

# Management and Organization in the work of Michel Houellebecq

## *Unplugged - Voices*

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Research in management and organization may only gain by being inspired from arts, culture and humanities in order to rethink practices but also to nourish its own perspectives. Life in organizations is artificially separate from ordinary life: all of mundane objects are thus conducive to astonishment, inspiration, and even problematization. The unplugged subsection “voices” gives the opportunity to academics and non-academics to deliver an interpretation about an object from the cultural or artistic world. Interpreted objects are or not directly related to organizational life, resonate or not with the moment, but share some intriguing features. These interpretations suggest a patchwork of variations on the same object.

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### INTRODUCTION: WHY HOUELLEBECQ?

Rarely is a producer of fiction subject to such a complicated mixture of praise and outrage as Michel Houellebecq. Saying that the opinions on the French novelist differ would be a euphemism. Literary scholars have provided extensive analyses of the racist, xenophobic and misogynist elements that recur throughout his work (e.g. Clement, 2003; Michallat, 1998; Morrey, 2013; Snyman, 2008), and already in 2001, Houellebecq was sued for propagating hatred against Islam in his novels *Plateforme* and *Les particules élémentaires* (Jefferey, 2011). His latest novel, *Soumission*, in which a Muslim political party wins the French national elections, leading to a gradual conversion to Islam of French society, came out on the day of the terrorist attacks on Charlie Hebdo, making it extremely difficult not to read his work as some kind of commentary on the current place of Islam in France.

His portrayal of women has received much criticism as well. Discussing *Les particules élémentaires* (generally considered his *magnum opus*), Wendy Machallat remarks that women either feature as lust objects, or, if their bodies are visibly aging, as pitiful or even disgusting things (Michallat, 1998: 193). Four novels later, nothing much has changed. His protagonists are invariably men, mostly of middle age and without meaningful social relationships, whose feelings towards women are either disgust, aggressive sexual desire, or an extremely patronizing kind of appreciation. Their lives consist of microwave dinners (often described with much precision), visits to escorts or massage parlours (the latter mostly in *Plateforme*), and the passing of immediate family members without much sadness.

Why then, it seems fair to ask, would anyone bother acquainting oneself with the adventures - or lack thereof - of such despicable creatures? I would argue that much of the attraction of Michel Houellebecq's work has to do with the minimalist, stripped down, portrayal it offers of contemporary western societies. Indeed, the very function of his novels is to analyse the current society we live in (Snyman, 2008) and this social scientific approach is clearly rooted in economic worldview: "A lot has been said about Michel Houellebecq, but perhaps it has not been said enough that he is, in his own way, a novelist of work and economy. The psychology and sociology in his novels are clearly built on this territory" (Lahanque, 2015: 208, my translation).

A researcher and a novelist use very different tools, but in the case of Michel Houellebecq their aims are quite similar. In an early essay, *Rester Vivant: méthode*<sup>1</sup>, the novelist himself articulates this mission in terms of truth and authenticity:

Take on those subjects no one wants to hear about. The backside of the facade. Concentrate on sickness, agony, ugliness. Talk about death and oblivion. About jealousy, indifference, frustration, lovelessness. Be abject, and you will be real (Houellebecq, 1997: 26, my translation).

This almost clinical willingness to expose, reveal, and debunk happens at the expense of comfort, ease, or simply the feeling, however rudimentary and modest, that one belongs in this world. As such, this statement can be read as a grotesque exaggeration of the social scientist's stance as the outsider, the decoder, thriving on the opportunity to show that not everything is what it seems. Such unloving truth-writing is exactly why Houellebecq's work is of interest to us. His radically minimalist and materialist depictions of social life allow us to ponder upon the market mechanisms behind social relationships. His main thesis is that all social relationships, but particularly sexual ones, are subject to market forces. He spells out part of his thesis in his first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, where the narrator claims that sexuality is a system of social hierarchy (1994). Although Houellebecq is still developing his style in that early novel, his working hypothesis is already fully shaped.

Satires - and Michel Houellebecq has rightly been called a satirical author (Lilla, 2015) – always have an uneasy relationship with the societies they exaggerate. In order to make use of caricature, hyperbole or absurdism, the writer must dare to take enough distance from what we call 'reality' in order to gain the authorial audacity for this type of writing. However, in order for such fiction to then be appreciated, the reader must reconnect it to the socio-political context s/he lives in, whilst also having enough distance to appreciate the comic effect. This requires a balancing act between the ability to relate the story to the world one lives in, and the feeling that the story does not come too close to that reality to be of immediate consequence.

Perhaps it is therefore unsurprising that the essays in this edition of *Voices* are written by authors who are not based in France, and therefore have some distance to the mediated controversies Houellebecq has become part of, and plays a part in<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the aim of essays is to look at the novels of Michel Houellebecq not just as readers of fiction, but also through the lens of our respective disciplines. Erwin Dekker and

1. Recently, *Rester Vivant: méthode* has inspired the Dutch artist and filmmaker Erik van Lieshout to make the film *To Stay Alive: A Method*. The film features Iggy Pop and Michel Houellebecq himself, the latter playing a character from *La carte et le territoire*, cleverly alluding to the often-heard comment that essentially, all his main characters are versions of himself.

Laurent Taskin have kindly accepted to join me in this task.

In his essay “Natural and artificial Man in the work of Michel Houellebecq and James Buchanan”, Erwin Dekker places the work of Nobel prize winning economist James Buchanan alongside the economic visions in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *La possibilité d'une île*. He demonstrates how both thinkers – the novelist and the economist – are criticizing isolated individualism and consumerism, and how they are exploring what genuine friendship and aspirations might look like in our modern economy.

Laurent Taskin, in his essay “The Map and the Territory: Considering spatially-grounded management”, discusses Michel Houellebecq’s second latest novel and argues in favour of more dialogue between the disciplines of management, human geography, and literature. Discussing recent management research on processes of territorialisation and space-production, he arrives at the conclusion that while the map is more interesting than the territory in Houellebecq’s novel, the opposite appears to be the case in critical management research.

Finally, my own essay draws attention to the role that love, sex, and work play in the “remaining Western societies” Houellebecq portrays in *Soumission* (2015b: 11). I will place Houellebecq’s exaggerated and highly stylised - if also often painfully recognisable - portrayal of this society next to sociological work that has drawn attention to the fact that our economies increasingly depend on the production and consumption of aesthetic and symbolic goods.

Together, the diverging topics of these essays show how multifaceted an author Michel Houellebecq is, as well as how close the topics he engages with are to the centre of social science. If the classic task of the novel is to explore the inner lives of fictional characters, Michel Houellebecq prefers focusing on the outside. Political changes, market forces, gender relations, family structures, consumption behaviour and even the function religion, all classic themes in social science, make up the cosmology of Houellebecq’s invented universe. Therefore, the take the various present on the novels here, is far from conclusive. The aim is not to present exhaustive analyses on this literary oeuvre, but rather to open up points of entrance for a more fruitful consideration of literary fiction in management and social science.

2. Besides the aforementioned *To Stay Alive: A Method*, Houellebecq also plays himself in the film *L'enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq*, which imagines the kidnapping of the novelist. It thus seems fair to suggest that Michel Houellebecq is more than a passive receiver of media attention - of which much surely is unwanted – but also actively performs his persona in the public eye, albeit within a carefully curated setting.

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## ASPIRATIONAL INDIVIDUALS IN THE WORK OF MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ AND JAMES BUCHANAN

“No man is an island, entire of itself;  
every man is a piece of the continent,  
a part of the main”  
– John Donne

Loneliness and alienation are central themes in the work of French novelist Michel Houellebecq. His works *Whatever* (1998) and *The Possibility of an Island* (2004, hereafter TPI), which will be our central focus here, explore the extent to which man can be an island, or indeed is made into an island by modern society. The protagonists of his novels are invariably incapable of establishing meaningful bonds with others, and Houellebecq questions the very possibility of love: “She had certainly been capable of love; she wished to still be capable of it, I’ll say that for her; but it was no longer possible. A scarce, artificial and belated phenomenon, love can only blossom under certain mental conditions, rarely conjoined, and totally opposed to the freedom of morals which characterizes the modern era”, he writes in *Whatever* (Houellebecq 1998: 112-113). Loneliness and alienation are themes which are normally far from (mainstream) economics and management studies. Such themes seem far from the concerns of the economist or the management scholar, but this essay will argue the contrary. It will argue that there are close parallels between the homo economicus of economic textbooks, the individual maximizing his own pleasure, and the protagonists of Houellebecq’s novels in *Whatever* and TPI. But also, and this is where it gets interesting, the way in which Nobel-Prize winning economist James Buchanan has attempted to move beyond this figure of homo economicus has close parallels in those novels. Or to turn it around, the explorations of Houellebecq to explore what neohumans are in his novel TPI is an attempt to imagine a meaningful individual life are similar to the attempts in economics to move beyond the figure of homo economicus. It is an unlikely pairing, an American economist from the south who had romantic notions about rural life, and a dystopian Parisian novelist. But what they tell us about humans and what they aspire to in life is surprisingly similar.

Let us start with Houellebecq’s work, so devoid of love and sympathy. That is especially true for any love or sympathy originating from the man. One woman in ‘The Possibility of an Island’ loves her husband, but it is a simple one-sided devotion, not mutual love: “It was in her nature to love, as it was for a cow to graze (or a bird to sing; or a rat to sniff about). Having lost her previous master, she had almost instantaneously found another” (Houellebecq 2004: 222). In the same novel, the only other loving relationship we find is that between a dog and his master; a similar naïve one-sided devotion, or dependence.

And it is not just the possibility of mutual love that is questioned. Friendship also is invariably suspect, and typically doomed to failure. Early

on in his first novel 'Whatever' Houellebecq writes: "The problem is, it's just not enough to live according to the rules. Sure, you manage to live according to the rules. Sometimes it's tight, extremely tight, but on the whole, you manage it. Your tax papers are up to date. Your bills paid on time. You never go out without your identity card (and the special little wallet for your Visa!). Yet you haven't any friends" (Houellebecq 1998: 10). Friendship, indeed the very notion or desire to empathize with fellow beings is problematized in his work. That is even evident in the curious distance from which Houellebecq's protagonists from which they describe and analyze their own lives: as if they even have trouble empathizing with their own actions.

The denial of both love and friendship are part of a bigger vision, which reduces human relationships to struggle and sex in Houellebecq's work. The French title of *Whatever*, *Extension du domaine de la Lutte* literally translates to 'The Extension of the Domain of Struggle'. The only relationships between man and woman in Houellebecq's novels are those that revolve around sex. And these inevitably break down because the physical attraction of the woman is bound to fade. Women are more generally secondary in his work, and usually primarily sexual objects. Part of this is undoubtedly a conscious choice for Houellebecq, it allows him to emphasize the struggle between men and the objectification of women. But his books have also been criticized for ignoring any serious female perspective.

Female friendship, for example, is wholly absent. And relationships between men are those of struggle, of trying to outdo the other. It is as if Houellebecq attempts to deny all of culture, as if he is intent on stripping away the illusions of relationships, the thin veneer of civilization, to expose the essence of humanity, its animalistic nature. In *TPI* it is telling that even culture is degraded, and denied any real existence. Art is veneer, it is kitsch, argues one of the protagonists: "Basically, it is a question of degree," he said. "Everything is kitsch, if you like. Music as a whole is kitsch; art is kitsch, literature itself is kitsch. Any emotion is kitsch, practically by definition; but any reflection also, and even in a sense any action, the only thing that is not absolutely kitsch is nothingness" (Houellebecq 2004: 103). Others are not interesting for who they are, but for what they have to offer us. And when we no longer need them, or they no longer give us pleasure they are discarded, like used up consumption products.

Upon first reading his work presents a naked Darwinistic—or Spencerian if you like—world. And thus, biological metaphors dominate Houellebecq's work: "In reality the vagina serves or used to serve until quite recently for the reproduction of the species. Yes, the species" (Houellebecq 1998: 94). But upon closer reading we discover that, instead, his work revolves around the tension between the longing for meaningful relationships on the one hand, and the difficulty of attaining them on the other. It is a tension between man at his basest who is often presented by Houellebecq as the authentic human being, natural man, and man fulfilling his ultimate potential, aspirational man, who is often presented by Houellebecq as naïve and artificial.

Consequently, there are two ways of reading the passage about the vagina. The first is that we have become detached from our natural self, and that modern society has made genuine relationships between individuals impossible. But on the other hand, Houellebecq is exploring what the human purpose is beyond reproduction. In *TPI* this is explored through a utopian future in which humans are freed from the need to reproduce and interact with each other. The neohumans in *TPI* no longer

need to move outside their home, all their contact, as far as they feel a need for it, happens digitally (remember that this was not yet a reality when the novel came out). They are, or at least should be, perfectly happy and unconstrained to realize themselves.

This perfect tranquility and total isolation, however, at the same time feels like a dystopia to the reader. What is happiness without any disturbance of it, and without any effort to bring it about? And how are we able to flourish in isolation? It is, however, this image of the individual which is eerily reminiscent to that of the homo economicus. The figure of Max U (from maximizing utility), as cultural economist Deirdre McCloskey has named him, is a pleasure machine, seeking happiness: goods and other individuals are only instruments to bring that happiness about. His only social roles are that of the worker and that of the consumer. *Whatever* is about the life of the modern knowledge worker. In the utopia of TPI the neohumans no longer need to work, only to consume. And consumers in Houellebecq's work indeed behave as economic theory describes: "all commune in the certainty of passing an agreeable afternoon devoted primarily to consumerism, and thus to contributing to the consolidation of their being" (Houellebecq 1998: 69). But it is mere consolidation, there is no striving toward anything higher.

The ultimate homo economicus in literature, as many economists have noted, is Robinson Crusoe on his island, alone, engaging in economic calculations. But Daniel, the neohuman protagonist of *TPI* is similarly isolated in his home, seeking happiness. Like Robinson Crusoe who seeks to return home, so Daniel is increasingly dissatisfied with his perfect life. The problems and frustrations that he encounters, illuminate what it means to be human, and in turn shed light on some central tensions in economic theory.

Some commentators have attempted to interpret Houellebecq's work as seeking to overcome humanism, through a kind of post-humanism, and thus to read the future world he portrays as his utopia. But I will argue that a more insightful way of reading the book is to explore the tensions between the future world and our world as Houellebecq describes it, for example in *Whatever*.

The first problem that Daniel, the protagonist of *TPI* runs into is that of remembering who he is. The technology which is central in the novel is the ability to clone ourselves, and thus to reincarnate ourselves back into a new, younger, version of ourselves. The novel is narrated from the various reincarnations of Daniel, particularly Daniel 24 and 25. To remember who he is, the later Daniels reads the life story of Daniel 1. Houellebecq's message is clear, our identity consists of our experiences, our memories, and to be human is to have an identity. Deprived of most emotions the later reincarnations also have to learn what emotions are from the life story of Daniel 1, and it is telling that Houellebecq incorporates culture, in the form of poetry as a way of doing so into the novel.

The second problem that Daniel runs into is loneliness. He longs for human contact, beyond the digital contact with other neohumans, and the physical presence of his dog. Initially that desire is almost absent, but slowly he starts to develop a relationship with Marie, incarnation 22 and 23, who shares poetry and conversation with him. Marie lives in what is left of Manhattan and although she does not venture outside, the ruins make her curious for the world beyond her apartment. It is Marie who talks to Daniel of an island where neohumans, fed up with their isolated and uneventful lives, have come together.

The meaning of the possibility of an island is thus reversed in the novel, from the desire to live completely free and independent of others, to

the possibility that somewhere out there, there is an island on which humans manage to live *together*. The novel ends when Daniel sets off to find this mythical island (albeit without success). The desire of Marie and Daniel to find this island speaks to the aspirational nature of humans, to their desire to explore, to discover and to develop. The static equilibrium that they have managed to attain, ultimately does not satisfy.

This is *precisely* the point that the economist and Nobel Prize winner James Buchanan makes in his essay 'Natural and Artifactual Man' (1979). In that essay, he argues that economists have painted a picture of natural man and have neglected the artifactual aspects. Max U is man without culture, without a history, and without friends, without a community. Artifactual man on the other hand, is man in the process of becoming somebody, seeking an identity, and aspiring to be realize his dreams, and to transform himself:

Nonetheless, the prospects of becoming are sufficient to channel action, to divert resources away from the automatic routine that utility maximization seems to embody. And choices made in becoming a different person are irrevocable (...). We move through time, constructing ourselves as artifactual persons. We are not, and cannot be, the 'same person' (Buchanan, 1979: 100)

Buchanan captures all the central elements of Houellebecq's novel: aspiration, the importance of memory, the impossibility of being in perfect stasis. Buchanan argues that it is only by making irrevocable choices, by taking a stab in the dark that we become different people. This is precisely what Daniel realizes when he sets out to find the mythical communal island of neohumans:

Despite my close reading of the narrative by Daniel<sup>1</sup>, I had still not totally understood what men meant by love, I had not grasped all the multiple and contradictory meanings they gave to this term; I had grasped the brutality of sexual combat, the unbearable pain of emotional isolation, but I still could not see what it was that enabled them to hope that they could establish between these contradictory aspirations a form of synthesis. However, at the end of those few weeks of travel in the sierras of inland Spain I had never felt as close to loving, in the most elevated sense that they had given to this word; I had never been as close to understanding "what is best in our lives," (Houellebecq 2004: 311)

It is this process of discovery, the process of becoming that Buchanan seeks to describe. By making radical choices we become who we are. Daniel in the novel attempts to become like his previous self through the study of the life story of the original Daniel, but it is not until he sets out to do something new that he discovers who he is. As Buchanan argues, we cannot be the 'same person', no matter how hard the later incarnations try through the devotional study of their life story.

But the link between his view and Buchanan goes further than the emphasis on the aspirational nature of individuals. Buchanan also faults his fellow economists for taking Robinson Crusoe alone on his island as the starting point of the economic problem of scarcity. Buchanan argues that what Crusoe faces in isolation is merely a problem of calculation: how to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. That is not where economics starts for Buchanan: "The uniquely symbiotic aspects of behavior, of human choice, arise only when Friday steps on the island, and Crusoe is

*forced* into association with another human being” (Buchanan 1964: 217, emphasis added).

In other words, Buchanan argues that economics is a human science and deals with the problem of *association*, of living together. Exchange which he regards as fundamental to human relationships is the primary focus of economics for Buchanan. It is, for him the most important way in which people associate, in both politics and economics. And hence social scientists should deal with the problem of living together, not of maximizing utility. Houellebecq’s work is an example of this: it explores the extent to which human beings can living meaningfully together.

His work questions the possibility of enduring love, it sees the modern economic system as one of struggle, just like the domain of human relationships is one of struggle to rise up in the sexual hierarchy. The other philosophers, artists and filmmakers that Houellebecq positively references all share this grim view of human relations: among the philosophers Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are favorite. But at the same time Houellebecq does not want to escape humanistic concerns. He wants us to live together and form meaningful relationships. The world of *TPI* with its neohumans is ultimately no place for real humans, and hence unstable. Daniel wants to escape it.

For both Houellebecq and Buchanan these problems extend to their methods, their crafts. Houellebecq wonders what the role of a novel is in this modern age in which humans do not form intimate relationships anymore: “The progressive effacement of human relationships is not without certain problems for the novel. We’re a long way from *Wuthering Heights*, to say the least. The novel form is not conceived for depicting indifference or nothingness” (Houellebecq, 1998: 40). What is there to explore for the novelist, if not human relationships? The protagonists in his novels are typically passive responders to changes that seem to happen to them, rather than active choosers. Many of his novels flirt with scientific and deterministic views, which seek to deny free will, and human relationships are repeatedly compared to those between physical elements, indeed *Elementary Particles*. But *TPI* clearly ends with an act of choice, a stab in the dark, with Daniel setting out for the island, even if doing so will be his death.

Buchanan wonders how economics can do justice to human freedom, the moral notion of responsibility, and the fact that humans make themselves through choices: “Once man is conceived in the image of an artifact, who constructs himself through his own choices, he sheds the animalistically determined path of existence laid out for him by the orthodox economists’ model” (Buchanan, 1964: 110). Determinism is given up, the economists have to acknowledge that the human sciences are ultimately about humans, no matter how much we have tried to fit them into deterministic models (often adopted from the natural sciences). Human beings are more than the elementary particles of the science of economics, argues Buchanan.

Finding a way to combine natural and aspirational man is the challenge we face. Not just as observers of the world, but also in our own life and as manager. If the Nobel-economist and self-proclaimed Southerner writing in Virginia (Buchanan) and the dark French novelist (Houellebecq) agree on something, it is that we cannot do without aspirational man. And despite the fundamental ambiguity in Houellebecq’s work it is clear that his heart is with aspirational man. When the protagonist in *Whatever* describes his co-worker Jean-Yves as truly free, in the sense of liberated from all intimate relationships with others, Houellebecq writes: “Here was, as I’ve mentioned, a happy man; that said, I don’t envy him his

happiness” (1998: 41). And Daniel, ultimately, gives up his neohuman independence and happiness to try to find the communal island. Late in life Buchanan writes an essay *Afraid to be Free* (2005) in which he questions the extent to which humans wish to shape their own life. But he, too, ultimately concludes in “Natural and Artificial Man”: “Man does not want liberty in order to maximize his utility. He wants liberty to become the man he wants to become” (Buchanan 1979, 112).

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## THE MAP AND THE TERRITORY: CONSIDERING SPATIALLY-GROUNDED MANAGEMENT

“The map is more interesting than the territory”  
(Houellebecq, 2014: 48)

If the map is more interesting than the territory, it is most likely because it represents Man’s appropriation of the territory, his mark on it. This is reflected in national roads, shortcuts, contour lines, chapels, farms or castles located alongside coloured zones indicating prairies, pine forests, streams, etc. – many of the codes that allow us to “situate” ourselves and “move” across the territory. These plans therefore reflect the act of mapping the territory, but also its inhabitants. Etymologically speaking, geography describes the land; here, the map *writes* the territory and in so doing the landscape becomes a *labour*. This makes Michel Houellebecq’s book the pretext for personal criticism – in the sense of any artistic criticism that is also intended to be creative<sup>3</sup> – and invites us to reflect on *spaces of dialogue* between geography and management.

3. Oscar Wilde is the source of this eulogy of creative criticism, of the literary criticism of which he was himself the victim and the author. In this eulogy, subjectivity and criticism are consubstantial. Criticism – literary criticism – is opinion. It has few canons, and those that are established are forever being redefined. Seen from this perspective, the prospect of critical studies in management as it has been institutionalised can appear to be instrumental when its parameters (its territory, its boundaries, that which is critical and that which is not) and even its methodology (observation of principles, prescribed methodologies or writing methods) are specified. The criticism of a novel clearly reminds us of the extent to which the exercise of criticism is linked to the subject who practices it.

## WHY IS MANAGEMENT NOT APPROACHED IN TERMS OF SPACE?

Geography, or at least the capacity to situate a phenomenon in space, has become a part of many disciplines and many activities, whether it is a matter of considering how the city produces certain communities and specific uses, how culture contributes to urban renewal, or how certain spaces are oppressive and lead to the adoption of other individual behaviours. Sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists, like mathematicians and physicists for that matter, think in terms of space. So why not managers?

Thus, free-market economics redrew the geography of the world in terms of the expectations of the clientele, whether the latter moved to indulge in tourism or to earn a living. The flat, isometric surface of the map was substituted by an abnormal topography where Shannon was closer to Katowice than to Brussels, to Fuerteventura than to Madrid.

(Houellebecq, 2014: 98, commenting the departure board of Shannon's airport)

It would be wrong to suggest that the spatial dimension is absent from management. Globalisation, which justifies many principles or models of strategic and international management, relates to territories and their borders, whether in the case of new opportunities to penetrate new markets (and therefore spaces), or of threats to re-localise businesses based on decisions to establish production sites in the most appropriate spaces. Similarly, the concepts of "competitiveness clusters" or "network companies" are as much the focus of entrepreneurial strategies as of public policies. Management therefore takes place within a space, but it considers it primarily as a given and even as a constraint.

## FROM SPACE TO TERRITORY: A HUMAN ENDEAVOUR

Yet beyond economic relationships, space structures, constrains and empowers social relationships in their affective, social and political dimensions. This is what is captured by the notion of "territory" as understood by the French geographer Michel Lussault (2007): space is political, it reflects the way in which it can be used, from its mere appropriation by certain parties to its conceptualisation. Space is not therefore simply Euclidean, it is not just a physical distance or a metric element; it is inhabited, and its inhabitants define it in turn: "Like a landmark, the peasant is flagged in his landscape and shackled to the land, as each works the other in a state between tension and passion, vocation and resignation, patience and valiance" (Lafon, 2015:16, my translation<sup>4</sup>).

Space is therefore also produced and transformed by the human and social experience. This is the principle that sociologist and geographer Henri Lefebvre (1971) captured in his threefold characterisation of space as being *conceived* (there is an intention), *perceived* (one imagines it in a certain way) and *experienced* (one lives space). This means we do not move through a given space; we fashion it, we write it:

4. Original quote: « Comme borne en terre, le paysan est fiché dans le paysage et chevillé au pays, l'un et l'autre se travaillant mutuellement au corps, entre tension et passion, vocation et résignation, patience et vaillance. »

Geography, in its most basic sense, is about writing the land (...) Men and women, and some children, live and work on it. Labour is a relationship with the body of the land, and its gestures inhabit the landscape, animate it in a way that is necessary because it is useful, or vice versa. (Lafon, 2015: 47 and 25, my translation<sup>5</sup>)

The link between space and identity is established, in human geography, by authors such as Lefebvre as well as Swiss geographer Claude Raffestin (1980; 2012; 2016). Based on their work, a whole new perspective of understanding and acting is opened up to the field of management. And like Jed Martin, the artist at the centre of Houellebecq's novel, who first achieves fame by displaying photographs of Michelin maps, and later portraits of workers and their working tools, geography feeds off labour to help us understand the process of identity production that is experienced in the locus of that labour.

According to Raffestin, the study of *territoriality*, i.e. one's relationship with a territory, allows us to understand how humans, through their everyday labour, appropriate and fashion space; this act is constituent of their identity (initially through work). Territory is this political space summarised by Lussault; it has an *innate* existence. Our interaction with it is expressed through territoriality: we invest a space and mark it (think for example of how certain colleagues decorate their office, or on the contrary of how one marks a space by leaving it as anonymous as possible). But Raffestin tells us that geography, like management, is not static but rather dynamic:

this amounts to saying that there is often discordance between a territory and current territoriality, which is evolving more quickly and adapts to needs that did not exist at the time when the territory was conceived. One thing is certain: a territory is never completely contemporaneous of its territoriality for it is the product of past territorialities that has been taken over by new territorialities which reinvest it and reshape it, in short which restructure it. (Raffestin, 2016: 131, my translation<sup>6</sup>)

Here, the identity production process is territorialised. Claude Raffestin sets out to understand this according to three distinct processes, i.e. the phases of action that we have just identified: territorialisation, de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation. In sum, far from being a constraint or a given, space is a structuring force which actors can seize upon. And should it not, therefore, be at the heart of a science of action like management?

## TERRITORY, WORK AND MANAGEMENT: A CRITICAL MANAGEMENT RESEARCH TERRITORY

Two recently completed doctoral theses offer spatial readings of management situations that are of peculiar interest. The first study takes place in a company in the services sector which succumbed to the "new world of work" fashion, i.e. reorganising workspaces as open-plan and anonymous areas (non-personalised landscaping) in order to gain space (reduce costs) and promote a flexible approach to work organization in

5. Original quotes: « *La géographie est au sens premier du terme une écriture de la terre (...) Des hommes et des femmes, et quelques enfants, y vivent, y travaillent.* » ; « *Le travail est un rapport au corps du pays et ses gestes habitent le paysage, l'animent de façon nécessaire parce qu'utile, ou inversement.* »

6. Original quote: « *Ce qui revient à dire qu'il y a souvent discordance entre le territoire et la territorialité actuelle qui évolue plus rapidement et s'adapte à des nécessités qui n'existaient pas au moment où le territoire a été conçu. Une chose est certaine, le territoire n'est jamais complètement contemporain de la territorialité qui s'y déroule puisqu'il est le produit de territorialités antérieures repris par des territorialités nouvelles qui le ré-investissent, le reçoivent, en un mot le restructurent.* »

which working from home is widely advocated. Under this model, the head office comprises around 10 floors, each rearranged as a giant open space. For management, this is a mark of modernity, the advent of a modern and flexible managerial approach with a focus on results. Céline Donis (2015), the author of this study, was allowed to occupy various floors, meet with around 50 employees, and use photo-elicitation – an innovative visual research method used in the field of management – to observe how employees re-appropriated their workspace. The process of territorialisation, de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation is particularly well described. By modifying the workspace, management modified their employees' relationship with it and therefore with their work. This denial of a personal workspace is experienced in different ways by different people, and the researcher illustrates the different strategies adopted: boycott, sabotage and withdrawal. Donis' study establishes a clear identity-based link between space, work and management. The rationalisation of resistant behaviours is clearly established thanks to the use of spatial notions.

The second research study was conducted by Delphine Minchella (2015)<sup>7</sup>. The primary appeal of this research is that it focuses on a private company which in the 1980s decided to build a new head office with a clear spatial vision: the structure was designed to encourage certain behaviours such as interaction, exchanges and well-being, making this workplace a living space in its own right. Through rich documentation tracing the history of the project and perspicacious use of Lefebvre's threefold analysis, the researcher shows how the gaps between what is conceived, perceived and experienced produces particular behaviours in the workplace, far from what was originally expected. She goes further to show that the appropriation of a space produces new territories with their anticipated perceptions and behaviours.

These two studies illustrate the type of research which, alongside others, can enrich the field of management. Geography is a case in point. Allow me to specify the essential characteristics of this approach, which I personally relate to a critical management research agenda.

First of all, let us be clear about what is meant by the term *critical*: without going into lengthy explanations, we can consider management research to be critical if it challenges anything that particularly appears to be *taken for granted* – a challenge which Hegel and Brecht consider to fall under the very concept of *knowledge*; this is a process of systematic doubt which, when it relates to received managerial wisdom, we refer to as *denaturalisation* (Taskin and Willmott, 2008). Things taken for granted include profitability as the ultimate objective of business, the flexibility of “win-win” work (flexi-security), (methodological) individualism, calculative rationality, and productivity as the ultimate objective of management and management research. Questioning the effect of a management practice that is recognised as promoting autonomy when it comes to monitoring and power is not something that is taken for granted.

The second characteristic is disciplinary, methodological and/or theoretical open-mindedness. This is as much about encouraging research that delves into other fields to find the keys to understanding management and work situations (in this regard, human geography has enormous potential) or using other approaches (the use of more heterodox methods as well as the expression of knowledge in canons other than the formatted academic article) as it is about condemning dominant research methods that crush knowledge with stupid model-based rigour in respect of the type of knowledge produced (measuring only the effect of a given variable on

7. Under the supervision of Prof. Véronique Perret, Université Paris-Dauphine

another using a model already accepted elsewhere and previously validated measurement scales, etc.). Let us limit our focus to these two elements.

Furthermore, we need to encourage research that is conducted in close proximity to work, the worker and work organization methods. It is in this place – the work *space* – that management research can find in the discipline of geography a useful way to resolve contemporary issues. A spatially-grounded management approach calls for the use of qualitative methodologies (space is as much a *signified* as a *signifier*) that can explore the experienced dimension of space and enable the researcher, and in turn the reader, to appreciate the scope of space and its influence, including in aesthetic terms. As well as the way workers express themselves (from emancipation to domination, from engagement to alienation, from collective communities to isolated individuals, etc.) through marking their territory, one of their lives' territories. To sum up: if management is to understand social phenomena in a new light, using the referents of geography, the study of work and work situations must be central to research.

Ultimately, I have used Houellebecq's *The Map and the Territory* as a pretext to consider the possibility of an original and promising dialogue in management science between human geography, management and literature. While in the story of Jed Martin's adventures, the map is more interesting than the territory, it would appear that the reverse is true in the case of critical management research. The map is no more than an infinitesimal part of the territory: it reflects the desire to make space controllable by those who map it, organise it and categorise it. The territory is this received space but also – and above all – a space that is inhabited, fashioned and written. It is not a static representation on a map that is imposed on everyone in the same way, but rather links to the experience of each individual, each worker community. Territoriality describes the relationship we have with this territory that is also the organization. In my view, it is partly in the study of territoriality that we find new potential for management research that would expand our knowledge of third places, nomadism, communities of practices and, more broadly, recognition and meaning in the workplace. For in many contemporary work situations, management is called upon to *humanise*, i.e. to (re)consider the link between work, organization and territory. In this respect, the current crisis of recognition in the workplace<sup>8</sup> can be understood as the demand of workers that they be allowed to exist – physically, with their bodies – in (the territory of) the organization (Gomez, 2016). This offers a new perspective with which to understand the tensions and policies described elsewhere.

This, ultimately, is the path to which Michel Houellebecq points.

8. Crisis of work and of recognition notably depicted by Dujarier (2015), Linhart (2015) and Bigi et al. (2015), whereby the cult of the individual, the cult of admiration, contrasts with a management approach that can be detached or psychologically-oriented but is far removed from actual work and expertise.

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## THE (UN)MANAGEABLE SELF IN MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ'S SOUMISSION

On the day he defends his doctoral thesis on the work of the French 19th century novelist Joris-Karl Huymans, François comes to the conclusion that the best part of his life is now over. This is how *Soumission*, the last novel by Michel Houellebecq (2015b), starts off. Such a beginning makes one recognise the work as quintessentially Houellebecqian: where others may feel joy or even a sense of pride when hitting milestones, his protagonists, always anti-heroes, experience a sense of loss, knowing that from here, all is downhill. However, apart from drawing us right into his depressingly realist universe (Jefferey, 2011), this remark also forms a straight arrow to core *Soumission's* subject matter. Not the science fiction of France's conversion to islam, but the near collapse of our current socio-economic regime is the issue. In response to the remark that recent political events make it difficult to appreciate *Soumission* for the satirical fiction that it is (Lilla, 2015), the exercise here is to detach the book from its association to the unfortunate events with which its appearance coincided, as well as the current rise of islamophobia in various parts of the western world, and treat it as a piece of fiction that speaks about social relations, about living together, and about the role of the market and consumption in it, which is very much the focus of all of Michel Houellebecq's novels.

In this essay, I will try to show how *Soumission* may be read as a commentary on contemporary consumerist societies. To do so, I will reveal the tactics Houellebecq employs in his prose in order to challenge the idea that anything is a worthwhile endeavour in its own. I will argue these tactics revolve around a meticulous entanglement of the following ingredients: sexual relations, pre-fabricated food, and professional status. I will show how these elements intertwine to prove Houellebecq's point: that all we think worth living for is essentially subject to market forces, and that the best we can do is surrender and give up on desire entirely.

## HYPER-DESIRE

Although *Soumission* sketches the rise of a Muslim political party in France, and the subsequent conversion of many unreligious French

citizens to Islam, the focal point of the novel is academia, or more precisely a French Literature department at the Sorbonne III University. François, the novel's protagonist, is part of the faculty there and enjoys the many perks that come with the academic lifestyle, most notably the opportunity to sleep with his students. The luxury of spending your time in proximity of your preferred universe of thought was afforded by certain financial structures that are described in typically Houellebecqian terms: “the last vestiges of a dying welfare state (scholarships, student discounts, health care, mediocre but cheap meals in the student cafeteria)”. To Houellebecq, this welfare state is undermined by an increasing desire for material possession, as François' contemporaries are

hypnotised by the desire for money or, if they're more primitive, the desire for consumer goods (though these cases of acute product-addiction are unusual: the mature, thoughtful majority develop a fascination with that 'tireless Prometheus', money itself). Above all, they're hypnotised by the desire to make their mark, to carve out an enviable social position in a world that they believe and indeed hope will be competitive, galvanised as they are by the worship of fleeting icons: athletes, fashion or Web designers, film stars and models (Houellebecq, 2015a: 9).

Here, at the very start of the novel, Houellebecq goes in guns blazing. What stands out is the vocabulary of strong attraction: desire, addiction, fascination, adoration, and even galvanization. For Houellebecq, desire and adoration acquire a religious, even an archaically and cynically mystic, quality. Money is compared to a Greek god, people are said to be hypnotized by desire, to consume in a primitive way, and to worship sports heroes, actors and fashion models as if they were icons.

A strong admiration, adoration, and even the downright religious worshipping of pleasure has featured throughout Houellebecq's entire oeuvre. In *La possibilité d'une île*, the novella 'Lanzarote' (2002), and the short text 'Cleopâtre 2000' (2002), his characters engage in orgies and seek out swinging clubs. The plot of *Plateforme* (2001) revolves around sexual tourism, and in *Soumission* too, François' main concern is his access to sexual gratification, whether via escort services or his students. Even his eventual conversion to Islam, seems largely motivated by the possibility of polygamy (besides winning back his job and having his salary tripled). This desire is not seen as resulting from individuals' own wishes, but rather as an inherent feature of the current social system: “In the work of Michel Houellebecq, the rights of the Western citizen are no longer exclusively limited to the political and the economic [...]. Sexual gratification becomes almost a civic duty” (Abecassis, 2000: 802, my translation).

A large part of Houellebecq's analytical exercise through fiction consists of identifying the excesses this 'mandatory satisfaction' leads to. In *Les particules élémentaires*, for example, Houellebecq draws a direct line from the communes that came out of the hippy heyday of 1968 to satanist cults engaging in extreme sexual practices, and even cannibalism (1998). In *La possibilité d'une île*, a dehumanizing effect is described when Esther's birthday celebration turns into a drug-fuelled orgy. Her main lover Daniel, being excluded from all the fun, suddenly sees her as nothing more than “a pretty arrangement of particles, a smooth surface, without individuality” (Houellebecq, 2005: 239). Similarly, in 'Lanzarote', the character Rudi describes how his swinging adventures went sour: “What started as a party full of joy, free from taboo, slowly transformed itself into

an exercise in depravity without joy, that had something cold and profoundly narcissistic" (2002: 50, my translation).

Houellebecq points out the dangers of our 'loose morals', although he cannot get enough of describing what things look like right before all goes wrong: "In the Nietzschean sense, Houellebecq's books are decadent: in love with what is harmful. His 'realism' is fundamentally split, with cynicism on one side, and intoxication with realer-than-real fantasies on the other" (Jeffery, 2011: 52). The link Jeffery drew between Houellebecq's style and the decadent philosophy, before the publication of *Soumission*, became even more apparent in Houellebecq's latest novel. François' academic expertise is the 19th century decadent author Joris-Karl Huysmans. Huysmans' conversion to catholicism, apparently not a rare event among decadent artists at the time (Lilla, 2015), features prominently in François' thoughts, and in a way the storyline of *Soumission* can be seen as mimicking elements of this historical period. The bottom line is that the increased freedom to satisfy one's desires as one pleases (even if this liberty only exists in a limited social circle) leads to a situation of extremes. The availability of products and services that make satisfaction possible at all times (food delivery services, escort agencies, easy air travel to sex tourism destinations) causes an acceleration of the continuous cycle between want and get (Cnossen, 2015), an unstoppable hyper-desire.

Hence, in the Houellebecqian universe, desire is not only engineered by our biological programming to 'get it while we can'. Such an evolutionary approach, very in fashion these days, would have us think that we are simply wired to by reach out for pleasure. Orgasms are there to help procreation, obesity is a result of our body's preference for high-caloric food, and drugs are a shortcut to the endorphins otherwise only delivered when finally killing an animal after days of hunting. For Houellebecq, it is that other things to live for are gone. Real love. Family life. Pure romance. But he does not blame our genes. He blames the market.

## SAVING ON TRANSACTION COSTS

In *Soumission*, the first focal point Houellebecq picks to observe how the market shapes the desires of this protagonists, is the area of sexual relationships. The first thing that stands out in this area, is the planning of sexual relationships within the rhythm professional life. For one, the protagonist always finds a new love interest among his new students:

These relationships followed a fairly regular pattern. They would start at the beginning of the academic year, with a seminar, an exchange of class notes, or what have you, one of the many social occasions, so common in student life[...]. The relationship would take its course as the year went by [...] When we came back from the summer holiday and the academic year began again, the relationship would end, almost always at the girl's initiative" (2015a: 17).

In the intermezzo between two academic years, until a fresh supply of students arrives, the protagonist hires an escort. Thus, there is not just a conflation of work and sexual relationships in terms of place (both happen at the university), but also in terms of time: the pace of one is also the pace of the other. Furthermore, love life is not only tied up with, but also seen as employment. Before the country's eventual conversion to Islam, the

protagonist observes an implicit model of romantic relationships, which is an exclusive one:

young people, after a brief period of vagabondage in their very early teens, were expected to settle down in exclusive, strictly monogamous relationships involving activities (outings, weekends, holidays) that were not only sexual, but social. At the same time, there was nothing final about these relationships. Instead, they were thought of as apprenticeships – in a sense, as *internships* (a practice that was generally seen in the professional world as a step towards one's first job) (ibid: 18-19, emphasis in original).

The entanglement of love and work is not just symptomatic of the state of 'late social-democracy' that is the starting point of *Soumission*, but continued when François contemplates on the possibility of leading his life as a muslim. When he runs into a former colleague at a reception who all of a sudden looks much better, he remarks that his improved appearance seems to display the influence of a woman. Whereas in the English translation, François' colleague mentions the word 'married', the original text is less subtle: "Yes, yes, a woman, they found me one" [...] "a second year student", his colleague responds (2015b: 288, my translation). 'They' are the new Saudi-Arabian management that has taken over the university. It is implied here that being 'found a woman' is one of the perks of re-entering the workforce under the new regime. Where at first, physically unattractive and socially awkward men such as François and his colleague had to go and buy love, either by abusing their status with their students or by seeking out the services of escorts, they can now move into a more permanent situation.

The exact same thing goes for food. A constant factor in François' life is the purchase of mediocre food, delivered by someone he does not know and prepared outside his own home. When François visits his colleague Rediger's house for a meeting about his possible return to academia, he notices the high quality of the food, and how it seems lovingly prepared by Rediger's first wife, Malika (2015b: 247). He makes a similar observation when he visits his favourite colleague Marie-Françoise in the countryside. Marie-Françoise lost her job at the university, since under the new islamist regime, women were no longer allowed to work. However, she seems surprisingly happy in her new role: "Marie-Françoise greeted me with a big smile [...]. To see her bustling around the kitchen in an apron bearing the humorous phrase 'Don't Shout at the Cook – That's the Boss's Job' [...] it was hard to believe that just days ago she'd been leading a doctoral seminar (2015a: 151).

Such remarks may seem meaningless. An account of someone's cooking skills and their excellent mood can simply serve the narrator to describe the current setting. However, Houellebecq juxtaposes these remarks with descriptions of home-cooked meals gone awry because of too much work stress. When François runs into Bruno, who was a doctoral student at the same time he was, Bruno invites him to a barbecue the following Friday, at his home with his wife Annelise and some neighbours. Just like most of Houellebecq's characters, François does not possess the capacity to immerse himself into a social event, and instead ponders upon the sociological reasons for Annelise's stress: "Their mistake, I realised as soon as I set foot in his garden and said hello to his wife, was choosing a Friday night. She'd been working all day and was exhausted, plus she [...] planned a menu that was much too ambitious" (2015a: 92). In terms of

describing the atmosphere of this particular setting, Houellebecq could have left it at that. But nothing in Houellebecq's œuvre serves simply to tell a story. There are claims to be made about the world. And so he moves on:

I thought about Annelise's life – and the life of every Western woman. In the morning she probably blow-dried her hair, then she thought about what to wear, as befitted her professional status, whether 'stylish' or 'sexy', most likely 'stylish' in her case. [O]nce she got home, around nine, exhausted [...], she'd collapse, get into a sweatshirt and tracksuit trousers, and that's how she'd greet her lord and master (Ibid: 93-94).

If the reader is still in doubt, it is clear that François sees the benefits of women staying at home:

Hidden all day in impenetrable black burkas, rich Saudi women transformed themselves by night into birds of paradise with their corsets, their see-through bras, their G- strings with multicoloured lace and rhinestones. They were exactly the opposite of Western women, who spent their days dressed up and looking sexy to maintain their social status, then collapsed in exhaustion once they got home (Ibid: 91).

Here the real concern with 'late social-democracy' reveals itself: the economic independence of women deprives men of housewives who cook for them and look sexually seductive. Indeed, in all of Houellebecq's novels, his male protagonists survive on passable microwaved dinners, the purchase of which is often accompanied by detailed information on prices, whether or not the recipe is new, and the ways in which supermarket chains market them.

His protagonists often secure access to sex in much the same way they purchase food. They hire escorts, frequent massage parlours, or indeed abuse their position of power to take their pick from the latest arrival of freshmen. In *Soumission*, finding an escort is explicitly related to the consumption of high quality food: "Escort sites were something like restaurant guides, whose remarkable flights of lyricism evoked pleasures decidedly superior to the dishes one actually tasted" (2015a: 185).

This typically Houellebecqian combination of sociological observations with casual-yet-extremely detailed remarks on pre-ordered food serves to prove his point: there is nothing outside of the market. Everything, from romantic love and sexual satisfaction to food is governed by the market. In the world according to Houellebecq, marriage is a way to purchase food and sex at the same time, and secure the supply the foreseeable future, thus saving on transaction costs. This is further illustrated by François' remark on the polygamous household of Rediger: "a forty-year-old wife to do the cooking, a fifteen-year-old wife for whatever else...No doubt he had one or two wives in between" (2015a: 262). Religion serves a purpose in this model, too. It proposes a model of governance for these needs: they need to be satisfied within the confines of marriage, and it turns the duties of wives (cooking, performing sexual favours) into a job. This is not only the case in religious societies, as apparent already from the moment when François compared his contemporaries' romantic engagements to internships, and their monogamy to stable employment. It is just that, in religious societies, freedom to break out of these arrangements is further restricted by lack of economic independence and strict moral codes.

## MANAGING THE SELF

Hence, Houellebecq's thesis can be summarised as follows: in our current capitalist societies, where almost nothing is restricted by morality, the free market helps people satisfy all desires, whilst creating those desires at the same time. His novels read as illustrations of what happens if the market is seen as the all-encompassing force, when anything – love, pleasure, aesthetic appreciation – was ultimately subjected (a literal translation of *soumission*) to the workings of capitalism. Houellebecq shows himself favourable to the critical stance, also reiterated in critical management scholarship, that the individual does not choose freely. It is the availability and accessibility of products and services that create the need. Thus, Houellebecq's works can be read against the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, or “the conduct of conduct” (Murray Li, 2007: 275). Governmentality implies not the forceful manipulation of people's behaviour, but rather the subtle governing of people's desires.

If critical theory has always insisted that individuals' desires are a result of market forces, this statement requires new relevance in the light of the unanticipated amount of personal freedom in shaping one's professional life. Several scholars argue that the appeal to people's passion is why governments and companies get people to give up social security or a work-life balance (McRobbie 2015; Tokumitsu, 2015). McRobbie delves into the European working culture of freelancers in the creative industries in order to argue that powerful narratives of independence and glamour convince young people that stability and a monthly income is old-fashioned. It is telling then, that the future France Houellebecq describes in his latest novel, goes hand in hand with several incentives to stimulate freelance work, which corresponds with “the universal professional dream expressed by young people to set up their own company, or at least to be a freelancer” (2015a: 202-203). Houellebecq's comparison of romantic relationships to types of employment, and marriage as a way to save on transaction costs and get women to work harder on their physical appearance at home, bring to mind scholarly work on emotional labour (Korczynski, 2003) and aesthetic labour (Loacker, 2013). If the professional sphere comes to absorb areas otherwise reserved for personal expression, everything becomes an instrument of one's professional endeavours. It seems that, if love is work, the only solution is for work to become love.

## A MEDIUM-SIZED WORLD

Michel Houellebecq's ruthless analysis of society is still executed in books that are presented, discussed, disseminated and perceived as literary products. The question of why Houellebecq is worth reading, is not (only) answered by exposing his criticism of capitalism beneath the unfortunate sexism and xenophobia. When we want to read the facts of social life, we turn to social science, or investigative journalism. In order to understand the pleasure that is to be gained from reading Houellebecq, we have to turn to matters of style.

Although Michel Houellebecq has been interpreted as a 'depressive realist' who misrepresents life (Jefferey, 2011), a quintessential proponent of 'the age of despair' in European literature after WWII (Hudson, 2004), I would argue the strength of Houellebecq's work is not the drama of despair, or the darkness of depression, but rather the cool, dry, matter-of-factly style he writes in. His sentences are short, and often seem to convey no particular message at all. His chapters often end with seemingly

meaningless statements about the weather or the logistics around food and transport (“The sushi showed up a few minutes after she left. There was a lot of it” (Houellebecq, 2015a: 44). He excels in combining dry, factual statements with sad circumstances (“my new year's eve of 1999 went bad; I tried to get online, but I failed. [...] I fell asleep around eleven. A modern new year's eve” (Houellebecq, 2002: 13, my translation) and “On the day of my son's suicide, I made a tomato omelette” (Houellebecq, 2005: 16). Whereas the narrator of his first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* keeps wondering whether he might be insane, and sees his discomfort with the world as a sign of mental illness, the protagonists of his subsequent novels accept that their outlook on life is the result of the dire circumstances they live in, often presented as the end of a social-democratic regime, the after-effects of the sexual revolution, in other words “the affinity between economic liberalism and sexual liberalism” (Lahanque, 2015: 197, my translation). One of the sentences that make him brilliant is the statement at the very beginning of the novella *Lanzarote*: “the world is medium-sized [le monde est de taille moyenne]” (Houellebecq 2002: 8). Sentences like these define his style in opposition to mysticism or lyricism, never aiming to embellish, animate, or enchant.

Houellebecq's work exaggerates our current circumstances, and takes the resulting scenarios to extremes. He exposes the market-based mechanisms behind all that looks pretty: romantic love, intellectual pursuits, even spiritual devotion. Statements on the medium size of the world are reminiscent of avant-garde filmmaker Stanley Kubrick's 'the universe is indifferent', or the minimalist painter Frank Stella's 'what you see is what you see, there is nothing else', which may not be a coincidence given Michel Houellebecq's deep admiration for another American post-war artist: science fiction writer H.P. Lovecraft (Houellebecq, 1991). The second part of the title of his essay on Lovecraft, 'against the world, against life', is again illustrative of his stance as a writer: there is nothing to be celebrated. In his chapter tellingly called “There is actually no such thing as atheism”, Jeffrey gets at the fact that such ambition and adoration for beauty, social status and ever-greater sensory stimulation is, ultimately, unsatisfying: “Houellebecq dramatises one great, largely unspoken anxiety running through Western culture – the anxiety that can be grasped by simply thinking long enough about any normal advertisement and the visions of the better, happier, more self-possessed you it tries to conjure. Health and pleasure and comfort cannot last. *You will die*” (2011: 76, emphasis in original).

## CONCLUSION

So what are we to do? Here the writer must distinguish himself from the social scientist, who has no other obligation than to observe, dissect, and present. What Houellebecq proposes over and over again, is a poetic image. This is an image of complete surrender, of, indeed, submission. This recurring image of surrender, of finding a place of quietness or nothingness (Cnossen, 2015), comes back over and over again throughout Houellebecq's oeuvre. Various poetic images feature in different novels: the idea of the sea as a place to disappear into in *Les particules élémentaires* (1998), the victory of vegetation over industrialism in *La carte et le territoire* (2010), daily doses of morphine, but also 'an island in the midst of time' in *La possibilité d'une île* (Houellebecq, 2005: 433), and a vaguely mystic experience with a statue of Mary in *Soumission* (Lilla,

2015). However, it always comes down to the same thing: with these images, Houellebecq carves out a calm, quiet space devoid of any want.

Mark Lilla argues that Houellebecq's beef is not with the cures we find for our loneliness or lack of purpose – whether conversion to religion or hedonistic practices such as drug use, swinging, or excessive booze-imbibing – but with the deeply rooted belief, originating in Enlightenment, that personal freedom is the most important value and the highest goal (Lilla, 2015). I would add that Houellebecq attacks this unshakeable belief in personal freedom, which he believes is the root of our current misery, by pointing at the excesses of contemporary consumerism. With this, he enters the realm of economic exchange.

The image that best emerges of the Houellebecq is one of a hedonist – always craving more, never satisfied, and a buddhist – finding solace in nothingness – in equal measure<sup>9</sup>. Houellebecq points to exits from our high-paced, competitive, consumerist, and status-driven society. He may paint simplified caricatures in order to exaggerate the criticism of modern society, but he does so in search for ways out.

9. Martin de Haan, who translates Michel Houellebecq's works into Dutch, expands on the novelist's affinities with buddhism (See De Haan 2000).

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