

Chapter 40 The Novel in French and the Internet

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(published in Adam Watt (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Novel in French* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021)

Abstract:

This chapter provides an overview of the ways in which the boom of digital technologies has affected the novel. The Internet and especially social media are now recurrent themes in print fiction, which also often reflect the changes in our experience of space and time through new structures and styles. Beyond such thematic manifestations, however, the novel has seen more fundamental innovations that stretch its traditional boundaries. We can discern three main areas of evolution. First, the emergence of new modes of publication, including digital publishing, self-publishing, and writing platforms such as Wattpad have democratized the access to audiences and incited amateurs to write fiction. Secondly, the new modes of communication facilitate the exchange between authors and readers, while also bringing about the rise of the ‘influencers’, who are taking over the role of trend-setting from professional critics. Last but not least, new modes of storytelling have emerged that rely on digital networks: interactive fictions that break up the linearity of the text and give agency to the reader, and blogs, websites, and social media experiments that play with temporality, form, and modes of interaction with the audiences.

Keywords: Internet, digital technology, social media, self-publishing, print on demand, interactive fiction, networked fiction, blog, hyperfiction

In 1998 Jean-Pierre Balpe publishes *La Toile* (‘The Web’), a ‘roman policier d’anticipation’ (approximately, a detective science-fiction), which tells the story of the murder of a world-famous web artist in 2015 in Montreal and the subsequent investigation carried out simultaneously by the police and by an American scholar specialized in the history of the web. The latter makes a bet that without knowing anything about the case, found in the news, and without even seeing the crime scene, he will solve the murder mystery quicker than the police by simply using the web, his worldwide network of geek friends, and some hacking.

The novel was written when the Internet had just become available to the public through dial-up connection, reaching about 3 million users in France by 1999, roughly 3% of the country’s population.¹ By 2015, the time the novel is set, over 55 million users have mostly high-speed Internet access, that is about 84% of the population,² increasing further to 85% by 2017, with some 60% overall accessing mobile Internet through smartphones.³ As the murder mystery unfolds across the globe, Balpe describes life in the Internet Age to come with striking perspicacity, from the two-tier society of the ‘integrated’ and the ‘disintegrated’ to the screen-obsessed teenager and the sect that tries to draw him in, online degree programmes and close ties between people who never meet, and the difficulty of telling facts from fictions and lies. The only points where this fiction diverts from what became reality are the global fame a digital artist could achieve, which now seems optimistic, and the emergence of the social networks that would radically change the shape and dynamics of the web. Two decades later, Sandra Lucbert’s *La Toile* (2017) revolves around a start-up and its actions take place through a social network called Medium, in the form of posts, comments, and messages, without a narratorial discourse to embed

¹ ARCEP, ‘Comparaisons 1999/2005: Le marché de l’Internet’ (n.d.) <<https://archives.arcep.fr/index.php?id=7875>> [accessed February 2018].

² Internet World Stats <<https://www.internetworldstats.com/eu/fr.htm>> [accessed February 2019].

³ ‘L’État d’Internet en France. Rapport d’activité, tome 3’ <<https://www.arcep.fr/index.php?id=13620>>, (ARCEP, 2017), p. 9 [accessed February 2019].

them, so that the reader has to make sense of the network of characters and communications into which they are thrown.

The representation of life in the digital world is the most straightforward way in which the Internet and its imaginary have penetrated the novel in French since the late-twentieth century. From the playful reflection on the impact of digital technology on reading (Paul Fournel, *La Liseuse [Dear Reader]*, 2012) and forward-looking sci-fi cyber-dystopias (Henri Duboc, *Dieu 2.0 [‘God 2.0’]* 3 vols, 2015-2018; Thomas Palpant, *E-STORIC: le jour où Internet s’effondra [‘E-storic: the day the internet collapses’]*, 2017) to present-time analyses of the impact and dangers of social media (Baptiste Rossi, *La Vraie Vie de Kevin [‘The Real Life of Kevin’]*, 2014; Virginie Despentes, *Vernon Subutex*, 3 vols, 2015-2017; Camille Laurens, *Celle que vous croyez, [Who you think I am]*, 2016) and the fragmented panorama of a polyphonic world sourced from, or inspired by, interactions on the web (Guy Tournaye, *Le Décodeur [‘The Decoder’]*, 2005; Emmanuelle Pireyre, *Féerie générale [‘General Fairytale’]*, 2012; Véronique Taquin, *Un roman du réseau [‘A net novel’]*, 2012), the range of thematic and stylistic variations is wide. The latter group especially, just as Balpe’s and Lucbert’s mentioned novels, perform the variety and complexity of the network in their structure and texture by offering fragments and connections between them, rather than a linear story. Most of these narratives also address the problem of blurry boundaries between fiction, the virtual space, and reality.

More fundamental changes have happened in other respects, however, that impact the novel as a sociocultural and literary phenomenon more deeply – even if on the surface the production and reception of the ‘old novel’ continues to dominate. The three main areas of evolution are the emergence of new modes of publication; new infrastructures and modes of communication around literature; and new forms and modes of writing and storytelling building on digital technologies and networks. These are global processes with local and linguistic variations based on cultural heritage and socio-political contexts. I will briefly outline the first two and discuss the third more in detail to offer a panorama of the ways in which the novel is remediated, rethought, and subverted in the French-speaking digital space.⁴

It is important to note that the nature of the corpus is very different from others considered elsewhere in the present volume. Beyond the fact that, as with anything contemporary, we cannot yet have a firmly established canon, and that institutional and scholarly engagement with these materials is still limited, as often is the visibility of the works, the very idea and practice of canonization is problematic when it comes to digital and networked art.⁵ First, the distinctions between art, games, and literature become blurred as they use the same space, technology, and modes of expression. Second, the rapid obsolescence of devices and software means that works often become unavailable or inaccessible, and third-party platforms might disappear with the content they hosted. Overall, the selection discussed here is inevitably shaped by serendipitous encounters as much as it is exposed to potential omissions. It does nevertheless aim to offer a representative image of the ways in which the Internet has shaped the novel in French.

New modes of publication and communication around literature

The Internet is a digital communication technology and infrastructure that covers much of the globe. The World Wide Web is the networked content that offers a public space: any person can publish information on a website and make it immediately available worldwide. This means a scale change from traditional modes of publishing, where all media had their gatekeepers (publishers, editors, institutions) and the reach of the content was far more limited. The current

⁴ I will not address digital archives and various remediations of classics, which would take us in a very different direction. The most important digital archive for pre-digital works in French is Gallica, the Bibliothèque nationale de France’s digital library: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/html/und/a-propos>.

⁵ The Electronic Literature Organization, the Laboratoire NT2, the Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice (ELMCIP), and a few other initiatives propose nevertheless invaluable directories and anthologies, and the Bibliothèque nationale de France selectively archives the French and Francophone web.

disintermediation – the removal of mediators between the sender and the receiver of a message – and the many ways in which content can be distributed explode the concept of publishing. Moreover, digital technology allows for the creation of a great variety of types of materials and the combination of media, including features such as interactivity and hyperlinks. These factors mean that today more than ever, we cannot talk about the novel, still the most popular literary genre, without taking into consideration the context in which it exists and which has equally impacted authors, readers, and the works produced.

Traditionally, before a novel could reach a reader, it had to cross a number of hurdles that included the professional evaluation of its literary quality, entertainment value, and chances of success with readers, critics, and prizes. That system still exists, producing the same kinds of stories as fifty years ago, but alternatives multiply around it. Meanwhile, the pre-digital system has also developed digital offshoots. Traditional publishers now often offer digital editions and work increasingly with print on demand (POD). More importantly, a number of ‘pure players’ have emerged, publishers that source their authors online and often publish exclusively in digital form, from as early as 1998 with 00h00.com. Today, such publishers tend to specialise in a specific genre or form (sci-fi, young readers, augmented books, etc.),⁶ with POD as an option, and be more open to works that do not meet mainstream (publishers’) expectations. The catalogue of *publie.net*, created in 2008 by a collective of authors on the initiative of François Bon – a well-established print author and avid experimenter with the new media’s literary potential – testifies to the variety of writings that resist classification and that a traditional publisher would most likely have refused. Digital publishing, which requires a lower material investment from the publisher, has opened the door for experimentation that disrupts generic conventions. Self-publishing has also become much easier and cheaper with platforms such as Amazon CreateSpace, which offers the necessary toolkit and distribution requiring no professional skills. It is usually unpublished authors who first try their luck with self-publishing, but counterexamples also exist, such as Bon himself, who created *Tiers Livre Éditeur* primarily for his own works and editorial projects. Amazon has also understood the importance and commercial potential of sourcing translation through the web: *AmazonCrossing* invites (aspiring) translators to propose their translation of popular self-published books. The problem with self-publishing and crowdsourced translations, from the readers’ and professionals’ perspective, is the lack of quality control before publication. Reader recommendations become increasingly important, but fake reviews are an issue.

Another hugely successful free writing and sharing platform with avenues towards publication is Wattpad. Founded in Canada in 2006, as of June 2018 Wattpad has over 65 million users and over 400 million texts produced worldwide in over 50 languages, with French among the most prominent. While it is open to other genres, prose fiction remains the uncontested favourite. Wattpad prescribes a serialised form and prefers short chapters published with regular frequency, targeting an easy read and hooked audiences. Most texts are teen romances and fan fiction, but the platform has encouraged an unprecedented engagement in creative writing and exchange about storytelling especially among young people, further blurring the boundaries between amateur and professional writers on the one hand, and between writers and readers on the other. Moreover, with the discussions around episodes, the social aspect of reading is reinforced. Wattpad feeds not only into self-publishing, but also into traditional publishing, the continuing prestige of which remains visible from the fact that being discovered by a traditional publisher remains an aspiration of most self-published authors. Meanwhile, publishers have also discovered the safe bet of publishing already authors already popular on the platform: Hachette Romans has even signed an agreement with Wattpad and published French-speaking authors successful on that platform such as Gally Lauteur or Mathilde Aloha.

With the new spaces and modes of publication, communication about and around literature has also gone through important changes, shifting practices and power relations in the system of legitimation. While journalistic criticism continues to exist, its value judgements now

⁶ See Lorenzo Soccavo’s list of Francophone pure player publishers at <https://prospectivedulivre.blogspot.com/2011/04/plus-de-30-editeurs-pure-players.html> [accessed February 2019].

have to compete with reader recommendations and often non-specialist ‘influencers’. The process began with literary blogs in the late 1990s and continued with reader reviews on Amazon, Fnac, and other online booksellers, and on reading platforms such as Babelio, the most popular one in France. All these affect potential readers’ decisions, while algorithms propose titles based on previous purchases or page consultations. Social-media buzz now also complements and competes with traditional media presence. The upheaval around Michel Houellebecq’s *Soumission* (*Submission*, 2015) in the immediate aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks is a good example of the amplifying effect of social media that quickly spread across borders.

The most recent phenomenon, expanding both in size and influence, is booktubing: mostly young amateurs present mostly fiction in YouTube videos, often followed by thousands of viewers.⁷ Literary professionals, including publishers, critics, and authors have also realised the potential and offer not only book trailers and interviews, but readings and performances as well. François Bon’s ‘Service de presse’ remains a unique kind of ‘unboxing’, where he opens his mail in front of the camera and comments on the books received and their authors, offering fascinating insights not only into the work of non-mainstream literary authors, but also into the publishing scene and the situation of the author today. The most important difference of this form of discussion as opposed to traditional journalistic and academic criticism is precisely that they *can* become discussions, creating virtual communities of users around the YouTuber. Engagement with books is also increasing on Instagram, with mini-reviews accompanying photos of books, but the platform better lends itself to the visual aestheticization of the book as object. Overall, if the Internet and digital technology in general is often accused of destroying the culture of reading, it has also opened new avenues for literature and reading as a social phenomenon, which continues to attract younger generations.

New technologies, new media, new forms

From the early days of personal computing, curious and creative minds began to experiment with the technology’s literary potential. In France, Jean-Pierre Balpe explored generative writing as early as the 1970s. Electronic literature thus existed well before the Internet, even though the latter opened new horizons for it. And well before the impact of the Internet could be felt in culture and society more broadly, in the mid-1990s, authors realised the interest of the web environment for literature. Digital literature takes advantage to varying extents and in various ways of the networked environment, and a work that we can more or less closely associate with the genre of the novel may be multimedia, generated, animated, interactive, non-linear, with internal and external hyperlinks, and unstable, with changeable form and content. Any of these features represents key differences in how a piece of digital fiction functions and is received compared to print fiction. Moreover, all digital content hides a two-tier structure: the ‘cultural layer’ rests on a ‘computer layer’,⁸ and the latter involves a further distinction between the hardware and the code that makes it work. The machine executes the code – the writing of which belongs to the creative process – to generate the cultural layer, which, depending on the code, may be different on each execution. But the execution also depends on the user, who may have various degrees of control. Some or all of the content may also be drawn directly from external sources, changing again the content on each execution. All this introduces complexity and dynamism that distinguish from print works digital literature with even the lightest use of the computer’s potential.

A distinction often made in relation to digital literature is between electronic literature in the narrow sense, which experiments with the technology, and web or blog literature, which involves using the Internet and often platforms such as Wordpress or Blogger. Social media projects are the latest addition to the range of online literary creativity. In the case of electronic literature in the narrow sense, the author is actively involved in developing the technical aspects of the work, the dynamic and/or interactive content of which would be impossible to print without losing key features, while in the other two, the technology rather serves as a carrier, inspiration, and constraint, more open to remediation in print. We find works labelled or associated with the novel

⁷ Booktubers-app.com lists thirty to forty new French and Francophone booktuber videos daily.

⁸ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 46.

in all three areas. In the following, I propose an overview of the range of novelistic works and experiments grouped according to the kind of apparatus they use and their relationship to print.

Interactive fictions: from telematic novels to hyperfiction and touch screen narratives

The first networked novels in French appeared not only before the birth of the World Wide Web, but before the spread of personal computers. France was home to the largest pre-web digital network, Minitel,⁹ launched in 1981 and shut down in 2012. As early as 1983 – when the Minitel network had just begun to expand across France – Camille Philibert, Guillaume Baudin, Jacques-Elie Chabert, and Jean-Paul Martin created the first ‘roman télématique’, a Minitel detective novel titled *ACSOO*.¹⁰ The title, borrowed from the videotex console, is short for ‘Abandon Commande Sur Ordre Opérateur’ (‘Abandon Command On Operator’s Order’), with each term also speaking to the narrative plot.¹¹ The story had various ramifications the reader could follow by choosing among the alternatives proposed at the end of each page, and the text also included highlighted words the input of which took the reader to another branch of the story, similarly to today’s hyperlinks. By enabling interactivity, digital technology began to allow the work actively to perform the readerly involvement advocated by the ‘new novelists’, Barthes’s concept of the writerly text, and Umberto Eco’s ‘open work’.¹² The telematic novel displayed the core features of the hypertext novel, which was born a few years later on personal computers and then developed with the emergence of the Web. Philibert, Chabert, and Martin were also contributed to two further telematic novels, *Vertiges, l’écran des destins croisés* (‘Vertigo, The Screen of Crossing Destinies, 1984) and *L’objet perdu* (‘The Lost Object’, 1985). All three works were commissioned for exhibitions, which included a specific layout and additional interactivity between the machines, the characters, and the visitors.

The initial institutional support for exploring the emerging communication technologies for culture was also manifest in the case of a different kind of ‘Francophone telematic novel’, *Marco Polo ou Le nouveau livre des merveilles* (‘Marco Polo, or The New Book of Wonders’, 1985), proposed by Bernard Tournois and coordinated by Hervé Fischer, with the conceptual lead of Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino and the participation of eight authors from across the Francophone world: Jean-Marie Adiaffi, Louis Caron, Abdelaziz Kacem, Florence Delay, Jacques Lacarrière, Jacques Savoie, Sony Labou Tansi, and Bertrand Visage. ‘Telematic’ here referred to the collaborative creative process using a telephone line and a modem. Each author created a character and a first chapter, and all characters had to converge in Paris by the end of the story. Every day, the authors circulated their new chapters, each picking someone else’s to continue for the next day, following an additional constraint set by Eco and Calvino. Two daily papers, *Le Devoir* in Montreal and *Libération* in Paris, published daily one of the eight chapters submitted by the authors, producing two different feuillets. Canadian poet and artist Herménégilde Chiasson created an illustration for each episode using the still very rudimentary MacPaint, the French Antenne2 broadcast a video animation created also on a daily basis, and the final texts were published in France and in Canada. A truly multimedia work, then, considering all the components and remediations, but with a traditional mode of writing and storytelling at its core, only carried out in collaboration by switching authors and texts. Hervé Fischer notes that the project was significant as an early symbolic gesture recognizing the importance of digital technologies for literary and cultural exchange and affirming the Francophone presence in the

⁹ ‘The Minitel has often been considered as a “pre-Internet” platform and now as a social media *avant la lettre*.’ Annick Bureau, ‘Art and Minitel in France in the 1980s’, in *Social Media Archaeology and Poetics*, ed. by Judy Molloy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), pp. 139–46 (139).

¹⁰ These works have been lost together with the infrastructure for which they were created. As of 2018, a preservation project has been undertaken by the Laboratoire PAMAL at the École Supérieure d’Art d’Avignon.

¹¹ Guillaume Baudin, ‘Le prétexte au désœuvrement’, in *L’Imagination informatique de la littérature*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Balpe and Bernard Magné (Saint-Denis: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 1991), pp. 151–61 (155).

¹² On the new novelists (*nouveaux romanciers*) and on theories of the novel, see respectively Chapter 29 and Chapter 32, above.

field of technological innovation, also for further connecting Francophone countries and cultures.¹³

While the 1980s through to the 1990s saw much literary experimentation especially with generative and kinetic poetry, it is the new millennium and the increasing availability of Internet access that brought a real scale change in playing with the potential of digital storytelling. Following the example of John Updike, Goncourt prize winner Yann Quéffelec launched in 1998 the ‘intercreative’ ‘first novel created on the Internet’.¹⁴ Quéffelec published a first chapter on the website of France Loisirs and invited readers to write and submit their own version for the second. A committee selected the best one, which was published with a renewed invitation to the public to continue, up until the last chapter, which Quéffelec wrote himself.

More digitally interactive were the hypertext fictions. Hyperfiction is a narrative enriched with hyperlinks that take the reader to another page in the same work or to a different website altogether, enabling a non-linear and open structure. Jean-François Verreault’s *Le Nœud* (1997–2001) and Fred Romano’s *Edward_Amiga* (1997–1999) reveal the fascination with, and focus on, the structure and technology. The latter is a ‘hyperoman in French and JavaScript’ ‘which describes the generational conflicts between two geniuses of computing, Edward_Amiga and his daughter Marlène_Pc’.¹⁵ Elisabeth Bauer notes that it was the best known French hyperfiction, but more successful abroad than in France, as Bill Gates listed it in the European section of the first internet literature competition.¹⁶ This work not only presents an anthropomorphised allegory of technological progress, but also assumes the didactic function of introducing the user to the basic concepts of the new environment, such as hyperlink, pop-up, or address bar.

From the same period, the Belgian Anne-Cécile Brandenbourger’s *Apparitions inquiétantes* (1997–1999)¹⁷ is a labyrinthine multimedia ‘cyber-polar’ that multiplies characters and threads deliberately to make the reader lose track – even though it also offers an ‘Atlas of Paths’, a ‘Emergency exit’. The text was also published in print by 00h00.¹⁸ Lucy de Boutigny’s *NON-roman* (1997–2000)¹⁹ mobilizes key functions and features the Internet of the late 1990s to tell the fragmented story of a young couple in the materialist neoliberal world, reminiscent of Georges Perec’s *Les Choses* (*Things: A Story of the Sixties*, 1965). *NON-roman* also performs the rhythm, superficiality, and emptiness of the characters’ life, however: showy graphics and animations mimic the media’s attention-grabbing visuals, parodies of commercials and chatroom discussions offer snapshots from life in the ‘global village’, internal and external hyperlinks that blur the boundaries between fiction and the ‘reality’ of the surrounding digital media environment and hijack the reader, who nevertheless remains implicated in the shaping of the narrative universe. Less showy in colours but richer in text, Philippe de Jonckheere’s *Chinois (ma vie)* (‘Chinese, My Life’, 2002)²⁰ consists of hyperlinked chapters, with an explicit reference to Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*, 1963), a postmodern hyperfiction *avant la lettre* which allows for its chapters to be read in different orders. Jonckheere’s hypertext novel is also enriched with tangrams, interactive Chinese puzzles that offer both a distraction and an allegory of the novel that tells the story – or rather the stories – of the visit of a Chinese friend.

These are just a few notable examples of a substantial and varied corpus, which was nevertheless to remain relatively limited. While the digital experiments with interactive fiction have never reached a popularity with audiences in any country that would compete with more conventional kinds of print fiction, Fred Romano notes the bewilderment and resistance of the

¹³ See Fisher’s conference presentation of the work at <https://vimeo.com/168449333> [consulted February 2019].

¹⁴ Yann Quéffelec, *Trente jours à tuer* [‘Thirty Days to Kill’] (Paris: France Loisirs, 1999). ‘Intercreative’ is Elisabeth Carolin Bauer’s term in *Frankophone digitale Literatur: Geschichte, Strukturen und Ästhetik einer neuen Mediengattung* (Berlin, Boston: transcript Verlag, 2016), p. 104.

¹⁵ Patrick Cintas, ‘Edward_Amiga – hyperoman (entretien avec Fred Romano)’, 2007. See <http://www.lechasseurabstrait.com/revue/spip.php?article1681> [consulted February 2019].

¹⁶ *Frankophone digitale Literatur*, p. 125.

¹⁷ http://www.anacoluthie.be/index_passe.html [accessed 29 August 2018].

¹⁸ Anne-Cécile Brandenbourger, *Apparitions inquiétantes* (Paris: 00h00, 2000).

¹⁹ <http://archive.synesthesie.com/boutiny/#> [accessed February 2019].

²⁰ <http://www.desordre.net/textes/romans/chinois/index.htm> [accessed February 2019].

French literary establishment facing such toying with technology, which also played an important role in its marginalization.²¹ Nevertheless, a handful of French scholars such as Jean Clément or Yves Jeanneret have also significantly contributed to the early theorization of hypertext and interactivity as new horizons for storytelling in the digital space.

The most recent developments in interactive fiction exploit the functionalities and accessibility of mobile devices, which publishers are also exploring, especially Seuil. Emma Reel's *Ah* (2012), a hyperfiction published in EPUB, inviting non-linear reading, was originally conceived as a network of websites where the author observed the visitors and constructed a narrative of amorous encounters inspired by their search terms. Chloé Delaume's *Alienare* (2015) is a literary app with Franck Dion's visuals and Sophie Couronne's sound design. This multimedia narrative with minimal interactivity plays on the codes of sci-fi and video games with the texts, images, and sound complementing one another to tell the story of a mission to destroy a faulty machine responsible for social organization in the near future, where the optimization of human beings is pushed to its limits, algorithms allocate people to functions based on their mental dispositions, and drugs can cure even heartaches. Mathieu Malzieu's *L'Homme volcan* ('The Volcano-man', 2012), an 'animated book' for iPad and iPhone with visuals by Frédéric Perrin and music by Dyonisos, uses touch screen technology and multimedia to illustrate the story of a young boy who falls into a volcano and comes back to haunt his sister. Designed for a now obsolete iOS, readers can access a Kindle edition without the interactive visuals and sound. The technology's programmed obsolescence remains a major obstacle to the investment in such mobile literature.

Blogs, websites, and books

The second major group of Internet-related phenomena that have further developed the novel genre is the blog- and website-based writing that builds on the web environment as a flexible, fluid space of construction and communication but places less emphasis on technological and formal experimentation with hyperlinks and more on crossovers and combinations between the digital and the print medium. Writing in these spaces more naturally follows, however, the open logic of the project than the closed form of the book.²²

With the explosion of blogs in the early 2000s, digital writing and its potential to feed into print gained an entirely new dimension. French *books* – books based on blogs – followed closely the first Anglo-American examples.²³ *Le blog de Max* (Robert Laffont, 2005) which claims to be 'the first blog-novel of history', is based on the author's blog telling his experience working in a company. Like blogs, *books* typically have a factual basis, even though the publication also often involves some rewriting and adjusting. A fictional example that first took the form of a *feuilleton* in a blog but aiming to produce a self-contained novel is Pierre Alferi's *Kiwi* (2012),²⁴ a playful narrative that uses and reflects on the conventions of serial storytelling.

The most notable French example of the blog to book publication is Éric Chevillard's *L'Autofictif* ('The Autofictive', 10 vols, 2008–2018). While the books that render yearly the blog's output, allegedly without any change, are not novels, they are in constant dialogue with the author's novels. On the one hand, the blog hijacks the trendy but often sensationalist and exhibitionist genre of autofiction, and on the other, Chevillard uses these digital 'notebooks' as an experimental space that feeds into, and picks up threads from, his novels published by Minit. Blog, *books*, and print novels thus constitute a complex semantic tissue that offers different modes and directions of reading exploiting the complementarity of the print and the digital space.

²¹ See Cintas, 'Edward Amiga'.

²² See *The Art of the Project: Projects and Experiments in Modern French Culture*, ed. by Johnnie Gratton and Michael Sheringham (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

²³ See Erika Fülöp, 'The Blogosphere and the Gutenberg Galaxy and Other Impossible Oppositions: Éric Chevillard's *L'Autofictif*', in *Readings in Twenty-First-Century European Literatures*, ed. by Michael Gratzke, Margaret-Anne Hutton, and Claire Whitehead (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), 39–57.

²⁴ The entire text is now freely available at <https://www.sitaudis.fr/Feuilletons/1-KIWI-roman-feuilleton> [accessed February 2019].

A more fundamental rewriting, turning the autobiographical experience of a factual and essayistic blog into a fictional novel is Lou Sarabadzic's *La vie verticale* ('The Vertical Life', 2016). The narrator's experience with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and depression and a number of passages closely resemble what the author first published in her French-English bilingual blog titled *Predicted Prose* about 'OCD, depression and grief'.²⁵ While the blog's stated objective is to share a life experience not many dare to talk about, the book offers a literary experience of a painfully contemporary theme: mental health in a performance-orientated society. The factual linearity and uniform layout of the blog is replaced by a complex temporality, typographic variations, and switches between black and white backgrounds that can be read as a journey into a consciousness struggling between self and other, past and present, imagined and real, effort and abandon, life and death.

Similar preoccupations characterise the work of Chloé Delaume, whose *Alienare* also continues a previous experience with the video game Sims. Her *Corpus Simsi* (2003) is an autofiction based on a virtual life first developed in Sims, using the software as a 'fiction generator' and reflecting on various aspects of the highly standardized life and freedom allowed by the digital space. Before culminating in the print book, the project included a blog and live performances, and the possibility for members of the public to use Delaume's avatar.

A different kind of web-based editorial experience is carried out by François Bon. Although not labelled 'novels', his *Tumulte* (2006), *Proust est une fiction* ('Proust is a fiction', 2013), and *Fictions du corps* ('Fictions of the Body', 2016) took advantage of the open space and quick rhythm of the web to build cumulative textual universes combining storytelling, autobiography, and essayistic reflections that could be considered the digital explosion of the novel – which then fed back into print books. His *Limite*, however, ran the opposite course: in 2010, Bon recopied in his blog the novel originally published in 1985 by Minuit and provided comments on each section copied, adding details about the background and the writing process²⁶. The whole text, including original and comments, was then self-published as an e-book in 2014, which can now also be purchased in POD. More than just a new edition, the blog, e-book and POD question the limits and identity of the novel in the digital age, drawing attention to the fact that forms and works no longer need to be fixed and definitive, and any closure might only be temporary, if not illusory.²⁷

Like Bon and Chevillard in their own ways, Renaud Camus uses the web to question the novel as a form and dominant mode of discourse. His *Vaisseaux brûlés* ('Burned boats', ***)²⁸ continues the book titled *P.A.* (1998) (for 'petite annonce', small ad), a series of 999 fragments, autobiographical reflections of various sorts, which already included a complex system of pointers inviting a non-linear reading. The website reproduces the fragments and takes them as a point of departure for virtually infinite expansion with further fragments and comments, including not only texts but also images, available through paid subscription. As of 2018, this exploded semantic network has been growing for twenty years, with a second volume published in 2001 (*Killalusimeno. Vaisseaux brûlés 2*), as an antithesis of the novelistic convention of a closed narrative structure.

The interplay between web and novel is realised differently by Claire Dutrait's *Aujourd'hui Eurydice* ('Today Eurydice', 2018). Presented as 'an open work', the text offers some choices to the reader in terms of the order of reading through internal hyperlinks in the digital edition, while an accompanying website enriches the experience with videos showing the industrial plants around which the story revolves, interviews with former employees, and Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, which underlies the novel.²⁹ The story, fragmented and poetic in its interweaving of past and present, myth, music, dreams, fiction and reality, is a mini multimedia *Gesamtkunstwerk* that inscribes itself in the new millennium's rising global trend of ecofiction.

²⁵ <https://predictedprose.com/> [accessed February 2019].

²⁶ See <https://tierslivre.net/spip/spip.php?mot551> [accessed February 2019].

²⁷ See Erika Fülöp, 'Limite Unbound: François Bon's Digitalized Fiction and the Reinvention of the Book', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 16.1 (2016), 62–90.

²⁸ <https://www.renaud-camus.net/vaisseaux-brules/> [accessed 19 September 2018].

²⁹ Claire Dutrait, 'Aujourd'hui Eurydice' <<http://eurydice.public.net/>> [accessed February 2019].

Using the web as a space for collaboration, *Radius Experience* (2015) is a sci-fi website-book deliberately blurring the boundaries between the two formats, but available only online. As in the case of *Marco Polo* (discussed above), six authors created a character each, each with a different power to twist reality. The reader can choose to include some or all of the characters and end up with different versions of the story of the world mysteriously starting to crumble.³⁰

A founder of Walrus (the set-up behind *Radius Experience*) and keen experimenter, Neil Jomunsi ventured into creating what might be the first (Francophone) digital audio feuilleton, *Gobbledygook*.³¹ Written and read by the author and distributed on YouTube, iTunes, and PodCloud, *Gobbledygook* is the suspenseful story of a book with mysterious powers, the story of which takes the narrator into an uncanny Lovecraftian world. The novelty of this experiment lies in the naturalness in which it exploits the video-sharing platform as both a form and a space to propose an otherwise traditional kind of immersive narrative directly in audio format, realised entirely by a single person, the payment for which is optional through the author's Tipeee or PayPal account.

Social media experiments

The most recent, highly impactful development in the digital space is the explosion of social media. While blogs and websites can in theory offer the same open access to content as Twitter, be as personal(ized) as a Facebook profile or as image-focused as Instagram, and allow for comments and discussions like any of these, with the social media platforms any content automatically participates in a community's shared space but has to obey a number of formal constraints and consider accepting or refusing its discursive conventions.

One of the major contributions of social media to literary life is the space they offer creative literary communities. While these most often do not focus on the novel, the potential is present. Before the birth of today's social media platforms, however, the web already facilitated collective writing projects that have continued through social media. The most remarkable is the Général Instin 'nebula'. Launched in 1997 after a serendipitous discovery by Patrick Chatelier of the grave of a certain General Hinstin (1835–1905) in the Montparnasse cemetery, showing a weather-worn photographic portrait that triggered his interest to the point of presenting it in a small exhibition, an interdisciplinary collective started growing around the appropriated figure, soon dropping the leading H to emphasize the I for 'imaginary'. A handful of writers were invited and others joined in to create a 'polymorph fiction' on remue.net, and the project has since inspired various creative writing workshops, festivals, meetings, and performances. In addition to an anthology of texts by dozens of contributors, a collective novel was published in 2015. Written by seven authors, *Climax. Une fiction – encore?* ('Climax. A fiction – again?'), is the story of a Roman soldier who travels across the Empire and experiences its limits. The digital space that facilitates communication and accumulation has thus enabled not only the constant growth of the project, but also the birth of more contained constellations of fiction in Général Instin's creative social nebula.

Inspiring formal and linguistic experimentation as well as collective writing, Twitter was discovered by literature enthusiasts soon after its launch in 2006, using the formal constraint of (originally) a maximum 140 characters per tweet for both micro-writing and serialized projects, poetry and prose, fictional and factual, original works and rewriting.³² French and Francophone interest followed closely the Anglo-American and Japanese creative infatuation with the platform, and the first Festival International de Twittérature was organised in 2012 in Montreal, accompanied by the creation of the 'Institut de twittérature comparée'. Thierry Crouzet was the first to adventure into writing, in the form of ten to twelve daily tweets, a fully-fledged novel, *La Quatrième Théorie*. Started in 2008 and completed in 2010, this 'twiller' inspired by the *Da Vinci Code* was, by the author's admission, written without an elaborate plan and he took into account

³⁰ It is emblematic that this work disappeared from the web during the very process of writing this chapter, after the announcement of the shutdown of its publisher.

³¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAL2XRzKxtc&t=85s> [accessed February 2019].

³² Thierry Crouzet, 'Twittérature', *Tcrouzet.Com*: <http://tcrouzet.com/la-quatrieme-theorie/la-quatrieme-theorie-liens/> [accessed February 2019].

the readers' reactions in shaping the story. The formal constraint of short sentences suited well the idea of a quick-paced thriller, which was then also published as a book by Fayard (2013), although not without revisions. Crouzet later self-published a second twitter novel, *One Minute* (2017), which he presents as a 'geographical novel': the chapters relate the same minute in 365 different places across the world, progressing not in time but in space. As such, it also allows for reading in any order. A fully immersed critical commentator of the web through his blog and books, and partisan of a non-hierarchical networked society, Crouzet presents his twitter narratives as a means of appropriating the platform with literary uses for which it was not intended.³³

Clara Beaudoux's *Madeleine project*, described by the publisher of its English translation as 'a graphic novel for the Twitter age',³⁴ was not conceived as a novel but can be read as one. On moving into a new apartment, Beaudoux, a journalist, found in the basement a large collection of memories from the previous owner, Madeleine, who died in her nineties. Beaudoux decides to explore and share the treasures in a series of tweets including photographs and links, from which the unknown history of a life emerges, with a personal history of the twentieth century. After a very successful first 'season', Beaudoux continued the project with four more, broadening the research with investigative work about Madeleine's life. The first two seasons and then a collection of seasons 1-4 were then published in print (2016 and 2017), and the whole project, including the English translation of the first two seasons, remains freely available on a dedicated website as well as on Twitter.³⁵ This corresponds to the free access spirit of many web-based authors and projects, rarely accepted by publishers in the (traditional) book industry.

Just like Beaudoux, Guillaume Vissac takes the role of the messenger-transmitter through his patient retranslation of Joyce's *Ulysses* into French a sentence or two a day posted on his website and Twitter. Started in 2012, *Ulysse par jour*,³⁶ as of February 2019, has covered some 17% of the novel, according to Vissac's progression indicator. Each post includes an interactive map indicating the hero's position, the original sentence, and Vissac's previous versions, as he also returns and amends while progressing. Introducing one of the most complex texts of the twentieth century into the fast-paced, attention-dispersing space of social media, Vissac resists the platform's 'natural' speed and attention-grabbing discursive trends with his slow and deep reading and operates what he calls a 'piratage poétique' [poetic pirating] of not only Joyce's novel, but also of Twitter and the willing audience's minds.

Even more radically rebellious are some initiatives on Facebook that pirate the conventions of the novel. *Un Monde Incertain* ('An Uncertain World')³⁷ is a 'digital installation', a virtual, fictional universe inspired by Proust and a 'collective work' populated by, and attributed to, pseudo-Proustian figures with names calqued on Proust's characters, such as Rachel Charlus, Antoine Elstir, or Sylvestre Saint-Loup. These are characters and 'authors' of Jean Pierre Balpe's text generator³⁸ who come alive thanks to Facebook, where each character-author has a profile and a network of connections. Their publications, in a sophisticated but often confusing Proustian language, are mostly machine-generated, but sometimes also written by Balpe – it is not always easy to tell. Rachel Charlus, the most active character, also offers a series of 'micronovels' published as status updates, and disconnected fragments from her husband Pierre's unpublished autobiographical novel, titled 'Le Roman de Pierre'. Continuing, destroying, and reinventing the novel at the same time, in terms of content, form, and ontology, while also hijacking the platform that explicitly requires every profile to belong to a real person, allowing only one profile per person, *Un Monde Incertain* is a playful but critical reflection on the nature and limits of language and fiction in the digital age and their power vis-à-vis the algorithms that dominate its platforms.

³³ <https://tcrouzet.com/la-quatrieme-theorie/> [accessed February 2019].

³⁴ <http://newvesselpress.com/books/the-madeleine-project/> [accessed February 2019].

³⁵ <http://madeleineproject.fr/> [accessed February 2019].

³⁶ <http://www.fuirestunepulsion.net/ulysses/> [accessed February 2019]; on Twitter: #Ulysse.

³⁷ https://www.facebook.com/UnMondeIncertain/?ref=br_rs [accessed February 2019].

³⁸ <http://www.balpe.name/> [accessed February 2019].

A set of fictional characters is animated by a group of individuals in *Nouvelles de la Colonie* ('Stories of the Colony'),³⁹ a collaborative feuilleton with several threads which present an Orwello-Kafkaian world of surveillance, hierarchy, and political and administrative nonsense that offers an allegory of both Facebook and the bureaucracy of French universities and other public institutions. The life of fictional avatars, who often have Russian sounding names to mobilize associations with the Soviet totalitarian system and central intelligence, is intertwined with the real life of their animators, which feeds into the feuilleton-like narrative 'reports' of the life of the Colony, watched closely by 'l'Oreille' [the Ear], under the rule of the 'Guide Suprême' [Supreme Guide]. Representative of the functioning of both the platform and the neoliberal Information Society at large, *Nouvelles de la Colonie* critiques both, insisting on making the users of the system – that is, ultimately, all of us – aware of how our actions, and even our resistance, inevitably feed the system.

Conclusions

Throughout the ages, literature has followed the development of new technologies, adapted to their constraints and explored their potential. Oral culture and handwriting, then print, with the book industry and national press, later radio and television, and finally digital technology all shaped literary forms of expression. If print represented a scale change and improved literacy and the increasing availability of books were indispensable for the boom of the novel from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, the twenty-first has brought another fundamental shift for authors and audiences. While the book industry is holding firm and continues to dominate our image of the novel, the context in which books exist is radically different. Audiences take an increasingly active role, including as authors, flooding the web with narratives that repeat infinitely the same old stories and feed back into the book market. At the same time, the fluidity, fragmentation, openness, multimodality, and seeming endlessness of information already perceived by modern and postmodern authors has become a common life experience shared by Western audiences. With digital technology and Internet connections omnipresent in daily life, conceptions of space and perceptions of time have changed: we no longer think only in terms of real and imaginary spaces, but also in terms of virtual space, of a yet uncertain status between or outside the traditional opposition. Geographical location matters less than linguistic boundaries. With social media and surveillance, the distinction between private and public spheres has also become muddled. Meanwhile a few seconds taken to load a webpage, or a text that goes beyond a single computer screen seem long. The representation of this world in print novels has incited identifiable formal and discursive changes in some of the examples mentioned, such as fragmentation, quick pace, or polyphony without a unifying voice. None of these is a new invention, but the digital world has reinforced their relevance.

Digital technology also allows for fundamentally different forms of expression and narrative, however. Literature can now much more easily and naturally not only talk about time, space, the fluidity of language and thought, the openness of interpretation, the role of the reader, the connections between words, characters, or moments, and so on, but also actively perform them. The three broad types – and somewhat artificial categories, with the undeniable intersections – distinguished here: interactive fiction, blog- and web-based narratives, and social media experiments, each place the emphasis on a different set of capabilities of the computer and/or the network and relate in different ways to the genre of the novel. We can discern two major ways in which they engage with the tradition: expanding the form and exploding it. The first consists in exploring technology's potential to play out possibilities that previously belonged to the fantasies of experimental novelists, such as forking paths, interactivity, changing and animated texts, multimediality, etc. The second critiques the ideologies perceived traditionally to underpin the form, such as closure and completeness, finiteness, and fixity. Expansion and explosion are not necessarily always distinct, however: the idea of opening the form to new modes of expression already explodes it and takes us beyond the genre of the novel, while contesting and exploding the form can be seen as a new extension and a timely (digital) revolution of the novel. The loose, baggy monsters are more than ever invaded by increasingly

³⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/anna.wegekrez/> [accessed 6 September 2018].

‘queer elements’ – and welcome them more than ever, as they move away from a preoccupation with ‘meaning’ something to *doing* something.⁴⁰

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⁴⁰ See Henry James, *The Tragic Muse*, ‘Preface’ [1908]
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