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The Importance of Being Earnest Again:
Fact and Fiction in Contemporary Narratives Across Media

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Where is Postmodernism and What Comes After?

In the epilogue of the second edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon (2002: 165-66) declares that postmodernism is 'a thing of the past'; for her, it is 'over'. While in 2002 Hutcheon's position regarding the end of postmodernism was relatively bold, she is now no longer alone. Cultural theorists herald various degrees of postmodernism's demise from a gradual 'passing of postmodernism' (Toth, 2010), to a more definitive move of 'supplanting' the postmodern (Rudrum and Stavris, 2015), to its death which is signalled by 'the wake of postmodernism' (Brooks and Toth, 2007). The basic idea behind such claims is that ironic self-reflexivity was perceived as being innovative and interesting back in the 1960s. In the twenty-first century, however, playful metafiction has become an exhausted (and thus potentially ineffectual) convention. Many artists feel that alternative ways of producing art are needed.

In his essay 'Mr. Difficult' (2003), Jonathan Franzen (2003: 259-63), for instance, considers the playful language games of postmodernists like William Gaddis to be outmoded. He puts this point as follows:

> To sign on with the postmodern program, to embrace the notion of formal experimentation as a heroic act of resistance, you have to believe that the emergency that Gaddis and his fellow pioneers were responding to is still an emergency five decades later. You have to believe that our situation as suburbanized, gasoline-dependent, TV-watching Americans is still so new and urgent as to preempt old-fashioned storytelling. … To serve the reader a fruitcake that you wouldn't eat yourself, to build the reader an uncomfortable house you wouldn't want to live in: this violates what seems to me the categorical imperative for any fiction writer. This is the ultimate breach of Contract.

While Franzen focusses on what he sees as outdated postmodernist devices in literary fiction, David Foster Wallace focusses on the role of television and particularly the show master David Letterman whom Foster Wallace sees as one of the most important manifestations of postmodernism (understood as self-reflexive irony). In *The Late Show with David Letterman* (1993-2015), Letterman liked to present himself as the postmodernist mocker of everyone

who thought that language could still be used sincerely or simply have a "point". In his article 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' (1993), Wallace (1997: 62-81; italics in original) comments on potential ways of rebelling against Letterman's postmodernist performances as follows:

> The only authority figures who retain credibility on post-80s shows … are those upholders of values who can communicate some irony about themselves, make fun of themselves before any merciless Group around them can move in for the kill. … The next literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti-rebels*, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue …. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how *banal.*'[1]

In the gap left by postmodernism's apparent departure, English studies is inevitably debating what comes afterwards, participating in what Brian McHale (2015: 176) calls the '*name-that-period* sweepstakes'. Many theorists stake a claim to what is happening to culture – and often literary fiction as the preeminent locus of culture – in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Theories emphasise both continuity with postmodernism – such as Jeremy Green's (2005) 'late postmodernism' – which he investigates via postmodernist American novels from the 1990s – to more apparent departures from postmodernism – such as Christian Moraru's (2011: 2) 'cosmodernism' – a form of fiction which he argues began in relation to the process of globalisation after the late 1980s and which emphasises relationality, or 'being-in-relation, with an other'. For Moraru, cosmodernism is a manifestation of the so-called age of networks that involves reciprocity, obligation and the idea of caring for others.

Common to many theories of what comes after postmodernism is the idea of a return to sincerity, realism or ethics via the deployment of postmodernist devices. Thus, the post-postmodernists take up and explicitly deal with many of the aporias of postmodernist fiction (McLaughlin, 2012: 222):

- even though they understand that truth is contingent, they try to speak the truth;

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[1] Interestingly, David Letterman's new show *My Next Guest Needs No Introduction*, which premiered in January 2018 on Netflix, follows a completely different format. In the context of this show, Letterman welcomes guests such as Barack Obama, George Clooney, Malala Yousafzai, JAY-Z, Tina Fey and Howard Stern, and they discuss rather serious and ethical issues.

- although they acknowledge that all representations are self-referential, they try to represent the real;

- even though they know that the human subject is constructed by discourse, they value the individual;

- and although they know that knowledge is ultimately impossible, they commit to an ethical and productive knowledge.

Focusing on US-American authors such as David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, Jonathan Franzen, Rick Moody, and Jonathan Lethem, for example, Robert McLaughlin (2012: 212) argues that in the late 1980s postmodernism was followed by 'post-postmodernism' which he sees as a response to 'both a perceived exhaustion of American postmodernism and the growing dominance of television in American popular culture'. According to McLaughlin (213), post-postmodern authors inherit 'the postmodern fascination with representation, the layers of text, discourse, narrative, and image' but, at the same time, aim 'to reconnect with something beyond representation, something extralinguistic, something real' (213). Thus, while post-postmodern narratives utilise postmodernist devices – and particularly self-reflexivity – they do so in order to 'break through to a reality outside of language, and … to connect with others' (216).

While McLaughlin associates a literary move away from postmodernism with television, Kirby (2009: 1) proposes that a cultural change started to take place in the mid-1990s as a consequence of digital technology, resulting in what he defines as 'digimodernism'. 'In its pure form' he suggests, 'the digimodernist text permits the reader or viewer to intervene textually, physically to make text, to add visible content or tangibly shape narrative development'. Accordingly, Kirby analyses the way that digimodernism is exemplified across media including CGI films, reality television, Web 2.0 platforms, videogames and radio. Digital technologies, he shows, allow works to be continually updated, edited, or influenced – sometimes by more than one author and sometimes by the reader/viewer themselves. What results is a 'group of texts in new and established modes that also manifest the digimodernist traits of infantilism, earnestness, endlessness, and apparent reality' (1). Like McLaughlin, Kirby (151) sees the new artistic mode as a form of cultural production that both participates in and departs from postmodernism, 'wip[ing] out postmodernism's irony' replacing it with a 'digimodernist earnestness' (151) which is not 'merely humourless' (153). Digimodernism thus manages to maintain a level of informal

sincerity whilst utilising potentially self-reflexive devices that could otherwise cause a more apolitical reaction.

The most media-comprehensive theory of what comes after postmodernism is currently Vermeulen and van den Akker's (2010; 2015; van den Akker and Vermeulen 2017) concept of 'metamodernism' (cf. Holland, 2013: 199-202; Gibbons, 2014). Whereas postmodernism (associated with the 1960s) closely correlates with 'a rather cynical attitude towards reality', metamodernism (associated with the twenty-first century) is characterised by 'a sense of earnestness and hope' (van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen, 2017: 8); it takes us into 'the realms of a renewed pathos, ethos and logos, albeit in a rather post-collective or, at best, loosely networked manner' (9). Furthermore, van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen claim that while postmodernists '"recycled" popular culture, canonised works and dead Masters by means of parody or pastiche', metamodernsists are more interested in the '"upcycling" of past styles, conventions and techniques' (10): they try to 'resignify the present and imagine a future' (10) in an ethical manner. Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2010: 2; emphasis in original) suggest that metamodernism is 'intertwined with social and economic tendencies that have come to be labelled under the cognomen of global capitalism'. Metamodernism, they claim, is '*aesth-ethical*' (2) in that it continues to utilise the formal conventions that preceded it, but in the context of a revival of theism and beliefs. Metamodernist works thus 'incorporate postmodern stylistic and formal conventions while moving beyond them' (2) as well as simultaneously returning to 'realist and modernist forms, techniques and aspirations (to which the metamodern has a decidedly different relation than the postmodern)' (2). What results is an artistic movement – what they define as 'a structure of feeling' (2017: 6) – that is 'typified by the return of … History, the grand narrative, *Bildung* and the agent' (2010: 1). Crucially, metamodernism, it is claimed, operates across media with a recent collection of essays charting metamodernism in fiction, film, television, politics and the visual arts (van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen, 2017).

As the preceding overview suggests, there are theoretical moves from across cultural studies which suggest that postmodernism has been replaced by new forms of self-reflexive artistic engagement that involve a higher degree of sincerity. That said, it is important to acknowledge that postmodernist works still exist and that there has not been a complete departure from postmodernist self-reflexivity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Contemporary cultural productions such as Mark Z. Danielewski's prose narratives *House of Leaves* (2000) and *Only Revolutions* (2006), Jasper Fforde's novel series about the literary detective Thursday Next (2001-12), Seth Grahame-Smith's mash-up novel *Pride and*

Prejudice and Zombies (2009) and its 2016 film version, the film *Stranger than Fiction* (2006), or some episodes of the television series *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy* continue the self-reflexive game of postmodernism which seeks to undermine the stability and/or unmediated existence of the real world. Postmodernism has not been replaced completely. Indeed, Moraru (2013: 3) argues that 'what we are talking about is an incomplete departure complete with extemporaneous returns'. For him, 'postmodernism is not dead but "deadish" as somebody might say about zombies'. Whether postmodernism is dead, dying, deadish or simply less dominant, there is a growing argument that many cultural artefacts in the twenty-first century use postmodern techniques not to foreground the artificiality of all narratives and by implication the world beyond but instead to earnestly engage with the moral, ethical and political issues affecting contemporary society.

Such a theoretical consensus, if this has indeed been established, is welcome because it allows the discussion to focus in more detail on exactly how change manifests itself in narratives across different media. Yet, if we are to demonstrate the way in which contemporary narratives re-purpose postmodernist techniques, then it is vital that we be explicit about what those techniques are and how they are being used. As transmedial narratologists we believe that the term "narrative" can be defined universally and thus without being dependent on a particular medium. Like Marie-Laure Ryan (2006: 6-12) and Jan-Noël Thon (2016: 26-30) therefore, we maintain that narrative representations 'must be about a world populated by individuated existents,' that 'this world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations,' and these 'transformations must be caused by nonhabitual physical events' (Ryan, 2006: 8). In terms of contemporary narratives, existing studies recognise that postmodernist devices are being used for sincere purposes, but the specific formal devices, strategies and techniques at work within those narratives are not always examined in detail via stylistic, narratological and/or semiotic analyses. As a means of addressing this gap, the articles in this special issue analyse the ways in which contemporary narratives across media play with the boundary between fact and fiction. In what follows, we first show that the self-conscious mixing of reality and fiction is a fundamental postmodernist device within literary fiction, second, provide examples of the new way in which this device is used across media and, third, offer a theory as to why this device has become so ubiquitous, benign, but ultimately powerful for contemporary audiences.

Mixing Reality and Fiction

In his seminal *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale (1987) proposes a dichotomy between modernism's emphasis on epistemology and postmodernism's preoccupation with ontology. While modernist fiction foregrounds questions of knowledge (e.g. 'how can I interpret this world of which I am a part?' [9]), he argues, postmodernist fiction foregrounds questions of being (or existence). For McHale (10), 'typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects' in order to 'foreground the ontological structure of text and world (or worlds in the plural)' (39). The preoccupation with ontology in postmodernist fiction is ultimately self-reflexive and therefore destabilising: by self-reflexively alerting the reader to the unstable status of the fictional text, the ontological status of the fictional world is foregrounded.

McHale (27) locates ontological self-reflexivity across postmodernist fiction and maintains that 'all postmodernists draw on the same repertoire'. This includes the following strategies: the intertextual borrowing of characters, metaleptic jumps between worlds, narrative contradictions and, crucially, what he calls the 'ontological scandal' (85) of mixing reality and fiction, exemplified by texts in which a 'real-world figure is inserted in a fictional situation, where he interacts with purely fictional characters' (85) or 'when two real-world figures interact in a fictional context' (85). For McHale, (1987: 85-96) this scandal is most apparent in postmodernist historical fictions (Hutcheon, 1988); which foreground their status as a fictionalised version of history, but it also occurs when authors (like Paul Auster) appear in their own fictional works (McHale, 1987: 197-215) by exposing the conditions through which the fictional world has been created thus acting as 'another tool for the exploration and exploitation of ontology' (202).

The ontological scandal that McHale identifies in some forms of postmodernist fiction is caused when reality and fiction come into contact and ultimately merge. As a metafictional device, not only does this foreground the ontological status of the fictional world, but it also shows, by implication, the ease with which the "real" world can become ontologically unstable and thus ultimately fictionalised. As Waugh (1984: 2) notes in her exploration of metafiction, 'such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text'. A degree of ontological ambiguity ensues because it is not possible to say that a narrative is purely fictional or purely real; it can contain elements of both.

While the preceding section has shown that the self-conscious mixing of fact and fiction is a common device in postmodernist fiction, we argue that one of the most prevalent but under-explored postmodernist techniques now being used for sincere purpose is

ontological ambiguity and specifically the complication of the fact/fiction divide. Such contemporary narratives cause an "ontological scandal" because they are ontologically ambiguous: they pretend to be real when they are fictional, they introduce fictional elements into real situations or their ontological status remains unclear. As we will show, these new narratives do not use these techniques to expose the artificiality of all narratives like their postmodernist predecessors. Instead, they engage with very specific moral, ethical and/or political issues that they consider to be relevant to the real world.

Contemporary narratives that play with the fact/fiction divide

In what we might see as a relatively early example of a text that uses postmodernist devices for sincere purposes, David Foster Wallace's short story 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' (1989) addresses the boundary between fact and fiction. In this narrative, Wallace combines postmodernist metafiction with references to real authors in order to communicate his impression of the US American writing scene during the late 1980s. It is about a creative-writing class taught by Professor Ambrose, the main character of John Barth's postmodernist narrative *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), and of course a stand-in for Barth, the famous postmodernist author himself. Not surprisingly, Ambrose/Barth teaches his students how to write metafictional types of fiction only. Drew-Lynn Eberhardt, one of the students, simply follows these instructions: she writes self-referential stories which are clever for the sake of being clever, having no goal apart from metafictional sophistication because, according to what she has been taught, there is nothing beyond the play of language.

The narrator of this short story is a nameless student from Ambrose/Barth's class who is dissatisfied with the legacy of postmodernism. He describes one of its worn-out conventions as being 'aimed at drawing the poor old reader's emotional attention to the fact that the narrative bought and paid for … is *not* in fact a barely-there window onto a different and truly diverting world, but rather in fact an "artifact"' (Wallace, 1989: 265). The narrator becomes interested in Mark Nechtr, another student who tries to find a new way to write: he is attempting to create a fiction that uses the conventions of postmodernism in such a way as to allow the reader to experience actual feelings (such as love or fear). In Ambrose/Barth's class, Nechtr creates a story which features a character who is significantly called Dave (short for David and a stand-in for David Foster Wallace). Dave/David struggles with the paradoxes of life but manages to hold on to principles such as honour, integrity and love. This, the narrative suggests, is the direction the new generation of fiction writers should take (see also McLaughlin, 2012: 216-17).

This short story is reminiscent of postmodernism. It is, in a sense, a story about the writing of metafiction and it involves a writing-class that is taught by a character (Ambrose) who has, in an instance of horizontal metalepsis (Bell and Alber, 2012: 168), transmigrated from another fictional text (*Lost in the Funhouse*). At the same time, however, the fictional characters (Ambrose and Dave) stand in for real authors (John Barth and David Foster Wallace). It is worth noting that 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' uses a story within the story to illustrate that what is needed "out there" is an impulse to break through to ethical principles outside language, and a desire to escape the atomised privacy of contemporary culture so as to (re-)connect with others. This short story is not at all a simple realist narrative. Rather, the return of the real or realism (including problems of the external world) closely correlates with the idea of working through the postmodernist legacy.

While Wallace's 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' incorporates its author David Foster Wallace in quite a subtle and somewhat inconsequential manner, other contemporary texts – and specifically autofictions – play more explicitly with the relationship between author, characters and text. Jonathon Sturgeon (2014: no pag.) sees autofictions – as written by authors such as, say, Dave Eggers, Damon Galgut, Sheila Heti, Karl Ove Kanusgård, Ben Lerner, and Will Self – as a new kind of life writing that moves beyond postmodernism by merging fact and fiction in the context of ethical questions. He puts this point as follows:

> The self is no longer drowned in a system of disinformation, paranoia, and entropy, in the vein of Pynchon and DeLillo. Nor does the self get washed away in an ocean of hyperreality or unreality, in the (Baudrillardian) style of Ballard. … We're witnessing instead the induction of a new class of memoiristic, autobiographical, and metafictional novels – we call them autofictions – that jettison the logic of postmodernism in favor of a new position.

Following this argumentation, Alison Gibbons (2017: 122) associates the autofictional texts *I Love Dick* (1998) by Chris Kraus and *Windows on the World* (2004) by Frédéric Beigbeder's with metamodernist affect, 'whereby subjectivity is linked to an external reality through personal connection and situatedness'. She demonstrates how these autofictions oscillate between fact and fiction. At the same time, however, she shows that they move beyond postmodernist playfulness and the fragmentation of the individual because they consistently point to real-world issues beyond the text, gesture towards interpersonal actuality, insist on situated lived experience, or ruminate on global concerns. In proper metamodernist fashion, subjectivity is grounded here in 'lived experience as well as in the interactions between our

bodies and our environments' (130). Gibbons shows that the closing sentences of the final letter exchange between Chris (Kraus) and her beloved Dick in *I Love Dick*, for instance, combine fiction and fact in the following way: "No woman is an island-ess. We fall in love in hope of anchoring ourselves to someone else, to keep from falling" (Kraus, 2006: 257). On the one hand, this segment playfully refers to John Donne's famous phrase that "No man is an island". On the other hand, it insists on situated and affective attachment: although the romance ultimately does not work out, Chris (Kraus) here learns to understand her emotions (Gibbons, 2017: 126).

Such games with the fact/fiction divide that serve an ethical purpose do not only occur in prose narratives but also in films like the mockumentary *What We Do in the Shadows* (2014) by Jemaine Clement and Taika Waititi. In this film, a documentary crew (who are wearing crucifixes) follows vampire flatmates from Wellington (New Zealand). The film depicts these vampires as pretty ordinary (albeit slightly eccentric) characters. Viago (Taika Waititi), Vladislav (Jemaine Clement), and Deacon (Jonathan Brugh) share a flat, and they deal with very mundane everyday questions – such as "who is going to clean the apartment?" and "who is going to do the dishes?" The film challenges the us vs. them mentality that is often set up by conventional vampire fictions. In contrast to more traditional vampire films, we are confronted with a group of likeable vampires that clearly resemble ordinary humans and, at times, we are encouraged to admire their philanthropic behaviour. For example, even though the vampires have problems with a group of werewolves, they ultimately befriend them and manage to fraternise despite obvious differences between the two groups. *What We Do in the Shadows* thus argues in favour of a sense of togetherness as well as the attempt to form friendships and interrelations between different species.

In the terminology of Moraru (2011: 5), the film is based on the idea of a 'cosmodern' or 'differential' notion of identity which involves a simultaneous understanding of similarities and differences: for him, 'differential' does 'not spring from smooth, equal-to-itself-sameness, and it does not reinforce "separateness", the apartheid type of difference either' (5). The groups in the film relate to and interact with one another and thus take up the sense of togetherness of the late-global era we are in. The fake framing as a documentary is crucial in this context: *What We Do in the Shadows* draws us as spectators in by pointing out that it communicates something about the real world even though it is of course "only" a fictional film about vampires. Here, fiction pretends to be real but not in order to deceive, confuse or fool us (as in postmodernism) but in order to invite us to transfer its ethics of relatedness to the actual world.

Carnage: Swallowing the Past is another striking example of the way mockumentary is used in contemporary culture. This British TV film written by stand-up comedian Simon Amstell and first broadcast on the BBC's internet streaming service, iPlayer, on 19 March 2017 focusses on veganism. Set in Britain in 2067, where meat, dairy and eggs are now illegal food sources, the film examines the guilt and shame associated with historic meat-eating – now known as "carnism" – in a society where "veganism" is so mainstream that the term itself is almost an anachronism. Individuals are moved to tears by the idea of meat eating and group therapy sessions take place in order that the older generations can rid themselves of the guilt and stigma associated with eating meat.

Hight (2014: 516) defines mockumentaries as 'playful-hybrids' because of the way that they combine fictional and real elements; they are fictional texts but they 'look and sound like a documentary' (515). Like *What We Do in the Shadows*, *Carnage* employs the conventions of documentary: it includes 'characters and events which appear to have been "captured" on location and through interviews by a documentary film crew, compiled together with other forms of evidence familiar to documentary productions, such as archive footage and photographic stills' (Hight, 2014: 515). Its ontological status as a fictional mockumentary piece is explicitly signalled by the future temporal setting of 2067. That said, unlike *What We Do in the Shadows*, *Carnage*'s satirical take on the future of human society and its relationship to animals is feasible enough to present what appears as a potentially realistic future and thus as something sufficiently important for viewers to consider seriously. *Carnage* primarily achieves this by playing with ontology.

First, the societal change from 'carnism' to widespread veganism is implicitly aligned with other significant social and political changes in real history. The film begins with footage from 'Troye King Jones Day 2067', imitating real-world national holidays that commemorate real-world political activists – such as Martin Luther King Day in the US and Gandhi Jayanti in India. Meat eaters are therefore shown as people who needed strong political leadership – of the kind seen in real-world political struggles – to expose the ideology behind their eating habits. Invoking the actual world more explicitly, actual archive footage is incorporated into *Carnage* so that the relevance of that footage to the fictional scenario is strikingly evident. Clips of real-world celebrity chefs, such as Gordon Ramsey and Nigella Lawson, are shown playing disrespectfully with meat; archive footage also includes films of people eating meat grotesquely or in very large quantities; scenes from the BSE (colloquially known as "mad cow disease") epidemic in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s are shown. What are quite shocking scenes of battery farms, dairies, abattoirs and meat

production factories are also included. These show the ways in which animal products are processed in the actual world. All of this real-world footage implies a human disdain for animals.

Yet while *Carnage* shows the way in which meat, dairy, and eggs are processed in our contemporary society, it also mocks the earnestness often associated with veganism. Interviews with vegans from the actual world show veganism to be an extremely geeky, bourgeoise, and to some extent, purely philosophical pursuit and the fictional citizens of 2067 are shown as stereotypically gentle, spiritual and obsequiously sincere. Yet by juxtaposing this knowing critique of the vegan stereotype with the behaviour of carnivores, *Carnage* also makes a very serious political point. When viewed from the perspective of this mockumentary, "carnism" looks cruel, indulgent, and ultimately absurd. The ontological hybrid nature of this mockumentary, in which we pretend that what we are watching is real, is also sufficiently close to reality that its message has resonance in the real world.

Indeed, the relevance of the mockumentary for contemporary society is shown by the BBC itself. *Carnage* is accompanied on the BBC's website by a '"top ten" questions raised by the film' (BBC, 2017) in order to show the extent to which *Carnage*'s subject matter is 'grounded in reality' (BBC, 2017). Questions include: 'Does the meat industry contribute to Climate Change?', 'Could animals really be given the same rights as humans?' and 'Could the world really turn vegan by 2067?' The answers are supported with facts from reputable sources including the United Nations, the National Health Service and various relevant academic studies. Nardi (2017: 73) claims that the mockumentary 'adopts the formal features of documentary while rejecting two of its main assumptions: that the facts depicted are factual and that they deserve serious attention'. However, in drawing on reality to highlight the ethical issues associated with "carnism", *Carnage* disproves both of Nardi's claims. This mockumentary is not playful for the sake of playfulness. Instead, it alerts us to the political, economic and moral issues that it humorously and often shockingly raises.

While literature and film are well established forms of narrative media, the emergence of new media has facilitated new forms of experimentation. Netprov – a linguistic blend of 'networked' and 'improvisation' – is a form of collaborative digital writing originally devised by Rob Wittig and Mark C. Marino which exploits existing social media platforms to make 'technologically self-aware art' (Rettberg, 2019: 175). Often including a 'parodic treatment of contemporary social behaviours on the Web' (177) and 'a subversive streak that uses satire as a mode of critique' (177), netprov artists propose a scenario and set up a series of constraints to which contributors must adhere and improvise within, often in real time. As

Wittig and Marino (2012, no pag.) explain 'netprov consists of narratives purportedly by and about people who don't exist (or fictional versions of people who do)' and works are comprised of 'an "inner circle" of writer/actors who are "in on the joke from the beginning" and an invited "outer circle" of reader/participant/players unknown to the inner circle' who also participate in creating the narrative.

Wittig and Marino's (2015) *I Work for the Web* is a netprov that focused on the way in which people's online activity is exploited financially or otherwise by large corporations. The narrative unfolded on Twitter and Facebook but was also supported by a website set up by Wittig and Marino to initiate the fictional scenario. The website explained that "RockeHearst Omnipresent Bundlers" – which is in fact a fictional corporation – had invited people to tweet about how much they like working for the web. This resulted in a netprov with two kinds of contributor: individuals who were acting as supporters of the initiative and individuals acting as part of a union of web workers who were against the initiative. Contributors were asked to tweet responses during the week of 6-13 April 2015 using the hashtag #IWFW.

I Work for the Web was a fictional scenario with contributors assuming a role in the unfolding drama. It mixes reality and fiction by asking real individuals to play a fictional role on real forms of social media. While fictional and in many ways playful, it also made a serious political point about the insidious nature of the internet. As a web piece itself, however, its ontological status is contingent on people recognising that it is a fictional performance. *Occupy MLA* (2011), another netprov by Wittig and Marino, which explored the use and abuse of temporary contracts in US universities was mistaken by some people as "real". Its true ontological status was only revealed after many individuals had naïvely made contributions to the debate on Twitter in good faith (Berens, 2015).

As this overview suggests, netprovs use ontological ambiguity as well as irony and parody to make a sincere statement about the digitally mediated and digitally dependent world in which many of us live. In other media, the ontological status of a narrative is often signalled by paratextual markers such as book covers, film summaries and trailers, or the cataloguing of narratives in databases according to 'history', 'documentary', etc. However, web-based narratives do not have to use paratextual markers to signal their ontological status and can in fact choose to avoid using them to mask their fictionality. The web is thus unique in the way its affordances can integrally facilitate ontological ambiguity (Bell, 2018).

The ontological ambiguity that McHale observes in postmodernist fiction is, as we have shown, perpetuated by contemporary narratives across different media. Indeed, narratives such as the prose text 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', the

autofictions *I Love Dick* and *Windows on the World*, the films *What We Do in the Shadows* and *Carnage* and the netprov *I Work for the Web* clearly play at being "real" while at the same time signalling that they are not. We have shown that narratives of the twenty-first century continue the postmodernist concern with modes of being but, rather than the ontological ambiguity leading to a defamiliarising 'ontological scandal' that might prevent engagement with the themes explored within them, we suggest that the effect is one of self-reflexive ethics.

Like their postmodernist predecessors, artists of the twenty-first century acknowledge the fundamental constructedness of ethical principles. The postmodernist reaction can be characterised as a form of escapist withdrawal from societal and global responsibilities into ironic self-reflexivity and/or playful metafictionality (following the motto that "if everything is meaningless anyway, we might as well enjoy ourselves"). By contrast, more recent artists suggest that belief systems and convictions matter, even though – as discourses – they are inevitably constructed. Indeed while the narratives we have discussed above all utilise self-reflexive devices, they also offer certain principles and convictions that they maintain should play a role in the actual world: 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' argues in favour of honour, integrity and love; *I Love Dick* and *Windows on the World* construct subjectivity in terms of situated lived experience (which always involves embeddedness, i.e. interactions with others); *What We Do in the Shadows* operates on the basis of a sense of global togetherness that transcends in-group identities and concerns; *Carnage* problematises the human disdain for animals as well as the role of the meat industry in the ecological crisis in the real world; and *I Work for the Web* thematises the insidious nature (and thus potential dangers) of the internet. As this representative sample shows, artists of the twenty-first century are no longer interested in pointing out that one cannot believe in anything because everything is just a discursive artefact (or a free-floating signifier). Rather, artists feel that as humans, we need to believe in certain principles while simultaneously (and self-reflexively) acknowledging their artificiality.

And, while the discussion so far has focussed on a general artistic shift and thus on the way in which contemporary narratives are being produced, it is also important to acknowledge the audience's role in the reception of these narratives. The movement from self- reflexive play to self-reflexive ethics has been made possible, we argue, because the formal devices on which postmodernism relies have become conventions. I.e., they have been turned into a perceptual frame that we can now invoke in order to make sense of fictional narrative phenomena (Alber, 2016: 50). Audiences of the twenty-first century are so familiar

with the metafictional language games of postmodernism, that most of them probably consider them to be yet another literary convention (like, for example, the omniscient narrator of much realist fiction, the focus on character interiority in the modernist stream-of-consciousness novel or the non-linearity of many contemporary films and television programmes). In other words, self-reflexivity has become a common and well-known narrative device, and, somewhat paradoxically, its familiarity has allowed authors to utilise these conventions to produce a new artistic movement.

The Contents of this Special Issue

While we have shown how ontological ambiguity operates in a sample of texts, the articles in this special issue continue this investigation by analysing the ways in which contemporary narratives across different media (including novels, autobiographies, films, television series, Instagram stories, and charity advertising campaigns) play with the fact/fiction divide to represent reality in the twenty-first century. The articles engage with theories of what comes after postmodernism, but they do so to support what are primarily narratological, stylistic and/or semiotic analyses of the devices on which such texts rely.

To begin with, Yvonne Kappel analyses *Artful* (2012) and *How to Be Both* (2014), two of Ali Smith's more recent books, through the lenses of metamodernism and the return of the real. She considers in particular narrative strategies that are used to reintroduce the real into fiction such as the purposeful blurring of generic boundaries and metamodernist uses of intertextuality, ekphrasis and intermediality. Kappel demonstrates that *Artful* and *How to Be Both* highlight the limitations but also the possibilities of glimpses of reality in the arts by thematising how and through which media we perceive the world and how politics of vision impact on our access to external reality.

Both expanding on and departing from the focus on literary fiction, Julia Hoydis looks at Salman Rushdie's novel *The Golden House* (2017) and his memoir *Joseph Anton* (2012) to explore entanglements between fact and fiction, raising questions about the perception and use of realism and postmodernism as aesthetic categories and narrative modes in twenty-first-century literature. She argues that both narratives do not primarily celebrate the blurring of boundaries but instead dramatise the real repercussions of an endemic failure to distinguish between factuality and fictionality. In different ways, Rushdie's two texts raise the question not just about where exactly these borders can be found but also what one is willing to accept as a form of deception, and why. Hoydis shows that whilst shaped by postmodernist

scepticism towards truth and reality, they nonetheless postulate the need to search for moral truths or realities with undeniable urgency.

Focussing on the way in which the actual world is invoked in autofiction and true crime television series, Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker argue for the centrality of metamodernism to contemporary narrative. They take their cue from Marie-Laure Ryan (1997: 183), who argues that 'postmodern literature ventures into the realm of the textually possible yet epistemologically scandalous'. In other words, by enacting well-known metatextual or ontological games, postmodernist narratives collapse the dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction, which leads to 'the expansion of fiction at the expense of nonfiction' (165). Gibbons, Vermeulen and van den Akker demonstrate that the contemporary autofictions and true crime television series of their corpus repurpose this ontological collapse to accentuate reality and to evince a mutual responsibility that places the contents of these works in an ethical relation to reality.

Stefan Iversen investigates instances of fictionality outside generic fiction by zooming in on NGO campaigns that seek to raise awareness and funds for children affected by the war in Syria. He shows that Save the Children's "Most Shocking Second a Day" (2014) and Unicef's "Unfairy Tales" (2016) do not simply use fiction in their attempts to motivate. Rather they challenge the ability to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction by employing strategies of what Iversen calls 'metanoia'. This occurs whenever combinations of textual and paratextual markers invite us to read an artefact as being fictional and non-fictional at the same time. In order to understand how and why such challenges work, he draws on a pragmatic, rhetorical conceptualisation of imaginative thinking and on rhetorical theory about metanoia as opening up a space of affect that can potentially transform our beliefs.

Louise Brix Jacobsen focuses on the ethical implications of a specific type of narrative, which is characterised by a boundary-crossing interaction between the real and the fictional. In Sacha Baron Cohen's *Borat* (2006), Mads Brügger's *The Ambassador* (2001) and The Yes Men's activist media hoaxes (e.g. Shell in the Arctic, 2012 and Dow Chemical Company, 2003) fictionalised characters interact with unsuspecting people. Jacobsen shows that this interaction displays various forms of immoral, unsympathetic and illegal behaviour that aims at a general critique of society and its institutions and that these bizarre encounters often create an absurd incongruence which causes a socially disciplining laughter that marks the subjects as socially inacceptable. Jacobsen concludes by arguing that irony is definitely not dead in the twenty-first century, but rather is used politically to display moral problems and/or forms of corruption.

Virginia Pignagnoli pays attention to the affordances of digital media and explores the ways in which stories told on Instagram attend to the current post-postmodern interest in relationality and the intersubjective. She presents an analysis of personal Instagram narratives, i.e. autobiographical accounts of the users' daily lives, whose overarching aim is to establish sincere communication with other users. Although nonfiction is clearly the dominant mode of these narratives, Pignagnoli shows how the affordances of the medium produce an effect of ontological ephemerality that prevents sincere communication. Users, however, contrast this potential effect by means of a principle of consistency, which – like the use of fictionality in non-fiction – provides an alternative way of representing and dealing with reality.

While one can describe the development from modernism to postmodernism in terms of a paradigm shift from epistemological to ontological questions (McHale, 1987), the new millennium involves a continued interest in the foregrounding of ontological questions paired with a serious interest in the negotiation of ethical questions. Taken together, this introduction and the articles in this special issue demonstrate that self-reflexive ethics – or the importance of being earnest again – has become the most significant artistic development in English studies today.

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