**Beyond Postmodernism: The Work of Michel Houellebecq as a Paradigm of the Return to Realism in the Contemporary French Novel**

The French novel of the last fifty years has usually been identified with the postmodern literary canon. However, after several decades dominated by Roland Barthes' formula: “to write is an intransitive verb” (618), it is obvious that the contemporary French novel is now released from this vision. It has lost its vagueness, ambiguity, and incoherence: new literary forms are emerging which are in tune with the world, less oriented towards textual experiments but anxious, indeed, to reconnect with objects, external to literature, which the avant-gardes of the 1960s to 1980s had massively abandoned. An alert reader may ask a question which is more and more pertinent: is the return to realism in the French contemporary novel similar to the realism that dominated French literature in the second half of the 19th century? Or rather is it a new form of realism with its own present-day characteristics? The proposed study focuses on the return to realism in the French *extrême contemporain* novel and attempts to analyze its unique aesthetic and ethical position in comparison with 19th-century realism. Through analysis of the work of the much-acclaimed novelist Michel Houellebecq (Reunion, 1958), I will seek to show how and under what circumstances a realistic movement has come into being in the writing of the French contemporary novel and why it has returned especially in the last three decades. This study will also take into consideration an illustrative group of French authors included in what is called “extrême contemporain” writing.

Michel Houellebecq, recognized as the novelist of the age of globalization, whose literary work is a paradigm of the literary, philosophical, and social modes of thought of 21st–century literature, is considered to be a provocateur. His work is a reflection of the social and economic reality of life in a post-industrial society. The analysis of Houellebecq’s case as a contemporary realist French author will demonstrate how a specific social experience of realism not only enhances the basis for the return of realism as both a worldview and an aesthetic style, but also intensifies and deepens it. The aim of the proposed research is to study Houellebecq’s work through a dual lens: as a branch of contemporary French literature (i.e., in its relations to French poetic discourse, to exemplary works, and to the modes of thought that underlie French literature), and as a paradigm of a specifically realist current in literature (adopting the principle of practical experience and social criticism as a form of writing, focusing on sociological issues in contemporary society) in the history of which has not hitherto been identified and evaluated as such.

The proposed study is the first attempt to analyze the work of this author in depth **in light of the notion of realism**, and its impact on other contemporary French authors’ work. My goal is to challenge the erroneous official history of considering the French writers of the last decades as postmodern, and state that there is a turning point in the “extrême contemporain,” showing that a frame anchored in reality is more and more convenient for a whole group of writers in France. Moreover, I will also prove that seeds of the New Realism aesthetics can already be discerned in postmodern literature. However, **the main innovation of this study will be** to provide thetheoretical grounds for the emergence of a new kind of French realism by examining its subversive response to 19th-century French literary realism. Many contemporary writers are no longer satisfied with telling or representing reality, but consider literature as a means of experiencing it, studying it, and facing it. Instead of offering fictions based on their observations, their books tell the story of this lived experience, its difficulties, and the reflections it stimulates.

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**Literary Historical Background**

French literature was profoundly shaped by the historical events of the 20th century and mainly molded by the political, philosophical, and moral aspects of that century. From the 1950s on, the French novel went through a period of experimentation where most of the writers abandoned traditional plot, voice, characters, and psychology. Writers like Georges Perec, Raymond Queneau, and Jacques Roubaud are associated with the creative movement Oulipo (founded in 1960) which uses elaborate mathematical strategies and constraints (such as lipograms and palindromes) as a means of triggering ideas and inspiration. The events of May 1968 marked a breaking point in the development of a radical ideology of revolutionary change in education, class, family, and literature. More than ever, literary and philosophical movements were to seek out their own truth. The most important review of the post-1968 period—*Tel Quel*—is associated with the writers Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva, and Georges Bataille, the poets Marcelin Pleynet and [Denis Roche](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Denis_Roche&action=edit&redlink=1), the critics Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, and the philosophers Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan.

Critics of French literature have all agreed that most of the French authors of the years 1970–2000 have written in the postmodern vein. The postmodern turn in literature was carried out as a reaction against the canonized forms of high modernism that had emerged in the United States in the 1950s (Virginia Woolf, Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, James Joyce). Postmodernist authors rejected the aesthetic of high modernism, as Steven Best and Douglas Kellner claim: “the notion of artistic work as a hieroglyph understood only by experts was rejected for a more accessible, populist writing style; and the concept of the author as an expressive unitary consciousness was dismantled to place the writing subject within a dense, socially constructed, intertextual discursive field” (130). Like John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Robert Coover, French writers of the 1970s on adopted self-reflexive and non-linear writing that broke with the principles of mimesis, depth psychology, and character development and abandoned the idea of the author as a sovereign subject in full command of the creative process. The postmodern hero became depthless and aimless, embodying “the waning effect” (Best and Douglas 130). Moral and symbolic themes were rejected in favor of surface meaning as in the novels of Alain Robbe- Grillet, Natalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Julien Gracq, and many others. Because post-war France was characterized by the presence of the Nouveau Roman until the 1970s, the post-modern novel developed there later, and was born in a different political and economic environment than American postmodernism for example: end of the “Trente Glorieuses” (post-war boom), start of the cold war for one, end of communism for the other ...

One of the first writers to have practiced postmodern writing is Michel Butor with *Mobile*. Another good example of a French author to have used postmodern aesthetics is Jean-Benoît Puech, who translated John Barth's famous essay[[1]](#footnote-1) on postmodern literature into French. He invented a writer, Benjamin Jordane, whose life he wrote as well as the complete personal and literary works and many comments on these writings, attributed to competing critics. The use of pastiche of style and genre is close to John Barth, and the playful “author's supposition” recalls the Nabokovian novels of Steven Millhauser. Georges Perros practices fragmental writing (*papiers collés*). Philippe Sollers, in *The Year of the Tiger*, offers us a form of writing where collage becomes the only possible form of expression. Jacques Roubaud’s *La Belle Hortense* becomes a “pseudo-novel” where metatextuality reigns. The story becomes incidental while its commentary is the main issue. Éric Laurrent practices irony, pastiche and intertextuality, even intermediality as in *Coup de Foudre*, based on Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. Marie Darrieussecq in *Truismes* uses the allegory of metamorphosis to counterpoint the excesses of society.

The French postmodern novel is marked, both stylistically and ideologically, by a reliance on such literary conventions as fragmentation, paradox, unreliable narrators, often unrealistic and downright impossible plots, games, parody, paranoia, dark humor, and authorial self-reference. It is characterized by the use of metafiction, unreliable narration, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and schematization of both historical and political issues. Generally, the postmodern novel has some or all of these characteristics: (1) there is no objective reality; (2) there is no scientific or historical truth (objective truth); (3) science and technology (and even reason and logic) are not vehicles of human progress but suspect instruments of established power; (4) there is no reason and logic. These characteristics are also current in the post-1968 *écriture féminine* promoted by the feminist Editions des Femmes, with writers such as Chantal Chawaf, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray. In addition, from the 1960s on, many of the most daring experiments in French literature have come from writers born in French overseas departments or former colonies. This Francophone literature includes the prize-winning Goncourt novels of Tahar ben Jelloun (Morocco), Patrick Chamoiseau ([Martinique](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martinique)), Amin Maalouf (Lebanon) and Assia Djebar (Algeria), Yasmina Khadra, Malika Mokeddem, and many more. These authors continue to write today and are still considered postmodern.

Yet the main innovation of the proposed research, as noted earlier, is the attempt to show that the last three decades have seen the emergence of a new group of authors and new forms of writing which, if they sometimes seem to be close to postmodern texts, are all the same far from inconsistency or at least, they have lost the experimental or critical dimension of the experimental writing, made prior to conventional logics of meaning. These forms of the French *extrême contemporain* novel style no longer have much in common with contradiction or discontinuity, randomness or semantic dispersion. On the contrary, they are rather well anchored stories in reality, often even defined as *autofictions*.

The proposed study will engage with and combine distinct literary perspectives: the perspective of the postmodern novel and that of the realistic novel. My goal will be to integrate these separate currents into a new and broader perspective, eliciting from the examined corpus insights into the history of literature in the wider contexts of French culture during this contemporary era of great transformation in France as well as in Europe.

At the core of this research lies the deep study of the full prose works of Michel Houellebecq. His dark perspective brought him many fans, but he remains a figure of controversy for expressing publicly in interviews as well as in his works what some readers consider racist, sexist, and deeply cynical views. Houellebecq is the author of a work that not only made an important contribution to the French novel, but also to the novel in general. Moreover, his contribution goes far beyond the novel and literature and reaches the fields of philosophy, sociology, and even economics. Houellebecq’s presence in the media essentially proves his talent for capturing reality and the atmosphere of the times and identifying those regions of experience where there is great tension and anguish in contemporary culture. According to Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, for Houellebecq, giving a clear picture of the world, “ce n’est donc en aucun cas se contenter de le copier, ni même chercher à l’expliciter: en le représentant, il s’agit de le révéler.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This revelation is proof of the writer's status as an investigator. His novels involve surprising forms of extensive knowledge, expression of adherence to daily life, and unconventional and precise solutions to problems of existence. In the visionary aspects of these novels, great transformations with irreversible consequences for the individual appear together with alienation, reification of human relations, and the fact that the individuals are lonely and unable to communicate with one another.

Houellebecq shows a world of violence and tension, a world where people find it hard to be at ease, so that life becomes a process of disease. And more than anything else he seems to want to cope with the problems of existence: the fact that one has to face death, old age, and loneliness in urban spaces, or that Islamic groups may cause problems in France. He shows us what we no longer see. Houellebecq, who was born in Réunion, has lived in Spain and Ireland for long periods and has acquired a extensive cultural background outside France, which made him look critically at France where was ignored for a long time by scholars. Although he has adopted much of the French realistic style of Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola, it seems he has invented a new style model, the clearest expression of which is *l’écriture plate*, a kind of writing “without style,” for which he has been highly criticized by French scholars. However, it is precisely the experience of the return to realism, the specific political and social experience of living in France after having lived in different countries, that coincides with the narrative of illusion and disillusion, concealment and revelation.

This experience corresponds to the dialectic process that constitutes the very essence of the realism worldview. However, because of the controversial nature of the Houellebecquian novels, they have often been included in the postmodern discourse not only as cultural, literary, and artistic phenomena, but also as correlates of social changes occurring in reaction to global capitalism and terrorist attacks (Rocha Soares [2010](https://journals.openedition.org/carnets/4709)). The proposed study is the first attempt to analyze in depth the work of this author as realist, by connecting it to relevant everyday life in French society. Moreover, until now critics have constantly claimed that the writing persona in Houellebecq’s novels is different from the author Houellebecq himself. However, I find that his bio-bibliography is not always and systematically different from the persona of his fiction. Indeed, in the way that it refers to the texts and various aspects of his writings, scholarship in effect splits Houellebecq’s personality, and thus fails to capture not only the full complexity of his identity and multicultural world, but also the full meaning and uniqueness of his realism: although some of his texts include speculative fiction (for instance, *Submission*) and even supernatural elements (as in *The* *Possibility of an Island*), the depiction of everyday and banal activities and experiences prevail. This kind of complexity, in its affinity with 21st-century attitudes, modes of thought, and identities is part of what motivated the realist discourse. Its manifestation in Houellebecq’s work and fascinating personality is what makes him so surprisingly “contemporary.”

The ambiguity of the Houellebecquian novel is based on the fact that one never knows what is true and what is not or who is speaking. In addition, there are several scenes in Michel Houellebecq's fictional accounts that have a double meaning, as several critics have already observed.[[3]](#footnote-3) Finally, another Houellebecquian strategy which makes it possible to cast doubt on the reliability and sincerity of his words is the use of irony, which has become the trademark of this writer who has chosen dark humor and sarcasm to point the finger at human misery. These facts are some of the reasons why Houellebecq's work has usually been read and analyzed in a dual manner, generally classified by critics as postmodern. Recognizing, integrating, and analyzing these perspectives are the primary innovating steps of the research proposed herein, bringing with them the potential to shed new light on the work of Houellebecq.

Although there is little analysis of Houellebecq’s work as realistic, critics of literature and culture have compared his writing to that of Balzac, who is associated with 19th-century realism. According to James Rowlins, “it is Honoré de Balzac’s novels and novellas which arguably offer the most apt analogies to Houellebecq’s fiction in light of their robust and pugnacious social commentary. It is more than incidental that many of Balzac’s most celebrated quotations figure in Houellebecq’s chapter prologues” (Rowlins 61). Moreover, Houellebecq inherits a fascination with materialism and promiscuity. As in Balzac, Zola, or Flaubert, “the reader finds representations of modern selfhood, subjectivity and ipseity, a unified “I” able to confront the world, love, loss, and death” (Rowlins 2009). This solid foundation for a sense of self in his characters confirms that Houellebecq attempts a return to the pre-postmodern era. A reviewer in the *New York Times* noted that he is “the first French novelist since Balzac whose work captures the social realities of contemporary life” (Eakin 2001). Generally, there seems to be little perceived sense of contradiction in portraying Houellebecq as a pioneering force for the future and as an inheritor of tradition according to popular critics. Yet, the difference between Houellebecq’s realistic work and the 19th-century realistic authors has not been discussed. This study stands to challenge the widely accepted idea of Houellebecq’s work as “copying” the classics, to sharpen the understanding of the characteristics of his realism which is highly distinct from the classical realism of the 19th century, and to shed new light on New Realism.

Finally, Houellebecq’s work will serve as a case study for understanding the New French Realism as reflected in the novels of a whole group of writers. This includes the novelists of the *Verticales* editions, and those of the “*Incultes*” such as Maylis de Kerangal, Arno Bertina, Mathieu Larnaudie, François Bégaudeau, or even Philippe Vasset and Vincent Message, Charles Robinson, and Chloé Delaume. For these authors, literature is no longer a question of transgression or reflexivity, but rather of hyperproduction and creative argumentation: incoherence and confusion are suspended in favor of a down-to-earth materialism, in short, a new realism. What are its characteristics? How does it express itself in today's stories? How does it differ from the realism of the 19th century?

The main innovation of the proposed research is the attempt to integrate the works of a large number of contemporary French writers who, although they differ in their approach, all have in common a desire to reorganize reality as it is perceived by the author. The mimesis of the novel appears as a focal point of the lived world, the discovery of which reshapes familiar reality along new horizons. The novel becomes the image of a practical knowledge of human action in which an increased authenticity is played out which appears emancipating from a desire to shed light on reality. In fact, Dominique Viart stated (as early as 2008) that:

“If there is today a ‘status’ of the writer, it is undoubtedly this unofficial status, entirely made of proximity, exchange, and dialogues, and no longer that conferred by an authorized and prestigious discourse. This, moreover, is a sign of the times. If the 20th century began with great aesthetic and political proclamations, it ended with a severe criticism of all forms of ideology, followed by more modest discourse, more restricted in its scope. The major reflections have been replaced by actions that are no doubt less extensive but more targeted” (Viart 2008).

At the core of this research lies a deep study of the most recent aspects of the contemporary novel that reveal a strong need and tendency to return to the *subject*, a return to elements anchored in reality. One of the goals of the research will be to link this phenomenon to writing "memory": whether it is echoed by individual or family memories, or echoed in a larger cultural memory, memory and its influence are questioned in the texts, with values which have structured the social body and its systems of representation. The return to the *subject* becomes obvious in new biographies, life stories, or even autofictions.

The proposed study will yield and establish a characterization of elements that appear in the texts of the contemporary French authors that reflect crucial changes in contemporary life in Europe and in the entire world: immigration and demographic change, radical Islam, feminism, new technologies, globalization, American capitalism, and the European Union. In their dystopian visions, novels such as Houellebecq’s *Submission* portray the collapse of France, Europe, and Western civilization. Above all, these novels depict a degenerative force whose effects on the nation and on reality itself can be felt. In her book *Degenerative Realism: Novel and Nation in Twenty-First-Century France (Literature Now)*, Christy Wampole examines key novels by Michel Houellebecq, Frédéric Beigbeder, Aurélien Bellanger, Yann Moix, and other French writers. She identifies and critiques an emergent tendency toward “degenerative realism.” She considers the ways in which these writers draw on social science, the New Journalism of the 1960s, political pamphlets, reportage, and social media to construct an atmosphere of disintegration and decline. Wampole maps how degenerative realist novels explore a world contaminated by conspiracy theories, mysticism, and misinformation, responding to the internet age’s confusion between fact and fiction with a lament for the loss of the real and an unrelenting emphasis on the role of the media in crafting reality. In a time of widespread populist anxieties over the perceived decline of the French nation, this book diagnoses the literary symptoms of today’s reactionary revival.

The result of this new dimension will be at the core of the proposed study. The adaptation between the sociological aspect of literature and the current position of the writer in society will be analyzed. In fact, the relationship between the author and the world, the need for representation as an ethical investment, play a significant role in the contemporary French novel. The description of “life forms” and situations leads to the evidence that there are types of socially organized practical activities that advocate the involvement of the author and his need to write.

Moreover, this research will focus on another strong characteristic of this new kind of realism: in this desire to describe the world, alongside the “life form” novel, appears another kind of novel, the "engaged novel" of recent years, which is concerned with the state of the social world — in terms of very distinct forms, in texts by Olivier Rolin or Michel Houellebecq, by Virginie Despentes, or by Cecile Wajsbrot, the contemporary writer has a place in society. He explores a new form of humanism, no longer with blind faith in the greatness of man and the potential of his future, but rather attention to his weaknesses, his mistakes. In her article: “‘Vous trouverez ce livre …’ – Cecile Wajsbrot and the Art of Belonging,” Stephanie Bung writes about the fact that books “ …in not belonging to anybody, may create fields of belonging…This paradoxical meaning of “belonging” – [is] not only in the sense of possession, but also in the possibility of being together” (Bung 58). Moreover, Bung insists on the fact that literature is to be “relief-like”: “A relief indicates a specific shift within time and space – either in the geological sense of tectonic movement, or in the sense of an artwork, such as a sculpture, emerging from its material background” (Bung 63).

**Research Objectives and Expected Significance**

The term "realism" has not found its way into literary discourse on the contemporary French novel although there is evidence of an ongoing process of a re-actualization of realist discourse from the 2000s onward. This re-actualization, with Houellebecq, the most famous French author today, at its center, is the impetus for a renewed interest in the aesthetics, genres, and worldviews that are most vividly reflected in literary texts. Moreover, at the core of this study lies the deep analysis of the characteristics of New Realism that are different from those of 19th-century realism.

**The broad objective of my proposed study** is to invest the term Realism with meaning within the contemporary French novel, considering social, political, and aesthetic contexts in their relation to the present period. Thus I will show strong evidence for defining the work of Houellebecq as well as that of a whole group of contemporary French novelists (including the authors of the “Editions Inculte”),[[4]](#footnote-4) as realistic. The study will include these authors:  Philippe Aronson, Bruce Bégout, Alexandre Civico, Claro, Mathias Enard, Hélène Gaudy, Mathilde Helleu, Maylis de Kerangal, Mathieu Larnaudie, Stéphane Legrand, Benoît Maurer, Nicolas Richard, Charles Recoursé, Oliver Rohe and Jérôme Schmidt, François Bégaudeau, Joy Sorman, Jérôme Ferrari, Alban Lefranc, and Philippe Vasset.

In addition to this group, I seek to engage further in comparison and analysis of these French contemporary authors and other works by authors such as Virginie Despentes, with her trilogy novel *Vernon Subutex*, which clearly addresses societal issues and is consistent with her explicitly political work; Arno Bertina's staging of urgent issues of migration (2006); Laurent Mauvignier’s texts about a society threatened by the exacerbation of community hatred (2016); recent novels by Jakuta Alikavazovic (2017) and Fanny Taillandier (2018), which question the discourses of history and the foundations of the belief system on which our Western societies are based.

**The proposed study, taking into account the characteristics of 19th-century realism, seeks to replace** the expression “*extrême contemporain* French novel” with the expression “realistic contemporary French novel” and thus to give a more effective analysis of the French novel at the present time. Moreover, another goal of my study is to show evidence of the distinction between **New Realism** and 19th-century realism.

In addition to the interest in Houellebecq and other authors’ works as an essential piece of this corpus, the study intends to highlight the role that French literature plays in the incubatory stage of contemporary literature in general, by incorporating works from this corpus into the canon of modern literature. This will lead to a more comprehensive investigation and understanding of literature today as well as of culture in general.

Ever since Balzac’s crowning as the father of French realist literature, the general tendency has been to regard the 19th century as the cradle of realism while minimizing the importance of the mimesis effect in the French novel of the 20th and 21st centuries. Establishing a canon of the new realist movement is an essential step toward filling this gap. The proposed study will use the case of Houellebecq as a window into understanding the French contemporary novel as well as an entry point into Realism. Understanding this work in its complexity will shed new light on the development of the novels written by the group of “Editions Inculte,” and more generally on that of the French contemporary novel.

**The contribution of the proposed research** to the study of French literature challenges the currently accepted critical demarcation of the study of the contemporary novel. It will also explain the fact that more and more contemporary French authors turn to **exploration** subjects in their fiction. This is a development facilitated primarily by the contemporary French authors who engage in investigations before and during their writing.

**The aim of this part of the study**, beyond analyzing Houellebecq’s oeuvre, is to demonstrate the ways in which the realist aesthetics of Houellebecq’s writing distinctly embody philosophical, psychological, and sociological modes of thought, such as New Age, Positivism, the question of loneliness, economic liberalism and its consequences on European society. I will explore the sense in which this corpus brings profound evidence to such questions as the well-being of humanity and happiness. Moreover, I will show it is a profound testament to a point of intersection in the history of ideas in the realm of globalization.

**Detailed Description of the Proposed Research**

**Working Hypothesis**

Part A – Theory of Realism Versus Theory of Postmodernism

In this section, I will offer a comprehensive theoretical examination of the theory of realism and explore the proper understanding of the terminology of this discussion. Specifically, I will dwell on the distinction between the uses of "realism" as a term in the field of literature and as an aesthetic-cultural category. I will survey the uses of this term within discussions of the contemporary French novel and explore the connections between the categories of hyper-realism and neo-realism that have been used in different periods.

In addition, the analysis of this development will be followed by a comparison with postmodernism, as it is a essential condition in order to understand fully the development of the contemporary novel. As many of the French novels include both postmodern aesthetics and realistic aesthetics, I will examine to what extent a novel considered as postmodern can adhere to the aesthetics of the realistic category. The views on the function of aesthetics in postmodernism and realism differ greatly. To write in the vein of traditional realism is to uphold criteria in the narrative such as “chronological plots, continuous narratives relayed by omniscient narrators, [and] closed endings” (Barry 82). I will mainly use the concept of postmodernism to contrast the idea of realism. According to Jean-François Lyotard, the role of realism is “protecting consciousness from doubt, […] stabilizing the referent, ordering it from the point of view that would give it recognizable meaning” (35). Implied here is the view that realism tries to conceal the facts that power structures are a part of language and also that words and signs do not have a stable meaning. The doubt that Lyotard mentions is the doubt that there might be no unity — that consciousness itself is fragmentary and by extension identity, reality, and language itself. There is no stable truth, only different attempts of organizing the world that attempt to appear as the ultimate truth. The postmodern critique of realism is that it represents the society in an unproblematic way. Although the characters of a realistic story often experience conflict this will never modify the hierarchy or foundations of the society, so that the ruling classes as well as the ruling order are not questioned. This is a status quo that also includes the concept of unity — both in language and the whole view of identity, reality, and truth. Fredric Jameson reads the “reality myth” as a capitalist construction and more explicitly describes it as the self-justification of the bourgeoisie. Realistic representation is seen as a transparent window to reality, unlike the postmodern artifact, the function of which is to make us question the view of reality and the act of narration itself. Therefore, the postmodern novel often makes the reader aware of the act of ordering the view of the world and the narration, and tries to undermine and question the concepts of unified identity and blur the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. Even though postmodernist writing can be seen as a subversive and a subjective act, I will maintain that there is a great amount of realism in novels that are considered postmodern.

It has been claimed that postmodern literature – as it draws attention to how power is immanent in language – is too relativistic and nihilistic to be able to muster resistance to power at all. I agree with Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh who infer that postmodernism “seems to plunge us into a situation of endless difference and of epistemological and cultural relativism which approaches a situation of nihilism” (410). However, the proposed study will show strong evidence that the contemporary novel, although it has realistic features, has a strong ability to condemn and shake the hierarchy or of the society, so that the ruling classes and the status quo of the ruling order are greatly criticized. This might be one of the main differences to be explored between 21st-century realism and that of the 19th century.

While examining to what extent a novel is a realistic or a postmodern novel, my overarching objective will be to determine the two different views of reality – the one within the realm of realism and the one within the realm of postmodernism – and the manner in which they are entwined in the French contemporary novel. To be able to focus on that main objective I will ask three sub-questions: 1) In what manner are the two different views of reality – realism and postmodernism – dramatized thematically and aesthetically in the French contemporary novel? 2) Can the view of the concept of progress and modernity in the novels be called postmodern? 3) Do the novels deconstruct the binary opposition between fiction and reality in a postmodern way and can the view of reality be compared to Baudrillard’s concept of Hyperrealism? I will analyze how the novels deal with general postmodern concepts like reality, truth, identity, and difference and to what extent these concepts adhere to or differ from the category of realism.

Part B – Rethinking Realism: Differences between Contemporary Realism and 19th-Century Realism

1. In “rethinking realism,” the proposed study will present a corpus and new literary practices where the contribution of sociocriticism is appropriate. I will show how these texts implement social discourses, submit to them, criticize them, or free themselves from them. The works considered here contribute to rethinking the relationship of literature to reality.

2. By analyzing contemporary texts that seem at first glance marginal, but whose number and importance continue to grow, the core of this research is to show that these texts have more and more significant characteristics of specifically realist literary production. In addition, the proposed study will offer a comprehensive examination of the works of writers who are no longer satisfied with telling or representing reality in terms of the mimesis effect as employed in the 19th century, but see literature as a means of experiencing life and facing it. To this end, these texts implement what it can be called "**field**" practices, in the sense used in the humanities and social sciences.

I shall argue that beyond their thematic and formal differences, these texts have in common the implementation of an **investigation**. But it is no longer a question of a preliminary investigation which would be absorbed in the completed text, in the manner of Zola’s method. A preliminary survey of the texts suggests that the contemporary authors write the narrative and linear restitution of events which they seem to have witnessed. I will try to show that these procedures replace the investigation itself in the form of a story. Moreover, my study will involve analysis of the technique that involves the **reader**. In some texts the reader is invited to share the developments and incidents in the course of the investigation. These works become heuristic narratives, in which the search for documents, the collection of stories, and the visit of archives are crucial. In addition, the discovery of forgotten correspondence, photographs, along with the narrator's hypotheses and meditations constitute the very materials of the book, while the actual result of these inquiries remains, for its part, very often barely formalized.

C. The Analysis of Houellebecq’s work as Realistic

The study seeks to replace in the relevant context the expression “contemporary literature,” which effectively defines a literary corpus using a historico-socio-political term, with the expression “contemporary realist literature.” Ever since the 1970’s in French literature, the general tendency has been to regard postmodernism as the cradle of the novel while minimizing the importance of realism. Establishing a canon of the realism movement is an essential step toward filling this lacuna. The proposed study will use the case of Houellebecq as a window into understanding the French contemporary novel as a unique form of literature and into understanding its influence on subsequent works of literature in general.

1. I shall try to discern trends in the development of Houellebecq’s writing by analyzing his first novel *Whatever* (1994). Although Houellebecq blends postmodern and realist aspects in this novel, I will show that it is ultimately a realist novel. My goal is to examine the interest in philosophical or sociological fields, and not only in the literary field. To this day it has been considered a pivotal source for change in the novel but it has not been identified as a work of realism, although it has been considered as a novel which primarily highlights the "disaggregating effects of post-Fordism on the intimate spaces of human affect" (Sweeny 42) through the story of a depressed and isolated man stuck in a tedious but well-paying programming job. The main theme of the novel is that the sexual revolution of the sixties created not communism but capitalism in the sexual market, and that the unattractive underclass is exiled while the privileged initiates are drained by corruption, sloth, and excess.

**Expected publication**: *"Whatever* as a reflection of Sexual Consumerism and Loss of Love in Contemporary Society”

*2. Atomized* (1998) is the story of two [half-brothers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sibling%22%20%5Cl%20%22Half-sibling%22%20%5Co%20%22Sibling), Michel and Bruno, and their mental struggles against their situations in modern society. The sexual liberation and utopian aspirations of the late-sixties counter-culture movements are seen to be largely responsible for today’s depressing impassivity before questions both moral and sexual, a cultural cul-de-sac that can only be transcended through an unlikely collective renunciation of individual freedom in the interest of the species. At the heart of each metaphysical transformation is a distinct worldview: an overarching mode of thought concerning how nature is theorized and studied and how society is organized. Houellebecq sees materialism as the hallmark of the second metaphysical transformation. Nowhere is the materialist worldview more prevalent than in biology, Michel’s own field. Society is indeed atomized, and its members are increasingly incapable of empathy and love for other human beings. In this context, people seek out alternative forms of meaning in place of traditional spirituality, and often end up finding it in New Age mysticism.

**Expected publication**: “*Atomized*: Materialism, Realism, and the New Age View of the World”

The novel *Possibility of an Island* (2005) will be the basis for exploring two essential questions related to realism. 1. It is set within a cloning cult that resembles the real-world Raëlians[[5]](#footnote-5) and deals with a topic that has a great realist effect: posthumanism (it seems very close to the ideas developed in Yuval Noah Harari’s 2015 essay *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*).*[[6]](#footnote-6)* The book was of interest to historians, but it is not typically viewed as expressing a realist worldview. In this section of my study, however, I will argue that there are good reasons to describe it as such. The study will thus offer a new analysis of this text as a work of literature, placing it within the New Age theory. At the heart of this tradition lies a belief in a holistic form of divinity that fills all of the universe, including human beings themselves. There is thus a strong emphasis on the spiritual authority of the self.

2. This part of the proposed study also innovates in offering the view that there is a strong autobiographical dimension to the novel. Daniel has a son he doesn't see and in whom he isn't interested, just as Houellebecq for a long time showed no interest in his son. Predictably, his favorite philosopher is the pessimist Schopenhauer, who believed that people could not have individual wills but were part of one vast universe-embracing but evil will, which is the source of all endless suffering. And, of course, Schopenhauer was a lonely, angry, friendless man, who found his only solace in his poodle — just like Daniel and his creator.

I will situate this poignant text within this conceptual-aesthetic tradition of realism, positing it as a quintessential specimen of the aesthetics and worldview of realism. The discussion will also address the link between the book’s understanding of the dialectic of realism and postmodernism, together with Houellebecq’s own biography. This link has never been addressed in the extensive criticism on *Possibility of an Island*, and in the context of realism, it is of paramount importance. My discussion of the link between Houellebecq’s writing as a dystopia has the potential to yield new insights not only on realism but also on the place of Europeanculture in the configuration of the realist aesthetic more generally.

**Expected publication: “***Possibility of an Island*: An Elegy, a Celebration of Everything We Have and Are at Risk of Losing”

One of the study’s focal points will be the Prix Goncourt winning *The Map and the Territory* (2010), Houellebecq’s fifth novel, which, I will argue, presents realist characters, taken from real life, (the author himself being one of the protagonists, named Michel Houellebecq). We are invited to contemplate Jed's career —a project to systematically photograph the world's manufactured objects, from suspension files to handguns to forks — through a period in which he manipulates Michelin maps to the painting phase in which he first encounters Houellebecq. Throughout these passages, Jed's overriding concern is "to give an objective description of the world" (page number). The protagonist Houellebecq is described as the real Houellebecq and corresponds to the information that we have about him ("It was public knowledge that Houellebecq was a loner with strong misanthropic tendencies") (page number). The story is a meditation on the relationship between art and the world it seeks to depict. Moreover, it is full of references to figures from French cultural life – provocative literary critics, showy television presenters and, most notably, the author Frédéric Beigbeder. It skillfully needles the current obsession with the notion of "*terroir*" — the link between land and identity — by projecting an imagined future in which wealthy Chinese immigrants make the French countryside more "authentic" than it has ever been through their excessive respect for local customs.

In *Submission* (2015), Houellebecq is concerned with what he likes to call “our occidental way of life.” The novel imagines or “predicts” a situation in which  a [Muslim](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam%22%20%5Co%20%22Islam) party upholding  [Islamist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamist%22%20%5Co%20%22Islamist) and patriarchal values is able to win the 2022 presidential election in France with the support of the [Socialist Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Party_%28France%29%22%20%5Co%20%22Socialist%20Party%20%28France%29). The book attracted an unusual amount of attention because, by macabre coincidence, it was released on the day of the Charlie Hebdo shooting. The novel mixes fiction with real people: figures such as [Marine Le Pen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marine_Le_Pen%22%20%5Co%20%22Marine%20Le%20Pen), [François Hollande](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fran%C3%A7ois_Hollande%22%20%5Co%20%22Fran%C3%A7ois%20Hollande), [François Bayrou](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fran%C3%A7ois_Bayrou%22%20%5Co%20%22Fran%C3%A7ois%20Bayrou), [Manuel Valls](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manuel_Valls%22%20%5Co%20%22Manuel%20Valls), and [Jean-François Copé](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Fran%C3%A7ois_Cop%C3%A9%22%20%5Co%20%22Jean-Fran%C3%A7ois%20Cop%C3%A9) fleetingly appear as characters in the book. The proposed study will offer an in-depth comprehensive analysis of this novel as an autofiction, demonstrating that its key characteristics are fundamentally those of autofiction, as exemplified in the works.

I have recently published an article on this book examining the role of academia as expressed in *Submission*. Is an intellectual elite's lack of attachment and indifference to the world around them a pragmatic response, as opposed to faith? Moreover, does Houellebecq attack French academics in the form of satire? In order to answer these questions, I concentrated on a few points: H's relations with French academics; the construction of the protagonist François, the professor of literature and the way in which he is presented to us; the peritext of the story and what it added to the description of the academics presented in the story; and finally, the parody of literary theories.

**Expected publication: “***Submission*: A Realist Prophecy”

In *Serotonin* (2019), the interest in happiness is revealed and specified in the title, in the form of a hormone: a neurotransmitter at the origin of our mood, used in antidepressants for better mental health. While in his previous novels Houellebecq built a disillusioned world where he persisted in identifying different forms of happiness embedded in philosophical doctrines, in *Serotonin*, he reveals a cynical and pessimistic vision of a universe where the possibility of life in a relationship is outdated, where the future of human society is endangered, where the authenticity of civilizations and the values ​​of contemporary culture are increasingly decadent.

In this section, I will analyze Houellebecq’s collection of poems, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (1992) and the latest novel, *Serotonin* (2019), positing it as a text in which essential problems of happiness are discussed. I will argue that, alongside the explicit narrative, the text advances a theory of happiness as a social and philosophical worldview.

I have recently published an article on the oeuvre of Houellebecq, analyzing the increasing role of the quest for happiness in modern society.

**Expected publication:** “Happiness in Contemporary Society through the Lens of *Serotonin*”

Part D. The Group of the “Editions Inculte”

After analyzing the work of Houellebecq as realist, I will proceed in showing strong evidence that this development takes place in a large number of contemporary French works, with the “Editions Inculte” group as the most apparent. The perspective of realism is part of a larger phenomenon which is emerging more and more in narratives exploring a new dimension, which can be described as "investigation." Laurent Demanze's excellent essay *A New Age of Investigation* (2019) describes a set of literary investigative writings that also question the apparent phenomenon of a "return to reality.” The passion for reality and the concern for exploration are evident in the novels of Philippe Vasset, Didier Blonde, Philippe Artières, Jean-Christophe Bailly, Emmanuel Carrère, Éric Chauvier, or even Jean Rolin as well as Olivia Rosenthal. These authors shed light on the end of an opposition between objective science and fiction, generally described as arbitrary and subjective. As Demanze specifies in an interview, the works of these authors highlight the dimension of "investigation" which is "a process of creation and, conversely, creation invents its protocol of investigation" (Benetti 2019). In these texts, although they are distinct from one another, it is striking to note the emergence of "research-creation" and a "requirement for the field." These two mechanisms allow contemporary literature to proceed "willingly to these gestures of getting out or escaping, in order to physically rub shoulders with an outside, in a resolute dynamic of self-alteration." (Demanze, 2019: 90).

**Expected conference:** *Rethinking Realism: the Inculte Authors* **and****Expected publication of a book:** *Rethinking Realism: the Inculte Authors*

My final goal will be to integrate these separate histories into a more broadly European perspective, eliciting from the examined corpus insights into the history of ideas in the wider context of European culture during an era of great transformation. The focal point of the research, both thematically and logistically, will be accomplished at the University of Haifa. A PhD student who has experience in similar research will serve as an assistant. He will monitor the research efforts to provide the study with required information. Graduate students in the field of French literature will serve as research assistants, mainly for the purpose of reading a large number of texts and classifying them in the right category. I believe that this study will not only equip participating students with direct tools and knowledge of the discipline, but will also enrich the junior academic community and help to develop future scholars.

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 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "..is in no way about copying it, or even seeking to make it explicit: by representing it, it is a matter of revealing it" (7). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For instance, Sabine van Wesemael (Wesemael, 2004: 97) on the double meaning of the vomiting scene/masturbation in *Whatever*; Murielle Lucie Clément on the ambiguity caused by the main narrator of *Elementary Particles*, since he is a clone (Clément, 2007: 88), on a second reading of the world of clones by Michel Houellebecq (Clément, 2007: 97), and on other ambiguities (Clément, 2007: 183-187). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The “Éditions Inculte” is a French publishing house active from 2004 to 2014. It was initially formed around a collective of writers who first joined together around the journal *Inculte*. Its catalog includes French literature and translations of foreign literature, particularly from English, as well as essays and documents. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Raëlian beliefs and practices are the concepts and principles of the religion founded by [Claude Vorilhon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_Vorilhon%22%20%5Co%20%22Claude%20Vorilhon), a former French auto racing journalist who changed his name to Raël.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ra%C3%ABlian_beliefs_and_practices%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-AutoPop-1)[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ra%C3%ABlian_beliefs_and_practices%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-Ra%C3%ABlID_135-6-2) Followers of Raëlism believe in an advanced race of extraterrestrials called Elohim who created life on earth. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The book deals with the future of humanity. The premise is that during the 21st century, humanity is likely to make a significant attempt to gain happiness, immortality, and [God](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God%22%20%5Co%20%22God)-like powers. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)