LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Is The Map More Interesting Than The Territory? A Post-Representational Approach to Michel Houellebecq's *The Map and the Territory*

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Abstract:

This collaborative, interdisciplinary article analyses Houllebecq's use of crime fiction and autofiction in *The Map and the Territory* (2010). The novel's intra- inter- and extra-textual geographies, including its depiction of urban and rural space, are explored through a post-representational lens. We argue that Houllebecq uses crime fiction and autofiction to destabilise and disrupt Baudrillardian signs and simulacra as well as Barthesian mythologies of the author - setting up his own 'death of the author' by writing his avatar's murder. By analysing how the novel 'sets the scene' in its depiction of both Houellebecq and France's rural and urban spaces, we find that the way the text maps and describes these spaces in/on/through which the novel 'takes place' lends itself to a processual or assemblage understanding of that space, where reality and representation are co-produced relationally. This spatial co-production leads us to productively re-consider the novel's broader themes through this same post-representational lens, and to problematise distinctions between reality and representation, author and text, and map and territory.

Keywords: post-representation; representation; Houellebecq; autofiction; crime fiction.

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This article seeks to exploit the productive interplay of literary and geographical theory following the trend of hybridization noted by Caquard: 'between cartography and creative disciplines; between the grid map and the story map; between fiction and reality; between the map and the territory' (2011: 140).   It does so through a post-representational, relational approach to Michel Houellebecq's *Prix Goncourt*-winning *The Map and the Territory* (*MT*). Using both authorial and cartographical metaphors, we argue that *MT* raises questions of reality and representation through its juxtapositions of genres, fiction and non-fiction, and intertexts/intermedia.[1] We show how these questions are evoked through an analysis of the novel's intra-, inter- and extra-textual geographies (Anderson 2016; Hones 2014).

In step with the 'relational turn' observed in both Literary Studies and Geography (Anderson 2016), recent work in critical cartography has suggested that it might be possible to move beyond the real/representational dichotomy of the static 'map' artefact to consider 'mapping' as a continuous set of processes and practices (Gerlach 2015; Kitchin, Gleeson and Dodge 2013). Representations of space are involved in the very (re-)production of that space, meaning that maps have the power to influence the formation of territory, just as territory forms the inspiration for maps (Elden 2010; Harley 1989). Early twentieth century semantician Alfred Korzybski underlined that 'the map is *not* the territory' (1933: 58), meaning that abstractions or representative models of reality are not the reality itself. However, Baudrillard's *Simulacra et simulation* asserted that it is 'the map that precedes the territory - precession of simulacra - that engenders the territory' (1981: 10). Postmodern society relies on simulacra, cultural symbols and signs, endless copies of an 'original' discernible only in the connections and references that replace the 'real' with the 'hyperreal'. In this context, the map has usurped the territory so signs reproduce signs rather than reality. Thus, the concept of territory is less straightforward than it first appears: territory does not somehow *precede* the map - the two are codependent on the cognitive process of mapping spatial information. David Turnbull has even gone so far as to argue that *Maps are Territories* (1989). As critical cartographers Kitchin, Gleeson and Dodge assert: 'maps are not representations but inscriptions or a system of propositions - they capture the world whilst simultaneously doing work in the world; they precede and produce the territory they purportedly represent' (2013: 481). Houellebecq's novel reopens these questions of reality and representation, beginning with its implicit reference to this debate with its ambivalent title *The Map* and *the Territory* (Buvik 2013), and continuing with its juxtaposition of genres, and narrative themes.

Scholars of literary geography have led the way in applying the insights of critical cartography to the study of literature (Kneale 2003; Turchi 2004). In particular, the post-representational perspective (Kitchin, Gleeson and Dodge 2013), which moves from a representational to a processual understanding of maps and mapping practices, has been used to investigate the cognitive mapping inherent in writing and reading fiction (Caquard 2015; Rossetto 2014). Concurrently, Jon Anderson has argued for an assemblage approach to literature in this journal (2016), drawing on Sheila Hones's conceptualisation of (writing and reading) 'a book' as a 'spatial event' (Hones 2014;

2008). Post-representational and assemblage approaches draw on similar scholarship, namely that of Bruno Latour (2005) and philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1988). The key feature of both these approaches is relational thinking, which moves from considering 'things', 'concepts' or 'networks' as existing *a priori* in the world, to considering them to be emergent, that is in a continual state of articulation and dispersal:

> From this [post-representational] perspective, the stories of mapping always need to be considered as historically contingent actor-networks; as timed, placed, cultured and negotiated; a web of interacting possibilities in which the world is complex and nothing is inevitable. The focus shifts from what the map represents to how it is produced and how it produces work in the world (Kitchin, Perkins and Dodge 2009: 16).

The post-representational perspective entails rethinking ontological distinctions between 'reality' and 'territory', 'representation' and 'map', to view both as always in the process of being brought into being through situated practices (Kitchin, Gleeson and Dodge 2013). These practices are always taking place within material or embodied relationships that continuously form assemblages, a 'whole characterised by relations of exteriority' (Dittmer 2014: 386). Although assemblage thinking informs post-representational thinking, it perhaps holds less immediate appeal for Literary Studies. The language (or 'currency' as Anderson (2016) puts it) of assemblage draws the focus to the material and affective connections between 'things' in the world, reminding us that a book is as much a physical object, its writer and reader embodied human beings, as a text. Whilst popular with geographers wishing to emphasise the extra-textual spatiality of literature (Anderson 2016), this approach is difficult to reconcile with literary scholarship which is primarily focused on the meaning of texts over texts as 'things'.

    In contrast, as post-representational thinking holds in tension 'representation' and 'reality' in the ongoing, processual practice of 'mapping' that is inherent to reading, referencing, and reproducing spatial information (Caquard 2014; 2015), it speaks to related debates in Literary Studies about the construction of meaning: Does meaning lie in the text itself, in the mind of the author or in the subjective experience of each reader - or a combination of all three? As Rosetto argues, 'texts should be researched for their added value: texts […] make us feel the processuality of mapping practices' (2014: 524). Reading Houellebecq's *MT* through a post-representational lens allows us to draw some conclusions about how the novel evokes and destabilises these complex notions of reality and representation, particularly as the text and its characters engage in 'mapping' in various forms.

    The first two parts of this article will address how Houellebecq's *MT* exposes and manipulates this processuality, focusing on its intra- and inter-textual spatialities (Hones 2014). We consider the novel's geography of connections with other texts and sources through an analysis of the use of crime fiction exclusively in the final part of the novel, and the effects of processual mapping practices in its fictional spaces. We then analyse the novel's extra-textual spatialities, focusing in particular on the person of the author. We agree with Anderson that these 'territorial affects should not be seen as secondary or

less significant to the intra- or inter-textual spaces that a novel can create' (2015: 127), but as well as focusing on its impact on place we argue that Houellebecq's autofictional[2] murder - a Barthesian 'Death of the Author' - also influences how he, as an embodied, human writer, is identified and exists within and beyond the text. We take a geographical approach to the novel by using a post-representational lens to readdress the themes outlined above, arguing that the way that the text maps and describes space lends itself to a processual or assemblage understanding, where reality and representation are continually co-produced.

The Crime genre and the *monde comme juxtaposition*

It is difficult to summarize the overarching narrative of *MT* because it is a novel of two distinct parts. The first part tells the story of artist Jed Martin, who achieves artistic and financial success by photographing sections of Michelin maps and by painting portraits capturing the changing professions of France. This portraiture work brings Jed into contact with people such as Bill Gates, Jeff Koons and an autofictional version of the text's author, "Michel Houellebecq" (inverted commas used henceforth for the character), who becomes the subject both of Jed's painting *Michel Houellebecq, l'écrivain* and of the text itself. *MT*'s depiction of present-day France starts with Jed's life in Paris, where he lives primarily. Jed feels threatened by vagrants who roam Paris's streets and homeless men who enter his building at night: 'the altercations that went on between them were brutal; generally it ended with cries of agony ringing out into the night; someone would call an ambulance and they would find a guy bathed in his own blood with his ear half torn off' (26-7). The cold and isolating metropolis of Paris is juxtaposed with France's countryside of leisure, safety and escape. The countryside '*régions*' are where Jed and Olga escape on weekends away, reinforcing them as a romanticized landscape. They are "Houellebecq's" place of inspiration, his creative space in which to write, and isolate himself from social life. The countryside is described as harmonious and natural with an atmosphere that is 'pure and pleasant, with a little haze on the horizon' (51). This dichotomy is inverted in the latter part of the novel, when character "Houellebecq"'s body is discovered in his rural home, scattered in laser-cut bloody pieces across his living room in a macabre scene. Now principally following the detective Jasselin instead of Jed, the rural space is no longer a safe haven but a hostile and violent environment, the scene of the crime. "Houellebecq"'s body is destroyed and the novel's intra-textual geography switches from rural refuge to rural crime scene. Just as the representations of "Houellebecq" and the countryside established in the first part is disrupted, genre is also unsettled as this final part of the text shifts into crime fiction. In this part of the novel, Houellebecq reproduces the mythologised signs associated with crime fiction, inserting them into one section that sits in juxtaposition to the rest.

Crime fiction is not merely defined by the presence of crime in the narrative, but rather employs a whole set of symbolic practices. Diana Holmes affirms: 'crime writing as a genre works variations on narrative structures so recurrent, pervasive and satisfying that they could be described as mythical' (2017: 12), and Houellebecq uses the sets of rules repeated and reproduced across crime fiction to establish the shift in genre. For

example, *MT*'s narrative is superseded by a problem-puzzle in which not only the characters but also the readers are implicated via the hermeneutic reading process. Both those within and outside of the novel search for *signs* to solve the puzzle: the detectives examining the scene of the crime and "Houellebecq"'s past, and readers searching the text for a hint or clue that could provide the solution. The text hints at the puzzle-like nature of the murder: "Houellebecq"'s scattered corpse itself incites Jasselin to feel as if he were standing before a puzzle:

> The shreds of flesh themselves, of a red which turned blackish in certain places, didn't seem to have been placed haphazardly but following patterns that were difficult to decipher, [Jasselin] had the feeling that he was in the presence of a jigsaw puzzle. (278)

The reader's attention is drawn to the significance of signs, drawn in by the puzzle. Unable to grasp the reality of what happened to "Houellebecq", Jasselin is only able to perceive and connect the signs and symbols that have been left behind. However, the non-coherence of these signs and symbols makes their meaning difficult to grasp for reader and detective alike.

Champigny argues that there are also narratological traits in the crime fiction genre, namely a 'narrative secret' (1977: 18). The mystery of the crime exists in the absence of its narration. The narrative that follows the detective exists in the notable absence of the narrative that depicts the crime. Eisenzweig explains this dualistic narrative technique: there is 'one narrative in which another narrative is sought, the former coming from the discovery (or the anticipation) of a crime, the latter providing the identity of the criminal, their motives and methods' (1983: 9). He asserts that crime fiction functions through this fundamental interdependence of the two narratives, one that is absent until the end and one that is present from the start. In this narratological way, the crime novel stands in opposition to other genres, such as realism, which do not offer this presence/absence dual narrative. This interdependent dual narrative arises in the crime fiction part of *MT*; the presence of Jasselin's storyline relies on the absence of the narrative depicting "Houellebecq"'s murder**.** This absent narrative revealing the solution only appears at the very end of the novel, and as Williams (2015) has noted, it does not provide the sense of resolution typically expected from crime fiction but instead an unsatisfying subversion. Rather than a character that appeared previously in the text, the murderer is new to the story, rendering it impossible for any reader or detective to have even suspected him. This subverts crime fiction's tradition of satisfying suspense, 'both through the introduction of apparently discrete narrative threads which, as readers, we anticipate will reveal their connection, though we don't know how, and through the posing of narrative enigmas' (Holmes 2017: 13).

The stylistic elements of crime fiction are also present throughout *MT* - particularly intertextuality. Eisenzweig insists that within crime fiction 'intertextual references are particularly numerous (Conan Doyle refers to Poe and Poirot cites Holmes, etc.)' (1983: 11). More recently, Pierre Lemaitre's 2009 award winning novel, *Travail soigné,* consists of an intertextual juxtaposition of "samples" from a variety of classics of the Crime genre.

MT's intertextual web is vast, covering many time periods, genres and sources. It includes intertextual references to crime authors like Agatha Christie and the recently deceased Thierry Jonquet – 'In France he's the best' (369) - and more broadly to the French police, including their Terms and Conditions for joining. Russell Williams (2015) asserts that *MT* primarily mimics Jonquet, not only directly mentioning him but also drawing on themes from his novel *Mygale* (1999), including a similar murderous plastic surgeon who performs grotesque skin grafts on his victims.

As 'genre takes on meaning in a network of oppositions' (Compagnon 2001), the juxtaposition of this section against the others therefore draws attention to the literary traditions and signs typically associated with crime fiction. By constituting only one section of the novel and subverting many of the recognisable signs of the genre, this representation manipulates the traits and expectations associated with crime fiction. Through this juxtaposition, Houellebecq's novel highlights how genre is a codified type of discourse, a particular grammar of 'mapping' (Turnbull 1989). Indeed, crime writing is not based on the ability to depict the truth or reality of a crime but rather on the ability to copy a set of reproducible signs associated with the genre, what Baudrillard would describe as 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality' (1981: 1). *MT*, in its subversive lack of climax and the general arbitrary nature of the murder and solution, plays with reality and representation, evoking the signs of crime fiction only to disappoint the expectations linked to such fiction.

Houellebecq is not established as a crime novelist: in fact his novels have been compared to other literary genres including Balzac-inspired realism (Viard 2007) and experimental naturalism (Rabosseau 2007). He has been compared to diverse canonical figures including Rousseau (Viard 2004), Sade (Steiner 2009) and Comte (Chabert 2002). In his intertextual references Houellebecq goes beyond the canon into a heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981) of references to television, film, magazines, websites and advertisements, amongst others. McCann describes the collage-like effect created from this combination of genres and references in Houellebecq's novels as a 'battle of discourses' (2007: 367). Indeed, Houellebecq argues that 'I don't have a style, I have several [...] I enjoy mischievously reproducing various types of discourses: marketing, sociology, etc.' (Houellebecq 2016: 963)[3]. To strictly focus on references to canonical texts would mean ignoring the more popular media forms that are embedded in Houellebecq's works - such as crime fiction in *MT*. Houellebecq's work often explores what he has referred to as a '*monde comme juxtaposition*'[4], through abrupt changes in tone, style and narrative content. Thinking relationally, one can understand juxtaposition as a 'powerful assemblage' (Allen 2011), where non-coherence does work in the novel, and demonstrates the artifice and agency of the writer. It is a reminder that a text's genre is subject to its author.

The juxtaposition of crime fiction with the rest of *MT* is 'powerful' in that non-coherence comes to characterise the world in which the novel takes place. As Gorrora (2000) writes, the crime novel is a fertile space to evoke and challenge formative cultural narratives, and Schmid (2012) argues that the solution narrative of crime fiction can be used to bring to light the elements that come together to produce the crime, shedding light on the way in which power operates in society. Crime novelist and theorist Jean-Patrick Manchette asserts that crime novels should be used as a social vehicle: 'for me, it

was, and still is the type of novel for very violent social intervention' (2003: 9). A key socio-political focus throughout *MT* is the changing geography of France's countryside spaces, particularly their post-industrial decline, museification and fetishization. The text emphasises nostalgia for the art, labour and naturalness of the countryside, passing from the 'real' into 'representation' as the territory is superseded by the map, and the productive, local rural economy relies increasingly on tourism. Houellebecq's 'secondary world' (Kneale 2003), or the *monde houellebecquien* (Sweeney 2013), is in this way reminiscent of the hyperreal landscapes described by Baudrillard (1988) or Eco (1986). Such hyperreal landscapes have the ability to obscure the often-fraught political inequalities that reproduce them (Duncan and Duncan 2004), instead presenting a pristine, apolitical world. In *MT*, the idealised and essentialised representations of the French rural territories (written, mapped, culinary, etc.) are juxtaposed with a depressing, complex reality. According to Caquard 'this resonates with the idea that in the postmodern world most of the time the hyper-real appears joyful beside the deterioration of the environment to which it refers' (2011: 140). The juxtaposition of genres in *MT* underlines this politics of representation, particularly concerning the rural spaces of France and the person of Houellebecq himself, as we will see.

Setting the Scene: A post-representational approach

Previous work by geographers on spatiality in crime fiction (Beyer 2012; Cook 2011; Miller and Oakley 2012; Schmid 2012), particularly on the 'scene of the crime' (Geherin 2008), has already explored numerous themes, such as the agency of place, the importance of setting, and the 'secondary worlds' of crime fiction. Relational thinking is by no means absent in this scholarship, however this work has largely been limited to the representational lens, describing and analysing the spatial 'relations of interiority' within the text, where the 'scene' or 'secondary world' is understood as a coherent whole, rather than exploring the processuality of writing or mapping.

However, Houellebecq's use of seemingly tangential descriptions of the material context of the murder scene in MT exemplifies this kind of relational, post-representational thinking. Indeed, the crime scene is depicted as an assemblage as the murdered body is 'read' by the detective, Jasselin, in relation to its surroundings. Before he examines "Houellebecq"'s mutilated body, Jasselin maps the crime scene in relation to its surroundings over two chapters. Arriving at "Houellebecq's" village, Jasselin sees flies hovering above the doorway to "Houellebecq"'s house and re-imagines the corpse from this perspective: 'From the point of view of a fly, a human corpse is meat, plainly and simply meat' (265). From this, the narrative digresses to provide a hyperrealist account of the lifecycle of the housefly over several pages (using text taken verbatim from *Wikipedia.fr*), describing in detail how the human corpse becomes the home and the food for the fly's maggot offspring. The lifecycle of the fly is joined to the place of the crime scene, meaning that it is now not only the place of a murder, but also the home of a swarm of reproducing insects. This temporal aspect underlines the processuality of the crime scene within the text, in a state of decay and putrefaction as its elements slowly disperse.

Next, before even entering the house, Jasselin takes a walk around the village in search of witnesses but sees nobody, only empty second-homes and abandoned streets laid out in a disjunctured road system. In contrast with the idealized rural tropes of the organic, the living and the local that had been evoked in the first part of the novel, the rural setting of "Houellebecq"'s murder is now described as an anodyne, lifeless, globalized space: 'everything gave the impression of being a film set, a fake village, put together for a television series' (270). Detailed descriptions of seemingly banal objects and statements of fact establish a sense of concrete realism in the spatial representation of the village. The description of the countryside is now in a depressive tone: 'The south of the village ended with the Emmanuel-Kant roundabout, a purely urbanistic, aesthetically sober creation, a simple circle of perfectly grey tarmac that led nowhere' (272). This spatially and materially descriptive passage is again reminiscent of a Baudrillardian simulacrum (1994), as a hyperreal ideal of franco-French and modernised rurality dominates the landscape. This materially-focused, tangential and in-the-moment description of the crime scene bears comparison with the trajectories of assemblage thinking (Featherston 2011) concerned with the material, the embodied, and the processual. The crime fiction genre suitably enables Houellebecq to use a forensic level of realism that highlights such interrelations between material things and social processes. Such a forensic level of realism would ordinarily include information that would later inform the detective's deductions, but as pointed out above, *MT*'s crime narrative is left incomplete and frustrated. The processuality of mapping practices can be felt through the novel's intra-textual geography as Jasselin builds up an ultimately irrelevant, though highly detailed, map of the crime scene.

Such a post-representational lens applies to other elements of the novel, including its intertextual references. In the same way that the crime scene is 'mapped' by Jasselin in relation to its surroundings, the novel too exists in assemblage as it is read intertextually by readers in relation to the other texts (Anderson 2016). The references to other texts are often explicit and come from texts and media of all kinds, from Houellebecq's own novels to canonical texts to advertisements. For example, quotations from the Bible in the novel are italicised so as to highlight their presence (e.g. 56), juxtaposed with popular jingles and slogans. This intertextuality is brought to its extreme through the embedding of extracts from *Wikipedia.fr*, as through the description of the housefly's lifecycle. Houellebecq actually acknowledges this source and points out some of the places where he used the articles as 'inspiration' in the novel's postscript, including in the description of the town of Beauvais. This overt usage of intertextual referencing provokes a reflection on the intertextual *process,* causing us to question the degree to which the idea that text, or knowledge more generally, can be a *product* created by the author. The text's meaning instead exists as a process, involving readers, writers and the material book itself. This in turn highlights the inherent complexities of writing, such as the boundaries of plagiarism and media, the creative power of the author and the supposed originality of a text (Harris 2017).

Intertextuality is itself depicted within *MT*'s narrative, with extra-textual effects, as France's rural spaces are considered in particular through the eyes of the tourist, a figure who is constantly 'mapping' through reading, referencing, and reproducing spatial

information. For example, Jed and his girlfriend Olga take numerous weekend breaks in the *'régions'* and these scenes are narrated through numerous intertextual references to travel literature, in particular guidebooks and road maps. The text goes so far as to describe the itineraries of the characters' journeys in such a way that readers can follow them precisely on a road map. The French rural spaces are also the focus of Olga's job for Michelin guides; in this role, she tries to sell the countryside by convincing wealthy Russian, Chinese and Indian tourists that the regions are of 'a genuine interest' in their 'franco-French' and 'traditional' nature (94), associating value with cultural "authenticity". The characters' perceptions and evaluations of space play a major role in setting the scene. For example, for Jasselin, the boundary between discrete urban and rural spaces is delimited by the first motorway tollbooth and the appearance of 'regional products' (346) in a service station, revealing his own internal mapping process. This tourist's-eye view targets the cultural commodification of France's regions, again destabilizing notions of reality and representation, particularly playing on the paradoxical search for a marketable yet "authentic" culture.

The tourist's-eye view is another example of how space in Houellebecq's *MT* is described through maps, map-readers and mapping processes in action. In an interview with Martin de Haan, Houellebecq stated that 'humans live in a world which is for the most part composed of texts on the world. We live in a world that is entirely culturally constructed, broadly speaking' (2004: 26). *MT*'s characters and the narration accordingly make sense of place using cartographic technologies, cognitive mapping practices, and other codified geographical knowledge. For Jed, it is the map itself which is a thing of beauty;

> Never had he contemplated an object as magnificent, as rich in emotion and sense as this 1:150000 Michelin map of La Creuse, Haute-Vienne. There in the map the essence of modernity, of the world's scientific and technological understanding, was mixed with the essence of animal life. (52)

Jed and Olga rely on tourists' written experiences of the *régions*, dictated by *Michelin* Guide recommendations for hotels and restaurants, over an unmediated experience of the territory. For example, when they visit Vault-de-Lugny, their experience of the château is described through guide excerpts: 'the kitchen, according to the guide, "enhanced a land of infinite richness"' (69). As such, Olga and Jed "map" tourist discourse (consisting mainly of the information provided to them in the guidebooks) onto their experience of the French territory:

> 'Where would you like to go first?'

> Thinking about it, Jed saw that the question was far from simple. Lots of regions, as far as he knew, were of real interest. It was perhaps true, he thought, that France was a marvelous country - at least from the point of view of a tourist. (93)

This tourists' eye view is one example of how Houellebecq's *MT* shows the process of "mapping" in action and the influence of the market on cultural values. The characters' and readers' perceptions of France's rural spaces are changed through the novel, in relation to other texts and sources, real and fictional. They are neither purely 'real', nor purely 'representations', but dynamic interactions of the two.

This marketing of the "authentic" France is taken to its extreme in the epilogue set twenty years in the future. In this dystopian world the rural economy and society has completely changed as the original people no longer live there and have been replaced by newcomers with a 'taste for business and marketable ecological convictions' (400). The local, productive rural economy is replaced by a globalised, post-productive, capitalist economy based on the marketing of cultural goods through tourism. Tourists come to experience a hyper-real version of France. Such a dystopian view of social change in the novel has led Diken to argue that 'Houellebecq's is a late modern world in which capital tends to replace, like a map, the actual experience of life, the territory' (2014: 1110). From this perspective, the territory is made lifeless, murdered like "Houellebecq", by its transformation into marketable representation. "Houellebecq"'s scattered parcels of flesh found at the murder scene can be seen as a metaphor for the parceling up of space into discrete 'territories', made ever more violent through capitalist market relations. However, if one instead views the text from a post-representational perspective the 'actual experience of life' cannot be merely 'replaced' by 'capital', but must be understood to exist in a constant process of change. Through this lens, in *MT* capital does not *replace* 'the actual experience of life', but it comes increasingly to mediate and define it. Houellebecq's novel does not necessarily fulfil Manchette's assertion that it must constitute a violent social intervention but it does provoke new questions around reality and representation, and the processes of commodification of both the author and the rural spaces of France.

The Death of the Author

So far, like other scholars (Anderson 2016; Rossetto 2014), we have used the post-representational lens to approach the geographical effects of the novel's settings and intertextuality, both within and outside the novel. However, the representation of the author can also be examined using relational thinking, and *MT* provides a unique case in which to do this. By writing himself into the narrative, Houellebecq not only plays with media representations of himself throughout the text, but creates his own 'Death of the Author'. Houellebecq's literary avatar possesses the *mythologised* signs (Barthes 1957) that are associated with him, such as his distinctive anorak and characteristic holding of cigarettes between his index and ring finger. The text refers several times to "Houellebecq" as 'the author of *x*', so the reader is reminded of his other works, and these works come to play a part in defining his identity. These written works and the characteristics reproduced by the media are all sources from which the author's identity, from the point of view of the reader as well as characters in the novel, develops. Following Philippe Vilain, we see the use of autofiction as representing the means to cultivate a 'personal mythology' (2016: 63). Readers' perceptions of Houellebecq, formed

in response to his earlier works and media representations, reproduce themselves in the character of the autofictional "Houellebecq" in each 'spatial event' of reading. These textual practices of identity formation within and beyond the novel are processual. On the one hand, Houellebecq is using and contributing to his caricatured representation, cementing its existence. On the other hand, he undermines this representation by taking it to caricatured extremes before murdering it. A paradox emerges from this as Houellebecq is undermining the signs around his authorial identity that he has helped establish while also criticising the press who have contributed to the solidification of his success (Harris 2017).

Through the character "Houellebecq", the novel implicitly refers to the French press and its substantial and damaging effect on the literary field. That Houellebecq would create an autofictional version of himself further complicates reality and representation, map and territory. The text's discussion of representation is highlighted not only through the focus on art and maps (including figurative maps like the *Michelin* guide) but through the inclusion of fictional representations of real people including Houellebecq, Teresa Cremisi, Jeff Koons, Bill Gates and Frédéric Beigbeder. Even the roles of both Jed and "Houellebecq" as artist and writer are based on their ability to create representations of the real. The novel's third-person, omniscient narrator asserts the purely representational nature of art, 'the productions of representations of the world, in which people were never meant to live' (37), but *MT* repeatedly unsettles this neat separation of reality and representation through the inclusion of real individuals as characters, including "Houellebecq". *MT*'s extra-textual spatial effects therefore have a very specific geography, focused on the people that feature in it, their bodies and the spaces they occupy.

Houellebecq is a well-known figure in France, occupying a space in public life and caricatured as being a reclusive, heavy drinker who has been labelled in the media as Islamophobic, misogynistic and racist. "Houellebecq" appears as a compilation of the acerbic criticisms of the author from across the French press. Rather than attempting to produce a positive textual version of himself that would perhaps work to counter this caricature, Houellebecq has instead reproduced his representation as a misanthropic, depressed, binge-drinking loner:

> [T]he author of *Atomised* was dressed in striped grey pyjamas that made him look like the kind of convict you see on TV series. His hair was tangled and dirty, his face was red, almost to the point of rosacea, and he smelt quite bad. The inability to wash oneself is one of the most certain signs of the setting in of a depressed state, remembered Jed. (160)

"Houellebecq" stresses the author's issues with his representation in the press, 'Really, the press is insupportably stupid and conformist [...] I am truly hated to an incredible degree by the French media; a week doesn't go by without one publication or another talking shit about me' (143). Houellebecq targets and challenges the sensationalism and simplicity of journalism; by writing himself as character, he is able to refer to, manipulate and deconstruct his caricatured media representation found in blogs, reports, and articles[5]

(see Harris 2017). The novel does more than show the limitations of press representations and their tendency towards essentialisations; it reconfigures the intertextual assemblage through which Houellebecq's personality is 'mapped' and known. It short-circuits this process of mapping by inserting his character as both subject and object of knowledge within and beyond the text.

Houellebecq reproduces his press representation only to destroy it, murdering the "Houellebecq" of the French media's imagination. "Houellebecq"'s graphic murder shows Houellebecq annihilating this caricatured representation by literally killing him off. Meizoz affirms, 'the small fable of this spectacular murder for and by the image reminds us once again that the representation (the map) has taken hold of the real referent (the territory)' (2016: 68). Even his scattered body parts are not "Houellebecq" but instead are described in the narrative as resembling a Jackson Pollock painting, emphasising the chopped-up fictional and representational nature of this textual version of himself. His death presents an implied intertextual reference to Barthes's 1967 essay 'The Death of the Author', which argues against the literary tradition of incorporating aspects of an author's identity and context in the interpretation of a text, asserting instead that (knowledge of) the writer should be disconnected from the text. Houellebecq puts into question the desire of the public and media to know about him and his private life in order to read or understand his work. This autofictional technique allows him to unsettle the fabricated representations of himself and to undermine the myth of the artist and the mediatisation of the author. The instabilities of reality and representation are underscored when Jed sees photos of Houellebecq's corpse and asks police: 'hey, what are these photos? […] I mean, what do they represent in reality?' (339), not realising that this is the corpse of the subject of his painting, '*Michel Houellebecq, l'écrivain*'. As with the text's treatment of crime fiction, the representation of the Author is shown to be a sign-based reproduction that can be destabilised and disrupted, leaving us unable to ask who, or where, the 'real' Houellebecq is.

Relational approaches have been criticised for not sufficiently addressing questions of agency (Allen 2011; Featherstone 2011). Similarly, literary criticism continues to debate whether the meaning of the text lies with the author, the text or the reader. Agency, and its distribution amongst actors, is difficult to identify in a post-representational approach, which risks over-description without conceptualisation. When "Houellebecq" is killed, there is still a *murderer* behind the *killing* of the character. Houellebecq holds a level of creative control over the text, allowing him to write himself and his death, and to assemble the narrative elements such as intertextual references that constitute the novel. He short-circuits the extra-textual spatial effects of the text-as-process by writing himself into the narrative. Although the novel is shown to be part of an intertextual process, formed by previous texts and forming the texts to come, Houellebecq has the agency to choose which references he employs. The mid-novel change in genre also highlights this active ability of the author to influence the construction of reality and representation through writing, similar to the ability of the cartographer to influence the construction of territory and map through their mapping. As such, another paradox emerges: by killing a representation of himself and writing a piece of crime fiction in which the murderer's identity is largely irrelevant, Houellebecq refers to the ideas associated with 'the Death of

the Author', but in doing so he further highlights his agency in the connection of the text's parts, reasserting his own agency. Authorial control survives; in a sense the author is both alive and dead. The post-representational emphasis on the *processual* is both highlighted and challenged by the active agency and power of the author.

Conclusions

Taking an interdisciplinary approach to *The Map and the Territory* has allowed us to bring critical cartography and literary studies into conversation. The text presents a complex set of juxtapositions and paradoxes surrounding reality and representation. Representation within the novel merges with "real" intertextual references and extra-textual effects. Understanding mapping territory as processual, rather than focusing on the products and their status, sidesteps the tensions between real and representation. The same can be said for the understanding of text as a hermeneutic reading process occurring between reader, text and author. However, post-representational cartography's value has its limits in literary criticism if one asserts the control and influence of the author and the characters in the text as active agents rather than parts of a process. *MT* provokes these productive questions about the process of writing (non-)fiction and mapping territories whether they are literary or geographical. This geo-literary exploration of *MT* has therefore worked to show how the novel evokes and destabilises complex notions of reality and representation, author and text, and map and territory.

Notes

[1] This article developed from a collaborative paper presented at Queen's University Belfast's *Crime Fiction and Rurality* symposium held in 2015.

[2] Autofiction refers to fictionalized autobiography, where a 'real' person's life is written into a fictional work. Autofiction raises the question of how 'factual' autobiography can ever be considered to be.

[3] All translations are the authors' own.

[4] "Houellebecq" describes his interest in the 'world as/of juxtaposition' in *MT*, and the theme is central to Houellebecq's collection of essays *Rester Vivant* (1991), his 2016 art exhibition of the same name, and *Before Landing* in 2014.

[5] This is also played with in the film *L'Enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* (Nicloux, G. (dir.) 2014, France, Les Films du Worso/Arte France/Chic Films)*,* in which Houellebecq acts a caricatured version of himself who has been kidnapped by the mafia.

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