is resisted by means of direct contradiction: a turning away from the characteristics of the banal set out by Sami-Ali. One example of this is the question of pornography, which I raised in Chapter 5 as an apparent indicator of the presence of the banal in Baker's work. I cited the unvarying schema of masturbatory fantasies of *Vox* and *The Fermata* as apparently conforming to the repetitive banality of pornography. However, I also argued that mere repetition itself is not a guarantor of the banal; there are other elements to consider. One such example is the importance of framing and context, as discussed in regard to the banal aesthetic – I demonstrated how repetition in Toussaint operates quite differently to repetition in Michael Crichton, for example. Similarly, Baker's repetitive fantasies contain other elements which contradict banality. There is the inventiveness and originality of situation, previously unseen in any pornographic context: the jeweller and the ruined fork in *Vox*;⁸²⁹ washing breasts in a bucket behind the door in *The Fermata*⁸³⁰ – the infra-ordinary intermingles with every sexual fantasy described. Sometimes the daringly unsexy and prosaic is woven into the sexual scenario. In *Vox*, Abby recalls her seduction of a man which culminates in mutual masturbation involving olive oil and scouring a bathtub, instead of intercourse, since, as she informs him: 'the problem is, I have this darn yeast situation, so I can't really do anything with that magnificent thing, much as I'd like to.'⁸³¹

⁸²⁸ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 21.

⁸²⁹ *Vox*, pp. 45-57.

⁸³⁰ *The Fermata*, p. 245.

⁸³¹ *Vox*, p. 144.

So the pornographic in Baker (and I think it remains pornographic in its intent to arouse) is in some ways a challenge to the rigid banality of pornography as form. We can see this at the outset of *Vox*, which opens with the obscene phone call cliché “‘what are you wearing?’”, to which the answer is not remotely ‘sexy’: ‘I’m wearing a white shirt with little stars, green and black stars, on it, and black pants, and socks the color of the green stars, and a pair of black sneakers I got for nine dollars.’⁸³²

Baker’s transportation of pornography away from the banal perpetuates this initial contradiction of expectation in *Vox*. All the usual elements of pornography are absent: cliché, objectification, primacy of intercourse, and so on. This is in many ways woman-centred pornography, despite some of the quasi-rape scenarios of *The Ferrata* where the women in question are frozen in time and thus unaware of Arno ejaculating onto their faces. The protagonists are so unremittingly *nicæ* and worried about levels of female arousal. Not only this, but intercourse almost never occurs – Baker’s characters are ‘wimps’ by pornographic standards, rarely even possessing their women fully. All of this goes against the traditional structure of pornography as phallic domination.

There are other areas in Baker which explicitly resist the banal. Unlike the use of repetition of words in Toussaint’s banal aesthetic, Baker wishes to avoid the banal by avoiding repetition, and worries about re-using favourite pieces of vocabulary – what he calls ‘this cribbed little circle of favored freaks’.⁸³³ For both Toussaint and Baker, the question of repetition is addressed via either its use or its neurotic avoidance; they both engage with the problem of the overwritten world, the postmodern problem of art which is forced to cite rather than invent. It is the problem succinctly put by Alfred Hitchcock: ‘Eventually everything becomes avoiding the cliché. Your own cliché as well as everyone

⁸³² *Vox*, p. 7.

⁸³³ *U and I: A True Story*, p. 77 – 80.

else's. It's not just what *you're* done. It's what everyone else has done and done and done. I pity the poor people in the future.⁸³⁴

Resisting the Banal – Pure Projection

This final chapter has set out various strategies in Toussaint and Baker that counteract the banal: the banal aesthetic, the infra-ordinary as content and as form, the banal as theme, and other areas where the banal is contradicted. In this final part, I want to examine the remaining areas of resistance to the banal. These concern the evidence of its antithesis - projection. This has been addressed to some extent in relation to projection *outside* the text in the sense of artistic intention as part of the banal aesthetic. I want now to look at projection inside the text, and the varying forms it takes.

The theorisation of projection as inside rendered outside, subjective rendered objective, via the medium of the body, is central to Sami-Ali's theory of the banal. There is a subtle (and doubtless unwitting) allusion to this theory in Toussaint. In *La Salle de bain*, as the narrator travels to Venice by train, he reflects:

J'avais passé la nuit dans un compartiment de train, seul, la lumière éteinte. Immobile. Sensible au mouvement, uniquement au mouvement, au mouvement extérieur, manifeste, qui me déplaçait malgré mon immobilité, mais aussi au mouvement intérieur de mon corps qui se détruisait, mouvement imperceptible auquel je commençais à vouer une attention exclusive, qu'à toutes forces je voulais fixer. Mais comment le saisir? Où le constater?⁸³⁵

Sami-Ali's response to these last questions would be 'à l'extérieur', since the real body and the imaginary body are inextricably double, and the condition of our real body (its disintegration) will necessarily participate in our projection of space-time around us. The narrator's heightened awareness of the train's movement could be read as that internal

⁸³⁴ Alfred Hitchcock, quoted by Charlotte Chandler, in *It's Only a Movie: Alfred Hitchcock, A Personal Biography* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2005), p. 4.

⁸³⁵ *La Salle de bain*, p. 51.

movement projected so that it is experienced outside – that is, as the movement of the train.

Other evidence of projection on the part of the narrators, despite their apparently blank and empty psyches, already discussed, is there in the presence of their fantasy and reverie. The fantasy of the Austrian ambassador's party in *La Salle de bain*, and the paranoid fantasy of *La Réticence* are examples of projection, as are the self-delusions of *La Télévision*'s narrator. The latter narrator is also prone to projection onto other characters, such as the neighbours who offer him a drink which he vehemently declines:

Il se retourna et me regarda de nouveau pensivement. Je sentais que mon explication ne l'avait convaincu qu'à moitié. Non, il devait soupçonner autre chose, une blessure cachée sans doute, quelque faille plus secrète, liée à l'alcool peut-être, puisque c'était le fait de me proposer de l'alcool qui avait été à l'origine de mon éclat. Peut-être était-il en train d'imaginer que j'avais eu un petit problème avec l'alcool dans le passé, et que, maintenant, ayant arrêté de boire, je m'étais senti en danger quand il avait été question d'ouvrir une bouteille de Sekt, ce qui aurait expliqué la violence maladroite de mon geste de refus. Enfin, je ne sais pas, on se demande parfois ce que les gens vont chercher (la réalité, une fois de plus, était beaucoup plus simple: j'avais tout simplement oublié une fougère dans le frigo de mes voisins de dessus).⁸³⁶

This elegantly incorporates both kinds of projection; the mapping of one's own anxieties onto another's behaviour, and the self-delusion involved in thinking that hiding a fern in their fridge is somehow the more 'rational' explanation. As with all of Toussaint's characters' apparent self-delusion, however, the author/narrator blur lends an additional level of awareness and self-mockery to the Nabokovian delusion.

Fantasy has of course a significant role in Baker's two sex books, as already discussed in relation to pornography. It exists elsewhere as well; when Baker imagines John Updike suing him, he writes that 'a flashy literary trial had some fantasy appeal'.⁸³⁷ Elsewhere he fantasises that Updike might think in relation to himself: 'Hm, I guess that

⁸³⁶ *La Télévision*, pp. 184-5.

⁸³⁷ *U and I*, p. 20.

Nick Baker is not to be underestimated.⁸³⁸ Indeed the very title indicates the theme of the book – that in writing about Updike, Baker can only ever write about himself – and indeed he enhances this inevitable projection by deliberately relying on his memory of Updike’s texts rather than re-reading them.

But perhaps the most consistent act of projection for Toussaint and Baker is constituted in the writing itself. In its reflexivity it points not only to the projection of the author’s intention (discussed in relation to the banal aesthetic), but also signals its own ‘becoming’ (unlike the banal which is essentially author-less, since it collectively precedes the subject). The texts do this by means of intertextual references to their own precursors, and through the positioning of themselves formally in respect to what has come before. This is quite the antithesis of the a-historical banal. Furthermore, experimentation which challenges the old and forges the new by definition resists the banal, which is repetition of the same forms, over and over. One never loses sight of the writing, even thematically – as can be seen from the commentary on its own genesis of *U and I*, the ‘rot’ written by Arno alongside his ‘autobiographical’ *The Fermata*, the blocked writer of *La Télévision*, Biaggi the absent writer in *La Réticence*, and references to writing in the non-fictional *Autoportrait*.⁸³⁹ Baker’s *The Size of Thoughts* contains both a long essay on the origins of the word ‘lumber’ and also the manner in which Baker conducted his research for that same essay. Even punctuation, the humble comma, is examined, in classic infra-ordinary mode: ‘Timidly and respectfully it cupped the sense of a preceding phrase and held it out to us. It recalled the pedals of grand pianos, mosquito larvae, paisleys, adult nostril openings [...]’.⁸⁴⁰

In Toussaint’s texts, as in Baker’s, this self-reference takes the form of an awareness of their status as texts. I noted this in section 6.1 concerning the banal aesthetic,

⁸³⁸ *U and I*, p. 56.

⁸³⁹ Mikko Keskinen has also written about the reflexive qualities of *Vox*, in its themes of mediation, representation versus reality, absence versus presence, in “Voces Intimae: Electro-Erotic Speech in Nicholson Baker’s *Vox*”, *Critique* 45.2 (2004): 99-114. Online. University of London Research Library Services. *Academic Search Premier*. 15 May 2006.

⁸⁴⁰ *Room Temperature*, p. 66.

and fully discussed it in Chapter 4. Toussaint's texts demonstrate this awareness in a number of ways: they exhibit signs of the historical process that has brought them into existence, through the use of citation and intertextual allusion. They draw the reader's attention to their artificial, constructed status, whether through the recurring use of 'en réalité' in *La Réticence*, their imperfectly repetitive structures or the self-consciousness of characters.⁸⁴¹

The ultimate form of projection is, for Sami-Ali, artistic creation, which in the context of this thesis, is writing, so long as that writing is not banal. As can be seen from the banal aesthetic, even when mimicking the form of the banal, Toussaint's and Baker's work shows evidence of projection that entitles it to the status of artistic creation. But what does it mean to say that artistic creation, that non-banal literature, is synonymous with projection? One answer is that already given in relation to literary experiment and authorial intention. But even more fundamental, perhaps, is metaphor, which, (so long as it is not the dead metaphor which no longer functions as such) is projection by virtue of its non-selfsameness. As Rosolato writes, it is the 'effet de rupture' which produces 'un effet de non sens'.⁸⁴² It is Lyotard's *figure*; it is unconscious investment; it is a \neq a, it is the way of saying what cannot be said by not saying it.

There are many examples of the use of metaphor in the quotations already cited. One such example which nicely involves the spatial aspect of projection is Baker's description of American slang as 'a dingy, stuffy, cramped apartment that we've lived in for so long now that it bores and irritates us'.⁸⁴³ So metaphor is one aspect of projection understood as depth. More broadly, writing equates to projection in the way I identified with regard to Baker, and the sensation of recognition that his, and other, realist writing engenders. I argued that instead of truth, we were witnessing an alignment of projection

⁸⁴¹ *La Réticence*, pp. 87, 112, 128.

⁸⁴² Guy Rosolato, *Les Cinq axes de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Éditions Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), pp. 19-20. Rosolato's metaphoric-metonymic oscillation is an oscillation between *rupture* (metaphor) and *sens* (metonymy).

⁸⁴³ *The Size of Thoughts*, p. 97.

on the part of author and reader. Literature is projection because it *creates* significance, it does not reveal it. It is on a continuum with the projection of our dreams, our memories, the daily narratives we weave of our own lives.

Realism is often at pains to conceal its imaginary status, in the sense Sami-Ali gives it. Hence experimentation, which heightens the awareness of writing itself, of the act of projection, forces us to acknowledge it. It ensures we do not, as Barthes deplored, simply turn culture into nature, or present truths as found rather than made. The imaginary does not describe, it creates. We co-create the world as we project our selves out into it; we project again in our art, which in turn remakes the world – that is to say, the only world that matters: the world *for us*.

Conclusion

This final chapter has attempted to bring together and finalise the answers to the questions with which I began this thesis. I asked how one might describe the contemporary novel, which required an understanding of the contemporary. I cited a number of pessimistic theories of the contemporary; these turned out to coincide with the banal. I also cited other optimistic theories arguing that subjectivity could still counteract the banal; this was the infra-ordinary. In Toussaint and Baker I found two contemporary writers, who, though separated by language and literary culture, and by significant differences of form, had evolved parallel negotiations with what I contend is one of the central problems of both contemporary life and contemporary literature.

This problem can be summarised as follows: what do you do, as a writer, in a contemporary world that is banal, and where it seems that all writing has become citation? You cannot write the extra-ordinary - it no longer exists. You can focus on the ordinary – but this may be no more than the banality of the contemporary world. Or, you can explore the infra-ordinary – the ‘ruses’ and ‘pratiques’ that fall between or beneath or just this side

of the ordinary, and that oppose the banal in both content and form. You can also oppose the banal whilst acknowledging its existence, via the banal aesthetic.

I have discussed the strategies used by Toussaint and Baker respectively; from which it should be apparent that these writers are quintessentially contemporary in their understanding of and negotiation of the predicaments of the contemporary subject. It should also be apparent that notwithstanding the apparently moribund negative impulse of art (which is supposedly utterly absorbed by the cultural/commercial sphere), negation and opposition are still possible, as are subjectivity and agency. The endless sterility of self-reference is not the only literary response, as the 'retour du récit' shows.

Baker's response involves reappropriation, reinvestment, and a joyful insistence on the power of the imaginary to encroach on areas where the banal seems to dominate. For Toussaint, the self-aware incorporation of the banal, both formally and thematically, ultimately counteracts its deadening effects. And it is that awareness, that solicitation of the subject, that provokes the function of the imaginary in ourselves, the readers.

In the final analysis, what ensures that the work of Toussaint and Baker eludes the banal is their infinite interpretability. It is the kind of writing which, as Sami-Ali writes: 'continue à résister au glissement du banal, tient à une relation que l'objet conserve avec un arrière-plan de sens inépuisable.'⁸⁴⁴

⁸⁴⁴ *Le Banal*, p. 23.

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