

Claire Legendre's Portrait of Hypermodern Society

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French writer Claire Legendre began her career in the late 1990s with her novels *Making of* and *Viande* 'Flesh.' Because of their graphic violence and sexuality, Legendre became quickly associated with the "nouvelle pornographie" 'new pornography' or "porno-chic" literary trend (Authier 33, 7, 23-25).¹ From the mid-1990s on, several young French women writers published sexually explicit and brutal narratives. While some of their books became huge successes,² they also triggered antagonistic reactions from the public, critics and academics alike.³ Some deemed these writings "barbares" 'barbaric,' a mere marketing ploy or essentially unliterary (Jacob 55-56).⁴ Others welcomed—albeit with some critical distance—the feminist challenge of traditional patriarchal forms these narratives generated.⁵ Similarly to these French women writers, Legendre undeniably questions gendered identities, violence against and by women in her fiction—sometimes through explicit narratives. She also denounces the lingering forms of sexism or misogyny in French society and art. However, focusing on the controversial aspect of her writing or associating her exclusively with women writers of her generation may lead to neglecting the literariness of her fiction and her broader position within French literary history. Legendre explicitly affiliates herself—in interviews and in her (auto)fictional narratives—with theater, autobiographical and autofictional practices. She acknowledges the influence of Constantin Stanislavski, Hervé Guibert, Jean Echenoz or Serge Doubrovsky, just as dialogue and staging become essential to her narratives.⁶ Furthermore, and similarly to other contemporary Francophone writers, she explores, parodies and deconstructs various literary genres or aesthetics, ranging from autobiography to theater, crime fiction or the fantastic.

Over the past decade, Legendre has published three additional novels: *Matricule*, *La Méthode Stanislavski* ‘The Stanislavski Method’ and *L’Écorchée vive* ‘Flayed Alive’; as well as one anthology of short-stories, *Le Crépuscule de Barbe-Bleue* ‘Bluebeard’s Dawn.’ In addition to pursuing her aesthetic and thematic explorations, she now also sketches a rather grim portrait of contemporary society and especially of the dramatic consequences of hypermodernity on individuals. This development further situates her within a broader literary spectrum as other contemporary francophone women writers—such as Marie Hélène Poitras in Québec or Isabelle Flükiger in Switzerland—have also depicted hypermodern life in their narratives.⁷

A number of historians, sociologists, philosophers and literary theorists have observed significant social changes over the past twenty years (Molénat “Vers” 1-4). For some scholars, Western society has now entered the age of hypermodernity characterized by “la radicalisation et l’exacerbation de la modernité.... le trop, l’excès, l’au-delà d’une norme ou d’un cadre, qui implique une connotation de dépassement constant, de maximum, de situation limite” (Aubert 158) ‘the radicalization and exacerbation of modernity ... too much, excess, going beyond norms or frames, which implies a connotation of constant surpassing oneself, of maximum, of borderline situations.’ According to sociologist Nicole Aubert, five areas of life have particularly been affected by these notions of excess, instantaneity, speed, performance, flexibility, intensity and individualism: one’s corporeality, time, the interactions with others or with oneself, and spirituality (157, 165). As a consequence, the number of diseases caused by disproportionate behaviors—eating disorders, tiredness, addictions, burn-outs or breakdowns—have significantly increased (Aubert 164; Lipovetsky and Charles 27, 53-54; Molénat “Vers” 3). Paradoxically, however, because of its emphasis on the fulfillment of one’s individuality, hypermodernity provides people with a (false) sense of freedom to define themselves (Molénat “Devoir s’inventer” 178-80).

This article focuses on three significant aspects of Legendre’s literary translation of hypermodernity in her narratives published in the 2000s. First, it examines her portrayal of contemporary individuality, affected by all sorts of excesses and especially by the

imperative to make the most of oneself and one's life. This ideal being in itself excessive, her characters resort to extreme behaviors. However, they never fully manage to achieve the uniqueness or exceptionality hypermodernity expects. Then, it reveals how Legendre's writing itself becomes hypermodern as she explores aesthetically some notions at stake in hypermodernity such as self-reflectivity, undecidability and intermediality. Her novels employ literary techniques that question autofiction or render any definitive interpretation of her books impossible. Eventually this study reveals how even if hypermodern ideals affect women and men alike, the former, for Legendre, still remain subjected to discriminative gender politics and suffer from contradictory and sometimes exacerbated forms of physical or emotional violence.

Hypermodern individuality

Since excess defines the hypermodern condition, Legendre makes her protagonists become hyperbolic representations of the contemporary need to be or do more at an ever faster pace. For example, in *La Méthode Stanislavski*, stage director Vlad Zeletin applies this acting method—proposed by Stanislavski in *An Actor Prepares* and based on the intensity of one's experiences—so faithfully that it leads his main actor to murder; Barbara Schmerz in *L'Écorchée vive* possesses an exceptionally disfigured face; or Lara Bell, protagonist of the short story "La Sainte" "The Saint" personifies hyperbolic heteronormative femininity, hence the title. Furthermore, Legendre's characters resort to or indulge in all kinds of bodily excesses: they mutilate themselves; suffer from eating disorders; commit murders; take drugs, smoke or drink in disproportionate manners. The anonymous teenage female narrator of the short story "Allumeuse"⁸ incarnates one of Legendre's best illustrations of the hypermodern imperative that prompts individuals to construct their identities in an excessive fashion:

[Fumer] me procure un plaisir illicite au goût de liberté, de suicide. Oui je me détruis! Oui mes parents veulent mon bien et moi je veux mon mal! Je ne vous laisserai pas me rendre heureuse et équilibrée comme tout le monde! Moi je serai originale et malheureuse! Mais jusqu'au bout: tragiquement malheureuse

ou rien.... Douter de moi n'a pas de sens. Aller en boîte: la décadence.... Moi la petite routarde qui a vécu. Moi la précoce autorisée à me détruire avant tout le monde.... J'écoute Kurt Cobain pas encore mort.... Je me sens gagnante si je vais plus loin que mes aînés. (*Crépuscule* 57-58)

[Smoking] gives me an illicit pleasure, a taste of liberty, of suicide. Yes, I am destroying myself! Yes my parents want what is good for me and I want bad stuff! I will not let you make me happy and level-headed as everyone else! I shall be original and unhappy! But to a bitter end: tragically unhappy or nothing at all.... Self-doubt is meaningless. Going to clubs: how decadent.... I the little experienced roadie. I the precocious one allowed to destroy myself before anyone else.... I listen to a not-yet-dead Kurt Cobain.... I feel like a winner if I go further than my elders.

One may claim that this passage merely stages adolescent rebellion and a teenager's quest for an identity radically different from her parents.' Still, the emphasis placed on the freedom to define oneself, the urge to be unique and hyperbolically different, the rejection of averageness, the will to surpass oneself and others, the identification with an iconic and tragically rebellious figure (Cobain), as well as the declamatory rhythm conveyed by the punctuation and the use of the pronoun *moi*, all reveal how the hypermodern notion of maximization has affected individuals and their identity practices. The narrator cannot envisage herself or her life outside of an immoderate frame: she must experience her choices—here smoking and clubbing—to the maximum or not at all. In addition, her disproportionate corporeal practices will necessarily lead to an excess-induced disease, as she herself acknowledges.

Through her paroxysmal characters, Legendre also illustrates how personal development methods have significantly shaped personal identity. Because these methods emphasize the constant need to fulfill and surpass oneself, they have generated frantic quests for achieving (unrealistic) ideals of success and uniqueness (Fournier 264-65; Lacroix 255-56). As a consequence, banality is stigmatized and the notions of respect and recognition—by peers or by society at large—have become essential to the fulfillment of

individuality.⁹ Indeed, the terms *reconnaissance* 'recognition,' original and unique are *leitmotifs* throughout Legendre's narratives and all her protagonists wish to become someone or to be exceptional. For instance, Bastien Salamandre, hero of one of the sort stories, craves literary fame (*Crépuscule* 17-18); Joseph Attal, in *Matricule*, believes that donating his sperm and, therefore, potentially fathering numerous offspring, represents a "grand œuvre" (100) 'great work.' Also, both aspire to become illustrious writers. Bastien Salamandre originally appears in Legendre's debut novel *Making of*. There, he is portrayed as an ambitious young man desperately seeking journalistic renown, especially through obtaining an interview with an excessive, iconic, and elusive filmmaker (9). In the short story, although Bastien Salamandre has become a writer he has not achieved the hyperbolic fame he aspired to:

Ça y est, Bastien Salamandre est un ringard de premier ordre, une meute d'adolescents inspirés lui collent aux talons... il sue il pense à ses vingt ans. Il se souvient d'avoir juré: si je n'ai pas publié au moins un livre à trente-cinq ans je me tuerai, je n'aurai pas la vie merdique qu'on me réserve, je ne me consolerais pas comme tout le monde avec des mouflets à qui je transmettrais des rêves déçus. (*Crépuscule* 32)

That's it, Bastien Salamandre is a true has-been, a pack of inspired young writers is on his tracks.... he is sweating and thinks of when he was twenty. He remembers to have sworn: if I have not published a book by the age of thirty-five, I shall kill myself, I shall not have the shitty life in store for me, I shall not cheer myself up with kids to whom I would transmit unfulfilled aspirations.¹⁰

In this excerpt, we find again the concerns at stake in the narrative "Allumeuse," as well as the feeling of urgency conveyed here by the commas. Bastien Salamandre also strives to achieve and cling to his relative fame, just as he cannot accept an average life—which he equates to failure—for himself. Legendre further stresses the imperative of exceptionality by making her protagonist feel threatened—if not already defeated—by a younger generation of writers which similarly aspires to great literary success. Once more, this section may be interpreted as any writer's will to succeed

or jealousy towards talented newcomers. However, Legendre's depiction of this obsession with hyperbolic renown strikingly echoes Flükiger's, another francophone writer of hypermodernity (Schaal 306-07). Actually, nearly all of Legendre's characters want to become the center of attention or envy, oftentimes to strange and excessive extents. For example, Graziella Vaci, the narrator of *La Méthode Stanislavski*, enjoys the attention resulting from rumors about her sex life or her being suspected for murder (78-79, 220-21).

Drawing on sociologist Michel Lacroix, personal development methods may be assimilated to performance as people are urged to maximize their potential through the imitation of famous individuals; the latter's success proves they have made the most of themselves (255). Consequently, this society which emphasizes hyperbolic individual self-fulfillment has also generated what Gilles Lipovetsky calls "*hypernarcissisme*": people are increasingly self-centered. (25-26). Legendre's narratives on hypermodern existence demonstrate that to thrive socially, or be acknowledged, there are social scripts to enact and, indeed, those are merely deployed for selfish or narcissistic purposes. Some characters attempt to imitate famous figures to achieve personal and social success or recognition. As a writer, Joseph Attal wishes to surpass James Joyce (*Matricule* 126); Martine, the insecure heroine of "Don't Bogart Your Idol," wants to appropriate the powerful femininity of Italian actress Asia Argento in order to become irresistible to her favorite singer (*Crépuscule* 164-65); in *La Méthode Stanislavski*—a title interestingly based on an acting method—Graziella Vaci confesses she enjoys being a "romancière" 'woman novelist' because it gives her an enviable status (14, 45-46). She also underlines how nowadays anyone wishes to become an "acteur, rock star ou serial killer" (60) 'actor, rock star or serial killer.' Once again, these occupations have an excessive nature and rely on performance, whether on stage or in numbers. They also imply a hyperbolic form of social recognition through personal fame, as well as a narcissist personality. For Legendre, hypermodern ideals of uniqueness and exceptionality have truly affected the way individuals construct their identities. As the "common" professional aspirations above show, these contemporary forms of individuality are self-centered and even questionable if one aspires to become a

criminal to achieve social recognition.

Still, in spite of all their efforts, Legendre's protagonists all eventually fail to accomplish hypermodern scripts or come to reject them. Here again, she echoes the findings of sociologists for whom, although hypermodernity appears democratic—i.e. all individuals can make the most of themselves—, social class or race, among other things, still determine one's ability to succeed.¹¹ Legendre's characters' hypernarcissism and aspirations are eventually always defeated or denied. They are constantly, and painfully, reminded that their hypermodern wishes for exceptionality are neither unique, nor original (*Crépuscule* 84; *Méthode* 44-46). For instance, in addition to never becoming famous writers, Bastien Salamandre and Joseph Attal are further humiliated by the success of younger women writers: Nine Valois, Bastien's ardent teenage fan and aspiring novelist (*Crépuscule* 28-29), surpasses him and Joseph's daughter publishes a very unflattering novel about his sperm donation adventure (*Matricule* 146-52).¹² Ironically too, when no longer suspected for murder, Graziella Vaci resents her renewed social invisibility and feels "vexée" 'insulted' to have merely been a pawn—and, therefore, not a protagonist—in the events at the *Villa Médicis* (*Méthode* 305). For Lipovetsky, excessive self-centeredness and the need to maximize one's self simultaneously inspire and plague contemporary individuals (25-29). Through her characters, Legendre depicts this fundamental tension at the heart of hypermodernity and hypernarcissism. All her protagonists crave exceptionality, strive to achieve excessive goals and believe they are qualitatively different from their peers. Nonetheless, nearly all end up understanding how common or infeasible their aspirations are, how they fundamentally lack the tools or status to become unique and exceptional. Ultimately, they resort to hyperbolic violence or suffer from excessive pathologies to cope with this core contradiction.

Actually Barbara in *L'Écorchée vive* incarnates best this fundamental tension within hypermodernity as well as the paradoxical nature of excessive scripts for social integration and recognition. This *bildungsroman* exemplifies how, from one life experience to another, she is both invited to participate in hypermodern society, yet, is always eventually rejected. She, however, still believes in the same social scripts as anyone else does and, thus,

demonstrates their inescapability. She and her friend Martin, a blind boy, play at being “les personnages d’une série télévisée, lui Kevin le jeune cadre dynamique séduisant, elle Cinderella la belle jeune femme active et libérée” (117) ‘the characters of a television series, he [is] Kevin, a young and handsome executive manager, she [is] Cinderella, the active and emancipated young woman.’ This passage demonstrates how popular media further enable the dissemination of contemporary archetypes of social realization. Simultaneously, it reveals what these ideals are today: great financial success and exceptional beauty. Actually, Barbara manages to live a hypermodern life as she maximizes her potential in various disciplines: she excels in athleticism (96), drawing (113), and school (149). However, in a Sartreian manner, “son handicap, c’étaient les autres” (18) ‘her disability were other people’ as her deformity eventually always leaves her an outcast. Consequently, Barbara decides to match her flawless achievements to physical adequacy by undergoing a drastic facial reconstruction. Ironically, however, she loses her hypermodern excellence and cannot stand the “transparence” her “normalcy” grants her (62, 160, 200). She, therefore, sabotages her “nouvelle vie” (75) ‘new life’ in hope to recover her former uniqueness. Barbara incarnates the paradoxical tension at the heart of hypermodernity: individuals are urged to conform or participate; nevertheless, they ultimately always fail to live up to these ideals. At the same time, some are willing to resort to excessive measures or extreme bodily practices to achieve visibility and exceptionality.

Hypermodern writing

Since in hypermodernity individuals have multiple options to define themselves or their lives, self-reflectivity has become a major element for establishing one’s identity or for choosing one’s life path(s). People constantly question themselves or are urged to interrogate their decisions in all areas of life. As a consequence, individuals embrace multiplicity and instantaneity to build their personality, just as they reject monolithic or unilateral identities or life patterns.¹³ This self-reflectivity and wish for plurality represent both thematic and aesthetic *leitmotifs* in Legendre’s work. Self-reflectivity transpires thematically as her characters often question themselves or wonder how they may make the most of themselves or

their lives. However, this notion transpires on the level of aesthetics and especially through Legendre's autofictional style. Through *mise en abyme*¹⁴ or allegories, she interrogates her writing and challenges any univocal reading of her narratives. Although all her novels contain self-reflective passages, *La Méthode Stanislavski* remains, to this date, her most complex autofictional work. Each chapter title reprises a step from the actual Stanislavski acting method, proposing to readers a new development in the plot—often intermingled with autobiographical occurrences such as Legendre's stay at the *Villa Médicis*¹⁵ or her experience with the French literary world (213-17). Several passages are actual *mises en abyme* and transcriptions of the method, a system "dans lequel ... on se glisse, et qu'on adapte à sa propre personne" (253) 'in which one slides, and which one adapts to one's own individuality.' Indeed, Legendre applies this method as she intricately mingles autofictional writing with crime fiction. This introspective and fictional writing also enables her, in a hypermodern fashion, to generate a multiplicity of interpretations:

Avais-je été folle de créer un personnage qui me ressemblait tant? N'avais-je pas eu conscience de m'exposer aux critiques et aux moralisateurs? L'angoisse me reprit. C'était mon double qu'on voyait sur la scène, et son impassibilité face aux tragédies humaines me faisait un peu honte. (331)

Had I been insane to have created a character so much like myself? Had I not been aware that I would expose myself to critics and moralizers? Anguish seized me again. My double was on stage and her impassibility when faced with human tragedies shamed me a little.

Graziella Vaci must here face her rendition, in a stage play, of her own fascination with a serial killer, yet also her involvement in a copycat murder. However, in this passage, Legendre may also be pondering the consequences of choosing autobiographical or autofictional writing. She anticipates, if not expects, to be confronted on both personal and problematic levels—such as her stay at the *Villa Médicis* or her frequent use of violence in her fiction—by audiences and critics alike. In this passage, it is, thus, impossible to decide whether this self-reflection pertains solely to Legendre's protagonist

or to her own experience as a writer. Both interpretations are valid. Nevertheless, the author warns against the reading of her texts as truth in the guise of fiction. In “Lectrice posthume” ‘Posthumous Reader,’ the narrator Philomène admits she has fallen into that very trap when reading Guibert’s work:

L'autofiction confère à l'écrivain un statut de rock star dont on veut tout savoir.... Il a fait de sa vie une œuvre, mais ce n'est pas sa vie. Je cours bêtement après des éléments biographiques qui ne me servent à rien. Prise au piège.... Je ne lis pas, je décède. C'est la perversion de la part de vérité: on veut toujours qu'elle soit plus grosse. (*Crépuscule* 143-44)

Autofiction grants the writer the status of a rock star about which one wishes to know everything.... He made a work of art out of his life, but it is not his life.... I foolishly run after useless biographical elements. I am trapped.... I do not read, I decipher. It is truth's darker side: one always wants it larger than life.

Again, this excerpt may be interpreted in different ways: Legendre's reflection on (her) autofictional writing, the tricky status it grants (her), an homage to one of her favorite writers, as well as a reassertion that any autobiographical element is necessarily and purposefully transformed through the act of writing.¹⁶ It demonstrates as well how self-reflectivity constitutes an essential aspect of her writing since both passages quoted above may be interpreted either as the characters' reflections on their lives or creations or as Legendre's own interrogation as a writer.

Self-reflectivity also generates doubt and “indécidabilité” ‘undecidability,’ literary figures which have become most prominent to represent contemporary society according to Bruno Blanckeman (“Du Soupçon” 83; *Les Récits* 11). Legendre certainly blurs the limits between reality and fiction, just as she blends literary genres. Furthermore, she switches between first, second and third-person perspectives; writes extra-diegetic paragraphs in italics; employs multiple focalization to prevent any definitive interpretation of the narrator's voice (Genette 207); features metalepses (243-44), uses truncated or unfinished sentences, directly quotes other authors or provides excerpts from various other artistic media. Consequently,

her texts remain essentially undecidable. For instance, in the short story "Ma Providence" 'My Guardian Angel,' a most moving tribute to her grandmother, she employs nearly all of the techniques above. How may one define this text then? Is it an autofiction? A literary essay? An elegy? It may be read as none and all of the above. In *Matricule*, Joseph Attal, his wife Clémence and their daughter Léonore all use "I," just as Legendre deploys an extra-diegetic narrator and multiple focalization. Once again, one may wonder who the storyteller is or to which genre the text belongs? A social comment on gender politics? A dystopian family portrait? An autofictional parricide? In a hypermodern fashion, providing a final answer to these questions remains impossible.

It is similarly impossible to establish with certainty what stems from reality and what is pure fiction in Legendre's narratives. Although all her books are undertitled "novels" or "short stories," all feature recurring autobiographical elements and cross-references with her former publications. For instance, both her father characters and her own father in real life work in the theater business; some of her characters have three kidneys like her (*Écorchée* 152; *Méthode* 86, 130), and have lived in or visited Italy, Austria or Romania as she personally has. Then, characters tend to reappear yet in different contexts: Bastien Salamandre is a protagonist both in *Making of* and in the short story "The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over the Lazy Dog"; Lara Bell is Legendre's, Bastien Salamandre's and Graziella Vaci's fictional character, eventually always murdered. Legendre also plays with the interpretation of (her) autofictional writing. In *La Méthode Stanislavski*, a first-person narrative, Graziella discovers that Guibert borrowed the same book as she did at the *Villa Médicis*. Before leaving the academy, she steals the library card with the signed name of her idol (64-66). Later, she discovers Guibert also wrote a novel on his stay there and quotes the passage where he anticipates her theft. Therefore, Graziella feels she "étais[t] devenue sans le savoir le personnage d'un roman d'anticipation écrit par un autre" (66) 'ha[d], without being aware of it, become the character of a novel of anticipation written by someone else.' When Legendre warns her readers about the problematic nature of truth in autofiction, she concurrently makes them characters of her fiction. She anticipates their wondering about how much of her text is real.

Yet, since so many autobiographical elements are featured in *La Méthode Stanislavski*, Legendre forces her readers to wonder which elements are true and which are not. The first-person perspective only reinforces this temptation. Just as Guibert did with Legendre, Philomène, and Graziella, she plays with her readers, simultaneously asserting and denying the relevance of truth in autofiction.

In “Tous les goûts sont dans la culture” ‘Personal tastes of all kinds are to be found in culture,’ sociologist Nicolas Journet—drawing on Bernard Lahire’s work—demonstrates that productions from popular and higher culture are equally enjoyed and claimed in hypermodern society; nonetheless, the qualitative distinction between them remains (271). Legendre’s fiction draws both from popular and classical sources, as the eclectic reference list provided at the end of *Matricule* testifies (155). This very intermediality¹⁷ with various artistic media further renders Legendre’s fiction undecidable, or at least undeterminable. She has especially played with the conventions of auto- and crime fiction, with fairy tale *leitmotifs*, photography and painting (Kubišta). *L’Écorchée vive* stems from heterogeneous sources: a young disfigured girl Legendre encountered in childhood, the surgical feat of face transplants, as well as the tortured paintings of Chaïm Soutine and Egon Schiele (Kubišta). This multiple play with various artistic forms also participates in Legendre’s literary self-reflectivity and, consequently, make her novels self-conscious performances of specific genres. Again, *La Méthode Stanislavski*, with its intermediality with both theater and crime fiction remains the self-reflective performative text *par excellence*. First, it mentions twice its similarities to “romans policiers” ‘crime fictions’ (184, 357), refers directly to detective novel writer Georges Simenon (208), to the Italian exploitation genre “giallo” (307), and to the predictable plots of crime series on television (181). The theatricality implied in the title is reinforced by Graziella Vaci’s writing of a play whose plot could be a performative *mise en abyme* of the novel and vice versa:

[Au] théâtre, ... Il fallait peu de personnages, si possible pas de changement de décor, et que les phrases sonnent juste. Deux ou trois morceaux de bravoure pour les comédiens. Une scène de larmes pour la fille, une colère pour le garçon. Quelques récits poignants. Des approches, un baiser, des étreintes. Une structure solide. Genre tragédie classique. Presque du temps réel.... Un

tueur, sa victime. Un retournement de situation. Une arme qui serait un symbole phallique. Un huis clos un peu exigu... (84)

[In] theater, ... one needed few characters, if possible no set change and well-sounding sentences. Two or three brave moments for the actors. A crying scene for the girl, one with anger for the boy. A few touching speeches. Some moves forward, a kiss, embraces. A solid structure. As in classical tragedies. An almost real-time situation.... A killer, his victim. A twist. A weapon that would be a phallic symbol. A somewhat exiguous in camera situation...

All these elements constitute the very plot of *La Méthode Stanislavski*: with only a few characters, the novel principally takes place at the *Villa Médicis*, Graziella Vaci cries a few times, the main actor has a tragic anger scene and every chapter in the novel has a solid structure based on Stanislavski's acting method in *An Actor Prepares*. Furthermore, all these features may also be found in Graziella's own play. Hypermodernity relies, on performing certain social scripts, self-reflectivity, excesses and, to a certain degree, self-centeredness. Pondering her own style, playing with her readers and genres, creating a whirlwind of intra- and extra-diegetic references, distorting borders between reality and fiction, low and high culture, featuring excessive characters and plots and ever-switching perspectives: Legendre has engendered a provocative and creative hypermodern literariness.¹⁸

Unequally gendered hypermodernity

Hypermodernity seems, in the words of its theorists, gender-neutral since all individuals are affected by it.¹⁹ Its manifestations affect women and men alike. Although Legendre has attempted to make the feminine the generic representation of the hypermodern condition, she has also revealed how hypermodernity itself remains (unequally) gendered. According to Lahire in "L'Homme pluriel" 'The Plural Man,' women today face a number of paradoxes which result from the hypermodern (false) sense of freedom to define oneself (62). If race and social class still represent obstacles in contemporary society, so does gender: some women who "avaient adopté le style de vie d'une femme 'moderne' et 'émancipée,'

retrouvent [lors de l'entrée en couple ou de l'apparition du premier enfant] ce rôle traditionnel de la femme au foyer dont elles avaient incorporé les habitudes sans toujours s'en rendre compte" (Lahire 62) 'had adopted the lifestyle of a 'modern' and 'emancipated' young woman, reprise [once in a relationship or when the first child is born] this traditional role of homemaker, whose habits they had assimilated without their even noticing it.' Nearly all of Legendre's female protagonists confirm this pattern. Clémence in *Matricule* is a dental surgeon and Barbara from *L'Écorchée vive* excels in various disciplines. Yet, once they are in a heterosexual relationship, they either submit to their partners' will, opt for a certain domesticity or lose their talents. The extra-diegetic narrator in *Matricule* describes Joseph's influence as a "gangrène" 'gangrene' and wonders "comment une jeune et jolie fille, avec un avenir tracé, une position sociale avantageuse, peut-elle à ce point se laisser immerger? Dériver" (18-19) 'how a young and pretty girl, with a laid-out future, a decent social position, can let herself be immersed [or] drift to that extent?'. Clémence accepts without any form of criticism Joseph's every whim concerning their relationship and even becomes his eager accomplice in his sperm donation adventure. With this disturbing tale, Legendre seems to equate heterosexual love to an unexplainable gendered capitulation.

Her fiction undeniably illustrates how women's minds and sexuality also remain shaped by heteronormative, if not patriarchal, ideals. She explores how fairytale archetypes still pervade women's psyche or even writing: several of her female characters describe or wish their heterosexual relationships to be as in fairy tales (*Crépuscule* 124, 160 ; *Écorchée* 13, 22), Legendre's anthology of short-stories itself refers to the classical story of Bluebeard and Barbara aspires to become a hypermodern Cinderella: emancipated, yet, in conformity with patriarchal norms (*Écorchée* 117). Both the character and the novel strikingly echo the studies of Mei Huang and Kay F. Stone, for whom women remain plagued by the ideal of femininity—and especially by the Cinderella character—conveyed by fairy tales and reprised in various cultural media (Mei 146-47; Stone 142-43). For Legendre, although women freely enjoy sexuality, they also continue to be afflicted by patriarchal fantasies. In *Matricule*, Clémence crudely begs Joseph to rid her of her virginity. In order to appeal

to him, she summons all clichés of sexual passivity and masochism (26-27). Graziella Vaci, in *La Méthode Stanislavski*, admits that her infatuation with a serial killer belongs to “cette situation archétypale: moi victime de l’homme tout-puissant, bestial, dangereux... ... [Ma pièce] était une sorte de fable sur le masochisme féminin” (17, 43) ‘this archetypal situation: me as victim of the all-mighty, beastly, dangerous man... ... [My play] was a sort of fable on female masochism.’ Although Legendre’s women all live and enjoy an emancipated life, they seem unable to escape persistent patriarchal norms and even hyperbolically conform to them, thus echoing Lahire’s analysis of the fundamentally paradoxical identities women construct in contemporary society: new patterns of femininity emerge, but traditional ones persist.

Legendre also illustrates how women’s bodies remain, as Susan Bordo explains, “a *practical*, direct locus of social control” (91). Her protagonists suffer from corporeal issues reflecting not only the enduring power of norms of femininity, yet also how in hypermodern society, corporeal self-consciousness has become an additional imperative: deemed a matter of personal effort, people suffer feelings of guilt and inadequacy if they do not manage to correspond to contemporary ideals (Fournier 265). As Bordo underlines, women have historically had to conform to unrealistic standards of femininity which, in turn, has triggered specific pathologies such as hysteria or anorexia (91, 93-95). Nonetheless, hypermodernity has exacerbated the need to conform just as bodily ideals have become increasingly excessive (Fournier 263-65). All of Legendre’s women consider themselves only of average beauty, which is an intolerable fact in a society that praises exceptionality. These characters record everything that is wrong with their bodies and, therefore, strive to incarnate hyperbolic archetypes of frailty (*Méthode* 16), or to appropriate the voluptuous femininity—again paroxysmal—of *femmes fatales* (*Crépuscule* 164; *Écorchée* 23).

Hypermodernity has also generated forms of excessive consumption. Not only do people buy increasingly, but more and more domains are becoming consumable: culture, historical sites, even living beings (Aubert 163; Lipovetsky and Charles 25, 32-33, 77-78, 86-87). The whore—or prostitution—*leitmotif* throughout her fiction, naturally reveals the objectification of her female

characters (*Crépuscule* 117, 160, 195, 198; *Matricule* 71; *Méthode* 62); however, this *leitmotif* also underlines the contractual vision that nearly all male characters have of sexuality or of heterosexual relationships. For Legendre, men view and use women as mere objects of consumption. All seem to have to fulfill various sexual fantasies, sometimes against their will. Out of financial reasons, Deborah Creutz in “La Muse” ‘The Muse’ is forced by a painter to pose naked, a victory over her “féminisme fin de siècle” ‘fin de siècle feminism’ for him (*Crépuscule* 196-98). In *Matricule*, Joseph needs a “receptacle” for his sperm and fantasizes about having the perfect Electra daughter (32-34). It is, however, Barbara in *L’Écorchée vive* who demonstrates best the hypermodern objectification of women. First, she is a medical object in the hands of the doctors who document her condition and later transform her into “une création chirurgicale inédite” (69) ‘an innovative surgical creation.’ Then, for her friend Pierrick, she becomes an object of art. In his before/after photographic project, he takes pictures of ugly or destitute people in their real state, then has them undergo a makeover (188-90).²⁰ He also asks her to have sex with him, perceiving this act as an artistic performance (191). In her “new life”, she also has to unwillingly incarnate Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* for her lover François (174-75). From one life stage to another, Barbara remains obviously a mere sexual object for men.

Perceived as commodities, women are therefore subjected to gendered hatred and violence, whether physical or emotional. Even if they at first seem prince-charming figures, men always end up being Bluebeards in disguise. In *Le Crépuscule de Barbe-Bleue*, explicitly advertised as “quand un homme aime une femme, il la tue” ‘when a man loves a woman he kills her,’ nearly all heroines are murdered by or die for the sake of a man: Bastien Salamandre kills his teenage rival; unable to deal with Lara Bell’s perfect heteronormative femininity, her husband drowns her; and the painter murders Deborah Creutz as he is unable to make her portrait.²¹ As previously mentioned, Legendre acknowledges the persistence of gendered fairy-tale ideals for romances. Nonetheless, she reminds her female readers of the violence inflicted on women in these very stories as love relationships seem abusive in one way or another: Joseph in *Matricule* imposes platonic love and his procreative fantasies on

Clémence before he is able to have a “normal” relationship with her; in *L'Écorchée vive*, François leaves Barbara when she becomes depressive as “il n'a pas la nature infirmière” (167) ‘he is not the nursing kind.’ Thus, for Legendre, heterosexual love appears impossible to achieve. However, it may also be a sign, as Zygmunt Bauman explains, of how hypermodernity has dramatically altered all human relationships and especially love (Vega 117). As stability and commitment do not correspond to hypermodern ideals of excess and instantaneity, relationships today tend to be more like “réseau[x]” ‘network[s],’ easily achievable and, therefore, easy to discard (116-17). The persistence or exacerbation of patriarchal norms in hypermodernity also explains why men still view women as commodities in Legendre’s fiction.

Likewise for her, it is perhaps because gender norms, and scripts, have become so excessive for women and men alike, that relationships necessarily fail. Like Judith Butler, Legendre considers gender not an essence but “intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Butler 177).²² However, her characters remain trapped by the gendered ideals—and the performances they imply—conveyed by hypermodern society as in *Matricule*:

Elle sait que Joseph est un oisif misérable qui ... se perd en délires géo-masturbatoires pour ne pas voir le monde autour, pour oublier sa condition étouffante de jeune-type-qui-n'a-rien-fait-encore. Elle croit que peut-être elle peut le sauver, lui faire un enfant, elle se rêve mère universelle, nonne dévouée à l'épanouissement exponentiel d'un homme. (110)

She knows that Joseph is a miserable, idle man who ... loses himself in geo-masturbatory deliria so as to not see the world around him, to forget his condition as a young-guy-who-has-not-achieved-anything-yet. She believes she might save him, provide him with a child, she dreams herself as a universal mother, as a nun devoted to the exponential blossoming of a man.

In this excerpt we meet again the imperatives and excesses of contemporary identity scripts: masculinity means being exceptional and achieving something of value; femininity remains plagued

with reactionary and exacerbated roles of devotion and woman/mother as a salvation figure. Here, Legendre also demonstrates how paradoxical hypermodern identity may become, whether for men or women. While new forms of gendered ideals are available and even achievable, older patterns persist, just as contemporary ones may become coercive too.

Once more, Barbara in *L'Écorchée vive* best incarnates Legendre's vision of gender as performative. Similarly to personal development methods and in order to be prepared for her new life and face, Barbara must have feminine figures of identifications to emulate. For her doctor, a Barbie doll is necessary "si on voulait que Barbara devienne une jeune fille, une femme, il fallait en passer par là. Les habits, la coquetterie" (70) 'if one wanted Barbara to become a young girl, a woman, one had to go through this. The clothes, the stylishness.' Barbara must be literally "'made' into a certain gender," which denies the naturalness of femininity (Butler xiii). Therefore, once she has achieved corporeal and emotional "normalcy," Barbara feels she is merely a "fiction" (*Écorchée* 78). Furthermore, she has believed in all hypermodern and heteronormative scripts—such as being and achieving always more or finding a perfect boyfriend—and has, to some extent, accomplished them. Yet, her deformity has also made her realize that "personne ne vous aime pour votre grandeur d'âme, de toute façon" (123) 'no one likes you for the nobility of your soul anyway.' While this quotation betrays how misanthropic Legendre's novel may sometimes appear, it also reveals that in order to be accepted, one must play a specific gendered—or at least social—role. Consequently, unlike what Butler claims, for Legendre, the hyperbolic "proliferation" or performance of gender does not "displace the very ... norms that enable the repetition itself" (189). Quite the opposite, they only ensnare individuals further into false and unachievable ideals of femininity and masculinity.

Conclusion

One may be tempted to perceive Legendre's writing as depoliticized or apolitical since her autofictional or first-person texts remain essentially self-centered. Michel Legrand claims that life narratives, while certainly narcissistic, may also represent "un mouvement de décentrement de soi, vers les autres, ... dans le cadre

d'une société hypermoderne où les individus se trouvent de plus en plus laissés à eux-mêmes, sans points de repère" (84) 'a move away from oneself towards others, ... within a hypermodern society where individuals are more and more left on their own, without any points of recognition.' Legendre's first-person or autofictional narratives published over the past decade truly illustrate how individuals, and especially women, seem lost in or attempt to negotiate with hypermodernity. While these texts do not provide any solutions—rather they tend to end pessimistically—they still try to make sense of contemporary identity and one's place in today's society. Furthermore and in spite of being centered on specific individuals and their issues with hypermodernity, major political events haunt Legendre's stories. *Matricule* happens shortly after 9/11 and stresses the lack of sensitivity towards the war in Afghanistan as people seem too self-centered to care (50, 53, 67). In this novel, she also underlines the social discrepancies still at work between Western and Eastern Europe, as well as the persistence of prejudices against former communist countries: Joseph Attal appears to be a selfish Westerner who, according to both his interpreter and his daughter, indulges in "Est-exotisme" (143) 'East-exoticism.' However, Legendre refuses to adhere to simplistic discourses denouncing ongoing social inequalities around the world. In another self-reflective passage in *La Méthode Stanislavski*, Graziella Vaci exposes how a seemingly alternative discourse may itself be yet another predetermined script to perform since "il n'est rien de plus commun que l'anticonformisme affiché" (29) 'nothing is more common than self-conscious anticonformism.' Legendre's writing is, therefore, well anchored in its own time, in spite of its autofictional style. By simultaneously performing and denouncing hypermodern imperatives, she has managed to create a complex, challenging and politicized hypermodern literariness.

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Notes

1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

2 (In)famous examples are Marie Darrieussecq's *Pig Tales* Virginie Despentes's *Baise-moi/Rape me*, and *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* by Catherine Millet. Original translated titles.

3 For studies of this literary trend and its mixed reception and messages, see in particular Christian Authier, *Le Nouvel ordre sexuel* and Christine Détrez and Anne Simon, *À Leur corps défendant: Les femmes à l'épreuve du nouvel ordre moral*.

4 See also Suzanne Bernard and Jean-Claude Lebrun. "Une Littérature de rupture. Entretien avec Jean-Marie Rouart," and Pierre Jourde, *La Littérature sans estomac*.

5 See Shirley Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives*; Catherine Rodgers and Nathalie Morello, eds., *Nouvelles écrivaines: Nouvelles voix?*; and Gill Rye and Michael Worton, eds., *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*.

6 Her doctoral dissertation focused on theater and truth in the writings of Stanislavski, Antonin Artaud, and Bertolt Brecht. Her current project explores truth in autofictional and (auto)biographical narratives in the works of Doubrovsky, Guibert or Echenoz for instance. See her webpage: <http://littfra.umontreal.ca/repertoire-departement/vue/legendre-claire/>

7 See Michèle A. Schaal, "The Hypermodern Condition in Isabelle Flükiger's Novels," *Readings in Twenty-First-Century European Literatures*. Michael Gratzke, Margaret-Anne Hutton and Claire Whitehead, eds.

8 This word is polysemic, it means both igniter and vamp. Throughout her fiction, Legendre plays with the conventions of the *femme fatale*, exploiting the contradictory nature of this figure as both powerful and an incarnation of patriarchal fantasies.

9 See Dubet 175; Journet ("Le Prix de la liberté") 148; Kokoreff and Rodriguez 134; and Lipovetsky and Charles 93.

10 Joseph's criticism of banality strikingly echoes Bastien's: "Alors j'ai cessé d'écrire et je me suis occupé de toi. Moi je ne voulais pas être bêtement bon. Je ne voulais pas, comme font les gens, m'accroupir pour un bébé. J'aurais été quelqu'un. Je voulais d'autres fiertés que tes premières dents" (*Matricule* 151) 'So I stopped writing and took care of you. I did not simply want to be good. I did not want, as people do, to crouch down for a baby. I could have been someone. I wanted to take pride in something other than your first teeth.'

11 See Dubet 168-69; Kokoreff and Rodriguez 134, 137; Lahire 65 ; Lipovetsky and Charles 75-77; Molénat "Devoir s'inventer" 180-81.

12 *Matricule* tells the story of Joseph's quest for fatherhood. He, wishes however to beget a child through sperm donation before having any children with a spouse or partner. In the last chapter of the novel, Léonore, his daughter, writes a punitive novel about her father's stay in Romania, the only country that—in the narrative—legally allows an unmarried and childless man to make such a donation.

13 See Dortier ("Comment") 55-56; ("Du Je") 11; Molénat ("Vers") 2; Molénat ("Sommes-nous") 109-11; and Molénat ("Devoir s'inventer") 178.

14 *Mise en abyme* is traditionally understood as a self-reflective work of art. For Lucien Dällenbach, however, there are three types of (self-)reflections: the "réduplication simple" 'simple reduplication' which reflects "une même oeuvre" 'one similar work'; the "réduplication à l'infini" 'infinite reduplication' mirroring "la même oeuvre" 'the exact same work'; and the "réduplication aporistique" 'aporistic reduplication' reflecting the "oeuvre même" 'the very work' (142). Claire Legendre has employed all three types in her writing.

15 The *Villa Médicis* is, nowadays, the home for the French Academy in Rome. Just as Legendre, Graziella Vaci was a pensioner there.

16 In *Matricule* and in *La Méthode Stanislavski*, Léonore and Graziella Vaci are novelists whose current literary projects are the very story Legendre is telling us. With a *mise en abyme* of the reading practices linked to autofiction, Legendre reminds us that her writing consists essentially in a play or artistic alteration of (auto)biographical truth.

17 Intermediality goes further than intertextuality since it does not only imply direct or indirect references to other texts, genres or authors but also to other artistic media such as film, theater, graphic novels or music.

18 Her writing may also represent an aesthetic homage to the *Nouveaux Romanciers*. Johan Faerber explains that these writers too have experimented with techniques inspired from theater or visual arts, have employed the "conjugaison des intertextualités externe et interne" (136) 'conjugation of external and internal intertextualities' and "mise en abyme" (140), just as they have sometimes resorted to "une esthétique néo-baroque" (121) 'neo-baroque aesthetics'. Thus, Legendre's fiction seems further undecidable: does she wish to partake in a specific French literary tradition or is she merely—and ironically—performing aesthetic features of the *Nouveau Roman*?

19 In the studies quoted here, the overwhelming use of the seemingly neutral "individu" 'individual' demonstrates a will to address how hypermodernity shapes the lives of men and women alike. However, most authors also stick

to the French grammatical rule that makes the masculine the generic. This particularly transpires when “homme” ‘man’ is used as an equivalent of individual or person. Feminist and postcolonial theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak or Monique Wittig have all explained how generic masculine forms are falsely universal and essentially exclusive. Therefore, the uncritical use of *homme* or masculine forms (including *individu* who is masculine in French) remains, in some instances, problematic and should be the subject of another study. Examples of this uncritical use of the masculine may be seen in contributions quoted here, such as Nicole Aubert’s “L’Individu hypermoderne. Une mutation anthropologique?”; François Dubet’s “Les Épreuves de l’individu”; Bernard Lahire’s “L’Homme pluriel”; Molénat’s “Devoir s’inventer. Questions à Jean-Claude Kaufmann”; or in Charles and Lipovetsky’s study.

20 Barbara refuses to undergo the makeover session. She condemns this second stage of Pierrick’s project as self-gratification (*Écorchée* 189-90).

21 Legendre uses “impuissance” and undeniably plays with the polysemy of this word which means both unable and impotent in French (*Crépuscule* 198). In the short story, even though Deborah Creutz is forced to pose for the painter, she appears to be the more powerful character.

22 Philippa Caine has made a similar analysis of the hyperbolic performance of gender in Legendre’s *Viande* in her article “Marvellous Bodies? Strange Sex(es)? - Fantastic Genre in Recent French Fiction” (436-40)

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