



# ***The possibility of an island*, or, The double bind of Houellebecq's apocalypse: when the end is not the end**

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## **Abstract**

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*The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that "The possibility of an island" (2005), the latest novel by the controversial French author Michel Houellebecq, utilises a variety of so-called marginal genres such as millennial, apocalyptic, Utopian writing and science fiction to question and to continue the millennial project he elaborated in "Atomised" (2001). The latter novel, first published in French in 1998, explores the idea of a new order that would gradually come into existence during the new millennium, namely that of a neo-humanity produced through cloning. In "The possibility of an island" this Utopian construction turns unequivocally into a dystopia. This novel thus adds a double bind to the Apocalypse foreseen in "Atomised": the end was not the end, but just the beginning of an intermediary phase. This analysis of Houellebecq's novelistic techniques is based on theoretical descriptions of the genres on which the two novels draw, as well as narratological concepts formulated by Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette. The conclusion of the article points out that Houellebecq's utilisation of marginal genres enables him to question contemporary civilisation and to investigate the consequences of scientific research on future generations.*

## Opsomming

### ***The possibility of an island*; of, Die dilemma van Houellebecq se apokalipse: wanneer die einde nie die einde is nie**

Die doel van hierdie artikel is om aan te toon dat "*The possibility of an island*" (2005), die jongste roman van die omstrede Franse skrywer, Michel Houellebecq, 'n verskeidenheid sogenaamde marginale genres, soos wetenskapsfiksie, apokaliptiese en utopiese geskryfte asook profesieë rondom die nuwe millennium, gebruik om die millenniumprojek van "*Atomised*" (2001) te bevraagteken en voort te sit. Laasgenoemde roman, waarvan die oorspronklike Franse weergawe in 1998 gepubliseer is, ondersoek op 'n verbeeldingryke manier die gelydelike totstandkoming van 'n nuwe orde tydens die nuwe millennium, naamlik dié van 'n nuwe mensheid geproduseer deur kloning. In "*The possibility of an island*" verander hierdie utopiese konstruk op ondubbelsinnige wyse in 'n distopie. Hierdie roman voeg 'n dubbelslagtigheid toe tot die apokalipse geteken in "*Atomised*": die einde was nie die ware einde nie, maar net die begin van 'n nuwe intermediêre fase. Hierdie analise van Houellebecq se romantegnieke is gebaseer op teoretiese beskrywings van die genres waarop sy twee romans berus, asook op narratologiese konsepte ontwikkel deur Roland Barthes en Gérard Genette. Die artikel kom tot die konklusie dat Houellebecq se gebruik van marginale genres hom in staat stel om die huidige samelewing te bevraagteken en die gevolge van wetenskaplike navorsing op toekomstige generasies te ondersoek.

## 1. Introduction

*The possibility of an island*, the controversial French author Michel Houellebecq's latest novel, made its entry in 2005<sup>1</sup> onto a stormy literary stage. According to Jean Bessière (2006:9), critics and writers currently complain that there are no more French writers of the calibre of Gide, Malraux and Sartre. In *Qu'est-il arrivé aux écrivains français? (What happened to the French writers?)* (2006), Bessière argues that the role of certain marginal forms of writing (like science-fiction, detective novels, works on the Shoah and on colonisation) is overlooked. He claims that these authors mediate in a much more "lucid" way the relationship between literature and reality than those who hope to continue the so-called canon of literature

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1 Both the original French and its first English translation appeared in 2005. However, all references in this article are taken from the 2006 English edition by Phoenix.

(Bessière, 2006:16). This well-known French theoretician of literature cites Michel Houellebecq's *The possibility of an island* (2005) as exemplary of the very relevant way in which, for instance, science fiction can reflect on contemporary society (Bessière, 2006:75-78), thus implying that this novel could be considered an important contribution to French literature.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that *The possibility of an island* not only uses science fiction, but also a variety of other genres such as millennial, apocalyptic, and utopian writing to question and to continue the millennial project elaborated in *Atomised* (2001).<sup>2</sup> Because of the perceived "deliberately provocative" (Patricola, 2005) nature of his novels, debates around Houellebecq tend to focus more on his controversial presentation of contemporary society, than on his creative use of previously marginalised genres. Our analysis of Houellebecq's novelistic techniques is based on theoretical descriptions of these genres as well as narratological concepts formulated by Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette.

## 2. *Atomised* and Houellebecq's millennial project

The original French version of *Atomised*, published in 1998, is an imaginative exploration of a new order that would gradually come into existence during the new millennium, namely that of a neo-humanity, produced through cloning, and in so doing positions the text undeniably within the tradition of millennialism, which we will define before proposing an analysis of the novel.

In her study on cultural manifestations of millennialism, Guttierrez observes that the phenomenon "appears in history whenever an approaching end is the governing idea behind a social, intellectual or artistic movement" (Guttierrez & Schwartz, 2006:1). The notion of millennialism is derived from the concept "millennium", which in the Christian religious tradition indicates

the thousand year reign of Jesus on earth predicted in the book of Revelation, from the Latin for 1 000 (*mille*); more commonly, the (usually future) state of perfection that will be inaugurated by the final days or end time. (Guttierrez & Schwartz, 2006: 296.)

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2      Originally published under the title *Les particules élémentaires* in 1998.

Jacques and Claire Arènes, in an article on Houellebecq's novels, further specify that a millennial vision of the end of time distinguishes three stages: a first period of ordeals and suffering followed by a subsequent period of peace, and a last period heralding the final battle between good and evil, which coincides with the end of historical time. The notion of the millennium usually refers to the second period, a 1 000 years of peace (Arènes & Arènes, 2006:799). According to these two definitions, the millennium can either precede, or follow the end of time. Guttierrez, referring to the Biblical books of Daniel and Revelation, observes that "the most narrow use of millennialism would be the interpretative schema used by Christians as they anticipate the end of time and the return of their saviour" and adds that this Biblical symbolism has "unslipped [its] moorings in antiquity" and has been "variously applied to many subsequent times of perceived crisis [...]" (Guttierrez & Schwartz, 2006:1). The change of the millennium in the year 2000, although not necessarily a time of "crisis", serves as an example of a historical moment which has been richly encoded with end time meanings:

The popular weekly newspapers made money hyping the change of the millennium [...] tapping into a deeply rooted millennialist world-view of a distinct segment of our population who were cautious about end time possibilities and willing to imagine various, wild even frightening scenarios. (Guttierrez & Schwartz, 2006:159.)

It is clear from the above how closely the notion of millennialism is associated and intertwined with that of the apocalypse, which is commonly interpreted as "the end of time". Guttierrez and Schwartz provide a more detailed definition of this latter concept, which reads as follows:

*Apocalypse*: usually based on Biblical prophesy, the final showdown between the forces of good and evil that will result in the end of history and usually the ushering in of the millennium; also from the Greek and more neutrally, to unveil or reveal. (Guttierrez & Schwartz, 2006:295.)

These definitions and critical commentaries show that millennial visions invariably also involve apocalyptic projections (cf. Guttierrez & Schwartz, 2006:ix). Taking these general observations on the millennium and the apocalypse as a point of departure, the following question can be asked: How does Houellebecq make millennial and apocalyptic visions dovetail to create a novelistic scenario of the time of the approaching end in *Atomised*?

Firstly, Houellebecq's narrative techniques contribute to the creation of a millennial context. Where narrative time conventionally proceeds chronologically with retrospections (analepses) and anticipations (prolepses) (Genette, 1972:82), *Atomised's* storyline starts and ends in eternity. The "Prologue" and "Epilogue" are focalised through a new species, created through cloning, which salutes twentieth century mankind for its suffering and the scientific endeavour which made a new metaphysical order of *joy* and *light* possible. The body of the novel becomes a long analepse, interspersed with many scientific references told in a detached tone, by an omniscient third person narrator, who belongs to the new cloned race. The scientific discourse serves as a filter through which the last era of human civilisation is retrospectively told, encoding the fact that the existence of the new species was made possible through the scientific discovery of cloning. From a narratological point of view, the novelty of *Atomised* resides in the replacement of prolepses, normally used to prophesy or anticipate what will happen in the future (Genette, 1972:105-107), by a long analepse through which the end of the twentieth century and the first decades of the 21st century are presented as a distant past.

Secondly, several terms rich in religious connotations contribute to the establishment of two semic codes<sup>3</sup> (Barthes, 1970:24) of which the keywords are *suffering* and *salvation*, notions usually associated with the millennium and the apocalypse. The time and place of suffering is that of "the latter half of the twentieth century" (Houellebecq, 2001a:34) and "Western Europe". This age "was miserable and troubled". Human lives were "lonely" and "bitter" for "feelings such as love, tenderness and fellowship had, for the most part, disappeared" (Houellebecq, 2001a:3).<sup>5</sup> The last part of the previous sentence introduces a semic code centred around the idea of "loving

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3 Barthes (1970:24) defines the semic code as a code formed by the connotations implied by a word. These connotations are units of meaning contained within words.

4 All the quotations from *Atomised* refer to the English translation (2001) of the original French text *Les particules élémentaires* (1998).

5 Houellebecq has already introduced the theme of the last decades of the twentieth century as a time of suffering in Western civilisation in his first novel *L'Extension du domaine de la lutte* (translated as *Whatever*), published in 1994. The first-person narrator, a software technician, reflecting on his miserable and lonely existence, attributes his own feelings of emptiness and bitterness to the civilisation and times in which he lives.

relationships", of which the lack in the end time caused human suffering. The Biblical idea (contained in the book of Daniel) of a historical chronology of "fallen empires" (Guttierrez & Schwartz, 2006: 1) preceding the end of time, is significantly conveyed in Houellebecq's text by the religious overtones of the concept of "metaphysical mutations": "that is to say radical, global transformations in the values to which the majority subscribe [...]" (Houellebecq, 2001a:4). According to the narrator, three such mutations can be observed in the history of Western civilisation, of which the first is Christianity, followed by the second mutation, namely the "Age of Materialism" brought about by modern science. This age of suffering (in which the reader still lives) was terminated by the "most radical [...] metaphysical mutation, which opened up a new era in world history" (p. 56). Against this millennial, apocalyptical background, the story of a saviour (Michel Djerzinski), who contributed "in a clear-sighted and deliberate" (p. 5) way to this last metaphysical mutation, is going to unfold. Salvation is brought about by brilliant scientific research: the saviour's eminence is conveyed by indices<sup>7</sup> like "first-rate biologist" as well as "a serious candidate for the Nobel prize" (p. 3).

The narrative unfolding between the "Prologue" and the "Epilogue" contains the life-stories of two half-brothers, Bruno Clément (a writer) and Michel Djerzinski (the above-mentioned biologist), who were born respectively in 1956 and in 1958.<sup>8</sup> The novel continues by sketching the general socio-historical context of the two main characters' existences, the reigning discourses of the time and the way in which their individual lives confirmed or deviated from those main trends. The third person narrator informs us that Bruno's "only goal in life had been sexual [...]. In that, Bruno was characteristic of his generation." (p. 73.) On the other hand, Michel "had lived a purely intellectual existence. The world of human emotions was not his field; he knows little of it" (p. 139). For Annabelle, who has loved

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6 References in Section 2 containing only a page number refer to Houellebecq (2001a).

7 Indices, according to Barthes (1975:249), are those elements in a text that refer to, for example "a personality trait, a feeling or an atmosphere [...]".

8 There is an interesting autobiographical element conveyed by these two dates: in his unauthorised biography of Houellebecq, Denis Demonpion (2005:28) explains that Houellebecq was born in 1956, but claimed at a certain stage to have been born in 1958. This fact adds weight to those who consider the two brothers to be hardly veiled literary representations of two aspects of the author's own personality (see Demonpion, 2005:291).

him since they were together at school, he can only feel compassion: "It was perhaps the only emotion which could still touch him. As to the rest, a glacial reticence had taken over his body; he simply could not love." (p. 285.)

The two half-brothers incarnate what Houellebecq considers to be two main tendencies in Western society in the latter half of the twentieth century: on the one hand, sexual liberation and a focus on the individual which could even turn (yet not in Bruno's case) into a dark Dionysian pursuit of violent sadism; and contrarily, rapid scientific developments which in the final instance would allow the human race to procreate through cloning without the necessity of sexual intercourse. In this way the respective existences of Michel and Bruno constitute a Barthesian symbolic field<sup>9</sup> (science versus love), that traverse *Atomised* but, as we will see later, also *The possibility of an island*. We shall argue that the fulfilment of the scientific millennial project, which annuls the idea of divine origins and metaphysics, will not succeed altogether in suppressing the second element of the opposing pair of science versus love. It is noted that Djerzinski's greatest merit was, as the narrator informs us,

... the fact that he was able, through somewhat risky interpretations of the postulates of quantum mechanics, to restore the possibility of love. [...] [T]hough he had not known love himself, through Annabelle, Djerzinski had succeeded in forming an image of it. He was capable of realising that love, in some way, through some obscure process, was possible. This was probably his guiding thought in the last months of his theoretical work, about which we know so little. (p. 363.)

In the "Epilogue", it becomes clear that Djerzinski's research on cloning is continued and remembered after his death, and not the notion of the restoration of the "possibility of love". The metaphor contained in the title of the second novel, *The possibility of an island*, suggests that the question of love in a new post-apocalyptic existence will again come to the fore, and as will be argued, holds the potential to dismantle the envisaged "state of perfection".

The "Prologue" of *Atomised* is divided into two sections, the first announcing the book's subject matter (the story of the last "metaphysi-

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9 In S/Z Roland Barthes (1970:25) explains that a symbolic field (or code) is often constituted by fundamental oppositions underlying a text.

cal mutation" and Michel Djerzinski's role in it), and the second taking the form of a poem presenting the eternal bliss of the post-apocalyptic, neo-human era. The choice of a poem to represent the era after the end of history is significant: the author suggests that narrative prose, in principle positioned in relation to objective chronological time, can not render eternity, when time will be no more: "We live today under a new world order / The web which weaves together all things envelops our bodies / Bathes our limbs / In a halo of joy" (p. 7). These opening lines inaugurate the semic code of "eternal bliss" through the connotations evoked by expressions like "a halo of joy" and "new world order", which are continued in the rest of the poem by words like "perfect", "dream", "light", "perpetual afternoon", "last destination" or "serene delight" (p. 7-8). The notion of gravity, associated with earthly existence, is replaced by the idea of liquidity, suggested by the verb "bathes" and a spatial informant,<sup>10</sup> the "water's edge". It is hardly necessary to point out the intertextual references to the Biblical "new heaven", the "new earth" and the "new Jerusalem", with its "pure river of water of life" and where "there shall be no night" (Rev. 21-22:5). This depiction of eternity contrasts starkly with the body of the novel which contains a bitter satire on contemporary society with many references to the media, real-life philosophers, writers, political figures, and religious and spiritual movements. In the "Epilogue" the tone is also somewhat subdued in comparison to the one used in the "Prologue":

Having broken the filial chain that linked us to humanity, we live on. Men consider us happy; it is certainly true that we succeeded in overcoming the monstrous egotism, cruelty and anger which they could not; we live very different lives [...]. To humans of the old species, our world seems paradise. It has been known for us to refer to ourselves – with a certain humour – by the name which they dreamed of, 'gods'. (p. 379.)

The conditionality of the "eternal bliss" (now conveyed by terms like *happy*, *paradise* and *gods*) points to the potential double bind of Houellebecq's apocalypse that we are going to examine in the following sections, where we will try to establish how the *The possibility of an island* draws on genres like apocalyptical and Utopian

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10 A term coined by Roland Barthes: "[...] the informant (e.g. the precise age of a character) is there to authenticate the reality of the referent, to root fiction in the real world" (Barthes, 1975:249). We refer here to the English translation of Barthes' original article (1966) by Duisit.



writing, as well as science fiction, in order to continue, but also to question the millennial project of *Atomised*.

### 3. *The possibility of an island or the pharmakon of Houellebecq's apocalypse*<sup>11</sup>

Literary versions of the apocalypse often endow this notion with a double nature: the apocalypse may deliver an end which is not a true end, and therefore followed by disappointment, but also by the possibility of renewal. Taking the Greek notion of the *pharmakon* with its double significance of poison and cure as point of departure, Kelli and Patrick Fuery investigate the opposite meanings associated with an apocalyptic representation of the end of history:

... versions of the apocalypse [...] often contain confusion and revelation at the same time [...]. [A]ny apocalyptic disappointment is immediately subsumed into its opposite celebration, and [...] any sense of success is subject to a succeeding despair (Gutierrez & Schwartz, 2006:8).

This potential duplicity of an apocalyptic vision is clearly illustrated by Houellebecq's two novels: the "Prologue" of *Atomised* creates an aura of revelation and eternal joy, only to be somewhat undermined by the "Epilogue"<sup>12</sup> which hints at the subsequent dark version of disappointment and despair to follow in *The possibility of an island*, when the time after the apocalypse turns into a kind of dystopia.

Before proposing a reading of the latter text to prove the above hypothesis, it must be mentioned that neither *Atomised* nor *The possibility of an island* can be regarded as constitutive of full-blown utopias: the ideal world suggested in *Atomised* is never worked out in full socio-political detail which could serve as a recognisable alternative milieu with the critique of a current order normally implied in such a utopian construction.<sup>13</sup> *Atomised's* "future state of perfection"

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11 This title is partially indebted to Kelli and Patrick Fuery who call their chapter in the volume *The end that does*, "The pharmakon of the apocalypse" (Gutierrez & Schwartz, 2006:7).

12 Robert Dion and Elisabeth Haghebaert (2001:518) point out that the description of the scientific utopia in the "Epilogue" of *Atomised* draws on many hackneyed clichés, which make the utopian dimension of the novel rather ambiguous. Sabine van Wesemeal (2005:90) also finds ironic and satirical elements in the last chapter which subtly undermine the idea of a utopia in *Atomised*.

13 Wegner discusses in a chapter on utopia, the following definition of the "literary Utopian":

rather conveys what is defined by Jameson (2007:6) and Wegner as a utopian impulse, namely "the deeply human desire for an utterly transformed, radically other, and/or redeemed existence" that "manifests itself in a wide range of cultural documents" (Wegner quoted in Seed, 2005:79) elaborating on themes like for instance "enhanced medical research and universal health coverage", "the appeal to eternal youth", "fantasies about the traffic in organs and the technological possibilities of rejuvenation therapy" and "corporeal transcendence" (Jameson, 2007:6).

In *Atomised* as well as in *The possibility of an island*, subjects like eternal youth and the uninterrupted continuation of corporeal existence through cloning, reveal humanity's underlying utopian wish. This utopian impulse is, however, not maintained in the latter novel, where it finally turns into a dystopia, as we shall show later.

The narrative techniques of *The possibility of an island* are adapted to a more pessimistic outlook, namely to present the neo-human era of cloned existence as not being the final "state of perfection".<sup>14</sup> The opening sentence of the "Prologue", "Welcome to eternal life my friend", with its strong phatic function of establishing contact with the addressee, plunges the reader directly into a post-apocalyptic era. The Biblical name "Daniel" and the repeated admonition "Fear what I say" establish a new semic code based on the idea of a prophecy to be feared about the future, and pointing to the dystopian character of the version of eternal life that is about to unfold. The narrative structure of the body of the novel is more complex than that of *Atomised*: it is divided into two parts which are presented as the commentaries of two clones, Daniel 24 and Daniel 25,<sup>15</sup> on the life-story of their ancestor Daniel 1. The two clones live, one after the

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Utopia is the verbal construction of a particular quasihuman community where socio-political institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than the author's community, this construction based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis.

Wegner explains that the definition was coined by the science fiction critic Darko Suvin. (Wegner quoted in Seed, 2005:79-94.)

14 The term *neo-human*, implying a new improved mankind, actually becomes very ironic.

15 The humour of sections enumerated like chapters from the Bible (e.g. "Daniel 1, 12" and "Daniel 24, 4") does not go unnoticed by the reader, and alludes to something prophetic while at the same time parodying it.

other, in the fourth millennium, whilst Daniel 1 is a 21st century contemporary of the reader. The writer creates an interesting *mise en abyme* by alternating the chapters of Daniel 1's life story with chapters containing the commentary by the two clones on his text. The mode of first person narration is chosen instead of the more distancing filter of the third person narration used in *Atomised*. While Daniel 1's story deals with a present the reader recognises, the clones' commentary sketches what this world has become after the 21st century. As in *Atomised*, the distant future, conventionally presented by prolepses, becomes the present of narration, and the reader's present a bygone era, already interpreted by future descendants.

It gradually becomes clear in the "Prologue" that the clones' existence does not represent the state of perfection traditionally inaugurated by the coming of the millennium. They may well live in a time of "peace", liberated from sexuality (cf. Arènes & Arènes, 2006:799), but they belong to an intermediary phase, awaiting a second coming, namely that of the "Future Ones" for whom the commentaries and the original life-story are intended. Houellebecq's future, post-apocalyptic world depicted in *The possibility of an island*, is still embedded in historical time and the apocalypse that initiated it was not the real end. In order to understand the disappointment of the "future other world" elaborated in, it is necessary to give a brief overview of Houellebecq's representation, in this specific novel, of the old order of suffering to be replaced by the new humanity.

In *The possibility of an island* Daniel 1 embodies the values, which, according to Houellebecq's own pessimistic views, will cause the final decline of the Western World.<sup>16</sup> The author considers materialism, incompatible with humanism, to have the upper hand, creating a culture based on the "justification of desire and sexual freedom, resulting in individualism, consumerism and mercantilism" (Dahan-Gaida, 2003:95; translation – ES<sup>17</sup>).<sup>18</sup> Daniel 1's mercenary

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16 A critic such as Olivier Bardolle considers the way Houellebecq integrates these views in his novels as an indication of his writerly talent and esteems that he deserves to be read because he dares to "consecrate the emptiness of our era" (Bardolle, 2004:13) instead of resorting to navel gazing or being merely entertaining.

17 The original French: "[...] l'apologie du désir et de la libération sexuelle, qui ont pour corollaires l'individualisme, le consumérisme et le mercantilisme" (Dahan-Gaida, 2003:95).

attitude is evident in remarks like: "When I met Isabelle, I must have been worth six million euros" (p. 21).<sup>19</sup> He possesses the financial means to consume, which he does with a certain panache: he drives expensive cars like a Bentley Continental GT, because "you could have lined up three sluts on [its bonnet] with no problem" (p. 35), and later a Mercedes 600 SL (p. 86). These elements serve not only as indices constructing the textual image of character traits like materialism and debauchery, but also as informants, rooting the text in a world the reader can recognise.

Daniel 1's success as a stand-up comedian capitalises on the moral void of his time. The actor becomes a nihilistic prophet, who destroys a world which is destroying itself: his brutal comedy shows advocate racism, paedophilia, parricide, the killing of babies and even incest and, what is worse, are box-office successes acclaimed by a public for whom no taboos exist anymore (p. 38).<sup>20</sup>

Sexual pleasure, which for Daniel is "in truth the sole pleasure, the sole objective of human existence" (p. 341) and only to be fully enjoyed by the young (p. 342), becomes the only manifestation of the sacred in Houellebecq's end time. This sacralisation of sexual pleasure will be discussed in the last section of this article where the clone's quest for love will be analysed.

The relationship between Daniel and Isabelle highlights another aspect of capital importance in the demise of 21st century morality and which is a corollary of the desire for sexual fulfilment, namely

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18 Dahan-Gaida refers here specifically to *Atomised*, but it should be noted that Houellebecq (1999:6) expresses the same criticism of contemporary Western society in his essay on Lovecraft, which he considers as "sort of" his first novel. It is significant that the two characters Daniel and Isabelle of *The possibility of an island* embody values that Houellebecq has already denounced in this essay: "Today the value of a human being is measured against his economic efficiency and his erotic potential: that is to say exactly the two things that Lovecraft hated the most" (ES – translation of the original French: "La valeur d'un être humain se mesure aujourd'hui par son efficacité économique et son potentiel érotique: soit, très exactement, les deux choses que Lovecraft détestait le plus fort" – Houellebecq, 1999:144).

19 References in Section 3-5 containing only a page number refer to Houellebecq (2006).

20 Stephan Beck severely criticises Houellebecq for this nihilistic depiction of Western civilisation: "Houellebecq has immersed himself in the ugliest expressions of human nature, and he expects us to accept that this represents all there is." (Beck, 2006:16-17.)

the quest for eternal youth. The theme of an ageing body and declining sexual functioning, the main cause of suffering in the end time, is enacted through the story of Daniel and Isabelle's marriage. Isabelle ends her relationship with Daniel because of the gradual decline of her body: "she could no longer stand herself; and consequently she could no longer stand love, which seemed to her to be false" (p. 58).

In Houellebecq's imaginary 21st century "unconditional love" (p. 60) is impossible, not only in the time of Daniel 1 but also in the time of Daniel 24, when its only manifestation still to be found is the affection of a dog for its human companion – a cloned version of Daniel 1's dog, Fox, the corgi lives with the neo-human character in his compound:

Goodness, compassion, fidelity and altruism, therefore remain for us impenetrable mysteries, contained, however, within the limited space of the corporeal exterior of a dog. It is on the solution to this problem that the coming of the Future Ones depends. (p. 63.)

Houellebecq's satirical suggestion (can a reader familiar with the author's biography and his affection for his own corgi take him seriously?) is that these moral qualities are not to be found now and neither will they materialise in the intermediary phase to which his clones belong. This is the disappointment of Houellebecq's apocalypse, which necessitates another "coming", that of the Future Ones.

This picture of decline rings all the more true in the mind of the reader as Houellebecq draws on many real-life elements to flesh out his novelistic universe: apart from referring to brand names known to the reader, contemporary personalities, like the political figure Bernard Kouchner, the designer Karl Lagerfeld and the model Naomi Campbell, become characters in his book. These references form what Barthes (1970:25) calls, "cultural codes", that is to say elements in a text which conventionally evoke knowledge and values shared by the reader and the text, and as Scholes (1978:154) puts it, "the various stereotypes of understanding which constitute human 'reality'". Houellebecq's exploitation of these codes and his textual mediation of contemporary reality, have often been interpreted as

deliberate provocation, as one can gain from the whole controversy around his novelistic treatment of the Islamic faith.<sup>21</sup>

The common denominator of the Houellebecquian vision of the end time in *The possibility of an island* is that man's existence in contemporary society is lonely and miserable. The only possible route of escape is to create eternal youth through scientific research on cloning, a solution with consequences that are further explored in the clones' narratives. To elaborate these stories, the author refers to yet another generic intertext, namely that of science fiction, for which he has a personal predilection (Demonpion, 2005:75).

#### **4. Science fiction based on a combination of science and religion**

In *A companion to science fiction*, Tom Shippey quotes Darko Suvin's definition of science fiction which reads as follows:

... a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment (Shippey quoted in Seed, 2005:15).

Shippey explains that "estrangement" [...] means recognising the novum" (Seed, 2005:15) which he defines as the "basic building block of science fiction [...] – a discrete piece of information recognizable as not-true, but also as not-unlike-true, not-flatly-(in the current state of knowledge)-impossible" (Seed, 2005:14). Novums usually refer to scientific innovations that do not yet exist in the real world inhabited by the reader. One could say that the novums are the informants which form the cultural codes of science fiction. Shippey points out that the element of "cognition" in Suvin's definition means "evaluating [the novum], trying to make sense of it" and adds "you need to do both [that is, recognising and evaluating the novum]

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21 Houellebecq's battle with Islam gives some perspective on this element of his novels: his abrasive remarks on this religion in the magazine *Lire* provoked a litigation against him in 2002, but he managed to win the case. Houellebecq's own politically incorrect opinions were already vindicated in 2001 when the publication of *Plateforme*, staging an attack on a holiday resort in Thailand by Islamist terrorists, was closely followed by the attack on the World Trade Center by Islam fundamentalists, and yet again by the bombing of a nightclub in Bali in 2002, in which several tourists from Western countries died. (Demonpion, 2005:328-338.)

to read science fiction” (Seed, 2005:15). The “Introduction” to the *Companion* also suggests that Suvin’s “alternative framework” could involve the “concept of world-building” which “is an intrinsic part of the construction of a science fiction novel” (Seed, 2005:4). Moreover, the genre is considered “a popular arena in which mythic narratives intertwine apocalyptic premises with futuristic settings” (Nadis quoted in Guttierrez & Schwartz, 2006:140).

All these aspects play a role in *The possibility of an island*, when Houellebecq imagines what the world in the fourth millennium may become on an earth destroyed by natural and man-made disasters, cloned beings live alone in compounds, protected by electric fences, and their only contact with other neo-humans is through computers. This alternative neo-human environment introduces the reader into an already familiar “technosphere”, of which some elements (like virtual means of communication) are hypothetically brought to a potential conclusion. In *The possibility of an island* the numeric codes (p. 4) following the computer messages the clones send each other, the paint on the outside walls of the compound, containing radioactive radium to protect against magnetic clouds (p. 152), the “IGUSes” (“Information Gathering and Utilising Systems”) (p. 298), the capsules of mineral salts that the clones live on (p. 382), are all novums, with the function of making the reader recognise the science fictional aspect of the text.

It must be noted that in *The possibility of an island*, Houellebecq’s new humanity is created through a combination of science and religion, epitomised by yet another controversial real-life element, namely that of the Elohimites.<sup>22</sup> The sect is a barely veiled reference to the Raël Movement, whose members do not believe in God and strive to prolong life by cloning.<sup>23</sup> Whilst Michel Djerzinski,

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22 According to the theologian Rudolf Otto (1968:75) the name “Elohim” denotes the familiar, rational character of God, which in this context is very appropriate: Houellebecq’s Elohim sect believes in the creation of eternal life through the science of biology without any metaphysical intervention.

23 In December 2003, Houellebecq attended a Raëliens’ conference in Switzerland, sympathised with their leader, Claude Vorilhon, and subsequently defended the movement and their concept of cloning in an interview (Demonpion, 2005:312). However, a first reference to the sect already appeared in Houellebecq’s novella *Lanzarote*, published in 2000, three years before the conference. In this narrative, the author introduces the information about the sect which he will later work out in more detail in *The possibility of an island*, for instance that the real creators of mankind are extra-terrestrials who mastered space travel and managed to overcome mortality through cloning, and that these creatures

whose research on cloning was worthy of respect, represented in *Atomised* the element of science in the symbolic field of science versus love, the Elohimites, rather satirically pictured, fulfil this role in *The possibility of an island*.

Houellebecq thus not only takes up the challenge set in *Atomised* when it is mentioned that the biologist Julian Huxley tried in a not altogether convincing manner "to set out the principles of a religion which could dovetail with science" (Houellebecq, 2001a:192), but also positions himself within the tradition set by Aldous Huxley's *Brave new world*. According to Seed, Huxley's novel is "the single most famous science fiction novel to describe genetic engineering and since the 1980s has become a major point of reference in discussions of cloning and related techniques" (Seed, 2005:477). As we have already mentioned, in Houellebecq's *The possibility of an island*, religion and science (through cloning) do finally "dovetail" to make the victory over death possible for a mankind who has always yearned for eternal life.

## **5. *The possibility of an island*: the clone, love and dystopia**

It is important to understand, as we have already mentioned, that the intermediary phase inhabited by the clones is not yet the long awaited "perfect state" characteristic of apocalyptic and millennial configurations, but still awaits a final "coming", that of the "Future Ones". In the intermediary phase, neo-humans live separated from the rest of humanity which has deteriorated into a state of pre-historic barbarism, and the new "master race" treats those beings like animals and does not hesitate to kill them. The lonely existence of the clones eliminates the possibility of physical suffering caused by the proximity of others. The dystopian aspect of the new era lies in the phenomenon of the total isolation of the clone, and the absence of any Other, which makes moral codes of behaviour obsolete: "In Houellebecq's paradigm the desired Other is eliminated together with suffering." (Arènes & Arènes, 2006:803; translation – ES.<sup>24</sup>)

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will come back to earth and share their knowledge on immortality with humans once these have built them an embassy. The site chosen for the embassy is the Canary island of Lanzerote.

24 The original French: "Dans le paradigme houellebecquien, l'Autre du désir est éliminé avec la souffrance." (Arènes & Arènes, 2006:803.)



“The modern dystopia,” according to Wegner,

... develops in the latter part of the nineteenth century by way of a fusion of what would appear at first glance to be two very different genres: on the one hand, the literary Utopian with its vision of a future other world, and on the other, the naturalist [sic] novel, which offers a bleak picture of both the present and humanity more generally (quoted in Seed, 2005:89).

Wegner continues to indicate that after the Second World War, science fiction becomes the genre par excellence in which the “dystopian form” expresses itself (Seed, 2005:90). Since the 1960s prominence is given to current concerns like “ecology, the environment, race, gender, and sexuality” (Seed, 2005:91).

Three aspects of this description fit *The possibility of an island*: in the first place, the genetic manipulation of cloning constitutes the deterministic aspect normally associated with the naturalistic novel and is the driving force behind the grim future that Houellebecq foresees. Secondly, notions like the “great drying up” (p. 93) and the “return of the humid” (p. 95) echo contemporary concerns about global warming. In the final instance, the theme of sexuality is central to Houellebecq’s dystopia and is explored through the figure of the clone, which, as we have indicated, is often a generic element of millennial and apocalyptic science fiction.

Fuery and Fuery indicate how “the clone, and other versions of the double, act as a type of insurance against the endings as well as a bulwark against millennial disappointments” (Gutierrez & Schwartz, 2006:9). These two authors also illustrate the *pharmakon* quality of the clone. This literary figure exemplifies a cure for mortality – the human race can continue after the apocalypse through doubles of themselves, but the mere existence of the clone also contains a “poison”, namely that the end is not the end: “Every attempt to avert apocalypse through cloning results in a different version of apocalypse, which is the classic double bind” (Gutierrez & Schwartz, 2006:13).

Houellebecq capitalises on all these aspects to create the figure of the clone, which is “purer than the original” (Gutierrez & Schwartz, 2006:13) and whose existence allows for the questioning of human life, without proposing a final solution. This is strikingly underscored by the narrative structure of Houellebecq’s novel where the clones comment upon the life story of Daniel 1, their all too human ancestor: “The clone is a reminder of the fallibility of the original for it brings into question the very status of what it is to be, to exist, by

allowing the question of authenticity" (Gutierrez & Schwartz, 2006: 13). In *The possibility of an island*, human existence of the 21st century is especially questioned through the clone's unsuccessful quest for love.

That "a compelling sense of love [...] underpins the existence of the clone" is borne out by Fuery and Fuery's study of contemporary films:

It is as if the clone must, at some point, come to the question of love in order for us to confront the deep challenge to our own subjectivity. The clone's existence, and its subsequent movement toward human subjectivity, more often than not demands an encounter in the domain of love. However it is a particular type of love, a sort of meta-discourse on love, which emphasizes just how much the capacity to show love and to be 'in love' has come to define human subjectivity in recent times. (Gutierrez & Schwartz, 2006:14.)

Houellebecq's clone confronts "the question of love" when he abandons his safe, uniform existence by leaving his compound in search of the kind of love that Daniel 1 experienced with the young Esther after his separation from Isabelle, thus acknowledging the failure of his own intermediary existence (p. 383-384). The clone's reflections introduce the meta-discourse on love and summarise the way it defined "human subjectivity" in the time of Daniel 1. Daniel 25 understands that, for Daniel 1, erotic physical love was the only form of the sacred left to be experienced by humans in a world which has lost all "sense of the sacred" (p. 20).

That immense joy, that transfiguration of his physical being by which Daniel 1 was submerged at the moment of the fulfilment of his desires, that impression in particular of being transported to another universe that he knew at the moment of his carnal penetrations, I had never known. (p. 384.)

The semic code of "bliss", evoked by the connotations of words like *immense joy*, *fulfilment* and *transported*, is prominent in Daniel 25's understanding of Daniel's experience of sexual beatitude. This concept justifies the clone's decision to leave his compound in search of the same kind of experience. However, Daniel 1's moments of "carnal felicity" did not last long and were also characterised by a lack of commitment on Esther's side (p. 294-295). Referring implicitly to Daniel 1's ruminations on compassion and commitment, the asexual clone's reflections introduce a spiritual perspective on love when he firstly quotes Plato and secondly St. Paul, to suggest that

his quest involves more than “the pleasure of the senses”: “It is obvious that the soul of each desires something else, *what* it cannot say, but it guesses it, and lets you guess.” (p. 416.)

The author seems to suggest in the “Epilogue” of *The possibility of an island* that the poison of the old order was the absence of compassion and emotional commitment in sexual relationships, whilst the downside of the post-apocalypse is the total absence of sexuality: only another coming, if ever, could restore this lack. The two original elements of the modern dystopia as defined by Wegner come together in Houellebecq’s bleak post-apocalyptic vision: scientific achievements, such as cloning and digital technology originating in the present world, could create, in a very deterministic way, a future world of monotonous, isolated sameness.<sup>25</sup> The second element of the Barthesian symbolic field, observed in *Atomised*, namely that of love, now gains in importance with the implied suggestion that science will not create a future world better than the present one, if there still is no possibility of love. The novel concludes with a feeling of emptiness, betrayal and infinite unhappiness: “Happiness was not a possible horizon. The world had betrayed [...]. The future was empty [...]. I was, I was no longer. Life was real.” (p. 423.) His quest for the happiness based on shared love induced the clone to leave his safe enclosure and to venture into the world of humans, without any success. The last two sentences suggest that the clone will die, not being able to win against life, which does not allow for the realisation of happiness. The “Epilogue” of *The possibility of an island* implies that the novel conveys a critique of the moral, and specifically the sexual misery of our times and prophesies that only unconditional love and compassion can make this a better world.

## 6. Conclusion

From the study of *The possibility of an island* it is clear that Houellebecq, draws optimally on “marginal” genres in order to question the world he inhabits. It is specifically the multigeneric aspect of *The possibility of an island* which allows for a second imaginative

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25 To readers of Houellebecq’s novels this conclusion comes as no surprise: in an article on Houellebecq’s nihilistic presentation of a declining Western civilisation, Sabine van Wesemael (2005:92; translation – ES) discusses how this author in this novel as well as in *Plateforme* and *Lanzerote* “demystify all forms of utopia”, by a satirical exploitation of “the main clichés of the genre”.

investigation after *Atomised*<sup>26</sup> into contemporary concerns and the consequences of scientific research on future generations. By leading the reader into a potential future, millennial, apocalyptic, utopian writing and science fiction all come together in *The possibility of an island* to create the novelistic space to explore and reflect upon the route civilisation is taking and may take in future. By further working out his millennial project, Houellebecq brings us to understand that if science creates a world where the physical presence of other human beings is eliminated, moral codes of behaviour will become obsolete and society, as we know it, will disintegrate. If suffering is caused by the Other, happiness is equally impossible without the physical presence of the Other.<sup>27</sup>

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26 In their article on *Atomised* Dion and Haghebaert (2001:523), illustrate that the multiple genres (including the pornographic novel) on which Houellebecq draws, allow for a dynamic renewal of the genre of the novel which echoes a modern outlook on reality.

27 The controversy around Houellebecq often obscures the seriousness and the moral aspect of his enterprise. Although a critic like Naulleau (2005:35) deems this best-selling author to be merely a skilful manipulator of literary capitalism, cleverly exploiting the media and a readership perhaps more interested in the "hard porn" element of his novels than in their literary merit, a scholar like Van Wesemael (2005:87), to the contrary, underlines that Houellebecq's novels are about the lack of commitment and the degradation of morality in contemporary capitalist societies.

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### **Key concepts:**

apocalyptic writing

Houellebecq, Michel: *Atomised*

Houellebecq, Michel: *The possibility of an island*

science fiction

### **Kernbegrippe:**

apokaliptiese geskrifte

Houellebecq, Michel: *Atomised*

Houellebecq, Michel: *The possibility of an island*

wetenskapsfiksie

