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Le roman d'entreprise: breaking the silence

Le roman d'entreprise : breaking the silence

This article looks at three recent French novels in order to explore key themes in what has become known as the *roman d'entreprise*: Pierre Mari's *Résolution* (2005), Nathalie Kuperman's *Nous étions des êtres vivants* (2010) and Thierry Beinstingel's *Retour aux mots sauvages* (2010). The figure of the *entreprise* functions both as a fictional representation of the post-Fordist workplace environment in companies such as France Télécom, and also as a means of tackling wider issues of work and social organisation in an era of neoliberal managerialism. The concepts of capitalist realism, organisational miasma and virtuality are used to analyse the ways in which the three novels convey the distinctive affective landscape of the contemporary *entreprise*. Fiction is used to consider the prolix and self-referential nature of the managerialist *entreprise*, which enables it to exert a significant influence on the individual and collective subjectivities of employees. The three novels focus on the capacity of the *entreprise* to capture language and impose an affect of silence on employees.

Key words

Roman d'entreprise, post-Fordism, managerialism, neoliberalism, *novlangue*.

Le roman d'entreprise: breaking the silence

‘[L]’entreprise a remplacé l’usine, et l’entreprise est une âme, un gaz.’ (Deleuze, 1990: 242)

Introduction

This article attempts to situate, contextualise and elucidate some of the key features of new literary sub-genre, the so-called *roman d'entreprise* that has emerged in recent years in France. In 2009 the *Prix du roman d'entreprise et du travail* was established by Place de la Médiation, an organisation focused on health issues in the workplace,¹ and in 2010 David Caviglioli in *Le Nouvel Observateur* marked the ‘rentrée littéraire’ with an article on the *roman d'entreprise* phenomenon, which he discussed in the context of the suicides of *France Télécom* employees (46 in total in the period from January 2008 to March 2010) and a growing public concern over the growth in physical and psychological pathologies in the contemporary workplace:

Maux de tête, baisse de la libido, dépression, prise de poids, atteinte du canal carpien, scoliose, épisodes hystériques, troubles de la digestion et du sommeil, suicide. Huit heures par jour, cinq jours par semaine, l’homme du tertiaire joue cette tragédie contemporaine entre une fontaine à eau et une machine à café. La cause est entendue depuis que les décomptes morbides d’un géant de la téléphonie se sont affichés sur les kiosques à journaux. Cette rentrée, le malaise du salaire migre en librairie. (Caviglioli, 2010: 106)

This article will focus in particular on three novels: Pierre Mari’s *Résolution* (2005), Nathalie Kuperman’s *Nous étions des êtres vivants* (2010) and Thierry Beinstingel’s *Retour aux mots sauvages* (2010), which illustrate some of the key preoccupations and formal strategies of the

roman d'entreprise. The challenge faced by these authors is, as Pierre Mari acknowledges, to construct a compelling fictional framing for subject matter that is not immediately and self-evidently novelistic: 'les fusions et acquisitions d'entreprises, les plans sociaux, l'évolution des métiers, la langue de bois managériale' (Blanchet, 2005). As the article will show, these novels draw on a variety of resources to create a distinctive fictional approach to work, which seeks to trace the contours of a disturbing set of pathological social psychological symptoms: a new psychic topography of work. As a character in Mari's *Résolution* suggests, the contemporary *entreprise* frequently has the texture of a clumsily constructed 'fiction', which is pervasive in its effects and yet appears to be as insubstantial as a 'rumour':

Je vois d'ici tout ce qu'on pourrait m'opposait si je parlais de « fiction de travail » dans le monde qui nous entoure – si je disais que la réalité, l'« urgence », l'« efficacité », les « défis de la complexité », ce sont des histoires qu'on fait tenir debout à grand renfort d'angoisse. Je ne suis pas sociologue, je ne suis pas philosophe, et j'aurais peut-être du mal à défendre ma position. Mais je vous assure : pour moi, le nœud du problème est bien là. Chacun raconte aux autres une histoire de travail qui n'a même pas le panache d'un beau mensonge, et tout ça rassemblé fait une rumeur qu'on vient aspirer à grandes bouffées. (103-4)

The emergence of a literary focus on work

The *roman d'entreprise* is a recent development within a wider focus on work in French literature that begins to emerge in the 1980s. The absence of work in literature in the post-war period up to this point can be explained by both the aesthetic preoccupations and the economic context of the *Trente Glorieuses*. First, it was rare in the 1950-1970 period, given the focus on formalist experimentation, for characters in novels to have recognisable 'jobs' (Viart, 2011: 15-16). Second, the success of the French economy and the relative stability of Fordist employment

throughout this period at this time did not stimulate literary output on work, despite the fact that working conditions were often harsh. Claire Etcherelli's *Élise ou la Vraie Vie* (1967) and Robert Linhart's *L'Établi* (1978) stand as isolated examples of novels dealing extensively with work (Viart 2011: 17). A significant turning point was the publication of François Bon's *Sortie d'usine* (1982) and Leslie Kaplan's *L'excès-l'usine* (1982). From this point onwards the literary focus on work gathered pace, and Aurore Labadie estimates that more than 150 novels on the subject were published between 1982 and 2012, with the majority of these published after 2000 (Labadie, 2014).

Labadie identifies three strands in this writing on work that develops from the early 1980s onwards. The first strand is focused on the decline of manual labour as it became increasingly clear that the Fordist era of industrial era of capitalism in France was coming to an end. Labadie points to François Bon's *Daewoo* (2004), which deals with the plight of workers at *Daewoo* factories in France when production is moved to China and Poland. The second strand focuses on workers who form the new 'precariat' – 'les précaires' – struggling to survive on short-term contracts and low wages, and who are largely prevented from organising collectively in order to negotiate with employers. The third strand portrays the contemporary *entreprise* rather than the factory, and focuses in particular on the new realities of neoliberal capitalism: redundancies, restructurings, managerialism, takeovers, etc. The novels dealt with in this article belong to this third strand, which begins to establish itself in the 2000s, and for which the term *roman d'entreprise* seems to be particularly appropriate.

As Viart points out, the emergence of a rich vein of sociological writing in France on work has exerted a significant influence on these new fictional representations of the workplace (Viart 2011: 21-3). The work of Vincent de Gaulejac and Christophe Dejours are of particular interest in this respect, since they both deal with the ways in which managerialism within the *entreprise* in the neoliberal era represents a new mode of social organisation that exerts a large degree of control on the subjectivities of employees. De Gaulejac focuses in particular on the

psychic investments that the *entreprise* requires, which frequently takes the form of an unhealthy narcissistic contract. Although the *entreprise* solicits libidinal investment from its employees, this is not reciprocated in the form of recognition (De Gaulejac, 2009: 112-131). Along similar lines Christophe Dejours has looked at the way in which the managerialist drive for quantification and individualising evaluation robs work of meaning and leads to new forms of alienation. For Dejours, the systemic dynamics of the *entreprise* give rise to behaviours that raise the fundamental question of how ‘good people’ become complicit with injustice and psychological violence (Dejours, 1998: 183-4)

Viart distinguishes between broadly realist and ‘neonaturalist’ uses of sociology and what he considers to be more interesting fictional approaches that reframe sociological insights in formally inventive ways. This second approach is concerned with the way in which language constructs the new reality of the workplace, and Viart argues that it is precisely this reflexive and inventive focus on language – as opposed to a more specifically sociological preoccupation with ‘suffering’ – that conveys the isolating and decontextualising tendencies of work in the contemporary *entreprise*. Taking inspiration from George Orwell’s concept of ‘Newspeak’ in *1984* (Orwell, 1949), a number of French commentators have used the term *novlangue* to characterise the managerialist language that Viart sees as being challenged in the *roman d’entreprise*. Just as the aim of Newspeak in *1984* is to control and limit thought within the totalitarian regime of Oceania, so managerial *novlangue* is designed to efface contradictions and hide power relations. As well as favouring the use of euphemism, *novlangue* is discursively structured around a series of paradoxical double binds. As Vincent de Gaulejac suggests, the underlying drive of managerial *novlangue* is inherently paradoxical, in that it seeks to compel employees to be autonomous by following orders: ‘Je vous ordonne d’exercer votre liberté en vous soumettant à mes ordres’ (De Gaulejac, 2011: 64).

In this way, neoliberal managerialism uses language to achieve a kind of linguistic Taylorism, isolating individual employees within tightly defined subjective dispositions, and preventing them from constructing a collective 'syntax' of work:

Il y a de moins en moins de « mise en syntaxe », c'est à dire de mise en relation des individus entre eux. L'assignation à une tâche unique et répétitive que la « chaîne » du taylorisme, au nom improprement choisi (mais riche de connotations esclavagistes), imposait à chacun, la division du travail orchestrée par le management néo-libéral l'accomplit aussi bien. (Viart, 2011: 30)

As well as taking inspiration from sociology and focusing on language the *roman d'entreprise* also draws on insights from disciplines such as social psychology and psychoanalysis. A major theme in this respect is the problematic mode of subjectivity created by organisations that elicit significant subjective identification and investment from employees as a means of control. Accommodation with reality as it is constructed by the *entreprise* necessarily involves a series of ultimately unhealthy psychological adjustments for individual employees. Strategies of compartmentalisation, denial and scapegoating inevitably lead to feelings of guilt, shame and worthlessness. In this way, an affect of 'silence' is imposed not only through the capture of language, but also the managerialist control of what might be described as the 'syntax' of collective subjectivity. As Sonya Florey points out, Mari's *Résolution* conveys this sense of silence by contrasting the plethora of detail relating to the transformation of the *entreprise* (Nexorum) with the schematic treatment of other conventionally realist elements in the novel: characters are, for example, referred to by single letters, and it is unclear what the company now produces: 'Le luxe de détails relatifs à la rationalisation ne parvient pas à faire oublier le silence qui pèse sur d'autres éléments constitutifs du récit' (Florey, 2013: 46).

In this sense, the *roman d'entreprise* carries out what Gilles Deleuze defines as the 'clinical' role of literature, by identifying new symptoms and tracing new lines of force in the workplace

(Deleuze, 1993). Giving these new symptoms fictional form can go some way to attesting to the existence of real suffering and injustice in the workplace, providing a vocabulary and a language for that which otherwise cannot be expressed or even properly witnessed. The *roman d'entreprise* seeks to reclaim and reconstruct some kind of social syntax from the fragmented, compartmentalised, conflicted and isolated psyches of individual employees. In short, the reality that the genre attempts to capture is elusive and problematic. Despite the bleak tone and dark Kafkaesque humour of the *roman d'entreprise*, the act of transforming this new reality into fiction gestures towards a hopeful politics, as the collective voice of the publishing house employees in Kuperman's *Nous étions des êtres vivants* recognises: 'la magie des épidermes qui, presque malgré nous, communique les uns avec les autres dans les situations de crise' (227).

The symptoms identified by the *roman d'entreprise* correspond to what Deleuze and Guattari calls 'affects' in art (Deleuze & Guattari 1991: 163-66). Claire Colebrook offers a compelling and useful analysis of the Deleuzian concept of the 'affect' in relation to literature (Colebrook, 2002: 21-25). As Colebrook emphasises, art has the capacity to explore sensible experiences – fear, horror, boredom, desire – in their singularity. That is to say, these experiences are freed from the representational constraints of individual affections, freighted as these are with opinion and convention. When art is successful in disrupting conventional, opinionated links between language and experiences, it is able to engage with impersonal affects in ways that bring out their strangeness and complexity. As the article will show, the *roman d'entreprise* engages with a series of complex affects that relate to feelings of resignation, powerlessness and isolation. The novels dealt with here explore the tensions that arise when the complexity and intensity of these affects comes up against both the inadequacy of the conventional language used by employees and the stultifying effects of managerial *novlangue*.

Transformations of work: financialisation, flexibility, managerialism

Before looking more closely at three examples of the *roman d'entreprise* it is important to understand the context in which the *entreprise* emerges as a distinctive contemporary institution. Since the mid-1970s advanced capitalist economies such as France have seen a significant shift from industrial- to immaterial, affective labour, and the general move from Fordism to post-Fordism has generated new forms of alienation (Renault, 2006). So, for example, the move from manual labour to call-centre employment for a former electrician in Beinstingel's *Retour aux mots sauvages* proves to be stressful and isolating. As well as being more abstract and more psychically demanding, work for many employees has become less secure, and the 'aristocratie ouvrière' of skilled manual labour no longer has the status and sense of self-confidence that it had in the Fordist regime of the post-war era. The changing status of these employees is summarised in Mari's *Résolution*:

Il y avait quelque chose de pionnier dans leur métier, au lendemain de la guerre et durant les années qui ont suivi : aujourd'hui, on demande aux uns d'accepter l'amputation de leurs tâches, et le chômage à peine déguisé qui l'accompagne, et on exige des autres qu'ils mettent tout en œuvre pour se reconvertir. (58)

These transformations of work have occurred within the wider context of the financialisation of the global economy. Globalisation, and in particular the steady growth of global free market economics, have meant that the *entreprise* is increasingly driven by the short-term economic demands of shareholders and debts incurred from leveraged buyouts. In this new phase of capitalism the *entreprise* focuses increasingly on knowledge, light assets, new information technologies, and ephemeral, immaterial outputs. These shifts in production are accompanied by a new focus on the careful management of appearances. Externally, this takes the form of a preoccupation with marketing as a means of constructing and promoting the *entreprise* as a 'brand'. Internally, the *entreprise* constructs a new, self-referential reality, and negotiating and interpreting the systems of signs that define this environment has become part of the world of

work. As a character in Mari's *Résolution* suggests, this new 'fantôme de travail' is considerably more burdensome than 'real' work: 'Parce qu'avec le fantôme de travail, vous ne savez jamais où vous en êtes, et qu'il vous détruit la vie bien plus que le travail le plus éreintant' (*Résolution*, 59).

Vincent de Gaulejac points to areas in which managerialism achieved social and political legitimacy in France from the 1980s onwards. First, the notion of 'human capital' gained currency in the fields of human resources and recruitment in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the extent to which managerialism had gained political legitimacy as a new mode of social organisation was illustrated by the fact it was felt that the 'managerial revolution' should be extended to public companies such as SNCF and France Télécom, and subsequently to prisons, hospitals, schools and the police (De Gaulejac, 2011: 63). In this financialised, managerial context, employees feature as a particularly costly and problematic 'resource' that needs to be maximised. As Bruno Diehl and Gérard Doublet emphasise in their highly critical assessment of the transformation of management culture at France Télécom, the management of human resources is frequently carried out in a ruthless, inhuman manner: 'une conception brutale du management, réduisant sauvagement les hommes à de simples variables d'ajustement économique' (Diehl & Doublet, 2010: 11-12). Along these lines, the fictionalised version of France Télécom in *Retour aux mots sauvages* is described as 'un totalitarisme entièrement dévoué au profit, corps et âme' (157).

Although often ruthless in practice, the managerialist ethos of the contemporary *entreprise* presents itself as progressive, offering opportunities for autonomy, self-development and creativity. In this way, the managerialism of the *entreprise* parallels a wider neoliberal shift that promotes and valorises entrepreneurial forms of subjectivity – mobility, flexibility, adaptability – which in practice facilitate new forms of control. The employee – and increasingly the citizen – is required to be consistently dynamic and flexible, willing to engage in an ongoing project of self-development and self-transformation. It is necessary to 'manage' one's own life, fixing objectives and evaluating performance in the hope of being seen as, and remaining, employable: 'À chaque

période de son développement, l'individu doit établir une compatibilité existentielle pour faire la preuve de son employabilité' (De Gaulejac, 2009: 188). The controlling nature of these managerialist requirements is nicely captured in the paradoxical formulation of managerialism as a mode of 'organised autonomy'. As one of the employees of the fictional *entreprise* featuring in *Résolution* suggests, autonomy and self-direction can in practice lead to stresses and that are all the more problematic for being largely self-imposed: 'Magnifique opération, quand on fait le bilan : chacun devenant le meilleur exploiteur de lui-même, chacun exigeant de soi ce qu'il n'aurait jamais accepté que l'autre lui inflige !' (40) Along similar lines, the collective voice of the chorus in Kuperman's *Nous étions des êtres vivants* expresses precisely this affect of organised autonomy. It is only when the employees are completely overwhelmed by work that they can allow themselves to feel indispensable:

C'est avec une jouissance ignorante d'elle-même que nous nous proclamons indisponibles. On serait presque flattés d'appartenir à un monde où l'on n'a plus le temps de peser l'essentiel, patron d'un semblant de soi qui se refuse aux autres tant les autres ont peu de poids à côté de l'enjeu. Enjeu imaginaire, bien sûr, mais qui tient la dragée haute. Je suis débordé, dit-on. Mais l'on aime que ça déborde, que ça nous dépasse, que ça nous inonde. Avoir du temps serait presque l'aveu de notre inutilité. (40-1)

At the same time, the *entreprise* has also retained and refined more obviously disciplinary techniques for control and surveillance to supplement organised autonomy. Individual self-management is framed within a ruthless focus on the quantitative measuring of performance and outputs that is imposed by management in the form league tables, performance indicators, and statistical measures of efficiency and impact: a hysterical data-driven 'quantophobia' (De Gaulejac, 2009). Employees at all levels experience high levels of surveillance and evaluations, and increasing amounts of time are devoted to performing and maintaining these reporting procedures. Working in tandem, the management of subjectivity and the obsession with

performance data mean that the *entreprise* constitutes nothing less than a contemporary dystopia of soft totalitarianism. The highly individualised nature of contemporary employment is described by Danièle Linhart in terms of a generalised ‘précarisation subjective du travail’. As well as the individualising tendencies of surveillance and evaluation, and the deliberately destabilising effects of organisational restructuring, the *entreprise* seeks to elicit forms of narcissistic identification that undermine class and professional solidarities (Linhart, 2011: 2-34). The argument here will be that the *roman d’entreprise* has taken on the task of diagnosing this new environment by means of a ‘clinical’ literary analysis of three major affects, which will be labelled here ‘capitalist realism’, ‘organisational miasma’ and ‘virtuality’.

Capitalist realism

The exhortation to be ‘realistic’ is a recurrent theme in the *roman d’entreprise*. Employees are constantly told that should be adaptable and flexible rather than resistant, and that they should recognise and accept the ‘realities’ imposed by a ruthless global economic climate. An older employee in Mari’s *Résolution* eloquently expresses his dismay when confronted with this ‘realism’:

Si vous les entendiez parler de la « réalité » qu’il faut regarder en face ! Ils ont une espèce de plaisir de la bouche et des mains à vous répéter qu’ils sont prisonniers comme vous, qu’il n’y a pas de choix, qu’il faut s’adapter, que personne ne peut rien contre. Je vous assure : le mot que j’ai fini par vomir, c’est bien la « réalité ». Il a trop servi à tout tordre et dans tous les sens. Leur « réalité », ça n’est qu’une manière de nous angoisser chaque jour un peu plus. (56-7)

This aggressive assertion of the need for ‘realism’ chimes remarkably well with the notion of ‘capitalist realism’ that the British cultural critic Mark Fisher has developed in recent years to encapsulate the pervasive sense that it now appears to be impossible to conceive of any kind of

alternative mode of social organisation that might replace the current hegemony of neoliberal capitalism (Fisher, 2009: 2). In the *roman d'entreprise* this new 'transpersonal psychic infrastructure' of resignation is sometimes expressed in banal, quasi-proverbial terms – along the lines of 'there's no point in fighting it' – but is also frequently *felt* whilst remaining unexpressed. It contains symptoms of the social psychological phenomenon of 'system justification', whereby individuals find themselves defending and identifying with a status quo that may objectively be harmful to them. Along similar lines, employees may compartmentalise potentially painful experiences of work in order to attenuate the mental strain caused by being confronted with the cognitive dissonance arising from unavoidable contradictions. On a number of occasions characters in the novels are shown as being aware of ideological nature of the *entreprise* and managerial discourse, and they may in some cases adopt an openly critical or ostensibly cynical perspective. However, they are frequently unable to articulate these insights in the context of any meaningful sense of collective consciousness or resistance. What is more, the temporary psychic relief gained by a strategy of cynical distance ultimately has the effect of defusing genuine critique and resistance. As Pierre Mari indicates in an interview focusing on *Résolution*, the psychic burden of internalising, and in some sense legitimising, the managerial 'reality' of the *entreprise* ultimately leads to a point of crisis for individuals:

[L]a manière dont une conscience peut accueillir un certain état du réel, en faire tenir ensemble les composantes, y trouver ses marques... jusqu'au moment où tout cela n'est plus tenable, où les cohérences établies à grand renfort d'aveuglements vous explosent au visage. (Blanchet, 2005)

In seeking to portray this 'realist' demeanour the *roman d'entreprise* responds not only to a new social psychological reality, but also deploys formal, aesthetic resources in order to convey the sense of a reality that presents itself as coherent and empowering, and yet which is experienced by employees as contradictory and isolating.

Organisational miasma

A second closely connected series of affects relates to the vicious cycle of contagious anxiety, gloom, and even hysteria that emerges in the context of rapid, traumatic organisational change of the kind experienced at France Télécom. Yannis Gabriel has recently described the destructive social psychological dynamics that occur in these conditions as a creeping 'organisational miasma', which colonises both the intersubjective world of the employees and, in many cases, individual psyches. As was the case with France Télécom, when change occurs new management portrays the 'old' organisation and its ways of working as self-evidently outmoded, indulgent and inefficient. The 'new' organisation is presented, in contrast, as being flexible, efficient and entrepreneurial, and particular emphasis is placed on maintaining and communicating this appearance to an external audience. The past must be erased and those remaining employees who have not been encouraged to leave or made redundant are required to adapt to new norms of flexibility and entrepreneurialism. Drawing on broadly psychoanalytic concepts, Gabriel shows how the collective affect of miasma that emerges as a response to such situations takes the distinctive form of a contagion, provoking a negative cycle of feelings of depression, unworthiness and uncleanness on the part of remaining employees. There is little will to resist and, despite high levels of personal distress, there is very little explicit discussion of the current situation amongst employees as a pervasive mood of gloom and resignation takes hold.

The concept of organisational miasma also has mythic resonances, originating as it does in Greek tragedy as a way to describe a society or family gripped by contagious and corrosive disease or fear. For Gabriel, miasmatic organisations are caught in a tragic destructive cycle of largely self-inflicted violence. The participants are unable to react in a rational or measured way to the situation they are caught up in them because they are, *tragically*, incapable of recognising its true significance (Gabriel, 2012: 1149) Closely related to these tragic qualities, miasma also has

significant anthropological dimensions, which are frequently expressed as an obsession with purity and cleansing. For a privatising and increasingly financialised organisation like France Télécom, the attempt to create a 'lean', efficient organisation that was well adapted to the demands of a globalised was formulated in terms of purification and ritual sacrifice. If only inefficient and unproductive elements of the company could be eliminated, then it could step into a bright new world of excellence, flexibility and efficiency. Gabriel notes that, in the anonymous organisation that he uses as a case-study (and for which he worked), the objectification of both employees and customers as resources to be deployed and exploited was internalised by many employees: 'Many came to view themselves as objects of no intrinsic value but merely resources adding or failing to add value to the organization' (Gabriel, 2012: 1140). In social psychoanalytic terms, employees in 'miasmatic' organisations are prevented from engaging in the necessary catharsis of mourning for what has been lost in the process of organisational change: 'Feelings of loss and grief for the organization that has been changed by an "irreversible discontinuity" are disavowed and repressed. Likewise, old colleagues, leaders, practices and so forth are denigrated as deadwood, behind the times or burnt out' (Gabriel, 2012: 1148). Miasmatic organisations are, as Gabriel puts it, littered with corpses.

Virtuality

Virtuality, the third affective structure, contains at least three distinct elements. First, and most obviously, there is the shift from material production to immaterial labour, which frequently entails the use of new information technologies. Although this abstract mental activity is, by definition, difficult to quantify and control, the aim of the *entreprise* is precisely to codify and formalise these forms of labour (De Gaulejac, 2011: 244). In practice, work of this kind – in a call centre for example – consists of fragmented, scripted and impersonal communicative interactions with virtual 'clients'. Employees in this situation experience a marked contradiction between work that is unsatisfyingly intangible and an organisational framing of this work that is

rigid and prescriptive. Second, employees experience a generalised affect of unreality and intangibility: a sense that it is not possible to frame work in ways that make it tangible and comprehensible in wider social terms. Third, there is a widespread sense of absence, abandonment and disorientation. This is provoked in large part by the widespread adoption of deliberately chaotic organisational structures. As well as facilitating frequent reorganisation, information technology provides an analogical model of organisational obsolescence. That is to say, just as the efficiencies offered by new information technologies render previous technologies obsolete, so the *entreprise* has equated efficiency in a broader organisational sense with constant restructuring.

***Résolution*: capitalist realism**

The central character of Pierre Mari's *Résolution* – whose name is never revealed – works for a fictional *entreprise* called Nexorum. As in the other two novels under consideration here, the narrative focuses on a period of apparently chaotic transformation in a public company, inevitably evoking the case of France Télécom. Significantly, the precise nature of the company's activities remains obscure as it moves through an ultimately disastrous period of expansion, acquisitions and restructuring following the recent move from public to private ownership. The character referred to as O. (as indicated previously, all of the characters are identified by a single initial), who worked briefly for Nexorum, and who subsequently sets up her own human resources and business strategy consultancy, summarises the changes in the following way: 'Ce qui frappe le plus, fait-elle remarquer, c'est le basculement opéré au cours des trois dernières années : d'une entreprise vénérable, symbole de l'économie administrée à un groupe entraîné dans une spirale de fusions et d'acquisitions' (64). This transformation is reflected in the determination to prevent employees from remaining for any extended period in a single post or sector of activity. Accordingly, the central character moves out of 'Réseau I' – which at one time constituted the heart of the company's activities – into the human resources department, where

his main task is to interview and advise older employees whose careers have ‘stalled’ [‘cantonnés’] (12).

As the novel progresses the internal organisation of the company becomes increasingly chaotic, and the narration is structured around an ongoing dialogue between the central character and V., a former employee of the company. The idea of ‘résolution’ in the novel refers to the attempt, on the part of the main character in particular, to develop some kind of external perspective on Nexorum. V. is committed to informed analysis and his capacity to communicate with the employees is highlighted in the novel as being qualitatively different to the controlling and one-dimensional communication of the company. In this way, the novel evokes the classic form of the *Bildungsroman*, tracing the gradual transformation of silence and self-deception into a self-reflexive, critical consciousness. Even if the employees who visit V. occasionally find themselves unable to follow his argument, they experience a youthful openness to thought has been revived (108). Crucially, V. is also willing to challenge strategies of self-deception and system justification, with brutal honesty if necessary. For example, when the main character justifies his decision to accept a post in human resources by claiming that this work should not be left to others who are less scrupulous within the company V. is unsparing in his rejection of this form of self-justification:

V. a répondu presque aussitôt, non sans brutalité. Je connais bien cet argument fallacieux, a-t-il dit : *Si ce n'est pas moi qui accomplis cette tâche, ce sera une brute sans âme*. Le problème, c'est qu'à vouloir maintenir leur droit de cité dans la Mécanique globale, les purs sont obligés de donner des gages, et de montrer qu'ils sont capables, à l'occasion, d'agir comme des brutes. Un pur qui joue à cache-cache avec le masque de la brute, c'est plus horrible qu'une vraie brute. (38)

In short, he draws out the critical faculties of a small group of employees by means of dialogue, reviving the capacity for nuanced, analytical thought that has been stifled by the *entreprise*.

Linguistically and psychologically, the main focus of the novel is the way in which the company effectively constructs a self-referential reality that elicits a mixture of complicity and resignation from its employees. The formal choice to refract this reality through a central character who is *not* the narrator, along with the ongoing dialogue that he engages in with V., emphasises its pervasive – and persuasive – quality. However absurd and problematic the internal reality of the company becomes, the reader is only ever granted access to the central character's attempt to negotiate it. If there is any absolutely private space of resistance and subjective integrity it is not revealed. It can only be tentatively approached through dialogue.

A number of mechanisms exist which appear to be highly effective in silencing or diverting any attempts to formulate an understanding of the work environment that does not correspond to the narrow constraints of company ideology. For example, when the central character encounters an employee who is deeply critical of the effects of managerialism on staff morale he knows that he is required to draw on set of set of discursive tactics devised by human resources precisely in order to defuse such criticism. The interviewer should initially welcome and even agree with criticism, and conversation should be refocused on banal commonplace observations designed to undermine the employee's line of critique. Subsequently, the interviewee should be gently reminded that all situations raise difficulties and challenges, and that there is a tendency to idealise 'l'entreprise d'autrefois'. At the same time, they should also be reminded that focusing on current difficulties detracts from the positive advances made on the past (57). In short, human resources interviews must be framed so as to avoid the expression of anger and frustration, 'pour éviter certaines dérives' (60) In general terms, employees are encouraged to limit their thinking to practical and pragmatic solutions to problems as defined by the *entreprise*. To this end, the company employs a psychologist who emphasises the importance of distinguishing between 'vrais et faux problèmes', and the importance of avoiding hypothetical 'speculation' when there are 'concrete, tangible' problems that require immediate attention (78-9). The internalisation of a collective, self-imposed reticence means that opportunities to voice

criticism and to engage in debate that arise in the course of management seminars arranged by the company are not followed up, as the central character recognises:

Il sentait bien, en effet, que le groupe tout entier manquait avec une constance remarquable les occasions qui s'offraient : un débat tournait poliment court, la tolérance arrondissait les angles qui affleuraient, des échappées intéressantes étaient soumises à un recadrage collectif. (18)

Employees engage in a variety of perverse psychological accommodations that prevent them from challenging this carefully engineered reality. So, for example, one character claims that, although criticism of the company's management strategy may be 'right' this is only in some abstract, ideal sense, and such criticisms are ultimately illegitimate since they serve no practical purpose: 'Tout ce que peut faire une communauté d'hommes, avait-il conclu, c'est chercher le moindre mal – et non être obsédé par une idée du Bien qui devient très vite terroriste' (53).

Similarly perverse strategies of system justification are employed by those attending management seminars designed to promote 'creative uncertainty' and 'controlled risk taking' (15-18). The employees quickly split into two distinct sub-groups: the self-proclaimed 'Ironists' ['les Goguenards'], who in turn take it upon themselves to identify a separate group of 'Cynics' ['les Cyniques']. The Ironists appear to take a critical distance, mocking the intellectually bereft nature of the seminars during breaks, and drawing in particular on a number of analogies with the blatant ideological distortions of the Soviet communist era. Crucially, however, during the seminars they participate seriously and do not voice criticisms. When one of the group is questioned about this contradictory behaviour he replies – as if this were a self-evident truth – that demands for integrity, coherence and consistency on the part of the company are simply unreasonable: 'reality' as defined by the *entreprise* is *legitimately* contradictory (16). The Cynics adopt an equally perverse, but subtly different, 'realist' stance: they recognise that the management discourse of their seminars is nothing more than the kind of marketing-speak

['simulation'] that is found in glossy promotional brochures, but they also insist that this fictional construction *is* the new reality of the company and must be engaged with accordingly. In Deleuzian terms, this constitutes the literary diagnosis of a distinctively new set of social symptoms, an emergent, complex affect of capitalist realist accommodation. This affect encompasses both self-justifying acquiescence and fatalism, and a perverse and somewhat infantilised pleasure in allowing complex problems to be radically simplified.

Nous étions des êtres vivants: organisational miasma

Nathalie Kuperman's *Nous étions des êtres vivants* focuses on a group of employees who work on producing children's magazines for a fictional company called Mercandier Presse in Paris. The company is in the process of being taken over and the intentions of the new owner read as a checklist of the aims of neoliberal managerialism. Mercandier Presse has, apparently, been 'pissing cash' for a number of years, and the stated aims of the new owner are to raise the company's market share from 14% to 22% by becoming 'une entreprise de propriété intellectuelle', diversifying into video games, toys and Internet sites, and by creating a new, thoroughly individualised work culture within the company (30-1). The narrative is constructed in the form of parodic tragedy in three acts: 'menace', 'dérèglement' and 'trahison', and the psychological disarray caused by the takeover process is conveyed through the internal monologues of five archetypal characters: Agathe Rougier, a single woman aged 50 who lives surrounded by cats and dolls and who has devoted her life to the company; Patrick Sabaroff, who has contempt for unions and relishes what he sees as a necessary shake-up of complacent colleagues; Ariane Stein, a stressed divorced mother of two; Muriel Dupont-Delvich, the ambitious new directrice générale; and Dominique Bercanta, who is unsure about taking on the role of being Muriel's assistant. In addition to this, comments from a collective 'chorus' punctuate the novel.

After the initial shock of new ownership ('menace') the novel focuses on a period of hysteria ('dérèglement') in which the employees turn on each other, followed by feelings of shame and betrayal engendered by the toxic atmosphere of the takeover ('trahison'). In short, the novel explores the *miasma* that envelops Mercandier Presse in this period of financialisation. In a significant episode which occurs the night before the company is scheduled to move, Ariane Stein enlists the help of the caretaker to stay overnight in the building. In the course of the evening she comes across copies of series of emails which reveal that she is on a provisional list of nine employees who will be made redundant (147).² The tone and content of the emails reveal how Muriel Dupont-Delvich has been drawn into collaborating with Paul Cathéter's ruthless plans for redundancy:

Assainir une société en se séparant des individus qui la ralentissent n'équivaut ni à dénoncer ni à trahir, prétend-il. Il faut qu'elle le comprenne. Qu'elle ait conscience aussi que, si elle ne joue pas le jeu, elle prend des risques. Il ne dit pas lesquels, mais l'avertissement est limpide. (148)

The episode has clear connotations in the context of the tragic framing of the novel: the emails constitute a 'thread' that provides Ariane, like Ariadne, with a means of escape from her prescribed fate at Mercandier Presse. Muriel Dupont-Delvich resigns and Ariane, emboldened by the knowledge that she now possesses, seizes the opportunity to become the new directrice générale.

The formal choice to frame the narration as a series of monologues conveys the sense of a breakdown of workplace syntax identified by Dominique Viart. The employees are unable to construct a mutually intelligible and meaningful language in which to express their anxieties, or even to come to some sort of consensus on the precise nature of what is happening. The focus on interior monologues also allows the novel to explore the ways in which each character experiences a complex and shifting engagement with the hypothetical future state of the

company. It is significant in this respect that, although the new owner Paul Cathéter barely appears as a physical presence in the novel, his influence on the characters' thinking is pervasive. The god-like powers that are attributed to him within the company are typical of senior managers in miasmatic organisations (Gabriel, 2012: 1174). Accordingly, he exerts an influence over the employees simply by virtue of the fact that they attempt to interpret his intentions and anticipate ways in which they might elicit recognition from him whilst he remains silent: 'Paul Cathéter est à l'œuvre en nous. Sa force à lui, c'est qu'il s'endort sans penser à nous' (102). Along the same lines, he represents the rarified sphere of 'expert' knowledge: 'Cette situation que nous maîtrisons malgré nos efforts d'en comprendre les ressorts a pour effet de nous rassembler dans une grande ignorance. Il vaut mieux, nous persuadons-nous, ne pas savoir' (161).

It is only the voice of the *chorus* that provides any collective articulation of the situation, which hesitates between hope and an appropriately tragic commentary on the inability to construct a common language of resistance. At times, it expresses the paradoxical sense of a shared existence that is also highly conflictual and conflicted:

Qu'est-ce qu'on va faire ? On ne sait pas ce qu'il attend de nous. On est d'accord pour travailler plus. D'accord ? Non, pas d'accord. Enfin si, d'accord. Ça veut dire quoi, ne pas être d'accord ? On ne sait plus. On attend de comprendre. (24)

As in Greek tragedy, the function of the chorus is complex: to provide context and commentary; to give voice to the fear and uncertainty of the main actors; and to participate as an actor in the tragedy. As the tragedy unfolds, the chorus expresses a wavering and uncertain sense of solidarity. The news – as if delivered by the gods – that the premises of the publishing house will remain in Paris gives rise to a fleeting sense of resistant solidarity, evoking temporarily reassuring and emboldening memories of a previous era of revolutionary songs, of workers' demands and of strikes (45-6). However, this nostalgic glow of solidarity is only temporary, and is subsequently undermined by recurrent feelings of confusion and uncertainty. In this respect,

the chorus' dilemma is linguistic and also proto-political. That is to say, it is engaged in the struggle to construct a form of shared language that can make sense of the fraught experience of organisational miasma. So, for example, the chorus voices the feeling – which remains unspoken – that the sense of gloom that weighs upon the employees is illegitimate: the association of work and sadness feels like a clash of registers. Instead, they feel that their resistance can only be legitimately couched in language over which they have no control: 'Nous empruntons leur vocabulaire, réclamons un business plan, nous préoccuons de la façon dont nous allons être « managés »' (35). As Jean-Paul Engélibert points out, the surname 'Cathéter' clearly has a clear metaphorical significance in this respect. Cathéter has a direct line, as it were, to the interiority of the employees. Once this point of access is established, the steady drip of managerialism realist infiltrates the consciousness of their individual and collective consciousnesses: 'Le système se maintient et son discours convainc par l'imprégnation lente que sa répétition impose. *Le novlangue se distille*' (Engélibert 2009: 60).

The breakdown of a collective, *political* language is experienced most intensely with the news, towards the end of the novel, that there have been three redundancies and one resignation in the company: 'Nos phrases à nous ne se finissent pas, elles tournent en rond sans trouver leurs points finals. Tu crois que. Ce n'est pas possible que. Il n'a pas pu. C'est complètement' (193). Significantly, the ambivalent note of resistance on which the novel closes is expressed in the non-linguistic form of contagious laughter: 'un rire chaotique et dévastateur, presque monstrueux, auquel personne n'échappait, une sorte de cri qui nous maintenait serrés les uns contre les autres' (230).

Retour aux mots sauvages : virtuality

Thierry Beinstingel's *Retour aux mots sauvages* focuses on employee of a large company who has moved, in his early 50s, from working as an electrician to work in a call centre dealing with mobile phone contracts. Although the company is never named there are clear parallels with

France Télécom and its recent history (Beinstingel worked for France Télécom whilst writing the book). Significantly, we never learn the real name of the main character, who chooses 'Éric' as a pseudonym for his work in the call centre. The novel covers a year-long period and deals with Éric's initially painful adjustment to this new employment and the strategies that he employs in order to make the work bearable and to recover both a sense of meaning in his work and an assertion of his sense of self. He takes up running, and he also keeps a personal log of his interactions with customers. The narrative also unfolds in the context of a wave of suicides of employees of the company. There are significant glimpses of the wider social reality of France in the twenty-first century. The familiar and reassuring landscape of working life – summer holidays, *la rentrée*, small-town life, watching TV in the evening – is in the process of becoming defamiliarised. For example, Éric undertakes a sixty kilometre round-trip commute each day and misses the simple pleasure of living in the same town that he works.

In part, the novel presents a phenomenological description of the stresses caused by the immaterial nature of call-centre work for 'Éric'. The gradual softening of his hands serves as a constant reminder of his unease with the transformation he is forced to undertake: 'combien de temps ça va prendre pour que la main prenne la consistance de la bouche ?' (31). This shift from skilled manual labour to immaterial labour is framed throughout the novel in terms of a general transformation from a world of solid structures and objects to a more liquid world, which dissolves the materiality of Eric's previous existence:

Il avait perdu la faculté d'évaluer le temps, les distances. Les milliards de mouvements qu'il avait accomplis depuis le lycée professionnel avaient brutalement quitté sa mémoire. Son travail était devenu abstrait, réduit au simple déplacement d'une souris de plastique. Ce qui se passait dans les entrailles de la machine était inconnu, parfois incompréhensible. (60)

This contrast is highlighted by a routine visit to a local garage by *Éric* to get his car repaired. The reassuring materiality of the workshop is contrasted with the alienating and one-dimensional smoothness of the call centre: 'Ici, la matière commande, la tôle, le plastique, le téflon, le carbone : il n'y a pas à négocier, convaincre, verser dans la fausse démocratie des relations commerciales. Ici, c'est la dictature de la matière' (177). The smoothness of this new work resists both engagement and critique: 'tout cela omnipotent, autonome, libre, faussement décontracté, un travail affranchi des limites du corps' (28). Significantly, he experiences the calls he deals with as a sort of 'liquid' flowing from his headphones that he must somehow collect in the receptacle of his 'script' (31).

As well as being frustratingly virtual and abstruse, work in the call-centre is pressurised in a number of other ways. The requirement to deal with high volume of calls on a daily basis and the repetitive nature of the interactions with customers are clearly mentally fatiguing. Furthermore, although this is a form of work that ostensibly relies on communication and human connection, the interactions between call centre workers and customers are in practice narrowly prescribed and scripted, leaving very little space for any meaningful kind of interaction: 'Mais ce qui est invisible est tout autant cogité' (27). The pre-programmed nature of this process is reinforced by the fact that customers are initially greeted by a recorded message in order to maximise efficiency. The novel's description of the alienating nature of immaterial labour of this kind corresponds closely to sociological research on the France Télécom suicides. Philippe Zarifian, for example, has looked at the way in which a psychologically disorientating working environment became extremely stressful for many of France Télécom employees (Zarifian 2009). Zarifian points out that these working conditions proved to be particularly difficult for those who were over the age of 45 and had moved to call centre work from other occupations within the company. The most difficult aspect of call centre work for this group was, according to Zarifian, a strong sense that they were prevented from engaging with customers in a manner that they regarded as appropriately professional, and ultimately meaningful. This created a profound

sense of psychological and ethical disorientation (147). As a reaction to this sense of alienation, employees engaged in clandestine forms of resistance: they refused to adhere to call quotas and follow scripts and, crucially, they were committed to providing useful information and advice to clients, rather than simply attempting to sell new products. Despite his general reluctance to talk to colleagues or family about the pressure of work in the call centre, 'Éric' does attempt in a variety of ways to assert his identity and humanity. He refuses, for example, to adopt the generalised use of 'tu' and he finds that running provides a way of reconnecting with a sense of bodily self. He also begins to phone some customers back during his breaks in order provide genuinely useful information. In particular, he helps a customer whose payment for his basic phone package has apparently gone missing. Éric is subsequently contacted by the customer's sister, who tells him that her brother is bedridden following an accident and has undergone a tracheotomy.

The novel shows how, in a variety of ways, the call centre employees' experience of work involves a dispossession of language. Although Éric appears to get on well with his colleagues – their day-to-day experience of work as is relatively convivial with birthday cakes and shared jokes – there is no wider context or shared meta-language available to them in order to articulate a collective sense of dissatisfaction. For example, when he is questioned by the call centre manager about the fact that he has failed to cancel the unpaid subscription of the customer whom he visits, Éric apparently reflects at some length on what he regards as an act of resistance against the duplicitous, hypocritical nature of the work in which he is engaged. The act of resistance has taken place and Éric has a rationale for it but, crucially, it cannot be validated and asserted in language. He remains trapped within the entirely artificial, virtual realm work as prescribed by the company:

Que répondre ? Tout est vrai. Mais c'est le faux qui a amené cette histoire. Comment l'expliquer ? Que l'opérateur Éric a péché les plombs, usurpateur d'un faux prénom,

tributaire de conversations enchaînées à la suite comme autant de mirages auditifs, spectateur d'écrans virtuels qui s'effacent au fur et à mesure sans possibilité de les retenir, tout un monde faux, approximatif, apocryphe. Que toute cette dissimulation, hypocrisie, duplicité est provoquée par ces séries de dialogues improbables et normés, soumis à l'aléatoire d'un logiciel qui décide pour vous des mots à dire. Est ainsi tronquée la perception d'une vraie vie. (92)

It is particularly in relation to issues of violence that the linguistic dispossession of the employees proves to be most alienating. A shared language would provide distance and reflection, the capacity to locate their work and its stresses in the context of the disturbing wider reality of the company. However, the absence of a common language means that, when the suicides within the company begin to be reported in the press, Éric and his co-workers are disorientated and disconcerted. Since they have never properly articulated the stresses involved in their work they do not recognise the description of the conditions within the company in the media: 'Il y a des articles de journaux qui titrent sous le nom d'entreprise : "Stress extrême", "Appel de détresse" ou "Le mal-être mine les salariés". Ça fait drôle, dit Maryse, on dirait qu'on ne parle pas de nous' (102). Similarly, the employees never talk openly about the abusive calls that they receive from some customers.

In the context of this dispossession of language, the impulse to return language to its natural or 'wild' state – as the title suggests – has a double sense. On the one hand, this is the demand that language be returned, like a domesticated animal, to a free state in which it would be unencumbered by ideological baggage and pre-scripted the exigencies of economic efficiency. It is also, along similar lines, the demand that language be more honest and direct, stripped of the euphemistic and ideological constraints of *novlangue*. This would be, for example, a form of language that effectively expressed and acknowledged the otherwise unacknowledged violence of the workplace. Language in this free state can either be eloquently polysemic,

proliferating and even poetic, but also brutally direct. So, for example, a key passage satirises the neo-liberal managerial *novlangue* of flexibility and endless commercial horizons by means of an elaborate conceit: the image of a fishing net is used to convey the way in which the apparently liberating, empowering, consumer-friendly, free-market *novlangue* of the company in practice ensnares both the employee and the company.

Et c'est justement l'image du filet qui s'impose, élasticité des mailles, malléabilité de la structure qui s'adapte *a contrario* du règlement, de la raideur, de l'engourdissement et de l'ankylose. Gloire à notre processus, donc, dernier empereur romain, débonnaire, ventripotent. Gloire à l'empire de notre société éclairée. Ainsi le client, poisson pêché par l'entreprise, est-il chouchouté, lustré, caressé dans le sens des écailles. On lui fait miroiter la surface limpide de la mer calme, les horizons toujours bleus, les espaces illimités de croissance inouïe, la liberté du libéralisme. (34)

Conclusion

The *roman d'entreprise* grapples with a new reality and a new, resigned and conflicted affect of 'realism' that has emerged in response to transformations in the workplace. The capacity of the *entreprise* to structure reality and infiltrate the subjectivity of employees means that conventional modes of ideological critique have little purchase. Whereas the concept of ideology implies some kind of misrepresentation and misrecognition of reality that can be overcome or resisted by raising the consciousness of individuals or groups, the employees of the *entreprise* are caught in a hermetically sealed, self-referential reality that resists and absorbs critique. Rather than suffering from false consciousness, their subjectivities have been colonised by the managerial logic of the *entreprise*. The intensely subjective dimensions of this managerial form of power mean that, although its effects are pervasive and real, it remains elusive. Ultimately, fiction offers ways of reconstructing a meaningful syntax of the social field and the self that might make some sense of work in the *entreprise*.

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¹ Delephine de Vigan refused the prize and Gérard Mordillat announced in advance that he would not accept the prize if he won it.

² The fact that the list contains nine names is significant because, as indicated in the novel, a minimum of ten proposed redundancies are necessary for a 'plan social'.