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## On the Return of the (Media) Author: Michel Houellebecq, écrivain médiatique

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## Abstract

This article argues that Michel Houellebecq is an *écrivain médiatique*, a media author, and examines how and why he engages in a type of authorial strategy that relies on more than the text and presents the author as a multimedia, visible and culturally relevant figure. It will address how Houellebecq attempts to situate and justify this media-focused and author-centric strategy, showing how this reflects a broader sociocultural shift. The article will first deal with the concept of media authorship, defining and situating it, to show how Houellebecq can productively be understood as an *écrivain médiatique*. The type of authorship that Houellebecq represents through use of more than the text but media activities and opportunities for visibility presents us with an epistemological need to reassess literary authorship in the media age. This article engages with critical tools that are able to address new authorial strategies. Firstly, this article will address Jérôme Meizoz's concept of posturing (2007) as a productive lens through which to understand Houellebecq's polemical public persona as it oscillates in and out of his novels. In doing so, the article considers how his posturing indicates a reliance on visibility for success in the contemporary sociocultural context. Secondly, the article examines the range of Houellebecq's multimedia activities and creations beyond the text, including adaptations, albums, exhibitions, films, photography, and media appearances, decentering the text as part of a broader transmedial whole, using Richard Saint-Gelais' concept of transmediality (2011). This will show how Houellebecq is producing a multimedia world beyond the text and constructing himself as more than an author. Finally, this article discusses the evocation of social discourse, to use Marc Angenot's term (1989), in Houellebecq's works as a means to present a digital and mass media orientated cultural context in order to justify and rationalise his media-focused acts. These tools provide a framework that enables us to better evidence and understand Houellebecq's focus beyond the text. This strategy for successful authorship, reliant on mediatisation and multimedia, reflects the challenges of the cultural domination of mass media and new technologies of the Digital Age and indicates that the autonomy of the literary field is diminishing as it comes under the increased influence of industry, and other media forms and cultural fields. This article will show how a superficially transgressive engagement with the media and multimedia in fact reflects consent to the dynamics and values of the contemporary sociocultural context.

## On the Return of the (Media) Author: Michel Houellebecq, *écrivain médiatique*

On January 4th 2019, Michel Houellebecq's novel *Sérotonine* was released to much media fanfare. Prior to its release, magazines including *Les Inrockuptibles* and *L'Obs* defied Flammarion's embargo on the publication of articles on the novel in December. Within two days, 90,000 copies were sold and the novel topped the French literary sales lists, adding to Houellebecq's total sales of over five million copies of his texts. Despite this excitement around the novel and its successful sales, Houellebecq was not on the literary scene and did not commit to a single interview to discuss this work. Instead, his presence was asserted in other ways and places unrelated to the novel. Indeed, he penned a polemical article in English on American politics for *Harper's* January edition entitled 'Donald Trump is a Good President' (Houellebecq and Cullen, 2019). He also released the official photographs from his marriage, following the unofficial photographs shared by guest Carla Bruni-Sarkozy in October 2018. Additionally, details were published about Houellebecq's role in a film directed by Nicloux, entitled *Thalasso*, depicting Houellebecq and Gérard Depardieu's fictionalised stay at a health spa.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting this mediatisation and multimedia engagement, magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* marked *Sérotonine's* publication by releasing a collection of their collaborations with Houellebecq, one that presented an author who has for a long time been seeking to engage with more than the novel, including an interview with Iggy Pop, his *chanson française* playlist, and an interview with Emmanuel Macron where it's unclear who is interviewing whom (*Les Inrockuptibles*, 2019).<sup>2</sup> Despite this *absence* of engagement with his new novel, or in fact instead of engagement with it, Houellebecq still commanded a widespread media *presence*. This article seeks to explain how and why mediatisation and multimedia are central to Houellebecq's strategy for success.

This article argues that Michel Houellebecq is an *écrivain médiatique*, a media author, and examines how and why he engages in a type of authorial strategy that relies on more than the text and presents the author as a multimedia, visible and culturally relevant figure. It will address how Houellebecq attempts to situate and justify this media-focused and author-centric strategy, showing how this reflects a broader sociocultural shift. This strategy for successful authorship, reliant on mediatisation and multimedia, reflects the challenges of the cultural domination of mass media and new technologies of the Digital Age and indicates that the autonomy of the literary field is diminishing as it comes under the increased influence of industry, other cultural fields and media forms. This article will show how a superficially transgressive engagement with the media and multimedia in fact reflects consent to the dynamics and values of the sociocultural context.

I will first deal with the concept of media authorship, defining and situating it, to show how Houellebecq can productively be understood as an *écrivain médiatique*. The type of authorship that Houellebecq represents through use of more than the text but media activities and opportunities for visibility presents us with an epistemological need to reassess literary authorship in the media age. New critical tools able to address new authorial strategies are needed. I will engage with three such tools that can enable us to approach Houellebecq (and peers), as an *écrivain médiatique*, to elucidate what he is doing and the motivations for this. Firstly, this article will address Meizoz's concept of posturing (2007) as a productive lens through which to understand Houellebecq's polemical public persona as it oscillates in and out of his novels. In doing so, I will consider how his posturing indicates a reliance on visibility for success in the contemporary sociocultural context. Secondly, the article examines the range of Houellebecq's multimedia activities and creations beyond the text, including adaptations, albums, exhibitions, films, photography, and media appearances, decentring the text as part of a broader transmedial whole, using Richard Saint-Gelais' concept of transmediality (2011). This will show how Houellebecq is producing a multimedia world beyond the text and constructing himself as more than an author. Finally, I will discuss the evocation of social discourse, to use Angenot's term (1989), in Houellebecq's works as a means to present a digital and mass media orientated cultural context in order to rationalise his media-focused acts. These tools provide a framework that enables us to better evidence and understand his focus beyond the text.

This is the first study to focus on the role, signification and relevance of the concept of the *media author*<sup>3</sup> in the contemporary French literary field.<sup>4</sup> It analyses the notion of the media writer as an authorial strategy and posture, and its creative consequences. This article seeks to contribute to current scholarship in several ways; first, it adds to current academic work on Houellebecq, illustrating a new way of understanding the interest in the author figure and filling gaps in research in regard to his post-textuality, mediatisation and media usage. Since its very beginnings, the polemical nature of Houellebecq's novels and interviews, and the extensive press coverage of these, has resulted in academic interest in reception, authorial intention and the role of the author.<sup>5</sup> Critics have made value judgements on his work, some criticizing<sup>6</sup> and some defending him.<sup>7</sup> This *tropisme de l'opinion* is exceptional, as Estier (2013:106) has noted: '*Houellebecq tend à apparaître comme un écrivain hors-normes, difficile à situer, ambigu, ambivalent, paradoxal, iconoclaste.*' This article seeks to respond by situating Houellebecq as a media author, showing how this helps us better understand his strategies in and out of the novel. The article tackles the scarcity of critical writing on Houellebecq's use of media,<sup>8</sup> despite his vast range of multimedia engagements. Secondly, this article addresses contemporary authorship from fresh socio-literary perspectives, contributing to the burgeoning study of posturing, transmediality, and social discourse, applying these methods in new ways to current examples and translating them for use in anglophone scholarship. Thirdly, the article extends beyond French Literary Studies into other disciplines including Sociocultural and Media Studies, proving its relevance to other fields. Finally, it produces a methodological framework to be applied to other media authors in other comparative cultural contexts.

## **Media Authorship: Michel Houellebecq, *écrivain médiatique***

In 1986, Pierre Nora published the second volume of *Les Lieux de mémoire*, a collective history of the *sites de mémoire* where French collective memory has crystallized around significant places, events and objects. In this landmark in contemporary historiography, CEO of Grasset, Olivier Nora wrote a chapter on '*La Visite au grand écrivain*', addressing the cultural significance of the relationship between the French and their writers. Nora argued, '*On consomme aujourd'hui la voix et l'image de l'auteur sans avoir souvent lu une seule ligne de lui : l'effet charismatique propre à l'écriture ne repose plus sur la lecture, mais sur l'audition et la vision.*' (Nora, 1986: 582) Since then, a range of French authors have gained success in and beyond the literary field in a way that reflects this assertion, including Michel Houellebecq.

In French literary practice, authors are responding to the ever-increasing influence of the logic of the market and of mass media in a context of a crisis of literature (Vilain, 2016: 11) on the one hand, and reinforced capitalist integration and multimedia mergers experienced by French publishers during the past decades on the other. While the notion of literary value is challenged from within publishing strategies, cultural value has become ever more closely linked to commodification and marketing. Following a long process in the evolution of authorial marketing and branding,<sup>9</sup> authors are responding to the cult of the market and the increased integration of cultural industries through interactions with other media. Andrew Keen (2007: 2) has described a cultural 'flattening' whereby culture is becoming a flattened plane where previous axiological hierarchies are unsettled. Houellebecq responds to this context predominantly in an often-ambivalent usage of mediatisation and mass media, revealing an important tension in his career between contesting and consenting to the dynamics and demands of the Digital Age and of a 'flattened' cultural landscape. Renowned Actes Sud publisher Hubert Nyssen highlights this change in how authors achieve success: '*Le succès d'un livre n'est plus, aujourd'hui, simple affaire de talent. Il est aussi tributaire d'un couple inquiétant, celui que forment promotion et médiatisation.*' (Nyssen, 2005: 120) However, it is not merely a question of the promotion of *texts*, but actually of the authors themselves. Sociologist Nathalie Heinich (2012) stresses that visibility has become one of the most significant forms of capital for success, including literary success. Authors can profit from the reassertion of their presence, and significantly not only in literary contexts. Jérôme Meizoz describes, '*un nouvel état du champ littéraire contemporain: la médiatisation des auteurs.*' (Meizoz, 2004: 202-203) In this new state of the field, '*la modernité médiatique a substitué au livre son auteur audible, visible ou télévisuel.*' (Meizoz, 2016a). Such authors who go beyond relying primarily on texts, spreading

their image and voice through a range of media platforms and mediatisation techniques can be defined as *écrivains médiatiques*.

I use the term *écrivains médiatiques* to account for this media turn for authors; in much the same way as intellectuals experienced in the 1970s with the Nouveaux Philosophes. The intellectual field has traditionally derided Media Intellectuals. Deleuze (1977) argued that they trivialise, undermine and hinder the profession that they claim to belong to and Bourdieu (1998: 106) criticised the media intellectual as being the *intellectuel négatif*. Despite the relevancy of the *écrivain médiatique* in contemporary culture, the concept lacks definition and treatment in academic writing. It has thus far been evoked unfavourably by Philippe Vilain (2016: 126) as marking a shift from the *grantécrivain* to the *écrivain pour tous*, and as such, '*Dans le concert des voix de la littérature, celle de l'écrivain médiatique [...] s'est d'ailleurs vulgarisée jusqu'à perdre son crédit et valoir, autant que celle du lecteur.*' Rather than working in binary terms of positive or negative authorship, we need to investigate this type of authorship, properly drawing out the nuances, as *écrivains médiatiques* are a hard to avoid reality of twenty-first century literature. For authors such as Houellebecq, but also Virginie Despentes, Frédéric Beigbeder, Christine Angot and Yann Moix, being media figures is integral to their literary project. Such authors reflect a solidification of the link between *œuvre* and industry, where mass media and mediatisation no longer denigrate the author but rather constitute supports on the route to stardom.

Houellebecq's activities reflect a reassertion of the author's presence that paradoxically relies on much more than the text. He is particularly known for his public persona as well as the much mediatised polemical content of his novels. He frequently appears in the media due to provocative statements and behaviour in interviews, and his private life has been the subject of numerous newspaper and magazine articles, as exemplified by the reporting of his recent marriage.<sup>10</sup> Even in his creative contribution, he expands beyond the novel into poetry, film, art, photography, music, and other media, and appears on radio, television, in movies and online. As such, to look strictly at Houellebecq's novels without considering broader sociocultural and multimedia perspectives means neglecting key aspects of his creative output and ignores the current cultural landscape. As such, the *écrivain médiatique* is an important lens for better understanding the figure of Houellebecq, his creative contributions, and also the context in which he works.

## Media Postures: Manipulation of Authorial Mythologies

Considering Houellebecq's *posturing* (Meizoz, 2007) allows us to address his publicised and mediatised behaviour, and how this consolidates his fame and contributes to the understanding of him as an *écrivain médiatique*. Meizoz (2004: 296-7) argues that Beigbeder, Houellebecq, Despentes and Angot represent a state of the literary field in which authors:

*assument désormais pleinement la mise en scène publique de l'auteur à travers les fréquentes polémiques portant sur leur personne et leurs écrits. L'échange littéraire s'étant peu à peu calqué sur les exigences de la publicité et de l'image [...], leurs écrits et la posture qui les fait connaître se donnent solidairement comme une seule performance.*

The concept of posturing addresses the types of self-presentation that authors use both in and out of their novels as a means of individuation to negotiate their position in the literary field. This means considering that how an author self-presents discursively (verbal and written contribution) and non-discursively (behaviour and appearance) plays a significant role in interpretation and reception. Indeed, it has become increasingly difficult to dissociate Houellebecq's texts from the author as is evidenced by questioning of his intentions by the press and politicians and in court. For example, former *Premier ministre* Manuel Valls declared after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks that, '*La France ce n'est pas Michel Houellebecq, ce n'est pas l'intolérance, la haine et la peur.*' (Leyris, 2015). Analysing posturing allows us to see how Houellebecq exploits this notoriety, exhibiting himself and his ideas beyond the text in non-literary

domains, and how his acts and works that appear transgressive actually represent his consent to the dynamics of the sociocultural context.

At the mere sight of the name of the *écrivain médiatique*, assumptions about the author come to mind and the text is regarded within the specific restraints that these bring. The work is therefore going through a process of '*personnalisation*' (Meizoz, 2007: 42). Houellebecq has often encouraged the identification of the author in his texts. One can consider that the back cover of *Sérotonine* opens with an un-sourced quotation from Houellebecq, rather than from the novel: '*Mes croyances sont limitées, mais elles sont violentes. Je crois à la possibilité du royaume restreint. Je crois à l'amour*' *écrivait récemment Michel Houellebecq*'. One wonders how this quotation relates to the new novel; the response is in the next sentence: '*le narrateur de Sérotonine approuverait sans réserve.*' This paratext, often the first thing a reader will read after the title, privileges the author over the text and reinforces its personalisation. Further emphasizing this, a complimentary bookmark is provided with an image of Houellebecq in a battery farm, mirroring the novel's narrator's agricultural employment, which includes a harrowing trip to a battery farm (166). Theorists have long challenged the idea of personalisation in literature. For over half a century, theoretical work addressing authorial mythologies has sought to debunk and contest them, such as Roland Barthes's metaphorical death of the author, Michel Foucault's reduction of authorship to mere 'function', and Bourdieu's assertion that author and text only exist through and within a field of relations. The success of the *écrivain médiatique*, in particular how this relies on an accentuated presence of the author, re-evokes questions around the notions of author and text. Meizoz (2016b: 11) asserts that, '*l'insistance de Michel Houellebecq, par exemple, à remettre l'auteur au centre de la communication littéraire, s'exerce à contre-courant des avant-gardes textualistes des années soixante.*' However, the appearance of a return to a state of literature predating Barthes' 'Death of the Author' (1967) and Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (1954) against the advocacy of biography within literary criticism is misleading. Sorbonne Professor, Jean-François Louette argues, '*Sainte-Beuve a désormais l'âge des médias, qui donnent tort à Proust: le moi profond de l'écrivain s'abolirait au profit de son moi médiatique*' (2003: 6). Indeed, we have not returned to an understanding of authorship that negates or predates these theories; instead the existence of the *écrivain médiatique* in fact reflects that authors have internalised this suspicion of authorial mythologies and now consciously play with them. Their authorship shows that authors can reject any long-established authorial mythologies that are no longer productive while profitably manipulating their own personalised reproducible mythologised signs across various media platforms.

Highlighting the constructed nature of mythological signs and how these have contextual bases, Barthes' *Mythologies* dealt with some of the many received ideas of authorship, including that '*l'écrivain écri[t] toujours, en toutes situations*' (1957: 32). However, strict and sacralised conceptions of text and author are manipulated by *écrivains médiatiques* for whom writing isn't a divine vocation and the text isn't treated as a sacred object. Instead, the text is one element amongst many other multimedia projects and overshadowed by the mediatised image of the author. Drawing attention to the author figure, Houellebecq ambiguously manipulates his own set of mythologised signs, including his anorak and Monoprix bag, atypical smoking style, his slow drawl and his provocative stances on Islam, gender, race and sex. These mythological signs are profitably cultivated in his novels and reproduced in the Press and across the media forms solidifying his high-visibility authorship. Heinich (2013) highlights that even previously typically negative ways of accessing visibility have become advantageous: '*Loin de représenter, comme jadis, une déchéance dans la dignité, l'exposition publique de sa propre image est donc devenue, même pour des catégories qui y étaient traditionnellement réfractaires, une façon de se grandir.*' Using posturing as a lens, Houellebecq's polemical texts, statements and acts are recognised as forming part of a larger strategy to 're-birth' the author in response to the contemporary mediatised context.

Houellebecq's polemics solidify his notoriety through frequent attention in the media both nationally and internationally. Houellebecq puts forward polemical stances discursively in fictional works and then reproduces variations of these stances publicly. The manipulation of this slippage between reality and fiction has already resulted in multiple polemics and court cases relating to accusations of misogyny, racism, and islamophobia. *Les Particules élémentaires* triggered one of the

first of several *affaires Houellebecq* as it provoked the expulsion of Houellebecq from the literary group *Perpendiculaire* for his denunciation of May '68 and sexual liberation, and resulted in legal repercussions for his depiction of a real New Age camp. His global visibility is exemplified by how, following the release of *Sérotonine*, *Courrier international* (2019: 16-21) dedicated six pages to reproducing excerpts from the press in the Netherlands, Ireland, Spain, US, Germany, Italy and Belgium that can be summarised by its title '*Michel Houellebecq, un provocateur mondial*', and the cover page including his caricature and the statement '*Houellebecq: Le Provocateur préféré de la presse étrangère.*' One case of well-mediatised postural slippage is Houellebecq's critical statements about Islam within his fictions (e.g. *Plateforme* and *Soumission*) that he repeats outside of his texts, resulting in criticism in the press and court cases. In *Plateforme*, the protagonist is white middle-aged Frenchman Michel, suggesting a slippage between author, narrator and protagonist. The novel reaches a controversial climax with a terrorist attack against the (predominantly European) guests at a sex resort in Thailand. The novel also contains several contentious passages with arabophobic and islamophobic statements.<sup>11</sup> Houellebecq extended the polemical treatment of Islam publicly in interviews including his infamous assertion in *Lire*: '*La religion la plus con, c'est quand même l'islam. Quand on lit le Coran, on est effondré... effondré!*' (Sénécal, 2001). Through this, Houellebecq blurs the boundary between the author and the fictional work, as if the position taken in the novel then dictates his public stance. His discussion of topics like Islam, terrorism and sexual tourism indicates a willingness to assume a polemical stance within the field through taking an abrasive approach to sensitive subject matter in and out of fiction. Wesemael (2011) describes Houellebecq's works as an example of the *roman transgressif contemporain* alongside Reinhardt, Pliskin, Liberati, Moix, Djian, and Zeller; significantly these are names which one would not always associate with transgression, but rather its media friendly pretense.

The identification of Houellebecq's allegiance to certain ideologies within a novel remains ambiguous as he can reassert its fictional nature, challenging the amalgamation of the opinions within the novel with his own. According to Houellebecq, the level of autobiographical veracity of a novel is completely irrelevant: '*je ne sais plus très bien ce qui, dans mes romans, relève de l'autobiographie ; je suis par contre très conscient que cela n'a aucune importance*' (Martel, 1999: 198). Furthermore, in Houellebecq's works the identification to different ideologies is not absolute between narrator, writer and the fictional character. Baroni (2016) has attempted to situate the authorial voice in his works and revealed the difficulties inherent to such a project. Korthals Altes (2004) has discussed Houellebecq's works for their contradictory rhetoric and ambiguous ethos. This plurality results in a slipperiness and ambiguity that means any attempts to pin down the ideologies of the novel and/or author are contentious. Thus, Houellebecq writes in a way that blurs the lines between fiction and reality and frequently later publicly either manipulates or refutes this coalescence. Indeed, Houellebecq criticises the press for this amalgamation:

What I do reproach them for isn't bad reviews. It is that they talk about things having nothing to do with my books [...] they caricature me so that I've become a symbol of so many unpleasant things—cynicism, nihilism, misogyny. People have stopped reading my books as they've already got their idea about me. (Hunnewell, 2010)

There is a tension therefore as, on the one hand, Houellebecq argues against mythologised notions of authorship and the personalisation of fiction where one cannot help but see the author in the text, and yet on the other hand he makes it so difficult to not consider him. Bessard-Banquy (2006:18) describes this as a strategy that has worked throughout Houellebecq's career:

*Houellebecq est dans une stratégie revendiquée de l'exploitation du crapoteux. Plus il s'enfonce dans un rhétorique de l'outrance et de l'agressif, plus il capitalise. Et plus il suit cette voie acide et pâteuse, plus il la revendique.*

Houellebecq admits that he knows when he is being controversial, as explains in to Teresa Cremisi in regards to *Soumission*: '*la soumission, la polygamie? la notion de collaboration? Tout me paraît explosif dans cette affaire*' (Cremisi, 2017: 145). In this correspondence spanning several years published in his *Cahier de L'Herne*, Houellebecq and his editor discuss his publications and how they will manage the press after each release; it is made clear that Houellebecq is fully aware of his novels' potential for controversy and of the effects on his reception. Houellebecq has confessed to manipulating polemics:

I admit that invective is one of my pleasures. This only brings me problems in life, but that's it. I attack, I insult. I have a gift for that, for insults, for provocation. So I am tempted to use it. [...] The provocation only lasts as long as the publication of the book. (Riding, 2001)

This manipulation of personalised authorial mythologies extends to Houellebecq's physical presentation. Critics and journalists remark upon how Houellebecq presents himself differently from his peers. Houellebecq dresses in what has become predictable *Houellebecquian* attire: badly fitting clothing enrobed in an anorak, even to collect the Prix Goncourt. He smokes cigarettes unconventionally between his middle and ring finger and his speech is an unusual, slow drawl, with frequent silences. Noguez (2003: 10) notes that Houellebecq works to '*imposer son rythme à des médias d'ordinaire très pressés avec les écrivains.*' He presents himself as unprepared and uninterested, as noted even by the British press:

Talking to him sometimes feels like winking a cockle out of a shell: the long silences, the folded arms to protect himself. Unlike almost every writer promoting a book, there is no prepared spiel. (Chrisafis, 2015)

Houellebecq's more unconventional features are frequently presented across the media as an essentialist package. For example, Thierry Clermont (*Le Figaro*) describes, '*une longue mèche de côté, cigarette tenue entre le majeur et l'auriculaire, une élocution lente et pas toujours très claire et, depuis une petite dizaine d'années, une passion pour les parkas bon marché.*' (Clermont, 2015) This image has infiltrated the Anglophone Press:

His quiet, otherworldly aura is enhanced by the anti-fashion statement of this ageing literary enfant terrible: too-short cord trousers that swing round his ankles, a C&A parka he is rarely without, comfortable shoes and the black backpack he takes everywhere containing his stash of Philip Morris cigarettes, which he smokes between his middle and ring fingers, smoothing his frizzy comb-over with a nicotine-stained finger. (Chrisafis, 2015)

According to Meizoz (2014), this emphasis on the appearance of the author is inextricably linked to mediatisation: '*[l]a modernité médiatique a accéléré cette fabrication, en substituant au livre son auteur visible et audible.*' Houellebecq may protest his essentialisation by the press, yet he manipulates the iconic power of these signs, evoking them in his texts and across media, including through his character 'Michel Houellebecq' in *La Carte et le territoire*. This textual alter ego works satirically as a compilation of the signs associated to the author across the French Press, presenting him as a depressive, alcoholic nihilist: '*[il] était vêtu d'un pyjama rayé gris qui le faisait vaguement ressembler à un bagnard de feuilleton télévisé, ses cheveux étaient ébouriffés et sales, son visage rouge, presque couperosé, et il puait un peu.*' (160). Through the character, Houellebecq manipulates many facets of the images that critics have constructed of him before violently murdering 'Houellebecq', subjecting him to the 'death of the author.' Isabelle Chanteloube (2013: 259) affirms that, '*La posture a fait de lui un personnage, une figure, dont il s'empare à loisir et auquel il fait jouer un rôle dans un roman.*' Similarly, in the film *L'Enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* (2014) and Thalasso (2019), Houellebecq stars and plays a caricatured version of himself. The films by Nicloux relies on the viewer's knowledge of Houellebecq's



reputation and his mythological signs. Throughout both films he complains in slow drawl, badly dressed and often with a cigarette and drink in hand. Indeed, Nicloux (2019) argues that Houellebecq and Dépardieu ‘jouent leur propre rôle à l’intérieur [...] des situations fictionnelles’, hinting at Houellebecq’s active exploitation of his representation in film. Houellebecq reproduces this persona again in music videos for *Aubert chante Houellebecq*, appearing drunk and dishevelled. Beigbeder (2010) argues: ‘*Le plus houellebécquien de ses personnages, c’est lui.*’

Renaud Monfourny, photographer of the much-reproduced photograph of Houellebecq smoking with a Monoprix bag, states: ‘*il ne sort jamais de son propre personnage: il fait du cinéma, mais ce n’est pas un comédien.*’ (Houellebecq, 2017: 330). Houellebecq emphasises both the necessity of a persona and the potential negative consequences of this on real life: ‘*Évidemment, il faut faire attention avant de choisir un rôle (parce que ce qu’on joue on ne tarde pas à le devenir); mais c’est un choix qu’il faut bien faire, d’une manière ou d’une autre, dans la vie*’ (ibid). Houellebecq believes that he is obliged to perform a role, and that this has to be a visible one in this cultural context. Therefore, through his posturing, Houellebecq is asserting his singularity, partly through his novels, but also by ambiguously manipulating his press representation and persona, and extending his contribution into domains including politics, religion, and film. Although these acts often appear transgressive or provocative, they actually show his awareness of and consent to the new dynamics of his cultural context in which capital is gained from visibility and activities beyond the literary field. Describing the release of *Particules Élémentaires*, Houellebecq stated, ‘*je croyais à l’époque, que la vente des livres avait un rapport avec leur médiatisation.*’ (Houellebecq and Lévy, 2008: 235). From his posturing, there is evidence that Houellebecq sees that the more productive target of mediatisation is now the author figure.

## **Houellebecq: Multimedia Figure**

In a context in which authors are responding to literature’s waning influence as commercial interests prevail over literary critics, the separation between the mass market and literary value has become blurred. This has resulted in increased advantages to creating a multimedia body of work. As literature faces the Digital Age, a period recognised for the integration of literature into the spectacular industries, it coalesces with the Internet, moving image, and mass media. These changes affect how artists like Houellebecq create their work, employing different media depending on the opportunities, pressures and restraints with which they are presented. Houellebecq’s œuvre has a marked character of transmediality (Harris, 2017). Richard Saint-Gelais writes about the concept of *transfictionality* (2011), the migration of fictional worlds and messages across texts. What Houellebecq is creating across media can be understood more specifically as *transmedial* in its expansion of his world and messages across media platforms. Rather than contesting the Digital Age context, Houellebecq manipulates the possibilities that it presents, establishing an on-going process of autographic transmediality that contributes to his status as a media figure. Houellebecq has engaged with television, film, music, magazines, online media, photography and multimedia exhibitions. His activities include media appearances, collaborations on music albums and comics, intermedial references, interviews with rock-stars and politicians, roles in films, adaptations of his texts and the creation of films, photographs and exhibitions. Houellebecq has spread his influence and presence into various media, decentring the text to be one element of a larger, expanding *transmedial* œuvre (Harris, 2017).

Seeing Houellebecq’s work through the lens of transmediality means recognising his activities beyond the text, and provides more evidence of an author who consciously plays with and defies strict and sacralised notions of authorship. It shows how Houellebecq postures as a multimedia figure, simultaneously an author and a director, actor, photographer, poet, musician and rock-star. It permits a new way of perceiving his works and of analyzing the motivations and rewards of the *écrivain médiatique*. This perspective also means focusing on Houellebecq’s messages and worlds in a way that doesn’t exclude any medium through any sort of value judgement.

Houellebecq’s multimedia engagement has taken various forms throughout his career. Houellebecq’s novels are all permeated by media, whether that is through intermedial referencing or the presence of images, as in the case of photo-novel, *Lanzarote* (2000). This piece is composed of a fictional

text and a collection of Houellebecq's own photographs of Lanzarote, combining the fictional text with real image and blurring the boundaries between and calling readers to interpret it through a transmedial perspective. However, Houellebecq creates much more than novels and as such an overview of his work should not be limited to that output alone. Before his novels, Houellebecq attended L'École Nationale Supérieure Louis-Lumière to specialise in photography and his first creative pieces were two short films *Cristal de Souffrance* (1978) and *Déséquilibres* (1982). Outside of his novels, Houellebecq has been involved in the media in two main ways: firstly, using other media forms as a space for his appearances, and secondly, in the creation of non-textual pieces. Indeed, Houellebecq seeks to assert his presence in media by participating and appearing in non-textual and non-literary projects. Houellebecq has interviewed figures including Jeff Koons for his Versailles exhibition, Macron for *L'Emission politique* and Iggy Pop for *Les Inrockuptibles*. He has acted in several major films, including *Near Death Experience* (2014), *L'Enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* (2014), *Saint-Amour* (2016) and *Thalasso* (2019) alongside Depardieu.

Secondly, in terms of the non-textual media pieces created by Houellebecq, they at times use text as a source and at others are completely independent from it. Using written work as a source, Houellebecq has many times adapted his texts either to image or to music. His adaptations to image forms include film, photography and *bande-dessinée*. For example, Houellebecq is the director and screenwriter of the film version of *La Possibilité d'une île*. The film stayed with the novel's theme of cloning but otherwise substantially changed the plot and cast including removing the protagonist. This theme of cloning has been treated transmedially across text and image by Houellebecq, in *Lanzarote*, *Les Particules élémentaires* and both text and film versions of *La Possibilité d'une île* (Harris, 2017). As such, using photographs and film weren't means for repetition (or clone copies), but in fact another space for creation for Houellebecq, showing the value that he gives to non-textual media. This adaptation to image is also evident in his collaboration with Alain Dual on a *BD* of *Plateforme* and his photo exhibition *Before Landing* at the Pavillon Carré de Baudouin in Paris in 2014 which explored the same themes as the novel *La Carte et le territoire*. Returning to the novel's exploration of the deindustrialisation and museification of France as a consequence of tourism, the exhibition had photos of regional products and of nature invaded by supermarkets. Houellebecq confirms that he uses adaptation as a means to further explore the themes in his novels across media forms; in the *dossier de presse* for *Before Landing* (2014), the photo-exhibition was described as '*une extension visuelle qui prolonge son roman.*' Similarly, referring to *La Possibilité*, Houellebecq states: '*j'avais tenté d'adapter les thèmes, mais l'échec public et critique a été total.*' (Moulène, 2012). In terms of adapting text to music, Poems from the collections *Le Sens du combat* and *Renaissance* have been put to music in collaborations with Jean-Jacques Birgé, Bertrand Burgalat and Jean-Louis Aubert. Houellebecq writes and provides the voice for many of these songs himself, as evidenced in the album *Présence humaine* with Bertrand Burgalat in which he reads his poems to electro-jazz. His album with Aubert is a collection of gentle rock and folk songs based on Houellebecq's poems and featuring him in the videos. These collaborations reflect how Houellebecq situates himself in new market positions with more popular and accessible forms of media, asserting himself as more than an author. His transmediality works against artistic puritanism and ignores distinctions between media and between high, low and middlebrow.

Houellebecq has also produced pieces that are entirely independent from text. For example, in 2001 he released *La Rivière*, a short film as part of a Canal+ series on eroticism. More recently in 2016, Houellebecq created a multimedia exhibition called *Rester Vivant* for Palais de Tokyo. Using various media forms including photographs, paintings, films, installations and music, he presented a multimedia '*monde de Houellebecq*' (Loisy 2015). Each of the eighteen rooms dealt with a theme, passion or memory using different media forms, including a jukebox of his music in a smoke-room, a room of photographs and postcards from tourist hotspots, and even a room dedicated to his dead dog Clément including his toys, portrait and a reading by Iggy Pop. This *monde houellebecquien* included collaborations with artists such as Robert Combas, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy and Iggy Pop, and often linked to themes of his texts, such as tourism and death. This exhibition confirmed Houellebecq's aspirations to be more than an author but to be singer, artist, sculptor, director, photographer, and for his world to not be limited to text. Through his multimedia appearances and creations, Houellebecq pushes his presence into non-literary spaces,

presenting himself as a culturally relevant, visible media figure. This varied range of post-textual activity by Houellebecq presents a challenge to axiological and cultural hierarchies that previously saw literature presented as a higher art-form (than say advertisements, film or television) as well as putting into question the boundaries of the literary field.

## Justifying Media Authorship through the Text

Houellebecq justifies his mediatisation and multimedia engagements by depicting the context for them in his novels. Houellebecq looks at issues of cultural value attribution in the contemporary context by writing novels that are comprised of a heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981: 263) of references to other texts, genres and media. Through this, he not only captures but also calls into question the contemporary socio-cultural context. He refers not only to the canonical texts of writers such as Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert but expands his referential network into a non-literary mosaic of songs, television programmes, films, tourist guides, catalogues, pornography, advertisements and websites.

The references that appear in the texts, at times seemingly randomly and at others as part of a larger theme, represent the society in which Houellebecq lives, one that is invested in digital and mass media culture. In evoking not only texts of influence, but also the full range of influential media, his novels reflect the media profusion of the Digital Age and the temptations and challenges that this presents. In this way, he touches upon the very issues and influences that have led him to become *écrivain médiatique*. Indeed, through this heteroglossia, he presents the 'social discourse' of the time, to use Angenot's (1989) term: '*la représentation discursive du monde telle qu'elle s'exprime dans un état de société, production qui présuppose le système complet des « intérêts » dont une société est chargée.*' (2014). Angenot's approach reflects the importance of looking beyond the canon into other influential forms of text and media in order to understand the various pressures and influences of a given period. Houellebecq evokes a range of (predominantly non-literary) media in his novels, including in *La Carte et le territoire* which includes *Wikipédia*, tourist guides, TV shows, film, catalogue, porn and other forms of marketing and popular culture.

Houellebecq's novels show how social discourse dominates the protagonists' vision of the world and dictates how they live. Popular media and objects of mass culture come to mediate the characters' experiences and relationships. In *La Carte et le territoire*, protagonist Jed spends his days watching *Questions pour un champion* (50) and when he visits his father the television sits between them and intermittently interrupts them: '*sur l'écran de la télévision se produisait maintenant un comique que Jed parvenait presque à identifier*' (42). In such examples, the media artefact is not the focus of the attention of the narration but plays a role in the evocation of the contemporary scene. This novel also imitates *Wikipédia*, at times through verbatim quotation, at others through Houellebecq's use of a flat style reminiscent of the website. Houellebecq affirms that these references are part of an attempt to understand the culture in which he lives, '*c'est l'inconscient qui parle, je me mets dans la peau du spectateur ordinaire*' (2008: 17). These references create space for reflection on the influence of mass and multimedia, from quiz shows to pornography, upon daily life and upon how we view the world and define ourselves. This is also evident how the narrator describes himself in computer terms in *Sérotonine* when he states that he couldn't ask Camille to be a housewife as, '*ça ne faisait pas partie de mon logiciel.*' (172). He also views his experiences several times through the lens of a film (for example: '*ça aurait pu être une scène magnifique dans un film français*' (117) and '*les choses qu'on dit dans ce genre de circonstances, au moins dans les films et même, me semblait-il, dans la vie réelle*' (123). *Sérotonine* also evokes Youtube (140) 'selfies' (173), *On n'est pas couchés* (198), Facebook, (338), and Rihanna ('*Rihanna aurait fait flasher Marcel Proust*', 335). As various media forms are presented alongside intertextual references to classic literature, the reader is pushed to reflect on the place and worth of the text in a spectacular society. Houellebecq (1998: 68) argues, '*Les distinctions antérieures entre films, clips, actualités, publicités, témoignages humains, reportages tendirent à s'effacer au profit d'une notion de spectacle généralisé.*' The place and worth of the text and author has come under pressure, pushing authors to seek new means to engage new audiences. By employing this range of references from the

popular to the canonical, giving space to pornography and *MTV* alongside highbrow literature and paintings, Houellebecq evokes a change in value systems that he manipulates.

Against the pervasive influence of mass media, marketing, and new technologies, *La Carte et le territoire*'s Jed develops a religious-like reverence for the past, photographing industrial era tools, old *Michelin* maps of former countryside and painting a series of traditional, fading *métiers*. Through the use of popular mass media and multimedia cultural markers, Houellebecq has depicted his sociocultural context, showing the cultural changes brought on by the prevalence of technology, marketing, consumerism, and mass culture. Unlike the examples of *métiers simples* depicted by Jed, by pursuing a mediated type of authorship, Houellebecq can thrive in this new era.

## Conclusions

Houellebecq's authorship relies on more than the text but on a large network of media activity and opportunities for visibility, manipulating the new cultural context that he depicts in his novels. Investigating posturing, transmediality, and social discourse are some recent theoretical tools for productively looking at Houellebecq, bringing to light his multimedia career. They prove useful for analyzing the context, motivations and rewards of being an *écrivain médiatique*. They have helped reveal that Houellebecq evokes questions around strict mythologised conceptions of text and author, presenting himself as a visible figure and the creative force behind multimedia worlds. This strategy underscores the influential effects of a concern for visibility and relevance in the Digital Age. This in turn presents us with important questions around the place and value of both text and author within the current multimedia cultural climate. By engaging with media in these ways, Houellebecq pushes back against restrictive artistic hierarchies that would limit his success and artistic possibilities but in turn means that he consents to mediation and mass media. For many, the problem with the *écrivain médiatique* is down to what Heinich (2000: 159) deems as the '*confusion entre l'œuvre et la personne, [...] entre les valeurs marchandes et valeurs littéraires, visibilité médiatique et talent, littérature et divertissement.*' Indeed, Houellebecq's fame exemplifies a rejection of the idea that these are dichotomous notions and instead blurs their separation and manipulates all of them as supports on the route to success. This type of authorship reflects the diminishing autonomy of the literary field, as it comes under the increased influence of industry, other cultural fields and media forms. Thus, in a not only post-Barthesian but also a post-Bourdieuian critical context, we must engage more with how authors work today, particularly in how they seek to go beyond the text.

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<sup>1</sup> The film was released in France on August 21st 2019. *Thalasso*. Nicloux, Guillaume (dir). Les Films du Worso, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> As revealed in the opening in which Macron asks 'Tu m'interviewes ou je t'interviewe?' to which Houellebecq responds 'Un peu les deux'

<sup>3</sup> Related works include: Heinich N (2000, 2012); Meizoz J (2016b).

<sup>4</sup> For detail on Bourdieu's conception of the literary field, see: Bourdieu, P (1992).

<sup>5</sup> For example: Meizoz, Jérôme (2004) and Bardolle, O (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Naulleau E (2005).

<sup>7</sup> Noguez D (2003).

<sup>8</sup> The few examples include Baroni, R (2017) and Engelberts, M (2013).

<sup>9</sup> See Viala A (1985).

<sup>10</sup> This was covered by major nationals including *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *Huffington Post*, but also celebrity magazines including *Gala* and *Closer*.

<sup>11</sup> For example, 'Chaque fois que j'apprenais qu'un terroriste palestinien, ou un enfant palestinien, ou une femme enceinte palestinienne, avait été abattu par balles dans la bande de Gaza, j'éprouvais un tressaillement d'enthousiasme à la pensée qu'il y avait un musulman de moins.' Houellebecq M (2001:257).