Dramatizing the Virtual: a Deleuzian Reading of Three Recent Metafictions

Erika Fülöp

This text was automatically generated on 21 August 2023.

Dramatizing the Virtual: a Deleuzian Reading of Three Recent Metafictions

Erika Fülöp

1   Three recent novels, Brice Matthieussent's *Vengeance du traducteur* (2009), Éric Chevillard's *L'Auteur et moi* (2012), and Tanguy Viel's *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* (2013) revolve around a (fictional) novel each, written by the narrator and accompanied by his comments. While the embedded narrative can — at least in a first stage — be relatively safely described as the narrator's fiction, the status of the commentary is more ambiguous. This article explores the nature of this commentary in its relation to the embedded narrative as well as to the whole and proposes to open a new perspective on metafiction through the lenses of the Deleuzian concept of the virtual. Reading the narratorial comments in light of the concept of the virtual as potential applied to narrative fiction will highlight both the impossibility of what may seem to be the ambition of metafiction — rendering the process of fiction's emergence from virtuality — and its ability to reach a perhaps even higher target in rendering the virtual by dramatizing and enacting it.

2   Let me first briefly introduce the novels (which will inevitably contain spoilers). Matthieussent's *Vengeance du traducteur* tells the story of a translator, speaking in the first person, first from the footnotes at the bottom of otherwise empty pages. The monologue makes clear his dissatisfaction with his situation as a secondary figure and he decides to rebel and follow his fancy in changing the novel he is supposed to be translating. Constantly commenting on elements of the "original" text, entitled "Translator's Revenge" (which we never get to see directly), he gradually introduces us to it by offering in the notes (allegedly) manipulated passages, often explaining his reasons for changing them. The plot of his rewritten-plagiarized novel (which I shall refer to as the "embedded narrative") thus begins to unfold in the footnotes amidst his commentary. The story is about the conflict between a French writer (Abel Prote) and his American translator (David Grey) — who is translating Prote's novel entitled

"(N.d.T.)," written in the form of the footnotes of a translator — which explodes because Doris Night, Prote's secretary and lover, leaves him for Grey. But despite all the liberties the translator takes in shaping the story, he is still not quite happy. He eventually makes a radical move and climbs above the line which marks the limit of his initial space. The text then continues there as the "main text", the translator steps into the fictional space, and the embedded and the framing narratives merge. He now interacts with the characters, falls in love with Doris, and eventually eliminates Prote by "deleting" him from the text — because despite being inside the fiction, he also remains its author. He begins a life with Doris and publishes his novel, entitled *Vengeance du traducteur*, and in the last scene we see him waiting for his American translator, hoping him not to be the revengeful kind.

3   *L'Auteur et moi* is the first among Chevillard's many novels to offer a spatial division of the text reflecting a distinction between narrative levels. A first glance in the book reveals that the text has three main components: a ten-page "Avertissement"; what looks like the "main body" of the text; and footnotes, which on occasion outgrow the "main" text. The "Avertissement," speaking about "l'auteur" in the third person, discusses his relationship to his characters. References to titles and protagonists of books that correspond to Éric Chevillard's publications invite us to identify "l'auteur" with the "real" Éric Chevillard. The body of the text (which I term "embedded narrative" here, diegetically framed by the footnotes) is then the tortuous discourse of a man speaking to a "mademoiselle". He claims to be chased by the police for murder, which is left unexplained until the very end of the book. Instead, the monologue revolves around the narrator's overwhelming abhorrence of "le gratin de chou-fleur", which he was once served instead of the much craved trout almondine, and which is allegedly the culprit of all his miseries. The third main component of the text, the footnotes, are comments attributed to "l'auteur", always in the third person just as in the "Avertissement", reflecting both on the narrator's words and story unfolding in the embedded narrative and on the manner in which "l'auteur" handles his character. They also contain personal information about the life and works of "l'auteur", which, again, correspond to what the reader may know about the "real" Chevillard. Moreover, the notes also contain three important digressions which stand out in their quasi-autonomy. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on the first and longest one: a narrative entitled "*Ma Fourmi*", which makes up about one third of the entire book and presents "ce que ce livre aurait pu être"[1].

4   The structure of Tanguy Viel's *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* appears rather simple in comparison. Viel's first-person narrator is an unnamed French writer seduced by the success of American novels which manage to be both typically American and at the same time address a global readership. He decides to write an "American novel" himself, and his monologue revolves around the birth of this book, told in the past tense. He retells the content of his (alleged) novel, accompanied with explanations on the clichés and conventions to which it means to correspond — characters, milieu, style, detail of descriptions, historical references, and so on — and the reasons for his authorial choices. The story of the emerging "American novel" is that of a middle-aged American literature professor, Dwayne Koster, who cheats on, and is cheated on by, his wife. They divorce; he is devastated and gets into some dirty business of smuggling artworks for his criminal uncle, who helps him take revenge on the lover of Dwayne's ex-wife. He is chased by the FBI and ends up killing an agent, loses his nerve and drives off a cliff. The "real" story of the singer Jim Sullivan, who one fine day disappeared

without any trace, accompanies Dwayne's story as a symbolic thread explicitly stated by the narrator to have been carefully chosen for this specific purpose. Viel's novel ends with what the narrator says is the last scene of his book.

Fiction and the virtual: a critical mess

5   Jean-Marie Schaeffer opens his introduction to *Pourquoi la fiction?* with a discussion of the case of Lara Croft, a fictional character first created in the virtual reality of a video game. Outlining the strongly polarized reactions to the evolution of "cyberculture", Schaeffer contests that the virtual worlds and beings created by digital technology would differ ontologically from those which humans have always created in other forms of representation, such as literature. "Le virtuel comme tel s'oppose à l'actuel et non pas à la réalité ; seule la fiction peut être dite s'opposer à la 'réalité'"[2], he notes, referring to Pierre Lévy's approach to the virtual. Lévy's work is in turn admittedly based on the Deleuzian conception, according to which "[l]e virtuel possède une pleine réalité, en tant que virtuel"[3]. Schaeffer's next step is then to highlight the link between fictionality and virtuality: "toute representation mentale est une réalité virtuelle", including fiction. In other words, the virtual is "une modalité particulière de la représentation", and fiction is "une forme spécifique du virtuel"[4].

6   A closer look at this argument, however, reveals that it contains contradictory statements. Translating it into set theoretical terms makes the resulting paradox particularly clear: (1) the virtual is part of reality (that is, the virtual is a subset of reality); (2) fiction is a form of the virtual (fiction is a subset of the virtual); (3) fiction opposes reality (fiction is *not* a subset of reality). Fiction would be the subset of a subset of reality and at the same time not a subset of reality. In the space of a few pages and while meaning to explain the relation between fiction and the virtual, Schaeffer falls prey to the slippery nature and ambiguity of the latter concept. The confusion is due to his use of the term "virtual" in three different senses without discrimination: the virtual as a technological phenomenon, as the complementary pair of the actual, and as a mode of representation. He is not alone with this; such homogenization of the term is rather frequent. The problem is that rather than one complex concept, we are facing the polysemy of an overloaded term the meanings of which have just enough connection to easily make one slip from one to another without noticing. Any use of the term therefore needs to be prefaced by a clear definition of the sense(s) in which it is (to be) understood.

7   In her seminal work on *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Marie-Laure Ryan does just that, clearing up the conceptual disarray around the virtual before going on to explore the potential of virtual reality for the understanding of how narratives function. Ryan distinguishes between three senses of the term, which (in reversed order) broadly correspond to those underlying Schaeffer's argument: (1) the optical sense, "the virtual as illusion", from which the connotation of fakeness emerged; (2) what she calls the "scholastic" sense, "the virtual as potentiality"; and (3) the technological sense, "the virtual as the computer-mediated"[5].

8   Ryan notes that the first sense of the virtual as illusion or fake has "obvious affinities" with fictionality, insofar as both associate inauthenticity. Inauthenticity, she specifies, refers on the one hand to "the irreal character of the reference worlds created by fiction", and on the other hand to the "logical status of fictional discourse", as Searle's

definition of fiction as "a pretended speech act of assertion"[6] suggests. While pretence theories of fiction have been criticized for construing fiction as a secondary mode of discourse compared to other, "serious" modes of discourse[7], this approach is not irrelevant in the present context because the metafictional novels under scrutiny here raise the question of authenticity and its relation to fictionality precisely through their complex toying with simulation and dissimulation. Rather than directly addressing the "obvious" link of inauthenticity between the virtual and the fictional, in what follows I propose to explore the second, "scholastic" sense of the virtual as developed by Gilles Deleuze, apply it to narrative fiction and in particular to the above mentioned examples of metafiction, and argue that these "narcissistic narratives" achieve authenticity in their expression of the virtual as potentiality in the Deleuzian sense. Without offering a new definition of fictionality, this approach means to problematize the concept from what I contend to be a new perspective with further potential to develop.

The virtual in Deleuze — and beyond

9   Deleuze's best known and clearest formulation of the virtual comes from Proust: "'réels sans être actuels, idéaux sans être abstraits'", he quotes, and complements it with "et symboliques sans être fictifs"[8]. Deleuze insists that the virtual *is* real — the virtual and the actual together constitute the real — and is not to be confused with the possible. The virtual is "une stricte partie de l'objet réel — comme si l'objet avait une de ses parties dans le virtuel, et y plongeait comme dans une dimension objective" (DR : 269). The relationship between the two "parts" or aspects of the object is complex and elusive, but Deleuze describes it in terms of a circuit, a self-feeding loop : "L'actuel et le virtuel coexistent, et entrent dans un étroit circuit qui nous ramène constamment de l'un à l'autre"[9]. The virtual is both the source of the process of actualization and is also constantly emanating from the actual object.

10   While it is rather difficult to picture how Deleuze's conception works in the case of a simple physical object, it lends itself very well to textual (or more generally, linguistic or semiotic) objects. Deleuze did not himself elaborate this beyond a few remarks on the virtuality of artworks formulated in terms of structure[10], but Pierre Lévy has proposed a continuation of Deleuze's theory in this direction. Lévy defines the text in the broad sense (i.e. including any form or mode of discourse) as "un objet virtuel, abstrait, indépendant de tel ou tel support particulier". Writing would be the process of "la virtualisation de la mémoire" which "extériorise, objective, virtualise une fonction cognitive, une activité mentale"[11]. Reading the text is then actualizing it — interpreting, filling the gaps, and recognizing connections.

11   However, Lévy's definition of the text blatantly conflicts with Deleuze's Proust quote stating that "virtual" does not mean "abstract". Following Deleuze's logic, it is more appropriate to regard the text as a real object having an actual and a virtual "part" or aspect. "Real" need not mean physical or material existence. Whatever the medium may be, the text has a well defined form, insofar as specific words follow each other in a specific order[12]. I therefore consider the actual part of the text to be that which is given to us as a predefined reality: the written (spoken, or even just memorized) words. Preceding and continuing this is the invisible virtual "part" or dimension of the text, which can include all that the words and the text as a whole carry from their past and

continue to generate: the process and conditions of writing, including generic conventions as well as the author's own aesthetic and other relevant views that influenced the birth of the text, the decisions made during the writing process and the reasons for those decisions at various levels from linguistic to representational and narrative aspects, the resulting structure inherent in the text, and also that which the text may become in the encounter with the reader; including the mental representation of a fictional world.

12   The virtual part, as Deleuze said, is in constant interaction with the actual. First, the actual text emerges from non-existence passing through virtuality as the author concretizes ideas, makes decisions, and produces a final and singular set of words[13]. Writing is in this sense actualization. Second, the reader completes the production of the text in and through reading and interpretation. This can also be regarded, as Lévy does, as actualization, in that certain meanings and potentials of the text will be activated, others not, and an interpretation is produced. If so, the actualization of the text happens in two stages: first in the writing process, then in the reading. The latter, however, can also be regarded as, or is combined with, a process of virtualization, insofar as the concrete, singular text, through the encounter with the reader's mind and experience, generates a multiplicity of potential meanings. Much of that will just flicker away as the reader moves on, but some can feed back into the text and stick to it as a canonized interpretation passed on with the actual text, from generation to generation. Reading thus activates the virtuality of the text, allowing the reader to understand the structure and primary meanings and to attempt to reproduce the "message" of the text; it can generate an entirely new virtual dimension with new meanings independently from authorial intentions; and it may also permanently enrich the text's virtuality when some of the new meanings are passed on to other readers and affect other texts. All three aspects of this process of virtualization can have far-reaching effects by, for instance, modifying the concept of a specific genre, which can then influence the reader's take on other texts.

13   This approach to the text can be narrowed down to apply to narratives, and one step further, to narrative fiction. In the case of the latter in particular, the actualization of the text, the author's choice of words also involves decisions about the properties and elements of the fictional world, including characters, setting, plot — or about how the narrative would go against referentiality and realism.

Metafiction and the virtual

14   The dominant form of self-reflexivity displayed in our three novels, which based on Werner Wolf's elaborate terminology we can classify as direct explicit fictio-centred metareference[14], proposes precisely to display some of the virtuality of the text and the process of its actualization and/or virtualization. Such laying bare of the conditions of writing and/or reading and/or the nature of the text can occur marginally even in realist novels[15], but in large proportions or when strategic importance is attributed to this gesture in narratives, it produces metafiction in the narrower, generic sense of the term[16].

15   As the plot summaries suggested, metareferentiality materializes in different ways in the three novels. In *La Disparition*, we see the narrator's commentary on the embedded fiction without the product of his (alleged) writing. The oft-repeated "ai-je écrit" is

inserted in what is presented as summaries of the story and of the targeted effect on the reader, such as when the narrator explains the focalization: "C'est même par ses yeux à lui [de Dwayne] qu'on pouvait comprendre au mieux tout le mouvement de l'action, un peu comme un travelling qu'on exécuterait pour suivre Lee."[17] These are accompanied by explanations on the reasons behind the choices made and techniques applied, such as the use of factual elements: "ce n'est pas dans notre habitude à nous, Français, de mélanger les vraies personnes avec les personnages de fiction. C'est pourquoi je n'ai pas mentionné le nom de Barack Obama dans mon roman." (JS : 120), or certain structures : "J'ai hésité et puis je me suis dit que non, ça n'avait pas de sens, qu'en Amérique les lignes qu'on trace ne font jamais des boucles." (JS : 147).

16   In Chevillard's novel both the embedded narrative and the commentary on it are present in their own right and spatially separated. One of the main points commented on throughout the "Avertissement" and the footnotes is the distinction between "l'auteur" and the protagonist of his novel and the former's control over the latter. The footnotes also multiply comments on literature and language, on other books of "l'auteur" and his style — so we learn for instance that "[l]es livres de l'auteur [...] suivent un cours digressif et déconcertant" (AM: 70) — and on the novel as a genre, as when the narrator wonders: "Pourquoi, en effet, serait-il interdit d'écrire un roman en bas de page?" (AM: 115). Within the narrative embedded in the footnotes, "*Ma Fourmi*", no comments are made with direct and explicit attribution to "l'auteur", but we do find similar comments by the first-person narrator of this digression[18]. Moreover, following the "clé ou une piste de lecture qu'il [l'auteur] livre" (AM: 115), "*Ma Fourmi*" can also be read as an allegory of fiction writing, where the author (incarnated by the ant) ruthlessly leads the character to his fate.

17   In Matthieussent's novel, while the alleged "original" text of the embedded fiction is missing, elements of it seep into the footnotes, sometimes presented as direct quotation, summary, or rewritten passages, while other passages of unspecified status occur in larger proportion. The narrator's comments are mostly related to his work as a "translator" and often address his predilection for "caviardage" and distortion : "Une précision sur mon *modus operandi* : même lorsque je résiste à la tentation du caviardage ou que je ne dilate pas la prose originale à ma guise, je suis un transporteur indélicat, un déménageur maladroit, un trafiquant louche."[19] He occasionally justifies these modifications by his desire to make the novel better, implying a certain image of the ideal novel in terms of plot, structure, and style[20]. The narratorial comments thus seem to directly reflect the process of transformation from the invisible "original" into the visible (rewritten) narrative.

18   In all three novels, then, it seems that the reader is introduced to aspects and fragments of the virtual dimension of the narrator's novel and of the process of its actualization by its author (the narrator) and by the ideal reader. It is as though certain aspects and moments of the virtual were made directly visible to the reader. Through their respective commentaries, the narrators make an implicit claim of the authenticity of this image and generate an impression of complicity in the reader. Chevillard and Matthieussent use footnotes, a device traditionally associated with scholarly factuality and precision. While in *Vengeance du traducteur* this technique is clearly part of a ludic presentation of the translator's situation, in Chevillard's text the footnotes can genuinely be understood as comments meant to be exempt from the fictionalizing frame established by the paratext. If such illusion-breaking strategies undermine the

"suspension of disbelief" for the embedded fiction, by the same token they work towards grounding the possibility of a genuine belief in the narrator's discourse. Moreover, in all three novels the profession of the narrator, and in Chevillard's case also specific biographical details, conspicuously correspond to the "real" authors' lives, which further invites us to make connections to our world, in which those authors live.

19   At the same time, all three books are labelled "roman" on the cover page. From the perspective of pragmatic theories of fiction, such framing instructs the reader about the fictional nature of the narratives, embracing both the embedded fiction and the narratorial comments on it. There are, however, a number of factors to take into consideration. First, "novel" does not equal "entirely fictional." Theorists may discuss whether the Napoleon Stendhal mentions *is* the historical figure or whether we should rather call this figure a fictional surrogate, but such references are clearly rooted in our actual world. Second, even the concept of a novel's fictionality cannot mean that everything in it is pure invention. It has long been pointed out that such absolute fictionality is impossible because mental representation requires grounding in the reality known to the reader. The substance of a fictional world is thus never homogeneous, and the invented elements are closely knit together with real world-based ones. This inevitable inner ontological heterogeneity of narrative fiction can be purposefully exploited to blur the distinctions between invented and "real" components. Third, one may also wonder about the scope of validity of the paratextual indication: why should it not apply to itself? If the title of the book belongs to the novel, why could that not be the case of the generic label as well? Then, if "novel" is understood as "fictional", that very label could qualify itself too as fictional, as a meta-meta-message twisting itself into a liar paradox of sorts — we could call this the paradox of the fictionalizing frame. And last but not least, suppose that we accept to simplify the issue and say that the label "novel" indicates the fictionality of the text, which in turn means that the worlds and events described therein do not correspond to our reality. Despite being aware that the entire text is placed inside this frame establishing the fictionality of the narrative, once inside the text, the reader can be led to forget that outer frame. The strategies building an image of authenticity work towards this effect. The suspension of disbelief then turns into genuine belief regarding the narratorial commentary. In other words, in-text strategies can (at least locally) overwrite the frame which supposedly established fictionality. This is precisely what happens in the autofictions whose authors find themselves in court for "atteinte à la vie privée". On the one hand, then, the fact that the narrator's discourse is part of the novel does not in itself mean that it cannot be genuinely rendering the virtual dimension of the embedded narrative, and on the other, the frame establishing fictionality does not mean that the content will be considered entirely invented.

20   If anything speaks against the possibility of the text being successful in representing the virtual and the process of its actualization, even fragmentarily, it is the logic of the virtual. Deleuze notes, namely, that despite their two-way connections, the actual and the virtual exist in different modes and the virtual is not structured in the same way as the actual. Multiplicity and dynamism belong to the very nature of the virtual; the actual can therefore never be a direct copy or image of it *as such*[21]. Any "correspondence" between the virtual and the actual is the result of a process involving translation, transformation, differenciation [*sic*][22], and individualization[23], and the virtual also always exceeds the actual. Consequently, any attempt to make the

virtual appear directly in the visible form of the actual can only fail, and any suggestion or claim that this is achieved can only be delusive, whether intentionally or not[24].

From representation to dramatization

21 This would suggest that the novels are doomed to be unsuccessful in dealing with the virtual in the Deleuzian sense and that failure is inscribed in the very ambition of metafiction. But this is still too early for a conclusion. In all three novels the narrator's commentary contains and/or is also intertwined with a complex textual machinery that further complicates the issue by calling into question the nature of that discourse.

22 To give a few examples of the strategies employed: I mentioned Chevillard's use of the third person to report the (alleged) thoughts of "l'auteur". In a literal reading, the distance between the first and the third person means an actual difference between individual voices, and the words of "l'auteur" turn out to be mediated. The attribution of the words we are reading is then unspecified and we remain without any information about the role — and potential bias and interests — of the person or voice hiding behind the never even vaguely identified first person. The title of the book, *L'Auteur et moi*, makes a distinction between the third-person "auteur" and a first person, which could refer to the "I" hiding in the footnotes. But since the narrative on the cauliflower gratin is told in the first person by a well individualized fictional character, the "moi" in the title can also refer to him. Both interpretations coexist and there is no basis for discarding either one of them. Moreover, the very first footnote states the use of "une stratégie de dissimulation" (AM: 19) by "l'auteur". The question is, then, whether sincerity about dissimulation is pretended as well: here too, we are facing the liar paradox.

23 In Viel's *La Disparition* the deictics are used in a way that blurs the boundaries between the framing and the embedded narrative. "Et c'est sûr aussi qu'au moment où je dis ça, forcément tous les regards se tournent vers le comptoir" (JS: 129), notes the narrator on one occasion, making the present moment shared between the narrated story and the process of narration. While this device can be quite naturally read as an effect of the narrator's emotional involvement in the process of (re)telling the story, it also efficiently contributes to the contamination of the frame narrative by the embedded fiction and vice versa, destabilizing the boundary between them and therewith the status of the narrator's discourse. The mystery of the life and the songs of Jim Sullivan, which accompanys the protagonist of the embedded narrative as well the retelling of his story, also create a bridge between the two diegetic levels and even further, with the extratextual reality. "C'est clair depuis longtemps, la raison de ce livre c'est Jim Sullivan" (JS: 148), comments the narrator near the end, leaving the "ce" ambiguous again between the two books, the fictional one and the real one — if they are two at all.

24 Much more straightforward — but not necessarily more reliable — are the hints at a pervasive unreliability in Matthieussent's novel. Both embedded narrative and frame, and even more so after their fusion, are stuffed with symbols, mises en abyme, and direct and indirect comments that state or suggest that we cannot know where the limits of fiction and pretence lie and how far they extend. Before the narrative merger, as I mentioned before, the narrator repeatedly highlights his own unreliability as a translator and messenger — which can either be taken as a sign of his honesty or apply also to his role as a narrator. After the merger of the two diegetic levels, then, even the

narrator admits to having lost his bearings: "Soudain tout m'échappe, je bascule vers l'inconnu et le vide." (VT : 254). He blames this on the troublesome "fifth element", Doris : "il suffit que tu apparaisses pour que les frontières deviennent poreuses et que le chaos s'installe" (VT : 285).

25   Moreover, in all three novels there is a further twist: the stated title of the narrator's novel corresponds to the title of the novel we are reading. The question is then, what is the nature of the relation between the title and the text. Gérard Genette identifies two main types of titles : the "thematic" type expresses the content, "ce dont on parle", while the "rhematic" title "vis[e] le texte lui-même considéré comme œuvre et comme objet"[25]. He notes that the categorization of a title is not necessarily unambiguous, but also points out another source of potential ambiguity : "la présence dans l'œuvre d'une œuvre au second degré à laquelle elle emprunte son titre, en sorte que l'on ne peut dire si celui-ci se réfère thématiquement à la diégèse ou, de façon purement désignative, à l'œuvre en abyme"[26].

26   This is precisely what we are facing in all three novels: the titles can be understood either as an indication of what the entire novel *is* or of what the novel *is about.* The second option allows for a relatively uncomplicated interpretation: the book we are reading has the title of the book the narrator is writing simply because the framing narrative is about the process of writing that fictional book. The hierarchy of levels remains intact. The first option, on the other hand, means that we take the identity of the titles at face value and consider their referents identical as well. If the embedded book and the framing book are one, however, the hierarchy collapses into what Douglas Hofstadter calls a "Tangled Hierarchy"[27] and produces an aporia or "Strange Loop". The resulting structure is similar to a Klein bottle, a tube which returns and feeds into itself, disabling the distinction between inside and outside. Lucien Dällenbach pointed out that such narrative "auto-enchâssement" transgresses the law of *tertium non datur* in terms of causality (because the narrative seems to be its own product), time (because it projects itself into the future even though it is already written or being written), and space (because it pretends to be a part of itself and allows its part to enclose the whole)[28]. In any event, we are beyond the limits of classical logic.

27   If the hierarchy of levels collapses and the distinction between inside and outside disappears, the limits of the validity of the narratorial comments also vanish and the hints at the narrator's unreliability and the other blurring strategies even more clearly and inevitably apply to themselves as well, rather than only the embedded narrative. In other words, not only can we not discern "the truth" about the embedded narrative, whether it is and was produced as the narrator says, but this same undecidability applies to the frame as well, to the narrator's activity as a teller of the story of his writing of his novel — and beyond that, to the "real" author's writing.

28   We should not forget, however, that while this reading is present as a *potential* in the novels, it coexists with the other potential holding equal power, the interpretation which maintains the hierarchical order, and in which the narratorial comments *may* apply to themselves indirectly, but need not. We are facing narratives which have multiplicity built into their surface level as well as in their structure, not simply as a consequence of the natural polyvalence of the words and their relationships, of the freedom of interpretation, or of Derridean *différance* which makes any process of interpretation infinite, but as a result of a carefully designed construction that disables decisions in order to maintain competing potentials.

29   It is precisely in this sense that these metafictional novels express the virtual in the Deleuzian sense: rather than representing it, they dramatize and enact its functioning[29]. To sum up the argument that has led to this conclusion: in these novels, the actual form of the narratorial commentary on the embedded narrative offers what seems to be the verbal rendering of snapshots of the virtual dimension of that embedded narrative. The logic of the virtual suggests that such representation cannot correspond to the virtual as such, since that can never appear in its "true form" as actual; it has no form. The narratorial comments which would stand for the virtual are, however, themselves interwoven with a set of destabilizing strategies that can both discredit and confirm the commentary's truth-value (in the classical sense), in the manner of the liar paradox, proving its statement as either both true and false or neither true nor false at the same time. Through the identity of the title of the fictional and the real book, all this is then wrapped in a frame which endows its contents with a holographic nature, as it were, changing the entire picture depending on the perspective we take. To use another optical metaphor for the whole, we are facing an object covered with two thick layers of glass the effects of which are sharpening or distorting, individually or together, and all the possible combinations *are* the case at the same time. The object may well escape classical logic with the coexistence of its different truths, but that does not mean that it is fake or mere illusion. This is just the effect of the fact that a multiplicity similar in kind to that which is proper to the virtual is present even in the actual form of the texts, rather than only in the process of their interpretation. As a result, they do not simply undergo virtualization in the process of reading, but also enact the Deleuzian logic of the virtual as potential.

30   These novels are certainly not the first to achieve this, but the extent of their explicit engagement with the virtuality of fiction and the complexity of the machinery that embodies their deeper, implicit engagement with it distinguish them among self-reflexive narratives. Moreover, the concentration of these three examples in the space of a few years suggests a revival — or continuation — of interest in metafiction in France, which merits deeper critical attention in the face of the mainstream discourse emphasizing the "return to the plot" and the move beyond self-reflexivity and experimentation with the limits of representation in post-1980 fiction. If fiction in general has often been associated with the virtual as "fake" or "illusion", metafictions can offer new insights into the concept of the virtual as potential. At the same time, the full potential of the virtual as potential for the understanding of fictionality in general is also yet to be explored, and these novels invite us to do just that.

NOTES

1. Éric Chevillard, *L'Auteur et moi*, Paris, Minuit, 2012, p. 115 ; hereafter : AM. English translation: *The Author and Me*, trans. by Jordan Stump, Champaign (IL), Dalkey Archive Press, 2014.
2. Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction ?*, Paris, Seuil, 1999, p. 10.
3. Quoted in the epigraph of Lévy's book; see Pierre Lévy, *Sur les chemins du virtuel*, available online at <http://hypermedia.univ-paris8.fr/pierre/virtuel/virt0.htm> (accessed 10 February

2014). My references will be to this electronic version, but the text corresponds to Lévy's published *Qu'est-ce que le virtuel?*, Paris, La Découverte, 1995.

4. Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction ?*, p. 10 (author's emphasis).

5. Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, p. 13.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

7. See for instance Richard Walsh, *The Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2007, p. 74–78.

8. Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, Paris, PUF, 1968, p. 269 ; hereafter : DR.

9. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, Paris, Flammarion, 1996, p. 184.

10. "Quand l'œuvre d'art se réclame d'une virtualité dans laquelle elle plonge, elle n'invoque aucune détermination confuse, mais la structure complètement déterminée que forment ses éléments différentiels génétiques, éléments 'virtualés', 'embryonnés' " (DR : 270).

11. See chapter 3, "La virtualisation du texte" in Lévy, *Sur les chemins du virtuel*.

12. One can of course raise the problem of establishing an authoritative text for a critical edition in cases where different versions exist, but I am only concerned here with the text as a finished product. Literary experiments such as B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, this "book in a box" where the chapters are unbound and the reader needs to decide about their order, or Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, which also enables various arrangements of its chapters, would on the other hand be interesting to examine in this light.

13. "Le virtuel a la réalité d'une tache à remplir, comme d'un problème à résoudre ; c'est le problème qui oriente, conditionne, engendre les solutions, mais celles-ci ne ressemblent pas aux conditions du problème." DR: 274.

14. See "Metareference across Media: The Concept, its Transmedial Potentials and Problems, Main Forms and Functions", in *Metareference across Media: Theory and Case Studies*, ed. Werner Wolf, with Katharina Bantleon and Jeff Thoss, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2009, p. 37–43. "Fictio-centred" refers to the concern with the mediality of the text, including the writing process.

15. Wolf himself quotes an example from George Eliot, see *ibid.*, p. 37.

16. I am referring to Linda Hutcheon's definition of metafiction: "fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity". *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, New York, Methuen, 1984, p. 1.

17. Tanguy Viel, *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, Paris, Minuit, 2013, p. 112 ; hereafter : JS.

18. Ex. "cette prose sans fin qui redouble mes journées" (AM : 136) ; "C'est l'un des principes de la narration bien comprise sans lequel l'action se précipiterait catastrophiquement" (AM : 181).

19. Brice Matthieussent, *Vengeance du traducteur*, Paris, POL, 2009, p. 35 ; hereafter : VT.

20. See for instance the case of the character Doris : "Le personnage de Doris [...] me semble insuffisamment développé. Je prends donc la liberté de l'étoffer" (VT : 45), or elsewhere : "Je ne sais pas ce qui me retient [...] de 'rectifier' à la fois Adam Prote et son texte." (VT : 107).

21. As Deleuze says : "Jamais les termes actuels ne ressemblent à la virtualité qu'ils actualisent" (DR : 273).

22. Deleuze distinguishes between two aspects or stages of differentiation and spells them with "c" and "t" respectively. See DR : 270.

23. "Le passage du virtuel à l'actuel. Quatre termes, à cet égard, sont synonymes : actualiser, différencier, intégrer, résoudre. Telle est la nature du virtuel, que s'actualiser, c'est se différencier pour lui" (DR : 272).

24. As Roger Laporte, the author of the most monumental effort to write writing, put it : "Même si son discours traite de son propre métier qu'il est juste en train d'accomplir, l'écrivain n'a aucune intuition directe de ce qui se passe, mais, toujours en retard, il accède à une histoire, apparemment la sienne, seulement en paléographe, par la lecture-écriture de pièces d'archive." Roger Laporte, *Fugue : biographie*, Paris, NRF, 1970, p. 58.

25. Gérard Genette, *Seuils*, Paris, Seuil, 2002, <Points essais>, p. 82.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

27. "A Tangled Hierarchy occurs when what you presume are clean hierarchical levels take you by surprise and fold back in a hierarchy-violating way. The surprise element is important; it is the reason I call Strange Loops 'strange'. A simple tangle, like feedback, doesn't involve violations of presumed level distinctions." Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, London, Penguin Books, 1980, p. 691.

28. See Lucien Dällenbach, *Le Récit spéculaire*, Paris, Seuil, 1977, p. 147.

29. Deleuze himself has presented, if only briefly, a "méthode de dramatisation", which he describes as an alternative to a more static, representational approach to raising questions (in philosophy in particular) and seeking to define concepts. See Gilles Deleuze, "La méthode de dramatisation", *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie*, 61 (July–Sept. 1967), p. 89–118.

ABSTRACTS

Selon Todorov et un certain nombre d'autres critiques, toute fiction littéraire traite en quelque sorte d'elle-même. Quelques-unes le font cependant plus que d'autres, en particulier au XXe siècle, où s'est produit ce que Werner Wolf appelle « le tournant metaréférentiel ». Trois romans français récents — *La Vengeance du traducteur* de Brice Matthieussent, *L'Auteur et moi* d'Éric Chevillard, et *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* de Tanguy Viel — ont néanmoins réussi à pousser plus loin que quiconque avant eux l'exploitation des possibilités offertes par la genèse de la fiction comme constituante d'une histoire et comme principe structurant, et offrent une nouvelle perspective sur le potentiel d'auto-définition de la fiction.

Les trois romans présentent un narrateur que nous voyons dans le processus d'écriture et/ou de commentaire de sa fiction. Cet article explore les commentaires du narrateur sur la fiction enchâssée dans la perspective de la notion deleuzienne du virtuel. Il fait valoir qu'au-delà de l'apparente transparence du processus de production et de lecture à travers les commentaires, les romans emploient un ensemble complexe de stratégies qui dramatisent la virtualité des récits et le processus de virtualisation.

INDEX

AUTHOR

ERIKA FÜLÖP

Université de Hambourg