

Diversity in Narration and Writing

Diversity in Narration and Writing:

The Novel

Edited by

Kornélia Horváth, Judit Mudriczki
and Sarolta Osztrólczyk

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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Edited by Kornélia Horváth, Judit Mudriczki and Sarolta OsztróLuczky

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This book first published 2022

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-7716-3

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-7716-9

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors and editors of this volume are grateful for the generous support given by Pázmány Péter Catholic University through the grant KAP17-61022-1.9-BTK that made it possible to organise the international conference *Focalisation, Narration and Writing: The Novel* in May 2018.

The editors would also like to thank Tamás Bényei for his professional advice and the prepress team of Cambridge Scholars Publishing for all their care and assistance during the editing process.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the members of the research group on Modern Hungarian Literature at Pázmány Péter University for their intellectual support and academic friendship throughout the years.

INTRODUCTION:
DIVERSITY IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSES
ON NOVEL STUDIES AND NARRATIVE THEORY
IN AND BEYOND CENTRAL EUROPE

JUDIT MUDRICZKI

The present volume is the written record of a series of academic discussions concerning texts commonly labelled as *narrative fiction*, or more generally the *novel*, and their impact on both traditional and more recent literary scholarship in and beyond Central Europe. These discussions started in May 2018 at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, the site that hosted the international conference *Focalisation, Narration and Writing: The Novel* organised by Professor Kornélia Horváth and Sarolta OsztróLuczky, lecturers at the Department of Hungarian Literature. The event welcomed established and emerging scholars of literature and cultural studies not only from Hungary but also from different parts of Europe including the Netherlands, Estonia, Slovakia, and Russia. It would be unrealistic to suggest that the participants managed to reach a conclusion even if the impact of this event was stronger than expected. For this reason, the editors of this volume decided to make a selection of essays available to a larger audience to show the diversity of approaches to narrative fiction that the participants had in common. This selection includes a wide range of studies from two distinct academic fields known as *novel studies* and *narrative theory*, the first of which regards the novel as a literary genre with its historical, ideological, thematic, and interpretive conventions, while the second stays more abstract, formalist, and ahistorical in its approach to discourses that can be interpreted as narratively organised.¹ In what follows, I will briefly highlight the main editorial

¹ For a more detailed discussion on the distinction between these two notions see Paul Dawson, "Introduction: Narrativizing Novel Studies, Historicizing Narrative Theory," *Poetics Today* 39, no. 1 (2018): 1-16; and for the difficulties of defining what narrative is see Marie-Laure Ryan, "Semantics, Pragmatics, and Narrativity: A Response to David Rudrum," *Narrative* 14, no. 2 (2006): 188-196.

principles of the present volume, and also summarise the content of the essays arranged in three separate sections to offer a taste of the ideas that the contributors worded at and after the 2018 conference.

All essays in the first section entitled “Intermediality and Narrative Theory” have a strong theoretical, and occasionally even interdisciplinary, focus. First and foremost, Mieke Bal, one of the most prominent cultural theorists today, explores the presence and significance of focalisation in narrative in order to grasp the political potential of art. Combining literary and adaptation studies, she discusses Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and the audiovisual narrative in the film adaptation Bal directed with Michelle Williams Gamaker in 2013. When Bal calls attention to the political potential of this particular narrative, she does not imply the topicality of storytelling in general, but rather refers to the manipulative and persuasive power that any narrative potentially has on public and academic discourses in a wider cultural context. Bal convincingly argues that focalisation, as a tool applied both in Flaubert’s novel and its twenty-first century film adaptation, demonstrates to readers and viewers the way in which cultural products reflect how business becomes emotionally loaded, as well as the way in which emotions, including love, turn into business ventures. Tibor Gintli takes an even more theoretical stand when he singles out a particular aspect of narratology to challenge Gérard Genette’s objective definition of the speed of narration. Gintli claims that it is much more a notion evolving in the reader’s mind than a value definable by seemingly objective methods. In his view, speed is considerably determined by the event of reading that involves interpreting poetic characteristics, and this event substantively influences the speed notion of the reader due to traditionally transmitted recipient strategies and cognitive schemes typical of our thinking. Gintli also points out that Genette’s notion of the narrative pause can be considered as the pause of story and not that of the narrative, which has its consequences even on the speed of the narration. Unlike the previous two authors, Kornélia Horváth offers a particular insight into novel studies when she compares three particular concepts of the novel genre by three outstanding Central European authors, Milan Kundera, Béla Hamvas, and Géza Ottlik. It is an innovative idea to read these three authors side by side because Hamvas and Ottlik are rarely accessible and valued in English academic circles. Although her essay does not rely on philological records to prove the extent to which each of these authors might have known about the ideas of the others, Horváth convincingly argues that they have many things in common, including their preference for classic European novelists from Cervantes to Tolstoy or the way in which they describe the relationship between reality

and the world of fiction. Focusing on the Bakhtinian notion of heteroglossia, András Kappanyos benefits from his experiences of retranslating James Joyce's *Ulysses* into Hungarian in 2012 with a team of scholars, who realised that the most challenging part of this work was to find the proper Hungarian counterpart for the representation of the several (inner) voices of the characters. Citing many examples from the 1974 Hungarian translation by Miklós Szentkuthy to show the contrast to their own 2012 version, Kappanyos explains, on behalf of the team of translators, that they had a strongly interpretive attitude instead of focusing simply on the direct wording of the English novel. Only after reconstructing the implied context of each and every utterance did they start rewording them in Hungarian. The detailed discussion of these examples highlights the interpretive difficulties of the narrative structure in *Ulysses* from an interdisciplinary as well as an intermedial perspective, which becomes a real virtue of the paper and a significant contribution to the present volume. To add one more shade to the diversity of academic approaches, János Szávai offers a historical overview of the representation of dreams and visions in various literate cultures and texts ranging from the Bible to contemporary Hungarian narrative fiction. Relying on György Lukács's theory of the novel, Szávai points out that European classics of realist fiction were not much interested in dreams. The only exception, Szávai argues, is Dostoevsky, whose description and references to Claude Lorrain's painting *Acis and Galatea* show how the role of dreams, as the manifestation of truth of a higher order in the Judeo-Christian tradition, changed in nineteenth century narratives of fiction, a legacy that was later also carried on by Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann.

Instead of staying on a strongly theoretical and intermedial path, the second section of the present volume, "Narrative Discourses in Classic and Contemporary English Fiction," offers seven case studies, arranged in chronological order, of renowned authors of modern English prose fiction. The first in the line is Antal Bókay's study on trauma narratives both in the Alice novels and in the life of Lewis Carroll from a psychoanalytical point of view. Based on Freud, Ferenczi, Lacan, and Laplanche, Bókay defines trauma as a personal and intricately deconstructive narrative with a special "poetic" character that preserves a constant, but hardly available presence in our self-narration. Bókay finds behind Carroll's oeuvre a deeply traumatised person, the writer himself, who developed a traumatising life history, and produced novels that present and even metonymically represent the traumatic process. With a slightly more narratological leaning, Gábor Kovács addresses the function of objects and descriptive discourses in prose narratives in general, and the role of narrative

parallelism in two short stories by Jack London in particular. In prose language, Kovács argues, narrative discourses and descriptive discourses, which refer to persons and to objects respectively, always interweave; moreover, the story of the object becomes the narrative counterpart of the story of a person. His study of Jack London's prose narratives attempts to show how they epitomise what he describes in the essay as a very special type of ambiguity of poetic language. In the next case study, Nóra Séllei turns to the legacy of racial and colonial narratives as they are exemplified in the first chapter of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*, and explains the dynamics of focalisation and the role of the voice in the British white community in Rhodesia. The narrative account of the murder of Mary Turner by her black servant becomes decisive in establishing the interpretive colonial position from which all the actions are judged, because this is the only chapter in the book in which the main focaliser is not the victim of the murder. As Séllei concludes, this narrative technique highlights the ways in which the community tries to process the trauma caused by Mary Turner, who breaks down the deep-seated taboo against desiring a black man. Angelika Reichmann also focuses on a piece of colonial fiction, but her interest lies in the influence of intertextuality on the narrative strategies of Eugene Dawn, the first person narrator in J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*. Reichmann points out that Dawn's narration abounds with intertexts from different genres and periods among which myth and mythography are used to set chaos in order, which obviously takes on the legacy of T. S. Eliot. The very idea that Dawn uses these pretexts and his own metafictional narrative to gain control over reality is, on the one hand, obviously the sign of his growing madness, and, on the other hand, the manifestation of how the colonising efforts of traditional European storytelling fail in a narrative that voices the trauma of the Vietnam War. As opposed to colonial narratives located in specific geographical areas, Yuliia Terentieva studies the narrative function of university sites in two of David Lodge's campus novels, *Changing Places* and *Small World*. Considering their storylines, these books are special travelogues whose protagonists keep moving between various places of academic life, including university lecture rooms, conference venues or waiting areas at airports. Terentieva applies Marc Auge's notion of a non-place to explain the transitory nature of these sites, where most people stay anonymous and lack meaningful communication in their social interaction. Positing the same idea in a Foucauldian context, Terentieva argues that these campuses are defined as heterotopias, places for those who are different from ordinary people but, due to the location itself, follow particular rules, a feature that strongly determines all narrative discourses

in these novels. The authors of the last two case studies, which discuss the most recent pieces of English prose fiction in this section, start from a similar theoretical stand, as they both study narratives in which the focaliser is a young boy. Nikolett Sípós concentrates on those three chapters in George R. R. Martin's highly popular fantasy novel *A Song of Ice and Fire* in which Bran is the main point of view character. These chapters establish a special discourse that abounds with allegories or tropes of reading, for example climbing or falling, which, according to Sípós, have a very strong influence on the reading experience, because they offer clues to the readers for a deeper understanding of the narrative itself. Noémi Albert, on the other hand, discusses Emma Donoghue's *Room*, a captivity novel with a five-year old narrator, Jack, who recognises in the titular garden shed his entire world. His specific perspective and voice with its childlike mode of expression offer new concerns over the narration of traumatic experiences such as abduction, confinement, or rape.

The last section entitled "Narrative Discourses and the Hungarian Legacy of Fiction" invites readers into the intellectual milieu of Central Europe, a geographical area that is often described as an *in-between* region, "different from both East and West, a peripheral and transitory zone that is characterised by cultural hybridity and ethical and religious heterogeneity."² The diversity of the region manifests itself even in the academic landscape, so it is not surprising that those seven Hungarian scholars who offer their insights into the particular narrative practices of classic and contemporary Hungarian authors all have their particular scope of interest. The first of them is László Bengi, whose paper on Dezső Kosztolányi's 1924 novel *Skylark* is centred around the narrative significance of thick descriptions of the eponymous heroine of the novel who, even in her absence, determines the fictional world of her parents. The inconsistent descriptions of her ugliness and the various reactions it provokes prompt Bengi to talk about descriptive strategies with performative power even on a theoretical level to show how the same or very similar textual components change their function under different conditions. Mihály Benda, the author of the second paper in this section, draws attention to a more particular type of description, which depicts the city of Paris through the eyes of the flâneur in three Hungarian novels written in the 1930s and 1940s. In the light of contemporary theoretical perspectives of space, Benda studies the way in which the authors, Gyula Illyés, András Hevesi, and Jolán Földes, reconstruct the urban image of the French

² Dávid Szolláth, "Inventory of Magical Textual Constructions of the Unnatural in Hungarian Postmodern Fiction," *Neohelicon* 45 (2018): 462.

capital in the moving descriptions of their protagonists. Adding a new perspective to the intercultural legacy of Hungarian fiction, Sarolta OsztróLuczky explores the influence of American author Thomas Wolfe on Géza Ottlik when she identifies the narrative features of the 1937 American short story “The Lost Boy.” Her claim is also based on philological grounds, as it is more than probable that Ottlik read “The Lost Boy” in translation, and this experience also influenced the writing of his 1968 short story translated into English as “Nothing’s Lost” in 1988. Both stories rewrite the parable of the Prodigal Son from the Gospel according to Luke, and OsztróLuczky sensibly argues that, in face of their differing writing methods, Wolfe and Ottlik employ a series of similar motifs in their fiction. One of these motifs is the presence of autobiographically inspired protagonists, who, either actually or imaginarily, return to the scene of their childhood to rediscover and realise that nothing has been lost. Although Sándor Márai has become widely known and popular even beyond Hungary, the paper by Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó is notable in this volume because it focuses on one of his novels that has not been translated into English yet, although it is accessible to non-Hungarian readers in Italian and German. *San Gennaro vére* [The Blood of San Gennaro] was inspired by Márai’s personal experiences during the years that he spent in exile in Naples, which obviously provide this piece of fiction with an autobiographic frame of reference. This background, however, is also decisive in the sense that the novel repeatedly questions the expectation of miracles, one of the most frequent features of the Neapolitan way of life. Kulcsár-Szabó also points out that the narrative structure of the novel is rather unusual because its protagonist does not directly appear in any of the scenes, but his presence is first and foremost implied in three different personal accounts, or confessions, of his suicide. The next two essays discuss prose works written by Imre Kertész, the only Hungarian laureate of the Nobel Prize in Literature to date. First, Dorottya Szávai posits Kertész in a European intellectual context and traces elements of his fiction and nonfiction to Kafka and Camus. These elements include, among others, problems of fictionality, absence, or linguistic communicability in the face of the compulsion to write. According to Szávai, one of the most striking features of *Fatelessness*, his most widely known novel, is the protagonist’s lack of a Jewish narrative and cultural identity, which has its precedent in the works of Kafka. Among many other things that Kertész owes to Camus, Szávai identifies the default Sisyphian position of human existence as the foundation on which Kertész’s concept of fate, inseparable from the absurd, is based. Sára Tóth, the author of the other essay on Kertész, narrows her scope onto the interpretive stand established

by Northrop Frye to explore the literary symbolism and recurring narrative patterns in *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*. Tóth applies Northrop Frye's notion of *katabatic* narrative to explain that this short novel is actually a drama of descent into death, in the course of which its speaker, a survivor of Auschwitz, says no to fathering a child and thus takes on the role of scapegoat in order to bring about the regeneration of the community. The last essay in the volume explores twenty-first century Hungarian fiction written by three female authors Kriszta Tóth, Kriszta Bódis and Agáta Gordon. Edit Zsadányi's academic curiosity in these authors comes from her assumption that the works on which she relies render the marginalised position of Hungarian writers visible when articulating subaltern female voices. Zsadányi believes that these voices surface in different literary genres, which explains why her discussion of the lyrical voice in Krisztina Tóth's poem "Szálak" [Kinship], precedes her look at the prose narratives in Krisztina Bódis's *Artista* [Artiste] and Agáta Gordon's *Nevelési kisregény* [Educational Mini-Novel], neither of which has been translated into English. Nevertheless, Zsadányi concludes that all these female writers benefit from unexpected shifts of perspectives and the interruption of conventional poetic and narrative discourses, which make the marginalised voice of the subaltern enter these literary texts as the subject rather than the object of narration.

Instead of coming to a firm conclusion of this introduction, which aims to give a taste of the diversity of ideas that discussions on novel studies and narrative theory have evoked at and since the 2018 conference, let me cite a deliberately provocative line of thought from Géza Ottlik: "The novel is composed of the fabric of silence, not the thread of speech, and we must be careful not to pull the threads out of the fabric, lest they get torn apart and become hopelessly entangled [...] It would be a shame to find an answer to the question: what is the novel? It would be a shame because we would render the novel itself, which attempts to answer this question, superfluous."³

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INTERMEDIALITY AND NARRATIVE THEORY

FROM “MADAME BOVARY C’EST MOI”
TO “EMMA IS US:”
FOCALISATION AS POLITICAL TOOL

MIEKE BAL

Flaubert’s 1856 masterpiece *Madame Bovary* is a novel. It passes for a realist one, the long-time predominant aesthetic of the genre. Subverting that aesthetic, Flaubert deployed it to address, and fiercely critique, his own culture, time and place. How can I then claim that Emma is us, in 2018? The answer is in the concept of focalisation, its meaning, use, and relevance.

I strongly advocate a close analysis of focalisation in its power to manipulate, persuade, and thus, have political power. That power can be understood, and thereby either undermined, when damaging, or enlisted, when supportive in view of a wider cultural political interest. I allege Flaubert’s novel, and the film and installation I made with Michelle Williams Gamaker to explain how focalisation and its close analysis can do this. True to the idea of close analysis of both works and the relationship between them, I will do this through a few examples only, five cases, which are visible in the film in response to the novel.¹

According to one of its best and earliest critics, Jonathan Culler, Flaubert’s novel is fundamentally ambiguous, both in narration and in focalisation.² I contend that the result of that ambiguity transforms our view of the woman character, and the implications of the novel as

¹ Although I am the author of this article, but I do not believe authorship is individual. Of the many people in dialogue with whom I have been enabled to develop these ideas, Michelle Williams Gamaker as co-director of the film has been completely involved. I use the first-person singular pronoun only to endorse my responsibility, but please bear in mind everything owes a great deal to Michelle. I wrote this in 2017, and in 2022 it appears in a revised version, differently framed, in *Image-Thinking: Art making as Cultural Analysis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2022.

² Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Aurora: Davies Group, 1974).

fictional. From an object of pity, or even contempt, judging her naive from the past, the ambiguity transforms her into “one of us,” a victim of the combination of “emotional capitalism;” of sexual selfishness and abuse, what we now call “#MeToo.” In other words, a victim of the cultural politics of Flaubert’s time as much as of our own.

Positing Focalisation: Witnessing

Let me begin with the beginning. Beginnings are notoriously difficult to write, but important. I have discussed the ambiguous narration of *Madame Bovary* in the recent fourth edition of my *Narratology*.³ The novel begins with an internal, diegetic narrator: “Nous étions à l’Etude quand le proviseur entra, suivi d’un *nouveau* habillé en bourgeois et d’un garçon de classe qui portait un grand pupitre.” [We were in study-hall when the headmaster entered, followed by a new boy not yet in school uniform and by the handyman carrying a large desk.] (I, 1)⁴ Note that the first word of the novel is *nous*, we. I titled this essay after that significant opening. “Nous” turns this realistic novel into a so-called first-person narration, a confessional genre, far removed from the novel’s alleged realism. As a consequence, technically, all quoted speeches are, then, second-level narrations. But the first level, first person narrator disappears from view rather quickly. He never says “I.” The collective first person, repeated only once a few pages later, rather serves the purpose of positing the reality of the subsequent narration; the idea that the narrator was there when it happened. He is, then, a narrator-witness. That status turns him into a focaliser. Soon, he will be forgotten, and the rest of the long novel seems to be told by an external narrator. But as a witness, hence, focaliser, he continues to implicate himself, and, across time, “us.”⁵

After the first few pages, the “nous” (we) returns one more time: “Il serait maintenant impossible à aucun de nous de se rien *rappeler* de lui.”

³ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 39-51.

⁴ Given the many different editions and translations of this novel, I will not refer to page numbers but to the chapters, which are relatively short. The English translations are cited, except for one passage, from Gustav Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Mildred Marmur (New York: Signet, 1964). On the beginning, a favourite of Flaubert critics, see Alain Raitt, “Nous étions à l’étude...,” *Revue des lettres modernes* 777-81 (1986): 132-151 and Francisco González, *La scène originale de Madame Bovary. Avant-propos de Charles Grivel* (Oviedo: Universidad de Oviedo, 1999).

⁵ All narratological terms are explained in Bal, *Narratology*.

[It would be impossible today for any of us to *remember* anything about him.] (I, 1)⁶ Relevant for my anachronistic, or “pre-posterous” conception of temporality, the adverb *maintenant* (today, now) pulls the first person from the past into the present, after the events, but in the subsequent situation. Yet, the preceding description is so precise, detailed, even including quoted speeches, that it contradicts the double negative of memory. Proust’s memorial writing repeats this ploy, turning it into his own rhetoric of ambiguous focalisation.⁷

The emphatic denial of knowledge must serve some other purpose that establishes a contradiction. The lack of memorability, the ordinariness of the new classmate must be the point of the use of “nous.” The narrator is a witness, but the character could be anyone, easily forgotten. His status as a witness will enable the narrator to present a devastating critique of his environment, the here-and-now, as well as shift his position constantly and creatively from identification with the main character, Emma, to an outsider’s position. This is the consequence of the ambiguity Culler noticed. This discourse of *us* in the *here-and-now* is Flaubert’s realism. It will not be so easy to disassociate yourself from the mishaps and unhappiness that follows. Flaubert refines the notion of realism as implicating the reader and placing the novel in a contemporary environment. One that can travel through time but must remain contemporary. Hence the need for what some would call, contemptuously, “anachronism.” This tends to be construed as a historical flaw, and, in assessments of films based on novels, an infidelity to the source novel.⁸

Over the years 2011-2014, British artist Michelle Williams Gamaker and I made a film and a video installation, the different versions of which are nineteen, thirteen, or five-channel works. These works are all based on the novel, and exploring not only the literary masterpiece but, in a project of what is now called “artistic research” but I term “image-thinking” (2022), also the relationship between novel and film on less orthodox

⁶ The emphasis is mine.

⁷ On “pre-posterous” history—my version of anachronism—see Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁸ On the problematic notion of “fidelity” in adaptations, see the following decisive article: Thomas Leitch, “Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory,” *Criticism* 45, no. 2 (2003): 149-71. This specialist in adaptation studies also edited a very useful handbook on the subject, to which I contributed a more extensive version of this argument, Bal, *Narratology*, 179-196. On Flaubert’s realism, see also Jonathan Culler, “The Realism of *Madame Bovary*,” *Modern Language Notes* 122 (2007): 683-696.

terms that the usual view of “adaptation” allows. Our film *Madame B* is not an adaptation but a response to the novel; the relationship is not imitative but interactive, what I have called an “inter-ship.”⁹ And it does not claim fidelity, but loyalty; not a “faithful” imitation of characters and events, but an attempt to first examine what makes this novel so unique, and then to try to come up with imaginative equivalents in cinematic language.

By messing up chronology, we made clear from the start that the film was not to be considered “faithful.” In our film, we have turned the ambiguity of narration and the implication of witnessing through focalisation into a beginning image that posits the preposterous temporality that makes us all peers of Emma. You see Emma in the ruined house that stands for her ruined life. But the image is ever-so-slightly wobbly, indicating a hand-held camera. That typical cinematic feature does not signify a claim to authenticity, but the presence of others: of focalising witnesses. These others, whom we do not see in the image but only in that slight movement, witness Emma’s ruin either with empathy or with relishing, as the neighbours do in the novel. We see this anonymous but far from neutral witnessing later in the film, when Emma is alone, including at her own wedding. The not-quite-stable image hints at spying, meddling, or possibly empathizing with others. The hand-held camera creates the “nous,” the “us.” And no viewer of the film, in 2014 and after, can claim that the mid-nineteenth century does not concern us.

Ambiguous Focalisation: Suspending Judgment

As a tool for narrative rhetoric, in the sense of potentially manipulative, potentially empathic, artful story-telling, focalisation has the power to persuade, and thus, to have political impact. That power can be understood and thereby either undermined, when damaging, or enlisted, when supportive in view of a wider cultural political interest. I allege Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* as a “theoretical object” to explain how focalisation and its close analysis can do this, and the film to argue for the relevance of the concept in other media as well. The examples below are also meant to put forward an “intermediality” that complicates any notion of “fidelity” and replaces it with a dialogue, non-chronological, not prioritising the relationship between novel and film. The “theoretical object” is thus extended from the excerpts of the novel alone to the dialogic relationship

⁹ Bal in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

between these and their cinematic (non)equivalent: equivalent in terms of story-telling, not of fabula events.¹⁰

That novel’s ambiguity transforms Emma into “one of us,” a victim of the combination of “emotional capitalism,” on which more below, as we all are; of sexual selfishness and abuse, what we now call “#MeToo.” In other words, of the cultural politics of Flaubert’s time, as of our time. And the ambiguity binds fiction to reality through the inevitable, affect-inducing activity of reading or viewing. These activities make any binary opposition between fiction and reality profoundly untenable. This ambiguity, thus, helps to point out how focalisation in this novel both indicts and transforms the politics of the culture we live in, and Emma lived in.

For this, my second case, I selected a very ordinary passage, a conversation between Charles and his mother concerning Emma’s vague and inexplicable malaises. It begins in direct discourse. “Do you know what your wife needs?” asked the older Madame Bovary. “Sais-tu ce qu’il faudrait à ta femme? reprenait la mère Bovary. Ce seraient des occupations forcées, des ouvrages manuels! ...—Pourtant elle s’occupe, disait Charles.” [She needs to be forced to work—hard, manual work...] “She keeps busy, though,” Charles said.] (II, 7) This is a classic quotation including the verb “to say” and quotation marks, as well as an indication of the subject who speaks. Each speaker can be characterised by their discourse: the mother harsh, full of contempt for Emma; the use of the qualifier “forcées” with “occupations” qualifies the mother and her discourse clearly. Charles weakly defends her, which tells us about his difficulty in making decisions. Soon, then, the discourse changes from quotation of a character’s speech to a narratorial conclusion. And, while such passages are supposedly clarifying, here, all clarity vanishes.

Donc, il fut résolu que l’on empêcherait Emma de lire des romans.
L’entreprise ne semblait point facile. La bonne dame s’en chargea: elle
devait quand elle passerait par Rouen, aller en personne chez le loueur de

¹⁰ The concept of “theoretical object” was coined by French philosopher and art historian Hubert Damisch, put forward in a conversation with Yve-Alain Bois. See Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Hubert Damisch, “A Conversation with Hubert Damisch,” *October*, 85 (1998): 3-17. For a notion of intermediality, see Jørgen Bruhn, and Anne Gjelsvik, eds., *Cinema Between Media: An Intermediality Approach* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013). That volume comes from an active research group on intermediality at Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden. See for activities and affiliated faculty, <https://elmcip.net/organizations/linnaeus-university-centre-intermedial-and-multimodal-studies-ims>.

livres et lui représenter qu'Emma cessait ses abonnements. N'aurait-on pas le droit d'avertir la police, si le libraire persistait quand même dans son métier d'empoisonneur? [So it was decided to prevent Emma from reading novels. The project presented certain difficulties, but the old lady undertook to carry it out: on her way through Rouen she would personally call on the proprietor of the lending library and tell him that Emma was cancelling her subscription. If he nevertheless persisted in spreading his poison, they would certainly have the right to report him to the police.] (II, 7)

The beginning of the passage seems to be a narrator's summing up, as a conclusive "so" indicates. The second sentence implies a conversation—the hesitant Charles objects it is difficult to do, and the resolute mother promises to solve the problem. But then, the mother's active meddling is rendered in the narrator's discourse, as the descriptive "old lady" ("la bonne dame") indicates. Neither Charles nor the mother herself would qualify her in such terms. And "s'en chargea" ("undertook") is the narrator's verb that characterises her readiness to act, again summing up. But like the verb "carry it out," it can be either the narrator's word choice or her own, as if saying: "don't worry son, you don't have to do anything, I'll carry it out."

The second half of the sentence clearly moves towards the ambiguity of free indirect discourse, however. This is projecting a plan. She was leaving soon anyway, and it is as if we hear her say: "On my way through Rouen, I will call on the proprietor of the lending library and tell him that Emma is cancelling her subscription." The final sentence of the fragment is more clearly free indirect discourse, and it is in fact a double one. It renders a quote within a quote. Imagine what the mother will have said to her son: "I will threaten this man: [quote] 'if you nevertheless persist in spreading your poison, we will surely have the right to report you to the police.'" A narrator could have used the word "threaten" and summed up the rest with something like "with the police." But both "spreading your poison" and "have the right" smack of the angry, intimidating old woman's righteousness, as she will threaten the librarian with conviction and even passion; these are all her thoughts, her words.

The entire passage becomes a mixture of the narrator's discourse, the character's quoted discourse, and free indirect discourse. Why would a novelist structure this passage so confusingly? As I see it, the point of this is to demonstrate the power of meddlers, so important in this novel. Like Homais the nasty pharmacist and the gossiping townsfolk who judge Emma's behaviour and rejoice in her downfall, Madame Bovary senior is herself a poison of sorts. Such phrases as "his poison," meaning novels,

can hardly be attributed to the primary narrator of a carefully crafted and proudly presented novel. Instead, the narrator here quotes, freely-indirectly, not just the mother but the *public opinion* of a large segment of the population, from “fiction is dangerous” to “fiction is nonsense.” Thus, the structure of embedded speech builds up the oppressive environment in which Emma lives, where the imagination is censored and freedom of thought is forbidden. Realism, here, does not mean objectivity but a fiercely ironic rendering of a real social structure of embedding whatever a character says in clichés; what Flaubert astutely called *idées reçues*.

What is Focalization?

The idea behind the concept of focalisation is that whenever events are presented, it is from within a certain vision. A point of view is chosen, a certain way of seeing things, a certain angle, whether real historical facts or fictitious events are concerned. This slanted or subjective nature of story-telling is inevitable, and denying it constitutes a dubious political act. Objectivity is an attempt to present only what is seen or perceived in some other way. All comments are shunned, and implicit interpretation is also avoided. Perception, however, is strongly dependent on the position of the perceiving body; a small child sees things in a totally different way from an adult, if only as far as measurements are concerned, but also due to the knowledge and experience that inform understanding. The degree to which one is familiar with what one sees also influences perception. We are confronted, not with events, a fabula, but with a *vision* of the fabula. Focalisation is, then, the *relation* between the vision and what is seen or perceived.

The short passage with Charles’ mother is translated into cinematic language in the brief moment that the mother sees Emma come down the stairs with, once again, new expensive clothes on. Without words, she shakes her head and looks with utter contempt at her daughter-in-law, so that the latter throws her out. The issue we gleaned from the novel is not, or not simply, to indict the cruel mother but to demonstrate that “looks can kill” as the saying has it; that silent looking participates as a full speech act, the evidence of which is that Emma responds with a speech act that is, indeed, a response to a previous speech act—that look. Understanding this helps us to grasp the complexity and subtlety of language, verbal and (audio)visual, to express disagreement, difference, and hostility.

As a third example, consider the famous sentence: “La conversation de Charles était plate comme un trottoir de rue.” [Charles’s conversation was flat like a side walk.] (I, 7) It is devastating for Charles in Emma’s

eyes—only if we consider the sentence as focalised by Emma. However, unmooring discourses and thus precluding facile judgemental attitudes are Flaubert's project, as this ambiguity demonstrates. The point is not that Emma's boredom justifies her later actions, but that we all *feel* her boredom, empathise with it, and yet keep also in view that Charles has no access to that understanding. The sentence is short but durational, as the verb tense of the imperfect (*était*) indicates. This brevity exemplifies Flaubert's economy of words. The generic noun "conversation" accompanied by a verb in the imperfect tense expressing the reiteration of routine, "tells" an infinite number of words. And, according to the comparison, they are deadly. This sentence is not only a narrative expression of a non-event—what Gérard Genette called with a phrase, paradoxical given the topic of wordiness, "Flaubert's silences"¹¹—but also an indirect image of the boredom that will kill Emma. It reverses the narrative dynamic between narration and description, and between literary and cinematic.

The sentence continues, and readers are made keenly aware of language as the primary material of this artwork: "... et les idées de tout le monde y défilaient, dans leur costume ordinaire, sans exciter d'émotion, de rire ou de rêverie." [...and the ideas of everyman came by; they wore drab everyday clothes, and they inspired neither emotion nor laughter or dreams.]¹² (I, 7) The sidewalk is one element of the comparison; strollers come in, but when their clothes are commented upon, readers lose the thread and thus realise the incongruity of language. This is one of Flaubert's devices to de-realise and re-orient his alleged realism.

The transformation of narrative discourse implicates a later short sentence that resonates with the comparison: "C'était surtout aux heures des repas qu'elle n'en pouvait plus." [Especially during mealtimes she couldn't stand it anymore.] (I, 9) This specifies time within duration. A metaphor sums up: "toute l'amertume de son existence lui semblait servie sur son assiette." [It seemed to her that the entire bitterness of her existence was served to her on her plate.] (I, 9) Erich Auerbach alleged this image as "the climax of the portrayal of her despair." He calls it a "formless tragedy."¹³ I agree with "tragedy," but I think the qualifier "formless" ignores the profoundly tragic temporal form at stake. In the film, we wanted to do justice to these crucial short sentences, but not through literally quoting them. Instead, we wished to show—rather than tell—what they imply, including their effect on Emma and the possibility

¹¹ Gérard Genette, *Figures I* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966).

¹² The translation is mine.

¹³ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. William R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 483.

for viewers to be effectively touched by it. Conflating the two short passages into a rather extensive audio(visual) image demonstrates the performative nature of Charles’s monologic conversations—a performance of communicative failure.¹⁴

What is the role of focalisation in this passage when rendered cinematically? In the film, the three short sentences turn into an audioimage in audiovisual free indirect discourse. This enables the spectator to experience, on an intuitive, sensate level, a double, conflicted perception. For this durational scene, a monologue creates the image. Charles drones on about the weather, the project to build a shed in the garden, a patient, and the tastelessness of the raspberries this year. Focalising on Emma’s face shows the visual echo of Charles’s boring chatter. Between the two characters the sonic image continues the visual performative image of the scene early on when Charles’s look brings Emma to life, recognizing in the girl the woman she is becoming right now. The dinner scene is edited almost exclusively with Emma’s face in the image; that face is the affected “second person” of the monologue’s performativity. That is where the boredom inscribes itself, producing more and more exasperation. The long takes are edited with minimal intervention, contrasting with the nervous discourse; they enhance the durational character of the scene.

Instead of his face, we see his shoulder, blurred, in what in cine-speak is a “dirty closeup,” and dark, looming over Emma. The closeup draws attention to the cinematic medium, comparable to Flaubert’s bizarre comparisons that foreground language, as analysed so brilliantly by Culler.¹⁵ Because we barely see him, Charles’s talk constitutes, indeed, a sonic image. In the novel, Emma focalises the one short sentence, even if the narrator without identity takes over. It is that narrator who makes the sentence ambiguous, implicating the readers-viewers into Emma’s focalisation. For Emma is the prisoner of the conversation—flat, like a sidewalk; crushing. And, according to the performative conception of the look, the film’s spectator enables her to show her boredom and, at the end, when boredom transforms into horror, to scream. It is the spectator who, seeing and feeling the horror, reads the face and grants the boredom visibility. As an interpretive anachronism, instead of figuring the metaphor, the scream makes Auerbach’s reading (“the climax of the

¹⁴ See also the psychoanalytic commentary by Ion K. Collas on the role of food and poison, eating, and eating disorders in the novel. Ion K. Collas, *Madame Bovary: A Psychoanalytic Reading* (Genève: Droz, 1985). The scene is based on improvisation by actor Thomas Germaine.

¹⁵ Culler, *Flaubert*, 1974.

portrayal of her despair”) and its instantaneousness concrete, not in spite of the durational sentence but because of it.

Speaking of deadly boring topics in a monotone voice, Charles nevertheless speaks on a nervous rhythm, and progressively more so: fast but also with silences, and sighing. Once he says pleadingly: “Say something!” Thus, he gives shape to the anxiety of the character who is also a prisoner of this marriage without exit. Sensing his wife’s boredom, Charles fills the silences he knows to be inevitable, and hence accumulates stupidities. Thus, *bêtise* is shared, and, as Emma will say when she lays dying: no one is to blame. The film takes the work out of the moralism that, suggesting judgement, would leave the viewer out of the novel’s grasp. Charles and Emma are more united than ever by the boredom, the nervousness, the anxiety, and by the sonic image’s reflection on Emma’s face. Their infernal union says everything that Flaubert, with his economy of words, did not narrate but implied in the narration, through focalisation.¹⁶

The visual image of Emma’s more and more exasperated face is the product of the voice, of words, of the dialogue with a single speaker that Flaubert (“la conversation de Charles”) has characterised so perfectly—but hyperbolically, in a proto-postmodernist vein. Charles is the character who brings about an invisible, but far from silent event: he is the one who transforms Emma, barely awoken to life, into a living cadaver, entering an agony that takes up the remainder of the story. Her husband does not cause this agony but only facilitates it, as its instrument. The veritable cause is the expectation, the passivity, of the woman who is captured by a system that she fails to understand, but that has been instilled in her from an early age on. This system, that needed to wait for decades to be articulated, is what Flaubert staged. And it is what binds his time to ours.

An Illness We All Have: Emotional Capitalism

Flaubert’s special, indeed sometimes almost ungrammatical use of verb tenses renders the idea and experience of routine as the source of boredom. In loyalty to this aspect, the central part of the film is marked by an alternation of different routines in Emma’s life and the repetition of sequences from these routines. This part tackles the central topic to which the film shifts the core of Flaubert’s novel, making visible what is really already central in the novel. It stages “emotional capitalism”—then and

¹⁶ *Bêtise*, which Flaubert cultivated in order to indict it, can also be contagious, as the moralistic reading of Marc Girard demonstrates. See Marc Girard, *La passion de Charles Bovary* (Paris: Imago, 1995).

now. This system, where capitalism and romantic love trade places and where commodities are invested with emotion and love is for sale, is what kills Emma and never ceases to kill or otherwise damage people. This is the bond between *Madame Bovary* and *Madame B*, the past to the present. The underlying syndrome is a *confusion between domains*, the translation of desire from one domain to another, as a response to frustration. This is as much of today as it is of the 1850s.¹⁷

The most revealing images in this respect show Emma's insecurity upon entering a fancy designer store. Shadows, reflections, and mirrors confront her with herself, her looks, and her anxiety. Transforming herself from a middle-class woman into a fancy-dressed beauty. Because it remains unseen, the syndrome continues its ravages undisturbed. The caring figure of the salesman reassures her in ways we can easily recognise from our own confrontations with the allure of capitalism and its ability to exploit emotions, insecurity, and hope for a more exciting life. Emma's desire to transform herself is matched by the fairy tale decoration of the store she enters.¹⁸

Emma's lethal trap is, then, not psychological or even ontological. It is social and economic. Flaubert's novel confronts us with a thematic as well as a stylistic exploration of the cultural conspiracy that turns business into an emotional issue, and love into a business venture. In studying the novel in view of filming, I saw how Flaubert had staged this syndrome. The novel, even more clearly than Illouz' books, helps to understand this cultural perversion that Flaubert imagined, Marx and Freud theorised, and in which today we still all participate. In Illouz's words, capitalism around the turn of the twentieth century had become an emotionally managed enterprise. She writes that “modern identity has become increasingly publicly performed in a variety of social sites through a narrative which combines the aspiration to self-realization with a claim to emotional suffering.”¹⁹

¹⁷ When we had almost finished filming and construed this syndrome, it took the belated discovery of the work of Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz to sum it all up in a single concept: “emotional capitalism.” Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007). She writes on *Madame Bovary* in a later book, but the earlier book is clearer on the concept and its background. Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

¹⁸ This is a real store, L'éclairer in Paris, and its real salesman, Pierre Lassovski, brilliantly played the part that is his everyday business, yet also something he knew our film was putting under critical scrutiny.

¹⁹ Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*, 4.