

**‘La transgression ne m’intéresse pas, pour le dire brutalement’: Michel Houellebecq, critic of transgression**

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Abstract:

Critics of contemporary French novelist Michel Houellebecq have frequently used the adjective ‘transgressive’ in their descriptions of both the man and his work. There are, however, huge differences of both order and magnitude between the notion of transgression in the writing of the provocative novelist and that theorised systematically in the work of the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille, archetypical avatars of transgression. Houellebecq has even gone on record to declare his disgust at what he perceives as the synonymy between cruelty and transgression in their work and ‘transgressive’ visual art more broadly. Nonetheless, Houellebecq’s fiction does display a constant preoccupation with both transgression and the transgressive: he is drawn to both the obscene and the unacceptable.

This article, which forms part of my ongoing research into the less canonical or less explored strands of Houellebecq’s work, considers the representation of both sex and transgressive contemporary visual art as represented in Houellebecq’s fiction. It demonstrates how Houellebecq’s writing maintains a critical dialogue with transgression, in particular in the work of the Vienna Actionists, Damien Hirst and, more implicitly, Jake and Dinos Chapman. It also touches on the author’s writing about art and his description of his own death, at the hands of a crazed art collector, in *La Carte et le territoire* (2010). As a result, it demonstrates how the image of a moralising author emerges in his work. It also considers how Houellebecq’s stance can be closely aligned with those of critics Ovidie and Paul Virilio. To conclude, it considers how the author formulates a specifically Houellebecquian notion of transgression, or an aesthetics to which art and writing should aspire, which resonates with the Roland Barthes’s *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* (1977).

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Amongst the many adjectives used to describe contemporary novelist Michel Houellebecq and his fiction in the numerous journal articles, collections of scholarly essays,

monographs and press clippings about the man and his work, the word ‘transgressive’ occurs time and again. Sabine van Wesemael groups him together with Bret Easton Ellis and Frédéric Beigbeder as a purveyor of what she terms the ‘roman transgressif’ [*transgressive novel*].<sup>1</sup> Murielle Lucie Clément suggests that Houellebecq’s literary project is concerned with ‘la transgression réitérée des codes, littéraires et sociaux’ [*the repeated transgression of literary and social codes*].<sup>2</sup> Jack Abecassis additionally argues that Houellebecq’s ‘true’ transgressions lie within his ambiguous relationships with the various ideological perspectives his fiction holds up for examination.<sup>3</sup>

The notion of what it means to transgress has also been examined within writing in an almost immeasurable number of ways by an equally immeasurable number of writers. Indeed the very word ‘transgression’ is an intensely critically problematic term. Julian Wolfreys, for example, reflecting the complexity of the critical debate, warns that critics should be particularly on their guard when using the term. He has reiterated that ‘there is no single definable concept of transgression’, ‘the very idea of transgression is irreducible to conceptualization’ and clarified that ‘Transgressions, plural, take place’.<sup>4</sup>

The use of the word ‘transgression’ is particularly problematic when discussing Houellebecq’s novels. The author’s work certainly displays an interest in themes that can be considered from the perspective of transgression: sex, violence and racial difference. These, along with the various unpalatable opinions expressed by characters in his novels, as well as the author’s real-life comments in media interviews, have added a somewhat transgressive aura to his œuvre.<sup>5</sup> While the ideas presented within Houellebecq’s novels might be provocative or unpleasant, even abhorrent, writing that could be described in terms of pornography or racism is certainly not without precedent within French writing.<sup>6</sup> Is ‘transgressive’, then, an appropriate adjective to describe Michel Houellebecq’s work? Indeed his writing seems to be of a very different order to that which Georges Bataille –

<sup>1</sup> Sabine Van Wesemael, *Le Roman transgressif contemporain* (Paris: Harmattan, 2010), p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> Murielle-Lucie Clément, ‘Michel Houellebecq. Ascendances littéraires et intertextualités’ in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, ed. Murielle-Lucie Clément and Marie van Wesemael (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. 106. My translation.

<sup>3</sup> Jack I. Abecassis, ‘The Eclipse of Desire: L’Affaire Houellebecq’, *MLN* 115 (2000), 801-26 (803).

<sup>4</sup> Julian Wolfreys, *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 7-9.

<sup>5</sup> Bruno Clément in *Les Particules élémentaires* is frequently used as a mouthpiece for controversial statements. A black student is described as a ‘grand singe’. Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), p. 192. Bruno is equally dismissive of the women he meets on a libertine campsite: ‘Parler avec ces pétasses [...] c’est comme pisser dans un urinoir rempli de mégots; ou encore c’est comme chier dans une chiotte remplie de serviettes hygiéniques: les choses ne rentrent pas, et elles se mettent à puer.’ *Ibid.*, p. 113 [*Talking to these morons (...) is like peeing in a urinal full of cigarette butts, like shitting in a bog full of Tampax: everything starts to stink*] Houellebecq, *Atomised*, trans. by Frank Wynne (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 131. Houellebecq declared in interview with the revue *Lire*: ‘Et la religion la plus conne, c’est quand même l’islam. Quand on lit le Coran, on est effondré... effondré!’, Didier Sénécal, ‘Entretien: Michel Houellebecq’, *Lire* 290 (2001), 28-36 (31). [*And the stupidest religion is Islam. When you read the Qur’an, you are blown away....blown away!*]. My translation.

<sup>6</sup> As an example of the ‘pornographic’: *Histoire d’O* by Pauline Réage (1954). Céline’s pamphlet *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (1937) notoriously contains anti-Semitic assertions.

theorist of transgression, and key point of reference for both writers and artists – Georges Bataille presents in a text such as *Histoire de l'œil* (1928) where both profanation and the illustration of the proximity between sex and death are systematic. Readers anticipating a Foucaultian 'éclair dans la nuit' [*lightning flash in the night*] on reading Houellebecq's work might be disappointed.<sup>7</sup> Indeed describing a globally recognised, multi-million unit-shifting, Goncourt prize-winning author as 'transgressive' when he has been fully recuperated into the consumer mainstream seems a highly problematic assertion.<sup>8</sup>

This article nevertheless argues that that a close critical examination of the relationship between the transgressive and the fiction of Michel Houellebecq is a valuable critical exercise. I will demonstrate that Houellebecq maintains a complex relationship with transgression and transgressive behaviour and we can identify a discourse of transgression in his work with which his writing maintains a sophisticated critical dialogue. This is striking in the way Houellebecq considers what he presents as the interrelated fields of sex and contemporary visual art. In this way an image of a moralising Houellebecq, critic of transgression and transgressive behaviour, emerges. Such a stance is not without precedent in contemporary French writing. As this article demonstrates, this critical position reflects those held by cultural critics of sexuality and art, notably Ovidie, ex-porn star and critic of the politics of pornography, and theorist Paul Virilio. This article concludes with a consideration of Roland Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (1977) and suggests how we might sketch a transgressive experience *à la Houellebecq* from the perspective of sentimentality, altruistic love and compassion, a crucial element of Houellebecquian aesthetics, tentatively and at least partially opposed to the cruelty and suffering he observes in contemporary cultural production.

### **Houellebecq on transgression**

In a 2007 interview with *Le Magazine littéraire*, Houellebecq grandly declared, after denying any interest in the writings of Sade and Bataille: 'Pour moi, le sexe et la transgression n'ont rien à voir. La transgression ne m'intéresse pas, pour le dire brutalement' [*For me, sex and transgression aren't related. To put it bluntly, I'm not interested in transgression*]. Clarifying this statement, Houellebecq added: 'Je n'aime pas

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<sup>7</sup> Such as that Foucault locates in Bataille's transgression. Michel Foucault, 'Préface à la transgression', *Dits et écrits, 1954-1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), Vol. 1, p. 265. My translation.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Crowley also considers the extent to which Houellebecq can truly be described as a transgressive writer. Crowley posits the idea that Houellebecq's work can be described as an attempt to 'transgress' from within a position of recuperation by market forces. He suggests it might be a '(dubious) attempt to fly under the radar of capitalist assimilation by producing an art so knowingly and nauseously trashy as to constitute an immanent denunciation of its inevitable assimilation by the market in cultural capital'. See Martin Crowley, 'Postface à la transgression, or: Trash, Nullity and Dubious Literary Resistance', *Dalhousie French Studies* 87 (2009), 99-109 (104).

cette confusion entre le sexe et le mal qui fait que tous les gens sont hors sujet' [*I don't like the confusion between sex and evil which means real people end up irrelevant*].<sup>9</sup> What displeases Houellebecq about Bataille and Sade's eroticism is the lack of shared pleasure, of joy associated with the sexual act in their work. If the Sadean libertine experiences pleasure through sex, it is only at the expense of his victim's ruthless exploitation.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the sexual experience for Bataille as explored in his fiction such as *Madame Edwarda* (1941) or *Histoire de l'œil* is inseparable from that of anxiety.<sup>11</sup> Houellebecq's narrow understanding of Sade and Bataille sees sex when viewed from the perspective of transgression as a negative, even unpleasant, activity, a denial of the other rather than a shared, jubilant expression of love which, as we shall see in the final section of this article, his texts appear to favour.

While Houellebecq here speaks from within the context of writing about sex, the association of transgression with exploitation and cruelty is made more broadly and consistently throughout his work. Indeed, this reflects a darker side to transgression which, while related to, is not confined to sexuality. The notion of transgression has, throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, become associated with and used to justify deviant or unconventional behaviour. In addition to producing scandalous fiction, so-called transgressive art and cinema have regularly approached the boundaries of what is morally and legally acceptable. As Roger Dorey notes, transgression has attained 'une signification négative où elle devient synonyme de violation, de profanation et souvent même de perversion' [*a negative signification whereby it becomes synonymous with violation, profanation and even perversion*].<sup>12</sup> This is a crucial consideration for Houellebecq's work and, as we shall see, contributes to the critical position his texts assume. Rather than explicitly a direct attack on Sade or Bataille, Houellebecq's work is consistently critical of how their work has been appropriated in the name of a celebratory culture of transgression.

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<sup>9</sup> Dominique Rabourdin, 'Pour moi, le sexe et la transgression n'ont rien à voir', *La Magazine littéraire* 470 (2007), 35-37 (37). My translations.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Sade, *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Patrick ffrench describes an 'influence of anxiety' that runs through writing in French in the wake of Bataille's work, see Patrick ffrench, *The Cut: Reading Bataille's Histoire de l'oeil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 39. This anxiety is posited in terms of both reflecting anxiety and producing it on the part of the reader. As examples, ffrench suggests the work of writers including Pierre Klossowski, Pauline Réage and Bernard Noël. I would suggest that Houellebecq's work is most appropriately viewed as remaining distinct from such an influence.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Dorey, 'Introduction: Penser la transgression', *L'Interdit et la transgression*, ed. Roger Dorey (Paris: Dunod, 1983), p. 1. My translation.

## Houellebecq on transgressive sex

Sex plays an important role within Houellebecq's fiction and critics have correctly identified how it is expressed in the context of a neoliberal libidinal economy within which everyone, according to the theory propagated by contemporary media, has access via consumerism to a fulfilling, varied, exciting sex life.<sup>13</sup> In reality, as Houellebecq demonstrates repeatedly, this is restricted to the young, the attractive and the rich. Those unlucky to be none of these are inevitably frustrated, resentful and unhappy. For those lucky enough to possess a degree of sexual capital, everything is permitted, but this freedom comes at a price, sexual promiscuity can lead to a hunger for bigger, better, ultimately more transgressive kicks, hence the hidden tyranny of sexuality that Houellebecq unmasks.<sup>14</sup>

Sex can, for Houellebecq, be a beautiful, joyful, shared experience, an expression of both compassion and altruistic love. This is explored within the context of the tender sexual relationships between Michel and Valérie in Houellebecq's *Plateforme* (2001)<sup>15</sup> or in the early relationship of Bruno and Christiane of *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998).<sup>16</sup> Sex can, however, also be understood from the perspective of cruelty; to be denied sex can be felt as an act of cruelty, as it is by the lonely Tisserand in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994), a consummate example of the suffering of the sexually disenfranchised.

Sex is also cruel when it ceases to be a shared experience, the realisation of tenderness and when it becomes, as in Sade, the search for solitary pleasure through the exploitation of others. For Houellebecq, when sex flirts with transgression it risks becoming selfish, even acutely narcissistic. This is best illustrated in *Plateforme* where Bertrand Bredane, significantly a contemporary artist, leads Michel and Valérie to an underground S&M club featuring PVC-clad dominatrices and sadistic behaviour, the parodic trappings of transgressive sex that evoke the 'negative' elements of transgression highlighted above by Dorey. Bredane attempts to justify his interest in 'la partie dégueulasse de l'être humain' [*what is disgusting in the human animal*]:

Je ne crois pas à la *part maudite*, parce que je ne crois à aucune forme de malédiction, ni de bénédiction d'ailleurs. Mais j'ai l'impression qu'en s'approchant de la souffrance et de la cruauté, de

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<sup>13</sup> This has been particularly effectively explored, for example, by Douglas Morrey. See Douglas Morrey, 'Michel Houellebecq and the International Sexual Economy', *Portal* 1 (2004), [accessed March 6, 2013], <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/portal/article/view/44/22>.

<sup>14</sup> This is demonstrated by the tale of David di Meola recounted in *Les Particules élémentaires*. David's desire for both fame and sexual satisfaction sees him move to California where he ultimately becomes involved in snuff movies, eventually himself carrying out sickeningly sadistic murders. Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 205-12.

<sup>15</sup> See Michel Houellebecq, *Plateforme* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), pp. 133-34.

<sup>16</sup> See Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 141-42.

la domination et de la servitude, on touche à l'essentiel, à la nature intime de la sexualité. Vous ne croyez pas?

*[I don't believe we have a dark side, because I don't believe in any form of damnation, nor in benediction for that matter. But I have a feeling that as we get closer to suffering and cruelty, to domination and servility, we hit on the essential, the intimate nature of sexuality. Don't you think so?]*<sup>17</sup>

Valérie responds negatively after witnessing the sexual torture on display, concluding: 'Je n'arrive pas à comprendre qu'un être humain puisse en venir à préférer la souffrance au plaisir' [*It's beyond me that a human being could come to prefer pain to pleasure*] and identifies sado-masochism as 'exactement le contraire de la sexualité' [*the very antithesis of sexuality*].<sup>18</sup> Crucially, Bredane's italicised reference to 'la part maudite' in the original French text functions as a reference to Bataille whose essay *La Part maudite* (1949) describes a worldview built on excess and transgression.<sup>19</sup> This specifically Bataillean term implicitly places Bredane's intensely materialistic view within the context of the discourse of transgression, which Houellebecq appears to parody here. This is, of course, a somewhat misguided reference to Bataille's text which actually presents a theory of 'general economy' for society, based on the squandering of profits over capitalist accumulation, rather than advocating libertarian S&M. What the intertextual reference serves to suggest, however, is an appropriation of Bataille in order to 'legitimise' such hedonism, as alluded to in Dorey's above quotation. Bredane's 'theoretical' approach to sex, with its focus on revealing the dark side of human nature, is thus something that Michel and Valérie, along with Houellebecq's writing more broadly, appear to understand, but ultimately reject.

Elsewhere, sex in Houellebecq is similarly corrupted and again approaches the 'contraire de la sexualité'. In *La Possibilité d'une île* (2005), for example, Daniel is struck when the prophet, the leader of the religious cult he has been frequenting, calls over one of the female members of the group mid meeting so that she will perform a sex act:

Obéissant sans un mot, elle s'agenouilla entre ses cuisses, écarta le peignoir et commença à le sucer; son sexe était court, épais. Il souhaitait apparemment établir d'entrée de jeu une position de dominance claire; je me demandai fugitivement s'il le faisait uniquement par plaisir, ou si ça faisait partie d'un plan destiné à m'impressionner.

<sup>17</sup> Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 183 [italics in original text]. Houellebecq, *Platform*, trans. by Frank Wynne (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 188.

<sup>18</sup> Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 185. Houellebecq, *Platform*, pp. 190-91.

<sup>19</sup> In this essay Bataille articulates his theory of general economics built on his observations relating to the dynamic of excess. Bataille has 'un angle de vue d'où un sacrifice humain, la construction d'une église ou le don d'un joyau n'avaient pas moins d'intérêt que la vente du blé' [*a perspective from which a human sacrifice, the construction of a church or the giving of a jewel is as interesting as the sale of wheat*], see Georges Bataille, *La Part maudite* (Paris: Minuit, 2009), p. 49. My translation.

[Obeying without a word, she knelt between his thighs, opened the dressing gown, and began to suck; his sex was short and thick. He wanted, apparently, to establish from the outset a clear position of dominance; I wondered in passing if he did it uniquely for pleasure, or if that was part of a plan to impress me].<sup>20</sup>

This blowjob is contrasted with the ‘immense Bonheur’ that Daniel receives during oral sex from Esther, with she performs ‘avec joie’ a few pages prior to this encounter.<sup>21</sup> The contrast between the two scenes serves as an implicit denunciation of the prophet. His behaviour here is reduced to a display of dominant machismo, the woman is completely subjugated, even humiliated; she is on her knees and completely ignored as the conversation continues above her head. For the prophet, the sexual act, arguably more unpleasant and narcissistic than truly transgressive, reinforced by his t-shirt bearing the crude slogan ‘Lick My Balls’, is designed to reinforce his status as alpha male, thus his place on the side of cruelty in the Houellebecquian worldview.<sup>22</sup>

What appears to be Houellebecq’s anti-transgressive stance towards sex is highly evocative of that proposed by Ovidie, who has taken a strikingly similar position. Writing in *Porno Manifesto* (2002), she is scathing about self-declared libertines, such as Bredane and the prophet, who claim that a committedly ‘transgressive’ approach to sexuality is justified by its liberating potential for the individual subject:

les néo-libertins adoptent souvent la définition consensuelle qui affirme que toute jouissance est jouissance de la transgression. Cela montre en quoi ils ne peuvent en aucun cas être une optique de libération. Car la liberté sexuelle ne peut s’obtenir qu’avec le dépassement de la transgression afin de jouir librement. Et lorsque cette transgression est dépassée, il est logique qu’un désintérêt pour la sexualité à excès finisse par s’installer.

[The neo-libertines often adopt the consensual definition which affirms that all sensual pleasure is a result of transgression. This shows that their perspective in no way offers any form of freedom. This is because sexual freedom can only be attained by moving beyond transgression to enjoy oneself freely. Once you have moved beyond transgression, it is logical that a disinterest for sexual excess will settle in.]<sup>23</sup>

Ovidie’s perspective is that sexual behaviour founded on transgression for transgression’s sake or in the name of freedom or self-liberation (or even based on a misquotation of Bataille, such as demonstrated in Houellebecq by the above example from *Plateforme*), is fundamentally opposed to shared, liberating sex since it effectively condemns the

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<sup>20</sup> Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), p. 229. Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an island*, trans. by Gavin Bowd (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), pp. 165-66.

<sup>21</sup> Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île*, p. 196.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>23</sup> Ovidie, *Porno Manifesto* (Paris: La Musardine, 2004), p. 201. My translation.

transgressor to consistently hunt for transgressive kicks rather than finding real subjective liberation. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the prophet's behaviour, it is also associated with narcissism and ultimately 'réduit la relation sexuelle à un acte masturbatoire qui devient jouissance égoïste et non partage d'un état émotionnel' [*reduces sexual relations to a masturbatory act which becomes selfish enjoyment and not sharing an emotional state*].<sup>24</sup>

The perspective presented by Houellebecq's work regarding the corruption of sexuality appears to have remained consistent in the years between the publication of *Plateforme* in 2001 and 2010's *La Carte et le territoire*. Houellebecq explicitly develops this same point in the latter text, when Jasselin considers how societal attitudes to sexuality have evolved throughout his life:

Marqué sans doute par les idées en vogue dans sa génération, il avait jusque-là considéré la sexualité comme une puissance positive, une source d'union qui augmentait la concorde entre les humains par les voies innocentes du plaisir partagé. Il y voyait au contraire maintenant de plus en plus souvent la lutte, le combat brutal pour la domination, l'élimination du rival et la multiplication hasardeuse des coïts sans aucune raison que d'assurer une propagation maximale aux gènes. Il y voyait la source de tout conflit, de tout massacre, de toute souffrance. La sexualité lui apparaissait de plus en plus comme la manifestation la plus directe et la plus évidente du mal.

[*Marked no doubt by the ideas fashionable in his generation, he had up until then considered sexuality to be a positive power, a source of union that increased the concord between humans through the innocence of shared pleasure. On the contrary, he now saw in it more and more often the struggle, the brutal fight for domination, the elimination of the rival and the hazardous multiplication of coitus without any reason other than ensuring the maximum propagation of genes. He saw in it the source of all conflict, of all massacres and suffering. Sexuality increasingly appeared to him as the most direct and obvious manifestation of evil*].<sup>25</sup>

As suggested by both Ovidie and Houellebecq, transgressive sexual behaviour is fundamentally opposed to loving, shared sexual relations: it is ultimately emotionally lacking and will inevitably lead to a sexual dead-end. Indeed, Jasselin's pessimistic analysis is proved elsewhere in Houellebecq's fiction. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, for example, it is instructive that Christiane aggravates her medical condition, resulting in her paralysis and subsequent suicide, during partner-swapping at a Parisian *club échangiste*.

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<sup>24</sup> Ovidie, *Porno Manifesto*, p. 201. My translation.

<sup>25</sup> Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), p. 303. Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, trans. by Gavin Bowd (London: William Heinemann, 2011), p. 203.

## Houellebecq and contemporary art

Throughout Houellebecq's work, such a descent into suffering is not confined to the sexual sphere. Contemporary art also notably presents a symptom of a broader contemporary slide towards the transgressive. In an early essay, Houellebecq describes a video work by Jacques Lizène where the artist's penis is trussed up and animated by strings as a sign of the 'foirage triste qui accompagne l'art contemporain' [*the sad atmosphere of failure which accompanies contemporary art*] which, in its sexualized bleakness is 'le meilleur commentaire récent sur l'état des choses' [*the best recent commentary on the state of things*].<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, it is fitting that, in the example considered above, *Plateforme*'s Michel is initiated into transgressive sexuality by an artist. Bredane's artworks can themselves be described as eminently, even stereotypically, transgressive. They include works of incredible repugnance, including 'laissant pourrir de la viande dans des culottes de jeunes femmes, ou en cultivant des mouches dans ses propres excréments' [*leaving rotting meat in young girls' panties, or breeding flies in his own excrement*] or cruelty, accosting gallery visitors with the parts of dismembered corpses.<sup>27</sup> Bredane's work can be read as a parody of real-world artworks that have been described as 'transgressive', and directly evokes Damien Hirst's well-known conceptual artworks which themselves have included the liberal use of dead animals and the deliberate cultivation of flies.<sup>28</sup> As with Houellebecq's exploration of sex, the world of contemporary art is infused with the transgressive; just as sex is corrupted through S&M, art has degenerated into exploitation, cruelty, narcissism, and a celebration of death.

Houellebecq's Prix Goncourt-winning *La Carte et le territoire* is particularly illuminating from this perspective. The text's main protagonist, Jed Martin, is himself a contemporary artist and the novel provides apparently well-informed observations of the Parisian art community.<sup>29</sup> At the novel's centre is the vicious murder of the character of 'Michel Houellebecq', who has been grotesquely killed and whose entrails have been arranged with great care in his living room:

Toute la surface de la moquette était constellée de coulures de sang, qui formaient par endroits des arabesques complexes. Les lambeaux de chair eux-mêmes, d'un rouge qui virait par places au noirâtre, ne semblaient pas disposés au hasard mais suivant des motifs difficiles à décrypter, il avait

<sup>26</sup> Houellebecq, 'L'Art comme épluchage', in *Interventions* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), pp. 83-84. My translations.

<sup>27</sup> Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 179. Houellebecq, *Platform*, p. 184.

<sup>28</sup> Notably Hirst's 1990 installation 'A Thousand Years', and 1991's dead shark notoriously preserved in formaldehyde 'The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living'.

<sup>29</sup> Indeed, this appears to be informed by the author's own interest in contemporary art. Houellebecq has been consistently involved in writing about, and the production of, visual art since the early 1990s. In 1997, for example, Houellebecq provided the text for *Opera Bianca*, an installation by artist Gilles Touyard at the Centre Pompidou, whilst he collaborated with artist Sarah Wiame in 1993-1995 and 1996.

l'impression d'être en présence d'un puzzle. Aucune trace de pas n'était visible, le meurtrier avait procédé avec méthode, découpant d'abord les lambeaux de chair qu'il souhaitait disposer aux coins de la pièce, revenant peu à peu vers le centre tout en laissant libre un chemin vers la sortie. Il allait falloir s'aider de photos, essayer de reconstituer le dessin de l'ensemble.

*[The whole surface of the carpet was splattered with trails of blood, which in places formed complex arabesques. The strips of flesh in themselves, of a red colour which sometimes became blackish, did not seem arranged at random but followed motifs that were difficult to decrypt; he felt it was like being in the presence of a puzzle. No traces of footprints were visible: the murderer had acted methodically, first cutting the strips of skin that he wanted to place in the corners of the room, then returning gradually towards the centre while leaving a path to the exit. They would need photos to help try and recreate the design of the whole].<sup>30</sup>*

The delicacy of the arrangement of body parts and the patterns created by the bloodstains are themselves evocative of a work of contemporary art. Furthermore, the narrator's description of the murder scene here invites comparisons with a piece of visual art criticism; the appreciation of colour in the line 'd'un rouge qui virait par places au noirâtre' and the observation of the artistic pride the murderer takes in his work: 'le meurtrier avait procédé avec méthode'. Moreover, when Jed is shown a photograph of the crime scene, he compares it to the work of transgressive visual artists Jackson Pollock and the Vienna Actionists.<sup>31</sup>

After an investigation that lasts for the final third of the novel, the murderer is revealed to be a depraved art collector with a taste for producing art using real human body parts which recall the hyperreal work of provocative visual artists Jake and Dinos Chapman.<sup>32</sup> His motive was to steal a portrait of Houellebecq painted by Martin. In this way, Houellebecq is murdered by a contemporary artist for a work of contemporary art in a slaughter that itself takes the form of a work of art. While arguably a light-hearted reference to how Houellebecq's writing has received its fair share of negative reviews from the literary establishment, he has here been literally torn apart by an art lover. The artistic assassination of Houellebecq also serves as a key motif for Houellebecq's critique as considered above. It is symptomatic of a spectacular world that values the visual above all and takes a narcissistic, even hedonistic, pleasure in experiencing the transgressive, even if it involves exploitation or, in this case, death. As Jed Martin concludes with an observation that can be applied to both the worlds of sex and art: 'La valeur marchande de la souffrance et de la mort était devenue supérieure à celle du plaisir et du sexe' [*The market value of*

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<sup>30</sup> Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 288. Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, p. 192.

<sup>31</sup> Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 351.

<sup>32</sup> Houellebecq's description here recalls works such as 1996's 'Tragic Anatomies: Fuck Face' which use realistic technique to give the impression that their work is made of real body parts.

suffering and death had become superior to that of pleasure and sex].<sup>33</sup> Martin proceeds to clarify how this movement is exemplified within art by the work of Damien Hirst, whose morbid creations have assumed a higher market value in the preceding years than those of the previous leader, Jeff Koons, whose work is best known for its kitsch, colourful irreverence. As with the previous examination of the libidinal economy, art too gives way to exploitation, suffering and death. This observation consequently permits a more oblique reading of a scene where Martin destroys his unsuccessful portrait of Hirst by driving a palette knife into the latter's eye.<sup>34</sup> This act thus becomes a critical statement about Hirst's grisly art, turning his techniques back against their purveyor. Bruno Viard's reading of the episode takes such a reading one step further and, perhaps slightly unconvincingly, proposes that Hirst himself is responsible for Houellebecq's eventual demise in the novel.<sup>35</sup>

The work of the Vienna Actionists, with whom Otto Mühl, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler were associated in the 1960s and early 1970s, is another recurrent target for Houellebecq's criticism in both his novels and critical writing. The Actionists' performance-based work has been described by Maggie Nelson as featuring 'multiple forms of mutilation, beatings, penetrations and bloodletting', and is proposed by Houellebecq as a further example of how art, like sex, has degenerated towards narcissistic cruelty.<sup>36</sup> Most damningly, in *Les Particules élémentaires*, Houellebecq's narrator elaborates a hypothesis where 'les serial killers des années 90 étaient les enfants naturels des hippies des années 60' [*the serial killers of the 1990s were the spiritual children of the hippies of the Sixties*], suggesting that the cultural liberalism of the 1960s has been responsible for a social movement towards extreme individualism, the natural consequence of which is murder.<sup>37</sup> For Houellebecq, the Dionysiac excesses of the Actionists were little more than a symptom of such a cultural slide, with the artists dismissed as 'matérialistes absolus, des jouisseurs à la recherche de sensations nerveuses de plus en plus violentes' [*pure materialists, libertines forever in search of new and more violent sensations*].<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere, and writing under his own by-line in the introduction for

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<sup>33</sup> Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 371. Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, pp. 251-52.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>35</sup> Viard argues that 'il est facile de reconnaître la manière habituelle de Hirst, spécialiste du trash et du macabre [...]. Le maître du morbide a simplement remplacé une œuvre (le tableau à l'huile) par une autre de sa façon (l'installation de chair humaine). Pas besoin de signature!' [*it is easy to recognise the stylistic hallmarks of Hirst, specialist of trash art and the macabre (...). The morbid master has simply replaced one work (oil painting) with another (human flesh installation). No need for a signature*]. Bruno Viard, 'La Carte et le Territoire, roman de la représentation: entre trash et tradition', *Lendemain*, 36: 142-143 (2011), 87-95 (92). My translation.

<sup>36</sup> Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: a reckoning* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), p. 21.

<sup>37</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 261 [italics in original text]. Houellebecq, *Atomised*, p. 252.

<sup>38</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 260. Houellebecq, *Atomised*, p. 252.

an art catalogue, Houellebecq has definitively declared that: ‘ma répugnance pour les actionnistes viennois reste entière’ [my revulsion for the Actionists remains complete].<sup>39</sup>

The perspectives presented in *Les Particules élémentaires*, *Plateforme* and *La Carte et le territoire* themselves reflect a broader late twentieth-century debate in the artistic community. In particular they evoke the views presented by theorist-turned polemicist Paul Virilio in his controversial pamphlet *La Procédure silence* (2000), whose publication generated a debate played out in media when it is fair to anticipate Houellebecq would have been writing 2001’s *Plateforme*.<sup>40</sup> In this book Virilio is aggressively critical of contemporary artistic production, arguing that it has few aspirations outside of a desire to shock, scandalise or even perpetuate violence against the spectator. This is an art that Virilio ironically describes as ‘art maudit’ [*accursed art*], which is also a nod to Bataille, and the product of an artistic current that runs throughout the twentieth century, from Dada, the Actionists, towards contemporary body modification by artists such as Orlan, all for Virilio crucially based on nihilistic destruction.<sup>41</sup>

In this essay, Virilio is definitively Manichean in his view of the art world: there are only two types of art, ‘pitoyable’ [*pitiful*], which is able to display a certain compassion for its subject, and ‘impitoyable’ [*pitiless*], the dominant trend in the contemporary art world concerned, ultimately, with cruelty and perpetuating a violent response on the part of the viewer through extremity.<sup>42</sup> The latter category is certainly congruent with the art that one would describe as ‘transgressive’, certainly the examples he provides seem to fit into that category. This simplistic view of the art world is arguably one that manifests within Houellebecq’s fiction: the work of Bredane and the artistic murder of the Houellebecq character could be considered, to use Virilio’s term, ‘impitoyable’. Indeed, this dualistic way of seeing, with clear distinctions being made between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ or ‘good’ and ‘bad’, can equally be observed within Houellebecq’s conception of sex. Sex is ‘bad’ when it is flavoured with the transgressive, but ‘good’, when associated with love, affection and tender compassion.

### **Love as transgression?**

Love, both as altruism and its ideal manifestation as sex, is crucial for Houellebecq’s novels, and risks being overshadowed by the elements of cruelty in his work with which it

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<sup>39</sup> Houellebecq, ‘Préface’, in *Erotoscope*, Tomi Ungerer (Paris: Taschen, 2001), pp. 10-11 (10). My translation.

<sup>40</sup> For a further discussion of this debate, see Andrew Hussey, ‘The atrocity exhibition’, *NewStatesman.com*, April 14, 2003, [accessed March 6, 2013], <http://www.newstatesman.com/node/145231>.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Virilio, *La Procédure silence* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), p. 15. My translation.

<sup>42</sup> Virilio does not explicitly clarify what he terms as ‘pitoyable’ art, but cites examples of artists as diverse as actor Charlie Chaplin, poet Bernard de Bonnard and contemporary musician Bob Dylan to illustrate his point.

forms a stark contrast. Whereas S&M is a darkly negative example, a tender, willing, shared heterosexual relationship is at the apex of both physical and spiritual happiness. This is perhaps best demonstrated in *La Possibilité d'une île* through Daniel's relationship with Esther: her eagerness to offer sexual pleasure is for Houellebecq the epitome of the form a loving relationship should take. The response this ideal sexual relationship has on Daniel is striking:

Pour la première fois de ma vie je me sentais, sans restrictions, heureux d'être un homme, je veux dire un être humain de sexe masculin, parce que pour la première fois j'avais trouvé une femme qui s'ouvrait complètement à moi, qui me donnait totalement, sans restrictions, ce qu'une femme peut donner à un homme.

[For the first time in my life I felt unrestrictedly happy to be a man, by this I mean a human being of the masculine sex, because for the first time I had found a woman who opened herself completely to me, who gave me totally, without limits, what a woman can give to a man]<sup>43</sup>

This relationship enables Daniel to find a profound happiness, based on a shared sexual experience, 'sans restrictions', contrasting with the limits that transgressive sexual relationships as described by Ovidie above ultimately impose.<sup>44</sup>

Crucially, this relationship with Esther also provides Daniel with the opportunity to, in a sense, transgress his own identity of cynical comedian. There is a transcendent quality to their loving relationship that provokes a turnaround in his personality:

Pour la première fois aussi je me sentais animé à l'égard d'autrui d'intentions charitables et amicales, j'aurais aimé que tout le monde soit heureux, comme je l'étais moi-même, [...] je revivais en somme, même si je savais que c'était pour la dernière fois.

[For the first time also, I felt moved in regard to others by charitable and friendly intentions: I would have liked everyone to be happy, like I was myself [...] I was living again, even if I knew that this would be for the last time]<sup>45</sup>

Such a reversal is evocative of another form of transgression, one liberated from the negative associations considered above: the transgressive potential for love evoked by Roland Barthes, in his *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* where he outlines its 'obscene' potential:

<sup>43</sup> Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 221. Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 158.

<sup>44</sup> A relationship based on love and compassion does not, however, need to be sexual. The strongest example of this is the relationship evoked between Michel and his paternal grandmother in *Les Particules élémentaires* which is based on 'classic' Catholic family values of devotion and duty.

<sup>45</sup> Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 221.. Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 158.

Discréditée par l'opinion moderne, la sentimentalité de l'amour doit être assumée par le sujet amoureux comme une transgression forte, qui le laisse seul et exposé: par un renversement de valeurs, c'est donc sentimentalité qui fait aujourd'hui l'obscène de l'amour.

[*Discredited by modern opinion, the sentimentality of love must be felt by the amorous subject as a strong transgression, which leaves him alone and exposed: by a reversal of values, it's therefore this sentimentality which makes love obscene today.*]<sup>46</sup>

Love, for Barthes, has the potential to be transgressive for the individual subject in how it results in an emotional vulnerability, which leaves the subject feeling exposed, but also unrestrained and unselfconscious, which Barthes expresses as 'la bêtise' [*stupidity*].<sup>47</sup> Love becomes obscene due to how the constructed subject himself is profoundly transgressed and consequently feels the emotions associated with being 'in love'. This is mirrored in the above extract detailing how Daniel feels reborn in his relationship with Esther, which results in a reversal in his character; he becomes friendly and kind-hearted rather than crude and exploitative. In a similar way, Michel of *Plateforme* also experiences love as a transgression of his personality: his relationship with Valérie leads him to a similar 'renversement de valeurs'; he changes the complete direction of his life from career civil servant to guru of sexual tourism.

While apparently held up as the apogee of positive physical and metaphysical experience, romantic love and sex are, however, not necessarily as uncomplicated as the previous examples might seem to suggest. As I have argued above, all of Houellebecq's protagonists are caught inescapably in the grip of the contemporary neoliberal system, which appears to extend as far as the domain of affective experience. In the previous example, Daniel is unceremoniously ditched by Esther as she opts to forge a career in the acutely unforgiving capitalist structure of the American movie industry. Houellebecq also notes in an early essay how contemporary courting can effectively be reduced to numerical exchange of vital statistics in the *société de marché*: a partner's desirability is calculated 'par la biais d'un calcul numérique simple faisant intervenir l'attractivité, la nouveauté et le rapport qualité-prix' [*by means of a simple numerical calculation which takes attractiveness, newness and the quality-price relationship into consideration*].<sup>48</sup> The sex act is thus similarly corrupted by the onward march of neoliberalism. Describing his

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<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, Vol. 5 (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 217. My translation.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218. My translation.

<sup>48</sup> Houellebecq, 'Approches du désarroi' in *Interventions 2* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), p. 27. Houellebecq later clarifies that such calculations can be based on: 'des critères simples et objectivement vérifiables (âge - taille - poids - mensurations hanches-taille-poitrine pour les femmes; âge - taille - poids - mensurations du sexe en érection pour les hommes)' [*criteria that are simple and objectively verifiable (age - size - weight - thigh-waist-chest measurements for women; age-size-weight - erection size measurements for men)*]. *Ibid.*, p. 30. My translations.

experiences in *clubs échangistes*, Bruno notes that

La plupart des femmes dans ce milieu branlaient avec brutalité, sans la moindre nuance. Elles serraient beaucoup trop fort, secouaient la bite avec une frénésie stupide, probablement dans le but d'imiter les actrices de films porno. C'était peut-être spectaculaire à l'écran, mais le résultat tactile était franchement quelconque, voire douloureux.

*[Most of the women in the group jerked men off crudely; they had no technique. They gripped the cock too tightly and shook it frantically, probably trying to imitate something they had seen in a porn film. It might have been spectacular on screen, but on the receiving end, it was mediocre, sometimes painful]*<sup>49</sup>

Here, the spectacular – and profit oriented – porn industry has provided a model that appears to have compromised the intimacy of the amorous experience. Bruno, however, still indulges. Perhaps inevitably, then, in the face of the onward march of the markets, love and sex are contaminated in Houellebecq's writing, resulting in what Best and Crowley identify as an 'ambivalent combination of critique and collusion' throughout his work.<sup>50</sup> Houellebecq's writing, then, is at least partially complicit in the world it claims to criticise. The overall textual attitude is perhaps most appropriately demonstrated by the distinctly Houellebecquian protagonist of a short story, 'Cléopâtre 2000', which recounts a visit to a Cap-d'Agde swingers' club. The narrator hesitates, in front of a 'glory hole':

Je regrette mon attitude, je me relève; j'ai décidé de jouer le jeu jusqu'au bout. Pendant deux heures, je resterai collé à la paroi, dans un état d'attente heureuse. De temps à autre, des mains et des bouches viendront s'occuper de mon sexe.

*[I regret my attitude; I decided to play the game to the end. For two hours, I'll stay stuck against the wall in a state of happy expectation. From time to time, hands and mouths will come and busy themselves with my penis]*<sup>51</sup>

This hesitancy, which gives way to participation, is characteristic of the partial complicity noted above: despite their critique, this never extends as far as practical abstention from such moments. Equally, the texts' explicit, repeated and arguably pornographic presentation of such scenes which, as Franc Schuerewegen has suggested, are largely designed to 'exciter les appétits sexuels du lecteur' [*whet the sexual appetites of the male reader*], can be seen as tipping the overall balance towards complicity, rather than uncomplicated critique.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 180-81. Houellebecq, *Atomised*, pp. 171-72.

<sup>50</sup> Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, *The New Pornographies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Houellebecq, 'Cléopâtre 2000' in *Lanzarote et autres textes* (Paris: Libro, 2002), pp. 79-83 (82). My translation.

<sup>52</sup> Franc Schuerewegen, 'Scènes de cul', in *Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Sabine van Wesemael (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 92. My translation.

Any emancipatory or transcendental potential for romantic love and sex is also undermined by its highly normative status in Houellebecq's work. The sex presented is almost exclusively heterosexual, or apparently designed to whet the appetite of Schuerwegen's clichéd heterosexual male (i.e. the narrator's *ménage à trois* with two lesbians in *Lanzarote*). Furthermore, gay and lesbian characters are repeatedly dismissed or ridiculed throughout. The lonely homosexual Desplechin resorts to peering at young men sunbathing through a telescope, while the gay restaurateurs described in *La Carte et le territoire* are reduced to stereotypes: 'Georges, maigre, chauve et vaguement inquietant qui avait un peu un look d'ancien pédé cuir. Anthony, en cuisine, était *bear* sans excès' [*Georges, a thin, bald, and vaguely worrying man who looked a bit like a former leather queen. Anthony, in the kitchen, was an understated bear*].<sup>53</sup> On the one hand, Houellebecq's work seems to champion a 'transgressive' romantic and sexual experience, yet on the other this is concurrently deeply conservative: are those who display a more unconventional or 'deviant' approach to sexuality fully able to enjoy such liberation in the worldview sketched by his novels?

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While Houellebecq's writings have been critically considered in terms of how they transgress, what they say about transgression is frequently in danger of being overlooked. The author has in interviews distanced himself from transgression as a synonym for cruelty and exploitation. As we have seen, however, Houellebecq enters into a critical dialogue with this form of transgression in his novels as well as starting to articulate his own, more optimistic form. It is also possible to suggest that this optimism can be observed within the way the author views his own artistic output. Traces in his writing seem to suggest that Houellebecq has a conception of an art which does not rely on exploitation or cruelty to have a 'positively' transgressive effect. This is vividly evoked in *La Possibilité d'une île*, where Daniel visits the studio of artist Vincent who has created a piece of immersive conceptual art which recreates the subjective experience of love on the part of the viewer.<sup>54</sup> Here, the potential for art itself to inspire emotion other than shock or revulsion is posited; Houellebecq encourages us to view art, and by implication his own writing, in terms of its ability to evoke a similarly pathetic effect. In this way, a different Houellebecq from the cynical nihilist of the contemporary media emerges and we can fully

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<sup>53</sup> Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, pp. 66-67. Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, p. 38. [Italics in original texts].

<sup>54</sup> Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, pp. 400-03.

appreciate the author's inherent conservatism, even his sentimentality. Maybe Houellebecq's true transgression lies in the extent to which his novels, even in the face of the insidious creep of neoliberalism, consistently champion the outmoded, what Barthes terms 'l'obscénité sentimentale': old-fashioned romantic love.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, p. 220.