Houellebecq's Priapism: The Failure of Sexual Liberation in Michel Houellebecq's Novels and Essays

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> The truth is scandalous. But nothing is worth anything without it.
> (*Rester vivant* 27)

> Jed had never had such an erection; it was truly painful.
> (*The Map and the Territory* 51; translation modified)

In the following, I will argue that Michel Houellebecq's essays and novels give voice to what I would label *priapism*. Houellebecq's dire analysis of postmodern societies and the malaise of the Western instinctual structure, and his vehement critique of the sexual liberation of the sixties as well as of Western individualism and liberalism are well known and well documented.[1] However, here I want to draw special attention to the way his texts embody an unusually bizarre and latently self-contradictory position of priapism. Priapism is a notion extremely well suited to the ways in which Houellebecq's novels and essays portray an involuntary desire or libido that is ordered from outside the subject, and thus is unfree. Priapism is a medical diagnosis for chronic erection not caused by physical, psychological, or erotic stimuli. It is potentially a harmful state, often quite painful. Untreated, the prognosis is impotence. For an outside party, the condition seems to designate lust for life, excitation, and pleasure, but the patient feels the opposite: pain, humiliation, and despair. Presenting a vision of a post-industrial neoliberal consumer society obsessed with pleasure and desire, dictating how the individual *must* desire and enjoy, Houellebecq's art discloses how Western societies' instinctual structure entails an alienated, stressed, and frustrated libido. The notion of priapism thus helps us appreciate Houellebecq's originality in spelling out this paradox in which his characters find themselves compelled to desire against their own will. He shows how the citizens of neoliberal market societies are constantly confronted with insisting and flirtatious offers of self-realization

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL SEPTEMBER 2016 SEPTEMBRE RCLC
0319–051x/16/43.3/477

and enjoyment. His characters cannot opt out of looking for pleasure; they are not *freely disposed* to seek it; they *must* strive to honour it. Houellebecq claims that today we are enslaved by an obligation to enjoy: capitalist advertising and the market society dictate that we must enjoy sex, work, family, leisure, food, and other things. If one fails to comply with this pleasure imperative, one is stigmatized, for in that case something must be wrong. Such a breach of the pleasure imperative prompts guilt, shame, and alienation, as is shown in the case of his characters.

In addition, the concept of priapism also signifies how the author's work is structurally animated by a sharply drawn and highly unstable dynamics of intensely contradictory forces. His prose is marked by a distinctly unstable undercurrent orchestrated by a desire that takes pleasure in and is absorbed by what it fiercely censures.[2] Though, for example, he adamantly criticizes pornography, he clearly takes great delight in painting scenarios in his prose scripted from pornographic phantasmagoria. Therefore, even though one might say that Houellebecq's sociological and moral critique runs parallel with traditional puritan and conservative attacks on postmodern society, the critical difference consists in the fact that the author himself is an active participant in what he condemns, describing himself as "terribly susceptible to the world surrounding me" (Houellebecq, *Interventions* 111). Thus, he takes a unique position as a kind of Buddhist libertine or voluptuary ascetic who bitterly dissociates himself from society's hedonistic pressure. The notion of priapism is therefore not only suggestive of the intellectual *content* of his novels and essays, but also of their aesthetic *structure* and *form*.

I. "A Sacrificed Generation"

The scandalous French author Michel Houellebecq (1958-) has made the cynical analysis of contemporary sexual culture his artistic watermark.[3] His examination of sex tourism, swinger clubs, S&M, prostitution, and pornography is well known. Houellebecq portrays the sexual *Lumpenproletariat* of post-industrial capitalist society, and in novels such as *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994, trans. as *Whatever* by Paul Hammond in 1998), *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998, trans. as *Atomised* by Frank Wynne in 2000; published in the US as *The Elementary Particles*), *Plateforme* (2001, trans. as *Platform* by Frank Wynne in 2002), and *La Possibilité d'une île* (2005, trans. as *The Possibility of an Island* by Gavin Bowd in 2006), the reader is introduced to lonely heterosexual men who spend their time on peep shows, adult theatres, sex travels to Thailand, prostitutes, and the like.[4]

Houellebecq provides a scathing, but also often funny, castigation of postmodern societies as well as of the erotic utopia and liberal ideals of the movement of 1968. Contrary to its declared intention, the sexual liberation movement has actually resulted in even greater cynicism, frustration, and lack of freedom. Houellebecq's novels do not merely express pessimism, but also—and, perhaps, even more—a cri-

tique of a shattering social crisis. The crisis consists of a social atomization, which means that the post-1968 generation must be understood as "a s*acrificed generation*" (Houellebecq, *Whatever* 112; italics in original). With disillusioned indignation, Houellebecq attacks the sexual liberation of the sixties for having paved the way for sexual liberalism. The idea of 'the Zipless Fuck' (as it was alluringly formulated in Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* in 1973)—of pure sex for the sake of pleasure with no strings attached—proved to be a fatal delusion. For, according to Houellebecq, there is no denying that "*Sexuality is a system of social hierarchy,*" as he says in *Whatever* (92; italics in original).

One could say that Houellebecq, like his character Bruno in *The Elementary Particles*, is gifted with a "*Depressive lucidity*" (186; italics in original), allowing him to perceive the contradictions in our culture all the more clearly. The great contradiction, according to Houellebecq, is that sexual liberation, the transgression of boundaries and taboos as well as the vision of a hedonistic utopia, did not give rise to more freedom, since this liberation has proven void and brutal: "The hedonistic individualism triggers the law of the jungle" (Houellebecq, *Interventions 2* 201). In other words, his depressive realism aims at unmasking an immense fraud: the sixties promised us a prospect of liberated eroticism and togetherness, but what we got was pure negative freedom—a neoliberal freedom that meant a release into emptiness, a freedom of the atom (compare the title *The Elementary Particles*). The title of Houellebecq's first novel, *Whatever* (*Extension du domaine de la lutte*—literally, 'extension of the battlefield'), is in this regard illustrative, as it clearly expresses the author's belief that the sexual revolution of the sixties had nothing to do with establishing an erotic communism. Rather, it had everything to do with a free sexual market, where the individual was left to realize himself within a system governed by supply and demand. The individual must be an entrepreneur of himself.

Houellebecq claims that this neoliberal freedom, introduced in the space of intimacy, brutalizes man. Unlimited sexual freedom has given rise to further depersonalization, commodification, and isolation. As a result of this sexual liberation, we now find ourselves in "a savage narcissistic competition" (Houellebecq, *Interventions 2* 86). Modern man is consequently more self-centered, anxious, and brutal; he has effectively been transformed into a Hobbesian wolf among men. The sexual revolution has served as a double-edged sword that has made the Western world organize its own doom, having been seduced into interiorizing the libidinal-neoliberal world picture. Martin Crowley offers a brilliant analysis of this contradiction in "Houellebecq: The Wreckage of Liberation," in which he argues that for Houellebecq, the sixties "resulted in hypocritically pro-capitalist forms of individualism" (Crowley 18).

Speaking about his prose in 1997, Houellebecq says that it becomes "more and more merciless and sordid" (*Interventions* 109). This sordidness is insistent in his novels. Hence, his *métier* is the portrayal of sex, a circumstance to which he himself points in an interview with Didier Sénécal. He claims that his sex scenes are superior to those of other contemporary novelists, since his depictions are more true

(Sénécal 30). However, the claim that his sex scenes are particularly true must be taken *cum grano salis*, since they are clearly staged with a pornographic script in mind.[5] Nonetheless, Houellebecq's focus on man's painful and frustrating bodily existence seems to distinguish him as a postmodern realist or naturalist. The desiring body is the impetus behind every human action in Houellebecq; the unprincipled stand-up comedian Daniel expresses this concisely in *The Possibility of an Island*: "for we are bodies, we are, above all, principally and almost uniquely bodies, and the state of our bodies constitutes the true explanation of the majority of our intellectual and moral conceptions" (155). Houellebecq untiringly writes about this all-domineering corporeality and sexual culture at the turn of the millennium. The bodily and sexual culture is in a deep crisis, for as the protagonist says elsewhere in the novel, "my body, because whatever else was true I had a body, was suffering, ravaged by desire" (*Possibility* 221).

The body is suffering more than ever, since, after the sexual revolution of the sixties, desire is excited more than ever before. According to Houellebecq, in late capitalist consumer society, desire has become imperative. The intense sexualization or pornification of mass culture after the sixties means that desire has increased exponentially, while satisfaction and/or pleasure have remained unchanged.

What is striking about Houellebecq's critique is, however, that he is repulsed neither by the sixties' erotic utopia nor by pornography's land of Cockaigne; on the contrary, he does not seem to care much, for example, about women being depicted as degraded or alienated in pornography or mass culture. The problem is, rather (for Houellebecq's protagonists), that reality cannot live up to these captivating hedonistic visions. Within the novelistic universe, Houellebecq's male characters would be perfectly content if they lived in a world in which women carelessly stripped and eagerly threw themselves into their arms. But the problem with the sixties' vision of the *Zipless Fuck*—or in the words of the slogan in France at the time, *vivre sans contraintes et jouer sans entraves*—which came to dominate the period after the sexual revolution, is thus that it was too good to be true. Without concretizing it further, Carole Sweeney senses this logic at play in Houellebecq's attitude to the sexual liberation of the sixties: "Houellebecq's position seems to straddle two seemingly incompatible ideological poles as his critique of post-'68 sexual liberation swings from right to left, coming to rest in some indeterminate space in between" (*Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* 129). This is why it is rather misleading when Sabine van Wesemael claims, along with Bruno Viard, Douglas Morrey, and Louis Betty, that the author is "a reactionary as regards the outline of morals" (Wesemael, *Le roman transgressif contemporain* 266)[6] or even "neoconservative" (Wesemael, *Michel Houellebecq: Le Plaisir du texte* 82). For the truth is, on the contrary, that Houellebecq is careful to distinguish himself from reactionaries, as he advances no nostalgia. In an interview with Susannah Hunnewell, he explains: "That's the difference between me and a reactionary. I don't have any interest in turning back the clock because I don't believe it can be done" (Hunnewell n. pag). In the book *Public Enemies*, featur-

ing a debate between Bernard-Henri Lévy and himself, he expands this argument, defending himself against charges of being a reactionary: "if there is an idea, a single idea that runs through all of my novels, which goes so far as to haunt them, it is the *absolute irreversibility of all processes of decay* once they have begun. Whether this decline concerns a friendship, a family, a larger social group, or a whole society; in my novels there is no forgiveness, no way back, no second chance: everything that is lost is lost absolutely and for all time. It is more than organic, it is like a universal law that applies also to inert objects: it is literary entropic" (Houellebecq, *Public Enemies* 111; italics in original). In addition, as concerns sexual liberation, the main problem, for Houellebecq, was that it *failed* to deliver on the hedonistic vision of free sex, unlike the reactionaries who object and oppose *the very idea itself*. The disparity between consumer society's unceasing arousal of desire and the individual's opportunities of realizing these seductive images is dizzying and unbearable. This is the root of the problem. For Houellebecq, this means that the current post-industrial society is suffering from a stressed and starved libido, thus resulting in bitterness and depression.

II. "The 'Dirt' of Postmodern Society"

Houellebecq gives voice to those whom the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (1997), has characterized as "the 'dirt' of postmodern society":

> In the postmodern world of freely competing styles and life patterns there is still one stern test of purity which whoever applies for admission is required to pass: one needs to be capable of being seduced by the infinite possibility and constant renewal promoted by the consumer market, of rejoicing in the chance of putting on and taking off identities, of spending one's life in the never ending chase after ever more intense sensations and even more exhilarating experience. Not everybody can pass that test. Those who do not are the "dirt" of postmodern society. (Bauman 14)

Houellebecq does not subscribe to a postmodern belief in the blessings of unlimited plurality and unrestrained freedom. He is not interested in a gaudy postmodernity, but rather in the banal, mediocre, and appallingly indifferent: "One holds it against me that I, in detail, display the mediocre humanity," he says in an interview with Josyane Savigneau ("Michel Houellebecq: 'Tout ce que la science permet sera réalisé'"). There is nothing glorious, spectacular, or outrageous about the characters in his novels, whose passivity and social defeatism merely make them stand out as non-empathic and emotionally numbed. Michel, the protagonist of the novel *Platform,* is consequently speaking on behalf of all the other main characters when, disillusioned, he describes himself as "a mediocre individual in every possible sense" (361). Houellebecq further explains his characters in *Interventions*:

> My characters are neither rich nor famous; neither are they marginalized, criminals, nor excluded. One will find secretaries, technicians, office workers, and higher clerks. People

> who sometimes lose their work, and who sometimes suffer from depression. That is to say, people who are completely average […]. It is undoubtedly this presence of a commonplace universe rarely portrayed […] that has surprised in my books—and particularly in my novels. (115)

Incapable of participating in a society that requires self-realization, the protagonists more or less helplessly swim with the tide in a sort of grudging conformism.[7] Being humiliated in the market society, they have lost all sense of direction while they at the same time are intransigently subjected to that society's insistent images and pleasure imperative. In this respect, one can say that Bruno—as a "sexually obsessed adult" (Houellebecq, *Elementary Particles* 54) who is "too miserable and frustrated to be especially interested in the psychology of others" (*Elementary Particles* 56-57)—is rather typical of Houellebecq's main characters. As mentioned above, Houellebecq gives voice to a male heterosexual *Lumpenproletariat*. This is accurately formulated in one of his poems (with the ironic title "L'amour, l'amour"), which ends as follows:

> Je m'adresse à tous ceux qu'on n'a jamais aimés,
> Qui n'ont jamais su plaire;
> Je m'adresse aux absents du sexe libéré,
> Du plaisir ordinaire.
> [I speak to all those whom one has never loved, who has never been able to please: I speak to those absent from liberated sexuality, from normal enjoyment].
> (Houellebecq, *Poésies* 128)

These characters are situated in a one-dimensional society that has reduced them to one-dimensional persons incapable of articulating goals or values, and almost incapable of relating meaningfully to other people.[8] This should come as no surprise, as the characters in his novels inhabit a world in which "human relationships become progressively impossible" (Houellebecq, *Whatever* 14). Bruno, who experiences bouts of bulimia (a condition that, in its mixture of excessive pleasure and abject disgust, is a prime example of the logic of priapism), is a good example of this in his relationship with Christiane. Christiane is as lonely as he is, and they form a kind of relationship based on a 'swinger' lifestyle. For Bruno, Christiane serves as a means of entering into sexual liaisons with other, younger, and more aesthetic female bodies. This erotic acceleration of insatiable desire ends badly, when Christiane has an accident during a gangbang and becomes partly paralyzed. Bruno suggests half-heartedly that they now can live together in his apartment, but Christiane replies that she does not want to be a burden to him or to anybody. No longer able to take part in hedonistic society, no longer able to constitute a means, but only a human being in herself, she commits suicide. In other words, priapism kills her; priapism destroys their relationship, for as Sweeney has it, "Effectively sacrificed to this evermore transgressive Sadean system, Christiane is killed by sexual dissipation" (*Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* 107-08). The narrator says as much when informing us that Bruno and Christiane had, in their lifestyle, joined "the liberal system […] the sexual model proposed by the dominant culture" (Houellebecq, *Elementary Particles* 201).

In other words, it is their inability to depart from the liberal system and the sexual model instilled in them that excludes them from having a beautiful relationship or a fulfilling love affair. Michel and Valérie in *Platform* are no exceptions. Both couples' relationships are shipwrecked because of the priapistic instinctual structure that vertiginously forces them to seek more and more extreme, accelerated, and intense pleasures. Thus, they fall victim to priapism, from which they fail to disentangle themselves. Social liberalism was institutionalized, Houellebecq claims, because of the liberation of the sixties, and it has left the succeeding generations confused and free-floating in an atomized society.

Hopelessness reigns here, where life is nothing but suffering, and where not even alcohol manages to soothe feelings of emptiness, displeasure, and meaningless social intercourse. In this universe, it is practically impossible to relate to one another in a meaningful manner; this is, strictly speaking, only possible by having sex together. The only time whatsoever in which life can offer some meaning and pleasure is in the sexual moment. But this is just a brief respite: after the orgasmic peak, when the sexual friction is over, suffering and emptiness instantly reappear. Once again, we can turn to Bruno: "His only goal in life had been sexual, and he realized it was too late to change that now. In this, Bruno was characteristic of his generation" (Houellebecq, *Elementary Particles* 54). Sex is the sole purpose of existence for these persons, whose impoverished imagination obsessively circles around nothing else, for, as Michel from *The Possibility of an Island* explains: "throughout my entire life I hadn't been interested in anything other than my dick" (*Possibility* 249). Sex is the only temporary sanctuary from a hopeless life in a hopelessly scattered and fragmented society: "I had probably placed too much importance on sexuality, in fact, that's indisputable; but the only place in the world where I felt good was snug in the arms of a woman, inside her vagina" (*Possibility* 74). It is crucial, however, to keep in mind that these persons are not to be conceived of as marginalized unfortunates or libertines, transgressing the norms of society. They are, like Bruno, *characteristic* of their generation.

As members of the sacrificed generation, these persons are victims of their time—a time that, after the sexual liberation of the sixties, has transformed them into serfs subjected to a postmodern sex-installation. A humorous and telling exemplification may be found in *Whatever*, in which the protagonist is hospitalized for depression in a psychiatric ward. At some point during their weekly conversations, the psychiatrist asks him when the last time he had sex was. To this, he answers that it was more than two years ago. *Heureka!*—The diagnosis is ready: The depression must originate in sexual frustration. Nathalie Dumas gives the following comment on this episode: "The psychiatrist confirms this when she asks the narrator of the novel how long time has passed since he slept with someone. The verdict falls promptly: It is impossible for an individual to find joy in life, when it has not have had sexual relationships for more than two years" (221).

Emotional brutishness and fatigue dominate the consumer society, which has cre-

ated a pure sexual Darwinism. The scientist and geneticist Michel gives the following disheartened characterization of men: "In fact, I'd say that men aren't capable of love […] The only emotions they know are desire—in the form of pure animal lust—and male rivalry" (Houellebecq, *Elementary Particles* 139-40). The stand-up comedian from *Platform* says something similar: "at heart, men don't give a shit about romance, they just want to fuck" (*Platform* 146).

The erotic totalitarianism means that the duality of power and impotence is accentuated further: "Physical beauty plays here exactly the role as nobility of blood in the Ancien Régime" (Houellebecq, *Possibility* 156). Beautiful and attractive people possess a power comparable with that enjoyed by the aristocracy during the absolute monarchy. Moreover, the order of the erotic hierarchy is juxtaposed with the vitalistic beauty ideals of Nazism: "And, with regard to physical love, I hardly had any illusions. Youth, beauty, strength: the criteria for physical love are exactly the same as those of Nazism" (*Possibility* 48-49).

Youth, beauty, strength: these traits are precisely what Houellebecq's characters lack, and the problem is, consequently, that "the characters can never freely satisfy their desire, being neither young, beautiful, nor strong" (Sacré 115). Hence, Michel in *Whatever* is not merely speaking for himself when he claims, "Lacking in looks as well as personal charm, subject to frequent bouts of depression, I don't in the least correspond to what women are usually looking for in a man" (Houellebecq, *Whatever* 13). The main characters are, perhaps, not repulsive, but they are nevertheless not attractive enough to belong to the erotic aristocracy. Feelings of insecurity dominate, as the erotic power of attraction is *alpha* and *omega*. The latent self-loathing caused by one's looks is sadly and touchingly expressed in Houellebecq's poem "Monde extérieur" (written in classical alexandrines) in the collection *La Poursuite du bonheur*:

> Je n'ai plus le courage de me voir dans la glace.
> Parfois je ris un peu, je me fais des grimaces;
> Ça ne dure pas longtemps. Mes sourcils me dégoûtent.
> J'en arrache une partie; cela forme des croûtes.
> [I no longer have the courage to look at myself in the mirror. Sometimes I laugh a little, make faces at myself. That does not go on for long. I loathe my eyebrows. I pull some of them off; they form clots].
> (Houellebecq, *Poésies* 148)

In this respect, women are probably the most exposed: "Without beauty a girl is unhappy because she has missed her chance to be loved" (Houellebecq, *Elementary Particles* 49). The situation is no better for beautiful women. Annabelle, Michel Djerzinski's teenage girlfriend, was considered "a prime cut," but she is nonetheless disgusted at being constantly objectified: "In the end, it was too painful to know they thought of me as just another piece of meat" (*Elementary Particles* 192). Houellebecq's protagonists, with almost no exception, speak about women in sexual terms—often in a condescending and degrading tone—such as (in alphabetical order) *bimbos, boudins, chairs fraîches, connasses, femmes qui m'ouvraient leurs organes, filles, igno-*

bles garces, jeunes pouliches, minettes, pétasses, pouffes, radasses, and *salopes*.

Furthermore, aging is experienced as a veritable erotic disaster. In a gaze back from a distant future at our time, we are told:

> The physical bodies of young people, the only desirable possession the world has ever produced, were reserved for the exclusive use of the young, and the fate of the old was to work and suffer. This was the true meaning of solidarity between generations; it was a pure and simple holocaust of each generation in favour of the one that replaced it, a cruel, prolonged holocaust that brought with it no consolation, no comfort, nor any material or emotional compensation. (Houellebecq, *Possibility* 280)

Inasmuch as sexuality is *sine qua non*, and inasmuch as sexual desire is mainly directed at young bodies (cf. Houellebecq, *Elementary Particles* 89), old age entails jealousy, bitterness, hatred, and loathing. The indispensable prerogative of eroticism, claims Houellebecq, implies that only youth is respected, which means that the individual will—eventually—perceive himself as abject, marginalized, or tabooed: "In the old world you could be a swinger, bi, trans, zoo, into S&M, but it was forbidden to be *old*" (Houellebecq, *Possibility* 152; italics in original).

Western societies' conflicting attitudes toward eroticism and age are, for Houellebecq, clearly exhibited in the matter of pedophilia: simultaneously with the increase of sexual obsession with youth, the taboo upon pedophilia is intensified, too: "At that time, the juridical arsenal aimed at repressing sexual relations with minors was getting tougher; crusades for chemical castration were multiplying. To increase desires to an unbearable level whilst making the fulfillment of them more and more inaccessible: this was the single principle upon which Western society was based" (*Possibility* 56). This statement marks the contours of Houellebecq's critique of Western societies' instinctual structure, which mercilessly excites desire to the utmost while at the same time limiting the possibilities of its satisfaction. Houellebecq claims that this issue is blatant as concerns pedophilia. Thus, in the essay "La question pédophile," he explains that "the pedophile seems to me to be an ideal scapegoat for a society which organizes the excitement of desire without delivering the means to satisfy it" (*Interventions 2* 159). The pedophile is symptomatic of his time, being "the most sorrowful in the world, as he experiences desire unable to satisfy it" (*Interventions 2* 160-61). Like Houellebecq's literary characters, the pedophile is both victim and product of the sexual structure of the market society. In both instances, the problem is that "the world of advertisement and the general economy rest on desire and not on its fulfillment" (*Interventions 2* 159). Regarding the genesis of the pedophile, Houellebecq notes: "in the present state of the sexual economy, the maturely aged man wants to fuck, but he no longer has the possibility to do so; he no longer really even has the right to do so. As a consequence, one should not be too surprised that he therefore attacks the only one unable to offer any resistance: the child" (*Interventions 2* 159-60). This explanation will, perhaps, make the psychiatrists and the sex pathologists shake their heads, but it nonetheless provides a provocative illustration of the basic idea in Houellebecq's critique of contemporary constructions of

desire. Yet another provoking and typical aspect of Houellebecq's interpretation of pedophilia consists of his characterization of the pedophile, *not* as a societal mutation or aberration, but as the logical outcome of the present order of society. In other words, Houellebecq shows that our resentment, anger, and disgust at the pedophile might as well be directed towards ourselves as a society, for it is we ourselves who have created this abomination. The pedophile is rather a victim of the priapism of present society. In his novels and essays, Houellebecq stages a moralism that coolly informs us that if we do not like what we see in the mirror, he is not to blame. He does nothing more than to hold it up in front of us: "The conflict here is simple and brutal. I hold a mirror up to the world, but the world does not finds its reflection beautiful" (Houellebecq, *Public Enemies* 276).

Since Houellebecq's characters sorely lack *youth, beauty*, and *strength*, society callously sentences them to run the erotic gauntlet. Bruno is a good example of this; his years in Paris in the seventies are described (in a manner that is both disheartening and darkly humorous) as particularly frustrating: "Those first couple of years the fashions were a real turn-on. It was unbearable, all those cute little girls in their little skirts with their little laughs" (Houellebecq, *Elementary Particles* 145).[9] The ever-present sexual impulses are perceived as an intolerable inferno of frustration: "All I wanted was for some little bitch to put her full lips around my cock and give me blow-job. I saw a lot of little bitches with pouting lips in the nightclubs, and I went to the Slow Rock and l'Enfer a few times while Anna was away; but they were always going out with someone else, always sucking someone else's cock, and I just couldn't stand it" (*Elementary Particles* 146). The market society's means of obtaining sexual gratification work as poison and medicine at the same time, for they compensate for an immense sexual frustration, which they themselves, however, have brought about, and which they perpetually uphold. Bruno's situation in Paris in 1976 is, in this respect, quite revealing: "Girls wore short, flimsy dresses which stuck to their bodies with sweat. He walked around all day, his eyes popping out with lust. […] He had a permanent hard-on. He felt as though what was between his legs was a piece of oozing, putrefying meat devoured by worms. […] He started visiting sex shops and peep shows, which served only to aggravate his sufferings. For the first time he turned to prostitutes" (*Elementary Particles* 128).

Houellebecq's characters are caught in an instinctual structure from which there is no escape and which alienates sexual pleasure, which increasingly develops a compensatory feature. It is consequently typical of the characters to find themselves in situations in which they masturbate to the lingerie sections in supermarket leaflets, John Grisham's novels, or lightly-dressed women displayed in rap videos.

III. "Bitterness, an Immense and Inconceivable Bitterness"

The alienation of sexuality and pleasure is unmitigated in Houellebecq's novelistic universe. An extreme expression of this is to be found in *Whatever*, when the protagonist is at a discotheque: "I was starting to feel like vomiting, and I had a hard-on" (112). He goes to the bathroom, sticks two fingers down his throat, vomits, masturbates, and ejaculates after a couple of minutes, after which he achieves a certain "feeling of confidence and certainty" (*Whatever* 112). Eroticism is so alienated that disgust and enjoyment go hand in hand. This is the terrible logic of priapism: "Throwing up or ejaculating is really the same in Houellebecq […] ejaculation is in this view a pathological phenomenon; it is the symptom of an ill and suffering body" (Schuerewegen 97). In the Western world, it is no longer possible to distinguish the erotic drive from repulsion and alienation:

> Desire itself disappears; only bitterness, jealousy and fear remain. Above all there remains bitterness; an immense and inconceivable bitterness. No civilization, no epoch has been capable of developing such a quantity of bitterness in its subjects. In that sense we are living through unprecedented times. If it was necessary to sum up the contemporary mental state in a word, that's the one I'd undoubtedly choose: bitterness. (Houellebecq, *Whatever* 148)

Bitterness, frustration, and alienation are characteristic of the modern instinctual structure, which in Houellebecq's universe is illustrated by the discotheque (hence, it is no coincidence that the scene with Michel in *Whatever* takes place here): "The universe as discotheque. The accumulation of frustration in grand style" (Houellebecq, *Rester vivant* 11). Going to a discotheque equals seeking out one's own erotic defeat and humiliation. The frustrated individual goes to the discotheque to ease his frustration, but doing so only maximizes it:

> Many of the frustrated continue—in spite of what one should expect—to visit them [the discotheques]. Consequently, they get the opportunity, minute for minute, to confirm their own humiliation; here we are very close to hell. Having said that, there are sexual supermarkets, which display a catalogue as complete as the offer of pornography; yet they lack the essential. (Houellebecq, *Interventions 2* 58)

The discotheque is a modern hell, which, as a sexual supermarket, apparently offers everything the heart desires, but which firmly closes the checkout for the frustrated, who—erotically speaking—are deficient in the necessary capital.

The discotheque is in this respect very similar to the supermarket, which likewise seems to be a hedonistic heaven of consumption: "The supermarket is the authentic, modern paradise; the struggle ends at the entrance. Here the poor, for example, do not enter" (*Interventions 2* 58). The twenty-eight year old Tisserand—who is so "ugly that his appearance repels women" (Houellebecq, *Whatever* 53)—expresses this situation with depressing clarity: "I feel like a shrink-wrapped chicken leg on display

on a supermarket shelf" (*Whatever* 98). The supermarket becomes a symbol of the modern condition, of a false freedom that seems infinite, but is not.[10] In addition, the supermarket provokes and excites the desire to the utmost while the purchasing power of the individual remains the same:

> The logic of the supermarket necessarily entails a dissemination of desire […] This entails a certain depression of the will in contemporary man. The individuals do not desire less; on the contrary, they desire more and more. Now their desires, however, have a somewhat high-pitched and reproachful look. Without being pure simulacra, they are, to a large degree, produced by exterior factors—we say *commercial* in the widest sense. (Houellebecq, *Interventions 2* 36-37; italics in original)

We are increasingly becoming strangers to our desires, as they are dictated from the outside by the market society. Man is accordingly becoming a commodity:

> [O]ne makes progress by keeping in mind that we are not only living in a market economy, but more generally speaking, in a market society. That is to say, a civilisatory space in which the entirety of human relations as well as the entirety of man's relation to the world is mediated by simple numeric calculation, putting the attraction, actuality, and value for money into play. (*Interventions 2* 27)

Human relations are completely saturated with liberal and mercantilist analysis. Thus, modern man seems to exist in a system of generalized transactions within which he has, in an unequivocal manner, been ascribed a certain exchange value.

The market dictates our sexual fantasies and programs them like commodities for consumption. Along the lines of this liberal logic of the market, the narrator of the ironic short story "Prise de contrôle sur Numéris" suggests that we introduce an erotic qualification parameter that includes age, looks, height, weight, breast measurement, size of hips, size of penis, among other things. In other words, he proposes to replace the social security number with a 14- or 12-digit alternative that designates the citizen's sexual market value. In another essay, "Approaches du désarroi," we find a similar idea of how the market has standardized love life to parameters concentrated in such numbers of physical attraction. These numbers are, for Houellebecq, popularized by the pornographic industry and women's magazines.

In a prose poem, "Dernier rempart contre le libéralisme," in the poetry collection *Le Sens du combat*, Houellebecq attacks liberalism for making human community impossible, since it evaluates human existence in terms of pure economic criteria, that is, from "pure numeric criteria" (*Poésies* 52). Economic liberalism and the market society have efficiently made their entrances into the private sphere and created a *liberalized sexual system*:

> It's a fact, I mused to myself, that in societies like ours sex truly represents a second system of differentiation, completely independent of money; and as a system of differentiation it functions just as mercilessly. The effects of these two systems are, furthermore, strictly equivalent. Just like unrestrained economic liberalism, and for similar reasons, sexual liberalism produces phenomena of *absolute pauperization*. Some men make love every day; others five or six times in their life, or never. Some make love with dozens of

> women; others with none. It's what known as "the law of the market" […] In a totally liberal sexual system certain people have a varied and exciting erotic life; others are reduced to masturbation and solitude. Economic liberalism is an extension of the domain of struggle, its extensions to all ages and all classes of society. Sexual liberalism is likewise an extension of the domain of struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society. (Houellebecq, *Whatever* 99; italics in original)

This purely economic and liberal approach to human nature and desire is goaded to its most extreme in the matter of sex tourism. In the novel *Platform*, the main character has the idea to organize actual sex travels, where the traveler can choose from a broad variety of erotic travel packages. The protagonist's thinking is as follows:

> "Therefore," I went on, "you have several hundred million Westerners who have anything they could want but no longer manage to obtain sexual satisfaction: they spend their lives looking, but they don't find it and they are completely miserable. On the other hand, you have several billion people who have nothing, who are starving, who die young, who live in conditions unfit for human habitation and who have nothing left to sell except their bodies and their unspoiled sexuality. It's simple, really simple to understand; it's an ideal trading opportunity." (Houellebecq, *Platform* 242)

The protagonist claims westerners are utterly alienated sexually because of narcissism, individualism, performance anxiety, cynicism, and a lack of ability to surrender oneself. The westerner has lost the ability to give without calculation. He is too conscious of his own individuality, which means that he cannot stomach any degree of dependency and weakness. In his idealized exoticism, Michel upholds the view that people from the third world possess a sexuality still intact and not yet infected by the liberal, libidinal structure of the West. Their sexual attitude is natural and immediate; they are still able to give of themselves.

What may provoke some in this line of argument may be that it makes perfect sense, from a strictly liberal and market-economic point of view. Judged solely by these criteria, sex tourism could be seen as a *win-win situation*, and if in spite of this we are appalled by the vision of "how important sex tourism would be to the future of the world" (*Platform* 107), the protagonist is not to blame. He is merely drawing the conclusion of the dominant principles and norms of our culture.

IV. "I Just Want to Make You Happy"

In his thought-provoking book *Le Consensus pornographique* (2002), Xavier Deleu explains how the consumer principle of the market society critically dominates our libidinal structure. Desire is enticed to hitherto unknown heights, and the wild hunt for pleasure and instant gratification rises exponentially:

> The free dynamics of production and the necessities of a growing consumption without end have established enjoyment as one of the basic principles of the individual and collective happiness. Any production of goods, but also of every cultural production, is

> nurtured by a motor of pleasure and a search for satisfaction. In any logic of hyper-consumerism, the social pressure advances a behavior of immediate personal satisfaction, thus containing a sexual content. (Deleu 9)

The hunt for pleasure is at the core of Houellebecq's analysis of the symptoms of the decadent decay of the West. The apocalyptic vision has everything to do with the accelerated hunt for pleasure, for as Michel remarks in *The Possibility of an Island*: "More and more, men were going to want to live freely, irresponsibly, on a wild quest for pleasure; they were going to want to live like those who were already living amongst them, the *kids*" (*Possibility* 299). One of the protagonist's lovers, Isabelle, works for a teenage magazine for girls tellingly labelled *Lolita*, whose aim and scope she explains as follows: "all we're trying to create is an artificial mankind, a frivolous one that will no longer be open to seriousness or to humor, which until it dies, will engage in an increasingly desperate search for fun and sex; a generation of definitive kids" (*Possibility* 21-22). The hunt for pleasure and for the next erotic *kick* creates a humanity that emotionally and culturally seems empty; a banal and mediocre humanity whose one-dimensionality has deep roots in desperation, futility, and anxiety.

The reference to the new generation of definitive kids might very well be Larry Clark's film *Kids* (1995), which gave rise to a great deal of controversy. It shows one day in the life of a group of teenagers in New York City during the HIV era in the mid-nineties. They display uninhibited sexual behavior and spend their time abusing alcohol and drugs; the group of teenagers that we meet in the film surely corresponds with Isabella's description of *an artificial and frivolous mankind*. The teenagers pass their time with endless vulgar dialogues about sex, with unmotivated physical violence, drug dealing, pilfering, date rape, alcohol and drug abuse, and sex with pre-pubertal minors. The main character Telly has been diagnosed with HIV, and has developed the idea only to have sex with virgins—unprotected sex, naturally. With his monotonous voice, lisping "I just want to make you happy," the immature Telly succeeds in seducing and exposing the unsuspecting minors to fatal dangers of infection. The film ends in a gloomy scenario with a gaze at the city's junkies in the morning hours, while Telly narrates in a monologue that without sex, he would have nothing to live for. The vision of *kids* desperately searching for *fun* and *sex* does, indeed, not seem very *funny* nor *sexy*, but rather apocalyptic.

The libidinal market society has inflicted a duty to desire, a pitiless command that no one can refuse, and which effectively makes us alien to pleasure and to ourselves. Houellebecq offers a precise description of this situation when he exposes the pleasure totalitarianism of the commercial world:

> It installs a horrific and harsh superego, far more unmerciful than any imperative that has ever existed; and it sticks to the skin of the individual, unceasingly repeating: 'You must desire. You must be attractive. You must participate in the competition, in the struggle, in the stream of life. If you stop, you no longer exist. If you fall behind, you are dead. (*Interventions 2* 41)

Consumption of the products of the market society becomes the *raison d'être* for existence as such; desire becomes the only justification for life. As desire becomes the only human parameter, the absent satisfaction becomes the more intense and frustrating: "The opposite is true of the sex-and-advertising society we live in, where desire is marshalled and blown out of all proportion, while satisfaction is maintained in the private sphere. For society to function, for competition to continue, people have to want more and more, until desire fills their lives and finally devours them" (Houellebecq, *Elementary Particles* 133-34). The market society is essentially sustained by desire and its maximization; satisfaction is principally counterproductive and undesired inasmuch as satisfaction does not endorse consumption. In other words, dissatisfaction is institutionalized in the market society, whose success depends on the restless dissatisfaction and demand of the consumers. As a consequence, market society brings about priapism.

The unfortunate results of this libidinal structure are evident inasmuch as the hedonistic pressure and high expectations are felt as all the more unbearable when one stands outside the festivities. The discrepancy of the average or depressed state and the exciting and alluring promises of sexual and amorous bliss merely help accentuate the dissatisfaction and frustration even more. This state is aptly captured in *Whatever*, when Michel has been hospitalized due to depression: "it's a depression. Officially, then, I'm in a depression. The formula seems a happy one to me. It's not that I feel tremendously low; it's rather that the world around me appears high" (135). The passage quite precisely depicts Houellebecq's appeal against the instinctual structure of Western society, as, via its hedonistic and libidinal consumption of mass entertainment, it is out of step with reality, which, held up against the stimulating images of the market society, is devalued. The discrepancy between Western society's ever-intensified desire and its actual means of satisfaction is emphatically illustrated in a scene at the beginning of *Whatever*. One Friday evening, Michel has been invited to a party at a colleague's place, where "some stupid bitch" starts to strip as "she pull[s] the most incredible faces" (3). To the male spectators, the scene seems awkward and inappropriate, especially because the woman is not apparently known to be sexually generous: "She's a girl, what's more, who doesn't sleep with anyone. Which only underlines the absurdity of her behaviour" (3). Sexually aroused, Michel's male colleagues gaze in frustration, well knowing that the scenario will lead to nothing.

Western societies' erotic contradictions and absurdities are, for Houellebecq, clear in regards to pornography, which may seem to ease frustration, but which really interiorizes it. It strives to excite desire to new heights. It strives to outdo reality—with the result that reality seems increasingly unable to honour the demands that are aroused: "Pornography […] is a system of constant disappointment. Its goal is to create habituation in order to make people consume new porno. It tries to be more desirable than the real world" (Steines 105). As a *system of constant disappointment*, pornography is paradigmatic for the Western instinctual structure, and it directly seems to affect the sex life of the individual. Houellebecq's main characters thus note how their

partners are inspired by pornographic movies; taking the images of pornography as standards, their lovers are, for example, too brutal and insensitive when performing *hand jobs*. Or, on the other hand, they are praised for giving great *blowjobs* learned through pornography. Like the market society's instinctual paradigm, pornography saturates the sexuality of the individual in a manner perceived as ambivalent and confusing. In an interview with Vincent Eggericx, Houellebecq explains his take on pornography: "A part of me, which is bound to the general currents of the time, is hungry for pornography; but it is a part that I dislike" (Eggericx 16). Houellebecq, who in 2001 directed a 17-minute-long lightly erotic movie, *La Rivière*, for Canal+, proclaims that he is engulfed by pornography, albeit grudgingly, since it also makes him experience great unease. He criticizes pornography's latent devaluation of real sex life, which increasingly becomes disappointing and unattractive as compared to manipulated erotic images.

Sexuality appears to be more and more artificial, staged from the outside, just as it installs unreal and unrealistic ideals for the body. The protagonist of *Platform* explains this as follows: "Try as they might, they [the members of his generation] no longer feel sex as something *natural*. Not only are they ashamed of their bodies, which aren't up to the porn standards, but for the same reasons they no longer feel truly attracted to the body of another" (244). The extreme idolization of the body entails an extreme disgust with the body.

Sexual liberation led to a massively increased interest in corporeality. However, rather than liberation, this gave rise to sterner bodily discipline, since the body now must be maintained and regulated in accordance with the renewed demands of *sex appeal*: "A number of other important events in 1974 further advanced the cause of moral relativism. The first Viatop club opened in Paris on 20 March; it was to play a pioneering role in the cult of the body beautiful" (Houellebecq, *Elementary Particles* 58). The manipulation of the body, through bodybuilding or cosmetic surgery, is the direct outcome of the sexual revolution's liberation of the body. The expansion of bodily freedom paradoxically equals a stricter bodily pressure to conform. Pornography is, therefore, one of the most manifest and conspicuous phenomena resulting from sexual liberation: "From a moral standpoint, 1970 was marked by a substantial increase in the consumption of the erotic, despite the invention of vigilant censors. The musical *Hair*, which was to bring the 'sexual liberation' of the 1960s to the general public, was a huge success. Bare breasts spread quickly across the beaches of the Riviera. In a few short months, the number of sex shops in Paris leapt from three to forty-five" (*Elementary Particles* 41).

Violence, sadism, and serial killers are, in Houellebecq's novelistic universe, the logical and unavoidable culmination of the sexual liberation of the sixties. The market society's acceleration of desire necessarily implies that the pleasures become more and more extreme:

> Having exhausted the possibilities of sexual pleasure, it was reasonable that individuals, liberated from the constraints of ordinary morality, should turn their attentions to the

> wider pleasures of cruelty […] In a sense, the serial killers of the 1990s were the spiritual children of the hippies of the sixties […] From this point of view, Charles Manson was not some monstrous aberration in the hippie movement, but its logical conclusion. (*Elementary Particles* 144-45)

The taboos and boundaries for what seems *outré* and acceptable have rapidly been blurred. Misogyny, disgust, violence, and sadism are thus on the rise. This tendency is, for Houellebecq, unsurprising if one considers the current libidinal structure: "This violence is perhaps linked to the difficulty of experiencing sensations within sexuality. The taste for things, which normally seem pleasant, is lost" (*Interventions 2* 201). The market society's acceleration of desire gives rise to greater frustration, bringing forth greater resentment, which entails more misogyny and disgust, accelerating desire even more, thus causing desire to be yet even more extreme and artificial.

Overall, Western societies have, with the establishment of sexual liberation and a liberal market society, paved the way for cruelty, revulsion, and depression: "it is clear that man soon will be hurled against a catastrophe under horrible conditions; we are already there. The logical consequence of individualism is murder and misery" (Houellebecq, *Interventions 2* 63).

What is to be done in this dire situation? Houellebecq gives two answers. One is critical—"the only way to go is relentlessly to express the contradictions […], which are typical of my time" (Houellebecq, *Interventions* 118); one is rebellious—"The society, in which you live, aims at destroying you [...] Attack!" (Houellebecq, *Rester vivant* 26). However, Houellebecq maintains that, in the end, it makes no difference one way or the other: at this point, in the view of his novels, there is no escape from priapism. For Houellebecq, priapism is absolute.[11]

Notes

1. The critical literature on Houellebecq has grown considerably, but is nonetheless somewhat uneven. However, I would draw special attention to Carole Sweeney's critical study *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (2013), which is the most penetrating and nuanced study I have read so far. Nurit Buchweitz's recent *An Officer of Civilization: The Poetics of Michel Houellebecq* (2015) is also worth consulting. Both studies are preoccupied with Houellebecq's sociological critique of contemporary society. Both underline how the author's works are informed by moral resentment and how it "is a socially involved project" (Buchweitz 26) attacking the pitfalls of post-industrial capitalist society that colonizes every aspect of our being. Sweeney draws attention to his special ideological ambivalence, "as it seems to participate in, even approve of, the very world that it purports to condemn" (x). Buchweitz similarly emphasizes how "Houellebecq writes from within post-capitalist culture and also against it" (27)—a belief shared by Sabine van Wesemael, who in *Michel Houellebecq: Le plaisir du texte* (2005) similarly asserts, "The capitalist world he denounces is his as well" (14). Van Wesemael expands this view in *Le roman transgressif contemporain: De Bret Easton Ellis à Michel Houellebecq* (2010), which places Houellebecq within the context of a contemporary genre of transgression. The author's stance is here understood as an extreme existential psychological reaction to postmodern society, and his characters are seen as psychological derivatives of contemporary society. Along with Murielle Lucie Clément (cf. her *Michel Houellebecq revisité: L'écriture houellebecquienne* from 2007), with whom she has done several collaborative studies (see, for example, the

excellent coedited anthologies *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe* (2007) and *Michel Houellebecq à la Une* (2011)), van Wesemael is particularly interested in the complex of castration, sexual abjection, and the crisis of sexual suffering and humiliation. Like Sweeney and Buchweitz, Bruno Viard insists in *Houellebecq au laser: La faute à Mai 68* (2008) that Houellebecq is first and foremost a moralist, and that it is as such that he attacks the *soixante-huitards*. In her fine comparative study *Sade-Houellebecq, du boudoir au sex-shop*, Liza Steiner probes the points of convergence between Marquis de Sade and Michel Houellebecq, and demonstrates how "Houellebecq chooses the point of view of a mediocre individual lost 'in the mass-culture' and subjected to the tyranny of a desire made the commercial motor" (17). I would also like to draw attention to Bernard Maris's excellent and highly polemical essay *Houellebecq économiste* (2014), which assiduously analyzes the author's disclosure of the self-contradictions and inhumanity of the neoliberal, economic ideology: "no other author has succeeded in grasping the economic malaise plaguing our epoch like him" (21).

2. Cf. Viard, *Houellebecq au laser* 76-77 and 122.

3. Houellebecq himself emphasizes how "the novel is a natural medium for expressing debates or philosophical disagreements" (*Interventions 2* 152). In many ways, his novels can be understood as literary illustrations of social debates or criticism. As with the novels of Voltaire, it makes good sense to comprehend Houellebecq's literary universe as an argumentative *exploratorium*, that is, as *romans à thèses*. I would thus go along with James Grieve, who claims that the texts of Houellebecq are to a large degree social pamphlets camouflaged as novels: "It is often said that the best novelists show rather than tell; Houellebecq is the extreme of the type who tells rather than shows" (88). This means that in the following, I shall, to a certain extent, be more preoccupied with the discursive and argumentative aspects of Houellebecq's texts than with the literary and poetic. By this, I nevertheless believe it to be true to the spirit and motivation of his work.

4. In comparison with the preceding novels, Michel Houellebecq's latest novels, *Submission* (2015) and *The Map and the Territory* (2010), change the scene. The central sexual-cultural critique (which is the subject of this article) does not play the same decisive role in these novels and so will not figure in the following.

5. Bruno, for example, ejaculates over Christiane's face (Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles* 199), as does Michel over Valérie's (Houellebecq, *Platform* 180), and in the short story *Lanzarote*, Pam licks the narrator's sperm from Barbara's breasts (*Lanzarote* 52). In other words, these are classic pornographic *cum-shot* scenarios. See, in addition, Sabine van Wesemael: "What equally juxtaposes Houellebecq's texts with the pornographic products is that he finds great pleasure in the redundant and in the clichés […] repetitions that contain an effect of exaggeration and childishness as in pornography" (*Michel Houellebecq: Le plaisir du texte* 191).

6. Like van Wesemael, Bruno Viard claims that Houellebecq's "critique of sexual liberty makes him a conservative as regards the outline of morals" (*Houellebecq au laser* 38). Cf. Douglas Morrey, *Humanity and its Aftermath*, and Louis Betty, "'Michel Houellebecq, Meet Maximilian Robespierre': A Study in Social Religion."

7. Michel Houellebecq seems to have mirrored himself in this depressive banality of his literary characters. One might say that his anti-liberal and anti-individualistic tendencies are so strong that, for the author, it would make no difference to invent other characters different from himself, since he is typical of his time as it is. Inasmuch as Houellebecq is more interested in sociology than psychology ("Je crois peu en la liberté—Entretien" 19), it is a matter not of treating the characters as distinct individuals, but rather as stereotypes: rather than characters, we have stereotypes that do not even regard themselves as individuals; rather than dapple in intellectual subtleties with the genre of *autofiction*, Houellebecq sneers at it, as without any metafictive sophistication, he merely prints commonplace chunks from his autobiography in his texts. Many of the protagonists have names in common with their maker (*The Elementary Particles, Whatever*, and *Platform*), and all of them are the same age as Houellebecq at the year of publication; the protagonist in *Whatever* is hospitalized for depression, as Houellebecq had been. The main characters often have futile jobs (like the IT job Houellebecq held in the Assemblée Nationale until the publication of *The Elementary Particles*); and like Houel-

lebecq, the main characters of *The Elementary Particles* have been abandoned by their mothers and raised by their grandparents. One of the main characters in *The Elementary Particles* has, moreover, immigrated to Ireland in search of refuge from French postmodern society, just like Houellebecq. Concerning the author's utilization of himself in the novels, Bruno Viard writes: "The author seems to say: You love freedom, the modern world, and individualism. I will show it to you in all its hideous truth, and this will not be difficult for me, as I myself am one of its most lamentable representatives" ("Situation psycho-politique de Michel Houellebecq" 135-36).

8. A commonplace view in the critical literature. See, for example, Sabine van Wesemael: "as his characters observe on many occasions, they lack the essential thing in their world: warmth, love, and life" (*Le roman transgressif contemporain* 133); and Nurit Buchweitz: "the protagonist is either cut off from meaningful relationship or his relationships are short-lived" and "relationships in Houellebecq's novels are grasped almost as consumer merchandise" (5, 58). According to Bruno Viard, Houellebecq's characters "abandon their sex-partners as soon as they discover the first signs of aging or disease. It is therefore the most complete dehumanization and savagery, which they describe" (*Houellebecq au laser* 20). Finally, Liza Steiner confirms that his characters suffer from "a profound incapacity of experiencing amorous feelings […] in Houellebecq's oeuvre it is easy to note […] how the amorous feelings of Houellebecq's characters are narrowly tied to the sexuality binding them to their partners" (194).

9. In the collection *Le Sens du combat*, Houellebecq includes a poem on "L'insupportable retour des minijupes."

10. Thus, the supermarket makes up the scene for human interaction. According to the poem "Transposition, contrôle" from the collection *Renaissance*: "In the supermarket I make my appearance / I play my role quite well" (Houellebecq, *Poésies* 238). Another poem, "Hypermarché—Novembre," from *La Poursuite du bonheur,* shows how feelings of isolation, insecurity, and anxiety are accentuated in the supermarket: "By the way, I stumbled in the freezing-compartment. / I started to cry and I felt some anxiety" (*Poésies* 113). Bruno Viard rightly notes that "the discotheque becomes a metaphor for the modern world" (*Houellebecq au laser* 47).

11. A point also made by Carole Sweeney, who stresses the claustrophobic atmosphere of Houellebecq's universe permeated by an omnipresent, relentless, and totalitarian neoliberalism: "This overpowering sense of a lack of an outside, of any kind of elsewhere, is the topography of Houellebecq's novels as they articulate the sense of entrapment within an infernal circuit of individualism and materialism, one that denies any possibility of an outside to the logic of the neoliberal cultures, that is, the complete disappearance of any opposition to this process" (57).

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